
THE APOCALYPSE WILL BE TELEVISED
DUNGEON CRAWLER CARL
MATT DINNIMAN


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&

Your Mom.

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Rome will exist as long as the Coliseum does; when the Coliseum falls, so will Rome; when Rome falls, so will the world.

- THE VENERABLE BEDE

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[1]



THE TRANSFORMATION OCCURRED AT APPROXIMATELY 2:23 AM, PACIFIC Standard Time. As far as I could tell, anyone who was indoors when it happened died instantly. If you had any sort of roof over you, you were dead. That included people in cars, airplanes, subways. Even tents and cardboard boxes. Hell, probably umbrellas, too. Though I'm not so sure about that one.

I'm not gonna lie. You guys who were inside, probably warm and asleep and dreaming about some random bullshit? I'm jealous. You're the lucky ones. You were just gone. Splattered into dust during the transformation.

It was a Tuesday, and the calendar had just ticked over to January 3rd. A terrible winter storm had descended on North America, and half the country was buried in snow and ice. In Seattle we didn't have too much snow that night. But it was well below zero, which was unusually cold, even for January.

I'm sure in other parts of the world where it was warmer and not in the middle of the night, many more people survived. Many more.

I also bet most of them were probably wearing more clothes than I was at the time of the incident. And those assholes were smart enough not to go into the light.

Me, I didn't have a choice. Like I said, it was below freezing. I was outside. And I was wearing boxers, a leather jacket, and a pair of pink Crocs sandals that barely fit me.

I was also holding a crying, scratching, squirming, and spitting cat named Princess Donut the Queen Anne Chonk. She was a tortoiseshell, Persian cat worth more than I made in a year. My ex-girlfriend called her Princess Donut for short. I just stuck with Donut.

So let me back up about ten minutes. I won't bore you with too much backstory, but some of these details may be important.

My name is Carl. I am twenty-seven years old. After a stint in the US Coast Guard, I ended up working as a marine tech, fixing electrical systems for rich assholes and their party boats. I, up until a few days before this started, lived with my girlfriend in our apartment in Seattle.

Her name was Beatrice. Bea. She went to the Bahamas for a New Year's thing with a bunch of friends. She didn't tell me her ex-boyfriend went along with her on the trip. I figured it out pretty quick when I saw the picture of her sitting on his lap on Instagram.

I don't like drama, and I don't deal well with it. Whether she was actually cheating on me or not, it didn't matter so much. She'd lied. So I called her up, and I told her we were done. I promised I'd have all her stuff ready for her to go when she got back. No drama. No fuss. But we were done.

She'd asked her parents to come get the cat, but they lived on the other side of the Cascades, and nobody was getting through any of the passes with this weather. So I promised I'd look after her until Beatrice got back.

So, let me tell you about Donut the cat. Like I said, she's one of those fluffy, flat-faced cats that look like they need to be sitting on the lap of a Bond villain. Bea and I shared a two-bedroom apartment, and one of those rooms was dedicated to the cat if that tells you anything. More specifically, the room was devoted to Donut's Best-in-Show ribbons, her Best-in-Breed ribbons, and the countless trophies and framed photographs of her sitting on a table, looking all fuzzy and pissed off while Bea and a judge stood behind her. Bea probably had fifty of the pictures. She'd won a mess of ribbons and trophies and photographs pretty much every time Beatrice took Donut to an event. And Bea took that damn cat to a show almost every weekend.

Her whole family was into raising and showing Persian cats. Me, I didn't really know much about that whole cat show world. I didn't want to get too involved. Like I said, I don't do drama.

And let me tell you something about cat people. More specifically, cat *show* people.

Actually, never mind. Fuck those guys. All that's important is Bea and Donut were a part of this whole world I didn't want anything to do with.

I never considered myself a big fan of cats. But, if we're being truthful here, I *liked* Donut. That cat did not give two shits about anybody or anything, and I could respect that. If Donut wanted to sit on my lap while I was blasting away on Playstation, then she sat on my damn lap. If I tried to pick her up, she hissed and scratched and jumped right back up there. And then she looked at me with a squished face that said, *what're you gonna do about it*?

I'd been tempted, more than once, to throttle the thing. But I'm not an asshole. Plus, I could respect the little monster's tenacity. Some of my buddies would give me crap about it, me spending all this time with a fuzzy cat that was probably worth more than I would make in a year, but I enjoyed it. I enjoyed having that ball of fuzz sitting in my lap.

One of Beatrice's ironclad, this-is-not-negotiable rules was no smoking in the apartment. So after our fight and breakup, I'd made a point of smoking as much as I could. I know, immature. But it was freezing outside. Donut didn't seem to like the smoke too much, and the smell clung to her hair. So, as a compromise, I would crack the window when I smoked.

So when I woke up at about two A.M., having been startled awake by a dream, I decided I needed a smoke. I pulled out my pack, cracked the window, and I lit a cigarette.

Donut, who had been sleeping right next to me on the bed, decided at that very moment that she wanted to—for the first time in her feline life—go outside and explore. She jumped up on my shoulder, and she leaped out the second-story window onto the tree outside my apartment. Just like that. I'd had that window open dozens of times over the past year, and she'd never even given the

window a second glance. But tonight, on the coldest night of the year, the furry asshole decided to Lewis and Clark her way out of the apartment.

She scampered down the tree, sniffed at the sidewalk a few times, and then promptly realized it was cold as fuck. Her adventure over as quickly as it began, she rushed back up the tree and stared at me over the five feet from the window to the branch. The adventure all drained out of her, Donut decided not to risk jumping back inside. So instead, she decided to start howling at the top of her lungs.

I spent the next several minutes cursing at the cat, trying to coax her back inside. I opened the window all the way, sending gales of ice-cold air in the previously-toasty apartment. The fuzzy, black and beige and white cat just sat there, bitching and howling so much I feared one of my neighbors might wake up and shoot her.

I'd left my boots in the dryer all the way in the building's basement. I didn't know where the hell my running shoes were. So, in a momentary decision I would quickly come to regret, I squeezed my feet into a pair of my ex-girlfriend's Crocs, pulled a heavy leather jacket on, and I rushed outside to grab the cat. A part of me kept saying, *Screw it. It's not your cat. Let the fucker freeze.*

But, like I said, I'm not that much of an asshole. As much as Beatrice deserved it, she loved that damn cat. And poor, stupid Donut wouldn't stand a chance out here in the cold. Not for long.

Plus, again, the cat was right there, howling like someone was eating her children in front of her.

I rushed down the stairs, and I jumped outside, rushing to the tree that sat between the sidewalk and the building. I immediately regretted not taking the time to put proper clothes on. The cold, windy air sunk its claws into my legs and feet.

Donut was right there, sitting on a tree just out of reach, looking between me and the open window into the apartment. She continued to howl. A light popped on in an apartment on the first floor. I groaned. Mrs. Parsons. Grumpy, I-like-to-file-complaints Mrs. Parsons.

"Donut!" I said. "Come on you little shit!" I held out my arms.

The cat could jump into my arms. It was something I'd trained her to do. I could shake a bag of cat treats, and she'd jump right up there. I could make a *pspspsps* sound, and she'd sometimes jump up on my shoulder. I cursed myself for not bringing cat treats out with me.

The window on the first-floor apartment slid open. "What in god's name is going on out here?" Mrs. Parsons called, sticking her head out the window. The old woman had her head wrapped in a some sort of towel, making her look like a swami. Her beady eyes focused on me. "Carl, is that you?"

"Yes, Mrs. Parsons," I said. "Sorry. My cat got out, and I'm trying to get her in before she freezes to death."

"It looks like you're the one who's going to freeze to…"

Mrs. Parsons never finished the sentence.

Slam.

It happened so fast.

The building smashed down to the ground. I watched it happen. The seven-story apartment building was there one moment, and then it was gone. But it hadn't disappeared. I was looking right at Mrs. Parsons when it went down. It was like the building was a massive tin can that had been crushed by a giant, cosmic boot. I saw it, and I heard it. Wind rushed at me, and it was instantly dark outside. The streetlamp just to my left was gone. The buildings all around me were gone. The cars on the street were gone, too.

Everything was gone except the trees and the bicycles in the bike racks, and Marjory Williams's moped that was still booted by parking enforcement.

I looked around, the freezing weather momentarily forgotten. In the dark, overcast night, I could barely see anything. In the distance—a distance I could now see thanks to the lack of buildings—a fire burned.

There was utter, complete silence.

"What the hell," I said, spinning in circles.

A couple random things remained. Like the bike rack. The stop sign was there, but the street sign next to it was gone. It didn't make sense. Where the cars were parked on the road, car-shaped

indentations of dirt appeared, as if they'd been pulled down toward the center of the earth, being ripped directly through the asphalt.

Donut jumped into my still-outstretched arms. I looked at the cat, not knowing what to do or say.

"What the hell," I said again.

All that remained of my building was a rectangle of churned dirt and rocks.

And then I saw it, right near my feet.

It was Mrs. Parson's head. In the dark, it was hard to discern. But I immediately knew what it was.

It hit me, at that moment. The sudden shock of the buildings was one thing. But there were people in those buildings. It was almost everybody in the damn city. Hell, even most of the homeless people were in shelters. There'd been a whole thing on the news about them rounding everybody up because of the extreme cold. It was two in the damn morning on a Monday night. Everyone would be in bed. And that meant everyone was dead!

I kept spinning in circles like an idiot, not knowing what to do. I felt sick to my stomach. Donut started to squirm, having decided I was useless. She clawed at me, but I wouldn't let the cat go.

Then came the voice. A male, robotic voice.

It spoke in my mind. The voice was like a physical thing. A spike in my brain, scratching me. It wasn't speaking English. But I understood the words. As the person spoke, the text also appeared floating in front of me.

Surviving humans take note.

"What?" I said out loud. "What's that? Who's there?" I kicked at the floating words with my foot, and the too-small Croc went flying. I hopped over and quickly shoved my foot back in. The words moved with me, floating just a few feet in front of my face.

Even the letters weren't in English. They crawled down, not across the screen. But I knew them, understood them like I'd been reading the language my entire life.

Per Syndicate rules, subsection 543 of the Precious Elemental Reserves Code, having failed to file a proper appeal for mineral and elemental rights within 50 Solars of

first contact, your planet has been successfully seized and is currently being mined of all requested elemental deposits by the assigned planetary regent.

Every interior of your world has been crushed and all raw materials—organic and inanimate—are in the process of being mined for the requested elements.

Per the Mined Material Reclamation act along with subsection 35 of the Indigenous Planetary Species Protection Act, any surviving humans will be given the opportunity to reclaim their lost matter. The Borant Corporation, having been assigned regency over this solar system, is allowed to choose the manner of this reclamation, and they have chosen option 3, also known as the 18-Level World Dungeon. The Borant Corporation retains all rights to broadcast, exploit, and otherwise control all aspects of the World Dungeon and will remain in control as long as they adhere to Syndicate regulations regarding world resource reclamation.

Upon successful completion of level 18 of the World Dungeon, regency of this planet will revert to the successor.

A Syndicate neutral observer AI—myself—has been created and dispatched to this planet to supervise the creation of the World Dungeon and to ensure all the rules and regulations are properly followed.

Please pay careful attention to the following information as it will not be repeated.

Per the Indigenous Planetary Species Protection Act, all remaining materials—estimated to be 99.999999% of the sifted matter—is currently being repurposed for the subterranean World Dungeon. The first level of this dungeon will open approximately 18 seconds after the end of this announcement. The first-level entrances will be open for exactly one human hour and one hour *only*. Once the entrances are closed, you may no longer enter. If you enter, you may not leave until you have either completed all 18

levels of the World Dungeon or if you meet certain other requirements.

If you choose not to enter the World Dungeon, you will have to sustain yourself upon the surface of your planet, and this may be the last communication you receive during your lifetime. All previously-processed matter and elements are forfeit. However, you are free to mine and utilize any remaining and naturally-occurring resources for your own benefit. The Borant Corporation wishes you luck and thanks you for the opportunity.

For those who wish to exercise their right of resource reclamation, please take note.

There will be 150,000 level-one entrances added to the world. These entrances will be marked and easy to spot. If you so choose to enter the first level of the dungeon, you will have five rotations of your planet to find the next level down. There will be 75,000 entrances to level two. There will be 37,500 entrances to level three. 18,750 to level 4. 9,375 entrances to level 5 and 4,688 entrances to level 6. The number of available entrances to the next lower level will continue to decrease by half, rounding up until the 18th level, which will only have two entrances and a single exit.

Crawlers who choose to enter the World Dungeon must find a staircase and descend to the next level down before the allotted time is up for that level. Once the time has passed, the level will be reclaimed and all remaining matter in the level, organic and inanimate, will be forfeit. Generated loot and other matter that is not gathered and claimed may be placed in the Syndicate market.

Each lower level will have a longer period of reclamation. Additional rules come into play once any crawlers descend to the tenth floor. These rules will be explained when and if any crawlers reach this level.

If you so choose to enter the World Dungeon, it is highly recommended you immediately find and utilize a tutorial

guild. Multiple tutorial guilds will be seeded throughout the dungeon on levels 1 through 3.

If you have any additional questions, or you wish to file an appeal, such requests must be submitted in writing directly to the closest Syndicate office.

Thank you for being a part of the Syndicate. Have a great day.

My brain could barely parse any of what the voice had said, so bewildered I was at everything that had just happened. I could no longer feel my legs. I had been outside much too long, and I was in serious danger of freezing to death, of losing toes to the cold. I had to get inside, and I had to do it now.

But there was no inside anymore. There weren't even any cars. I eyed the fire that continued to rage a few blocks over. I needed to get over there, and fast. I turned, and I started to shuffle run.

The wind, which had been a light breeze before the buildings all disappeared, was now a constant, freezing gale that stank of the ocean. Donut twisted in my arms, scratching at me, trying to get free. She chomped onto my shoulder, but my jacket protected me. I clutched the cat tighter.

Was this a dream? Had I accidentally been dosed with some sort of hallucinogen?

World dungeon? What the actual hell? What did that even mean? My mind continued to race. I immediately thought of *Pathfinder* and *Dungeons and Dragons* and other games I hadn't played since I was on active duty. I couldn't see a single damn person. I was surrounded by only the sound of the wind.

A horn, like a trumpet, sounded, blasting through the night air. I stopped dead, looking around. What now? *It's the dungeon appearing*, I thought. *This is happening. Holy shit, this is really happening.*

Less than a hundred feet to my left, right in the middle of what had once been a thrift store, a spotlight burst into the air. I saw an additional spotlight appear about a mile away. I turned, and I saw a few more littered throughout the city.

Even from this distance, I could feel the warmth radiating from the brightly-lit hole in the ground.

I didn't think about it. My head still swam with all the information that had been thrown at me. The pink Crocs barely fit on my feet. The distant fire was further away than I thought. I had seen firsthand what hypothermia did to people.

So I turned toward the light, and I ran.

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[PART 1]



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[2]



Dungeon Floor 1.
Time to Level Collapse: Five days.

An ornate staircase led down into the light. Each step appeared to be made of wrought iron, and the whole thing was wide enough to accommodate twenty people walking side-by-side. Glowing warmth radiated from the hole. I took a step, falling down a little further than I anticipated. My footfalls echoed into the brightness.

This was a city of almost a million people, and I was the only one here.

Donut, who had stopped fighting, clutched onto my shoulder and started growling as we descended toward the bright light. Welcome, glorious warmth beckoned me deeper. My legs and feet, which I hadn't been able to feel, were now starting to burn. I hadn't been out in the cold long enough to sustain any real damage, but I was frostbitten to hell.

The stairs seemed to go on forever. The iron steps were carved in an odd pattern depicting what could've been fish. Or maybe demons. The almost Asian-looking carvings gave me an uneasy feeling. These stairs weren't here just a few minutes ago. *This whole*

thing is made of the buildings and cars and people of the world. Who did this? *How* did they do it?

By the time I reached the bottom of the stairs, the temperature had risen to a humid, balmy 80 degrees Fahrenheit or so. The metal stairs ended at a marble floor and a hulking door that stood about thirty feet tall and was just as wide. The wooden, arched door was carved in the shape of a massive fish demon, like the stairs.

I looked up at the double doors.

"What the hell is this thing?" I muttered.

As I stared at the door, an information box popped up over the door. The box appeared so suddenly and unexpectedly that I stepped back. It was like I was in a game, or maybe wearing special contact lenses that popped up informational tooltips. It even had a little X in the corner to close it out.

This is a rendition of a Kua-Tin, the dominant species of the Borant System and principal owners of the Borant Corporation. Make sure you recognize these guys. There'll be a test later.

Was that last part supposed to be a joke? I focused on the X in the corner and mentally closed the box.

Huh, I thought. I looked up at the carving again and I felt something, almost like a slight, haptic tingling in my brain. The information box popped up again. I closed it.

Weird. I could control the information with my mind. I could open information boxes on certain items by focusing on them. I could close the boxes by mentally clicking the X with my mind.

That means they're in your head. *Maybe this isn't really happening. Maybe you're asleep, and this is all some sort of high-tech simulation. Like in the Matrix movies.*

The pain in my warming-up legs and feet reminded me that simulation or not, it didn't matter. Not when I could hurt.

With my one free hand, I pushed at the door. It opened easily inward, revealing a long hallway lit by multiple torches. The hallway was just as wide and tall as the door, more like a tunnel for a double-lane roadway than for someone to walk through. In the distance I could see several branches leading off the main hall. A

blinking light appeared near the first branch. It seemed to be a sign of some sort, but I couldn't read it from here.

"*Oww*," I cried as Donut chomped down on my hand. I dropped the cat, and she bounded forward into the hallway. She stopped about ten paces in, looking around with a confused, startled look on her face.

I stepped toward the cat, and the doors slammed behind me. The light from the entrance room cut off and was replaced with a dusk-like dimness.

Welcome, Crawler. Welcome to the First Floor.

This was a new voice. It was male, sounding overly enthusiastic, almost like a game show host. It wasn't the same person or speaker from the original announcement. The words appeared floating before me and were simultaneously spoken in my mind. Unlike the tool-tip like box, I wasn't able to close it out. This was more like subtitles.

A timer appeared in the upper right of my vision. It was at **4 days, 23 hours, and 48 minutes** and counting down. I, again, swiped at the characters. They didn't go away. I closed my eyes, and the information disappeared. It was unsettling and it gave me a slightly queasy feeling to my stomach.

Donut remained in her spot several paces in front of me, but the chunky cat was swiping at the air in front of herself. *She sees it too*, I thought. *Holy crap*. Whatever this was, it was happening to the cat just like it was to me.

"Donut," I said, calling to the cat. "Stay with me."

The cat, being a cat, ignored me. But as I looked at her, I felt that same almost imperceptible tingle I felt when I'd looked at the door. I focused more tightly, and an information box popped up over the cat.

Crawler #4,119. "Princess Donut."

Level 1.

Race: Cat.

Class: Not yet assigned.

I took a step forward, painfully aware that I was wearing Crocs that didn't fit.

More text assaulted me.

You have been designated Crawler Number 4,122. You have been assigned the Crawler Name "Carl."

You are assigned the race of Human. You are currently level 1. You may choose a new race and class as soon as you descend to the third floor. Your stat points have been assigned based on your current physical and mental profile. See the stat menu for more details.

Menu? I wondered how to pull a menu up. But before I could even try to figure it out, I was bowled over by a wall of text.

Congratulations! You've earned your first achievement: Crazy Cat Lady.

You have entered the World Dungeon accompanied by a cat. Ahh, isn't that sweet?

***Reward:* You've received a Bronze Pet Box!**

New achievement! *Trailblazing* Crazy Cat Lady.

You are the *first* crawler to have entered to the World Dungeon accompanied by a cat. You must really love that thing. Too bad you're both probably going to die a horrible death at any moment. Or maybe not. Look at the prize you just received!

***Reward*: You've received a Legendary Pet Box!**

New achievement! Early Adopter.

You are one of the first 5,000 Crawlers to enter a new World Dungeon. Sucker.

***Reward*: You've received a Silver Adventurer Box!**

New achievement! Empty pockets.

You didn't bring any supplies. None. You know you still gotta eat, right?

***Reward*: You've received a Bronze Adventurer Box!**

New achievement! Why aren't you wearing pants?

You entered the dungeon wearing no pants. Dude. Seriously?

***Reward*: You've received a Gold Apparel Box!**

New achievement! Unarmed combat.

So. You just gonna waltz right into something called a "World Dungeon" and you're not even going to bring a weapon? You're either braver than you look, or you're just an idiot. Good luck with that, Van Damme.

***Reward*: You've received a Bronze Weapon Box!**

New achievement! Loner.

You entered the dungeon without any human companions. Didn't anyone teach you there is safety in numbers?

***Reward*: None! Haha. You are so dead.**

I stared at those last words as they faded away.

You are so dead.

Donut was, again, swiping at the air.

"Menu," I said out loud. Nothing happened.

"Stats." Nothing.

How the hell was I supposed to look at my information? It said I'd "received" multiple… what? Loot boxes? That's sure as hell what it sounded like. Which meant I had some sort of inventory. I remembered something from the initial announcement, something

about finding a tutorial guild. I looked up at the neon sign about a hundred meters down the dark tunnel. Would that be it?

I started to shuffle jog down the tunnel toward the blazing sign. I passed Donut, who sat upon the ground, licking her paw and rubbing it against her forehead. After a moment, the cat seemed to sigh and decide to follow.

The neon sign read "Da Tutorial Guild" with an arrow pointing down a thin, dark alleyway. I shuffled to a stop. The swish of my footfalls echoed in the large, empty tunnel. I peered into the darkness. It was pitch black in there.

Behind me, Donut meowed with concern.

I stepped into the alley.

New achievement! Fall into an obvious trap.

***Reward*: Well, if there's a heaven, and if you haven't been too much of an asshole, maybe they'll let you in. Because you about to meet your maker.**

Three lights flipped on, blinding me. I covered my eyes and took a step back. Something mechanical hissed, and what sounded like a steam engine roared to life. I heard laughter, high-pitched and squealing.

I turned, and I ran. Both of my pink Crocs went flying as I turned down the main tunnel, heading away from where I'd come down the stairs. Donut yowled and rushed after me.

I hazarded a look over my shoulder and saw the contraption rocket out of the alleyway, almost crash into the far wall, and then slowly start to back up and turn, facing me.

The machine was the size of a tractor and ran on treads, like a tank. The thing was built out of mismatched, rusting hunks of metal, and it looked as if it would fall apart at any moment. A spinning, spike-covered wheel dominated the front of the death machine. On top of the tractor three green-hued humanoid monsters stood, screaming and pointing in my direction. Each of these monsters looked to be about four feet tall and were dressed in leathery rags. One appeared to be wearing a kitchen pot on his head. He grunted and screamed as he worked the controls for the tall machine. Black

smoke billowed from several pipes. The spinning wheel whirred even faster as the machine righted itself and started barreling toward me.

A tooltip popped up.

Goblin Murder Dozer. Contraption.

A goblin-built, steam-powered machine designed to mow down and slaughter unsuspecting dungeon crawlers. I hope you're up to date with your tetanus shots.

Three more tooltips popped up over the three riders. Two of them read:

Goblin. Level 2.

Small, green, and smart. What goblins lack in physical strength, they make up for in pure spunk.

The third goblin, the one with the pot on his head and driving the machine had a different description:

Goblin Engineer. Level 3.

Engineers. The incels of the goblin world. They have a hard time finding a date, which makes them extra angry. If there are any females in your party, they will attack them first.

I didn't have time to think about the stupidity of the jokes or the fact I was, for the first time, looking upon a group of real, live monsters trying to kill me. I rushed down the hallway and reached another junction. I could go three ways: forward, right, or left. Right was another half-lit hallway about half as wide as the last, but still plenty big enough for the goblins to follow. Left led into a tight, dark hall that'd be way too thin for the bulldozer.

The obvious choice would be to flee down the dark hallway. I paused. It was *too* obvious of a choice. I sensed another trap. I couldn't go straight because the next junction was too far away, and the machine would catch me for sure.

I turned right. Donut followed, choosing to stay by my side, which was very un-Donut like behavior.

This hall was only as wide a regular road with a smooth, fifteen-foot ceiling. Green, lichen-like growths glowed on the brick walls and ceilings, giving the tunnel an odd glow. Behind me, the goblins squealed as they struggled to maneuver the Murder Dozer. The thing

had a wide turning radius, and it would take them at least a minute to pursue.

Ahead, another group of junctions appeared. But just before the intersection, I spied a single, plain wooden door built into the wall. A simple sign was attached to the wall above the door. The words were painted the same color as the dark-red bricks of the wall, and I could barely read it. It read "Tutorial Guild." The words were in that same, odd language.

The moment I read the sign, a glowing green box appeared, highlighting the name.

New achievement! You've discovered and read an official dungeon sign.

Wow. You can read. Whoopie.

***Reward*: All official dungeon signage will now be highlighted and easier to spot. Nearby guilds will appear on your minimap.**

A minimap? I really needed to figure this out. Behind me, the murder dozer had gotten stuck on the corner, and one of the level-two goblins was shouting and beating on the pot helmet of the engineer with what looked like a stick. The third looked at me and shook a fist.

Would they follow me into the guild? I didn't know. I grasped the brass door handle and tried to turn it.

It didn't open. Locked.

"What the hell?" I said. I banged on the wooden door.

"Hey," I called. "Is there anybody in there?"

The two, level-two goblins seemed to give up on waiting for the bulldozer to negotiate the tight turn, and they hopped off and started jogging toward me. They were unarmored, but both wielded what appeared to be wooden sticks with a pineapple on the end of it. They'd catch up in a minute. Next to me, Donut started to growl and hiss.

From behind the door I heard the rattling of chains and turning of locks. The door cracked, only pulling open part way. A single chain remained, keeping the door from opening further.

A bearded, rat-like creature appeared in the doorway. I could barely make out his features, but he was about a head shorter than me. So taller than the goblins, but not by much.

"Whaddya want?" the voice said. "You mobs ain't allowed in here. You know that!"

"Hey, this is a tutorial guild, right? The thing said I was supposed to go in here."

The eye widened as it looked at me.

"You're… you're a crawler? Wait." The rat creature stepped back as if to get a better look at me. I was immediately reminded of Master Splinter the rat sensei from Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. "You are! By his left tit, we opened up and I didn't even notice! I must have slept through the announcement. Nobody tells old Mordecai anything! There used to be a newsletter. It was delivered every few cycles, reliable as can be. But then it just stopped. Budget cuts, I'm guessing. They're always cutting corners. I thought we weren't opening for another two years!"

"Hey, let me in!" I interrupted. I turned to face the two goblins who jogged to a stop. One moved to my left, the other moved to cut off my retreat.

"Open the damn door!" I cried.

One of the goblins said something to the rat man behind the door, whose name appeared to be Mordecai. I couldn't understand the goblin language. It was grunts and squeaks. Mordecai responded in the goblin language. They both laughed.

"Sorry, crawler. You took too long," Mordecai said through the chained door. "I can't open up if there are mobs directly outside. Rules are rules."

"*I* took too long?" I said. I moved to a fighting stance. One of the goblins feinted, swinging at me with his club. The pineapple at the end of the club fell off when he swung it, and it hit the ground with a splat. The goblin cursed and kicked it away. I took a step back. Donut stood between my legs, hissing and spitting.

"At least tell me how to open these damn loot boxes!"

Mordecai was silent for a moment, as if he was contemplating on whether or not to tell me.

"It's in the Awards and Boxes tab of your inventory menu," the rat man said. "But you can't access it yet, kid."

"How do I get access to the inventory menu, then?"

The second goblin—the one who still had a pineapple on the end of his stick—swung at me, missing by a wide margin. Up close, the goblins looked much like they did in movies and videogames. Short, green, mostly bald with pointed ears, angular faces, and sharp teeth. I briefly wondered on that. It seemed the aliens, or whatever, knew a whole lot about earth mythology and lore.

Far behind him, the murder dozer had finally backed up properly and had straightened out. It rumbled down the hallway toward us.

"Yeah, you gotta complete the tutorial."

The pineapple goblin swung at me again. I waited until the club passed the apex of its arc and stepped in. I hit the goblin square in the nose with a jab and then a left hook to its right temple. It crumpled to the ground in a heap. A bar appeared over the creature's head the moment I hit it. A health bar, I realized. It hadn't appeared until it took damage. The bar went down more than halfway, turning from green to red. The goblin had more than half of its life drained.

I'd clocked it pretty good, but not that good. It was like I'd just punched a ten-year-old.

The second goblin looked at his friend, open-mouthed, then turned and ran back toward the dozer.

My fists ached. I hadn't been in an actual, physical fight in years. Most of my time as a coast guardsman was aboard a cutter as an MK—a technician. I was never involved face-to-face with any sort of real law enforcement. That said, most people I encountered who'd never been in the service didn't realize that we trained as much as we did. People thought of us as glorified lifeguards. They had no idea how much we trained in hand-to-hand combat.

"How the hell do I do that if you don't open the door!" I yelled as I kicked the downed goblin in the ribs. I felt a satisfying *crunch*. "Can't you just let me have access now?"

"It doesn't work that way, kid," Mordecai said. "We can't just have untrained crawlers wandering around the dungeon, you know.

Besides, you can't open boxes unless you're in a safe zone. And unless you're a complete idiot, you can probably guess you're not in a safe zone right now."

The goblin's health bar had moved deeper into the red, but he wasn't dead yet. A distant part of me seemed horrified that I was planning on killing this thing. Despite his weapon, he was incredibly easy to hurt. But one glance up at the bulldozer, which had stopped to pick up the second goblin, relieved me of any potential regret. I put my hands on either side of the unconscious goblin's head and I smashed down on the stones. I smashed down again and again until the health bar completely drained away.

"Hey, hey!" Mordecai yelled. "Hey, stop!"

"Whose side are you on anyway?" I asked, whirling on the creature.

But then I realized the rat wasn't talking to me. "You can't come in here!" he was saying, his back now turned.

Donut. He was talking to the goddamned cat. She had decided she'd had enough of this hallway and wandered into the guild through the cracked door.

A whole wall of **New Achievement** notifications appeared along with a couple other, new notifications, but instead of auto-playing like they did before, they appeared as little messages in the upper left of my screen. I sensed I could mentally click on them, but not now. The AI or whatever the hell was running this circus seemed to know that right now was not an opportune time to cover up half my line of sight with game bullshit. Not with the real danger barreling down on me.

"Open the fucking door!" I cried.

"Kid, get your creature!" Mordecai said, turning toward me, a strange hint of panic in the rat's voice. "I'll get in trouble if they find out I let a crawler sneak in against the rules."

"Open the door," I repeated. "Look. It's clear, but it won't be will be in about five seconds. Let me in!"

The door slammed, the last chain rustled, and then it opened all the way. I rushed inside just as the murder dozer barreled by, rolling directly over the bloody corpse of their friend. The brakes screamed,

but the dozer continued its forward momentum, sliding on the body as it smeared down the hallway. The two goblins turned and met my eyes as I flipped them both off. They squealed in rage as I slammed the door.

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The moment the door closed, a notification appeared.

Tutorial Guild Hall

This is a Safe Zone.

Warning: level timers are still active.

"I shouldn't have let you in," Mordecai said, wringing his furry hands. I examined the rat creature. He wore a black vest and blue pants. He had a pair of well-worn sandals on his feet. An infobox popped up.

Mordecai – Rat Hooligan. Level 50.

Guildmaster of this guildhall.

This is a Non-Combatant NPC.

Hooligans are the smartest, fastest, and ugliest of the Rat-Kin race. While not as roided-out as a Rat Brute, or as *Imma fireball yo ass* as a Rat Shaman, Rat Hooligans offer the best of both worlds. They are physically strong, and they have a decent grasp of magic.

I closed out the box. Through the door, I could still hear the screech of goblin machinery just outside.

I mentally clicked on the first of several information boxes cluttering my vision.

Error. You may not access this until you have completed the tutorial.

All the boxes disappeared, swooping away into a single folder item that started to blink.

I stood in a wide room about the size of a classroom. A fireplace and bed dominated one side of the room. Several shelves dotted the walls on the left half of the room, filled with random objects and a few framed photographs of bird-like creatures. The other half of the room was nothing but a well-worn and oval-shaped gray carpet and an empty desk. A half-dozen classroom-style chairs lay scattered about. I turned back to the door.

"Is this the only way out of here?" I asked.

"What?" Mordecai asked. The rat wasn't paying attention to me. He was focused on the cat.

"Yo," I said. "Morty. Is this the only exit?"

"It's Mordecai, kid. And yes, yes. Of course."

"Are those green assholes going to still be waiting for me when I get out of here?"

Donut jumped up on a high shelf and knocked a vase over. Ash spilled out.

"Mom!" Mordecai cried, running to the shelf, shooing the cat away. He reached up for the shelf, but he couldn't reach. "Damn this body." He turned back to me. "Can you just grab that thing for me? Get him out of here?" Mordecai sneezed. "I think I might be allergic."

I didn't think he was sneezing because of the cat but because of the gray cloud of dust that had formed around the spilled ash.

"Holy shit, man," I said. *Be careful*, I warned myself. *He doesn't seem too tough, but he's level 50. That's gotta mean he's a powerful bastard*. "Can you help me? Are they going to wait for me or not?"

"Yes. No. Probably. Well, it's complicated. One might wait. But one will definitely go back to their clan and call the others. You smashed that poor goblin's head right in. Give them an hour and the whole family will be out there."

Across the room, Donut discovered the fireplace, which crackled merrily. The cat sat in front of it, lifted her leg, and started licking herself.

Shit. "Okay," I said. "Don't you dare lock this door."

I grasped the handle and went back outside.

I barely had time to hear the rat say, "You're tracking my mother's ashes all over…" before I slammed the door.

The goblin tractor had overshot the doorway by about ten meters and was in the middle of a wide turn, trying to come back the way it had come. The engineer had driven the tractor right into the wall. The spinning wheel sparked as the spikes shredded against the stone. The dead goblin remained smeared over the tiles. The corpse looked more like a party-sized sausage and green pepper pizza that had been run over a few times.

Both of the remaining goblins had their backs turned to me. I sprinted toward the vehicle.

The murder dozer had a small ladder near the back. It looked as if it was made of bones tied with rope. One of the goblins would turn at any moment. I had to get them now. If one of them got away and warned the other members of its "clan" or whatever, I'd be screwed. I *needed* this tutorial guild, so I only had one choice.

The jagged bones of the ladder ripped into my bare feet as I pulled myself up. I stifled a cry. I jumped onto the top of the metallic, whirring contraption.

The murder dozer screamed so loudly that neither had noticed me. The whole top of the machine was nothing but a fur-lined, recessed hole with benches running the length. Despite the fur, the ground was hot on my feet, almost burning. It smelled of scorched tar and animal musk. The machine could probably carry about fifteen or so goblins, not including the driver, who had a seat up front. A dozen levers and spigots and vibrating handles extended from the floor in the cockpit area. The controls all vibrated and bounced up and down. The pan-wearing goblin sat in the seat, screaming and grunting something as he twisted and turned and pulled on levers. Smoke billowed and steam hissed from multiple pipes. The whole machine vibrated like a boiler about to blow.

The smooth, rocky ceiling of this tunnel was much lower than the long, main hallway leading off the stairs. When I stood to my full height, I could reach up and touch it. Barely. It still amazed me, the idea of an entire world made up of these hallways and paths.

I rushed forward and grasped onto the regular goblin, who still clutched his pineapple-less stick in his hand. The creature barely weighed anything, surprising me. I picked him up as he grunted in

surprise. He unsuccessfully attempted to hit me with his stick. With all of my strength, I threw the goblin forward. He rocketed out of the passenger area of the dozer.

The screaming monster sailed directly over the head of the engineer, who was only now starting to react. The flying goblin crashed onto the tunnel wall then bounced back, landing directly onto the spinning front blades. A spray of red showered over the both of us.

The final goblin snarled, and quick as a whip pulled a small, curved blade from a sheath on his side. He jumped from his chair and rushed at me.

Oh fuck.

The monster moved much more quickly than I anticipated, surprising me. I had to remember this was a different class than the last two, and he was a level higher. Two levels higher than myself.

This was a dumb idea. What was it that Bea always said? "You just jump headlong into things without thinking it through?"

I kicked at the goblin with my bare foot. With nobody at the controls, the tractor continued to whine and shred at the dungeon wall. The vibrations got worse by the moment. Soon the whole thing was bucking like a washing machine with a rock inside it.

The goblin was yelling something at me in its guttural language.

"You're in my world now!" I yelled back at him. "You need to speak *my* language you weird, green piece of shit."

To my surprise, the goblin grinned. I could tell he understood me. The little monster switched the knife back and forth between hands. "*You're* not speaking your language," he said. "You're speaking Syndicate Standard, you idiot slave. They programmed it into your brain. Do you really think you'll survive past…"

The goblin never finished the sentence. As he was distracted with his own soliloquy, I leaped forward, snatched the pot off his head, and clobbered him with it. Sharp little teeth went flying. The goblin stumbled. I smacked him again. He careened off the side of the tractor. His health bar appeared after I'd smacked him the first time, but it was still well in the green. He splatted to the ground, groaning. His knife went flying.

I peered over the edge. The goblin lay on his back. The tractor continued to spin and buck, but it was edging in the opposite direction. The goblin's health was still 3/4's full, but he'd had the wind knocked out of him.

The goblin started to sit up and I threw the pot at him. To my utter astonishment, I clobbered him right in the forehead. He cried out, his hands reaching to grasp the new wound.

I gauged the distance. It wasn't very far. Like maybe seven, eight feet. I'd done that plenty of times as a kid.

What the hell. I jumped off the murder dozer, aiming both feet toward the chest and stomach of the still-recovering goblin.

I'm not sure if I mentioned this earlier, but this is important information right here. I stand six-foot, three inches tall. I weigh about 230 pounds, and while I wasn't in nearly as good shape as I was while I was on active duty, I'd been hitting the gym three times a week for years, building my muscle mass. I'd always been blessed with one of those bodies that naturally held muscle well. My dad was a linebacker. Hell, even my mom was five foot ten. And *her* dad had played center for Oregon State before becoming a prison guard.

So, what I'm getting at is that I'm a large dude. I have a lot of bulk. The goblin was small, and he did not have hardly any mass at all. The effect of me jumping onto him from high above was like someone smashing a fat jelly donut with a sledgehammer. The little dude didn't have a chance. Goo spurted out of the goblin from every orifice.

The murder dozer started to whine even louder. I looked down at what I'd done, and I suddenly felt sick to my stomach. More notifications appeared on my screen. A tooltip popped up, appearing in my peripheral vision. I turned to look.

Goblin Murder Dozer – Boiler Breach Imminent.

A countdown timer appeared below the text. It was at 12 seconds and counting down.

Son of a bitch. It's gonna blow.

I turned back toward the room, a mere thirty meters down the hall. Was that too close? I didn't have time to think about it. I ran, slipping and sliding on the tiles as I booked it back to the room. I

ripped open the door and jumped inside. I slammed the door and braced for impact.

Bam! The world shook. The door bucked, throwing me forward onto the floor of the guildhall. My ears rang. But the door held, and I didn't seem to be otherwise injured. Donut was in the corner of the room, poofed out and hissing.

"What the bloody hell did you do, kid?" Mordecai asked, looking over me at the door. "That gate is capable of holding back a kinetic strike from a star destroyer. I'd never seen anything shake it that much."

"Huh," I said, sitting up. My ears continued to ring. "That goblin bulldozer thing got stuck against the wall, and then it blew up."

Mordecai nodded slowly. "A boiler breach then. The local shaman probably enchanted it in case it ever exploded. It would have focused the energy from the blast at the closest non-goblin. You're lucky you were behind that door. A focused explosion, even a small one, has a lot more energy than you might think."

Having decided the commotion was over, Donut left the corner and returned to her spot in front of the fire. Her normally-poofy exterior remained extra puffed out, and her tail swished up and down. I could tell the cat was pissed off.

"Your creature crapped in my mother's ashes," Mordecai said, shaking his head. "This is so not worth it. Not worth it at all."

"So, Mr. Training Guild," I said, leaning against the wall. My feet ached. My heart continued to thrash in my chest. I was covered in goblin blood. It felt as if I had raw hamburger meat stuck between my toes. I shuddered. *I need to get shoes. Shoes and pants.* "What the hell is going on? What's with the dungeon? Is everyone really dead? How do I work this shit?"

A million other questions popped into my head. I knew he could probably snap and break me in half, but I had an overwhelming urge to grab the rat man by his stupid vest and shake him until all the answers tumbled out of him. "Also, who the hell are you? Why are you here? What's really…"

Mordecai held up his hands. "Okay, okay, slow down, kid. I know you're confused. I've been in your position. All will be explained.

That's why I'm here. But before I start, I need to explain something to you two." The rat looked over at the cat, who glared back at him. "My name is Mordecai, and I am what's called a Non-combatant NPC. I am like you. I'm a person whose world was displaced. This was many, many solars ago. I was a dungeon crawler just like you. I made it all the way down to floor 11, and I knew I would never make it any further than that. Once you descend to floor 10, you're given several options to exit the dungeon. The deeper you go, the better those options are." He walked over to the shelf with the upset vase, and he picked up a framed photo of one of the bird creatures. He handed it to me. It looked remarkably like a normal, framed photo. But the material was peculiar, and the photo was cut oddly, oval-shaped with the corners lopped off.

"That's what I really look like. This is a photo of my brother. I was born a skyfowl, but I became a Changeling when I reached floor three of the dungeon. I switch form every time my guildhall is moved."

Mordecai continued. "When a dungeon first opens, I work in a guild such as this. Later on, after the third floor collapses, my room here is transported to a much-deeper level, and my form is changed again. I spend most of my time working a magic guild, which is a place one can go to pick spells and train if they've chosen a magic-based path. Though over the years I've only had a handful of people actually make it that far. Most crawlers don't make it past the tenth floor."

"So, a Changeling is a shapeshifter?" I examined the picture. I couldn't tell if it was a photograph or a painting or something else. The eyes of the image seemed to bore into me. It was a golden eagle-like creature. Wings, angel-like, were folded on its back.

"Yes," Mordecai said. He sighed. "They recreated my home for me, including all my possessions when I decided to become a guildmaster. I had but a few moments to grab anything I wanted before they evaporated it all. Now, every time I move to a new world, they change my shape. It's something different every time, but it's always a type of mob from the current floor of the dungeon. I don't know why."

"I don't believe any of this," I said. "So you're aliens? You're all from a different world? Then how does the game or whatever know how we talk? Some of those last notifications mentioned Jean Claude Van Damme and incels and steroids!"

Mordecai nodded. "You're getting ahead of yourself. Each dungeon is specially built for the world it inhabits. And they spend a lot of time... *a lot*… of time making sure the locals understand the game and the notifications. They go for authenticity. I'm not really supposed to tell you any of this stuff, but I figure if you're going to be stumbling around out there, you need to know what's happening."

"I still don't know what's happening," I said, frustration rising further.

Mordecai shook his head. "You humans are all the same. This is the seventh or eighth human-seeded world, and it's always the same. You always want to know why. Why can't you just accept your circumstances and move on? My people, the skyfowls, we generally last much longer than you humans. You know why? Because we roll with it."

I didn't say anything for several moments. There was a lot to parse there. "Human-seeded world?" Did that mean that conspiracy-spouting asshole on TV with the crazy hair was correct? That humans weren't unique, but a crop, left to grow unattended until, until… *this*?

Mordecai saw my look of bewilderment and sighed. "Okay, okay. I'll give you the quick version," he said. He pulled a seat and sat down. He gestured to another chair situated in the center of the round carpet. "You might as well get comfortable."

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"THERE ARE SIX BASIC STARTER SPECIES THE SYNDICATE USES TO SEED worlds. Humans are one of them. They find a compatible world, sprinkle the humans on there, wait a couple thousand years, and then reveal themselves to the largest settlement. They usually do this as soon as civilization starts to take hold, but long before any sort of industrial revolution. As long as there's a working government, this counts as 'First Contact.' In a legal sense, I mean, which gives them leave to wait a couple thousand additional years, come back, and strip the planet dry."

"How?" I asked. "It all happened in a second!"

Mordecai shrugged. "Technology beyond your understanding seems like magic. So as far as you're concerned, in this place, it *is* magic. It's like that *Wizard of Oz* movie, but you'll never get to peek behind the curtain."

"You've seen *Wizard of Oz*?"

"Guildmasters prepare for years for each new dungeon world. Kid, I have been preparing for this longer than you have been alive. The advance team arrived in your 1930s, I believe. Whenever that book came out, *The Hobbit*. I left the last system and entered the prep phase in your year 1964. I know this world and your customs just as well as you do. I even once got to shapeshift into a human and go out into the world. I went to a Blockbuster Video and stole a

bunch of James Bond tapes. I was so happy once you guys started digitizing everything."

"How long have you been a guildmaster?"

Mordecai shook his head. "You don't even want to know. So anyway, your planet defaulted on claiming Earth as a sovereign entity. You had 50 local years since first contact, and first contact was several thousand years ago. Whenever those pyramid things were built. The Borant Corporation has a huge backlog of worlds to mine, and your time is now."

My head swam. "So, they're taking all of our minerals?"

Mordecai nodded. "Sort of. Borant deals in rare *elements* and the like. What they end up mining will fit on a single transport. I don't know too much about that part of the process. The elements involved are unimportant. It's a big universe out there, and there are plenty of places to mine. That's not why they're really here. While Borant does make a profit on the mining, the real money is in the game. The dungeon."

"How?"

"Are you kidding? The Syndicate consists of over three billion independent star systems. Every season, a new *Dungeon Crawler World* debuts across the net. Quintillions of citizens of the Syndicate become obsessed with the Crawl."

"Wait, so this is like a TV show? Like *Survivor*?"

"Oh, I loved that show. And as far as you're concerned, yes. It's a show like *Survivor*. But it's more a *Running Man* situation than a *Survivor* one."

I leaned back in the chair. *I'm on an alien television show. Holy shit*.

Bea had always wanted to be on television. She'd tried out for countless reality shows. Me? I'd rather have a hot poker stuck through my eye. I briefly wondered where she was, and if she was alive. Probably not, I decided. It'd been 5 AM in the Bahamas when it had happened, which meant she'd probably been asleep in her hotel. Probably in bed with that asshole. And if by some miracle she had survived, there's no way she'd have gone into one of those tunnels.

"So are there people watching right now?" I asked, looking around.

Mordecai put his hands together. "I will get to that in a moment. It doesn't look like anyone else is going to be joining us any time soon, so let's get the tutorial started."

Mordecai's right hand glowed for a moment, and I felt that haptic buzz in my brain. Across the room, Donut hissed and batted at the air.

You have been granted access to the Crawler Menu.

My world blinked, and several items appeared in my vision. A long green bar—a health bar, I realized—appeared in the top right. It pushed the timer down a notch. That blinking folder remained in my top left. A small minimap appeared in the bottom right.

"You just received a notification," Mordecai said. "That's called a crawler notification. There are a few different kinds, but that type will only be seen by you. There are also system messages, which everyone sees no matter what floor they're on. Those may be in different voices. There are also floor-specific notifications, etcetera."

"I have a blinking box in my top left," I said.

"Those are game and status change notifications. Probably from your fight outside a few minutes back," Mordecai said. "Don't click it yet. We'll get there. First, I want you to focus on the map on the bottom right. Look right at it, and make sure you're thinking about looking at it."

I did as he asked, and the map got bigger, increasing to fill my entire vision. It was a simple blue and gray map showing the hallways and a few random doorways. Most of the area around us wasn't filled in. It only showed the area we'd walked, pushing out about twenty meters in every direction. A green dot sat in the middle, right in the guild. Two additional dots appeared, a blue one and a white one. I focused on the blue dot, and a note appeared above it:

Crawler Princess Donut.

The white dot read:

Guildmaster Mordecai.

The whole room glowed yellow, and when I focused on it, it read:

Tutorial Guild.

A trio of X's appeared outside in the hallway. I mentally clicked on one.

Corpse – Level 2 Goblin.

I mentally clicked away, and the whole map shrank back to normal.

"Good, good," Mordecai said. "So, you're the green dot, the blue dots will be other crawlers, white dots will be NPCs such as myself, and mobs will be red. There are a few other kinds, but you'll figure those out along the way. By the way, no other crawlers or mobs can see your menus, but while you're inside this guild, *I* can see what's on your screen. You are already adept at opening and closing, which is good. Now try focusing on the map again. With your mind, pinch it smaller. And then move it across the screen. That way you can customize your HUD."

It went on like this for a while, him explaining how to open and close menus within my display. I could just think about it, and a whole menu system would pop up, giving me access to several folders. Once I got used to the weirdness of it being in my head, the system was quite intuitive.

The first menu was player stats. Like I mentioned earlier, I'd played a handful of computer and tabletop RPGs over the years, so this section wasn't too surprising. My stats were:

Strength: 6
Intelligence: 3
Constitution: 5
Dexterity: 5
Charisma: 4

According to Mordecai, I couldn't directly adjust these stats. Not yet. I received three stat points every time I leveled up, but I couldn't distribute them until I picked a race and class. And I couldn't do that until I reached the third floor down. For now, these numbers went up and down on their own based on my inherent, real-life physical and mental attributes. He also added the typical

adult human averaged between three and five for each of these first five stats, so my six in strength was good.

I could find items and potions that would either temporarily or permanently adjust these numbers, but for now, there wasn't much I could do about them.

"Why do we have to wait until we go down to the third floor before we get to pick a class?" I asked.

He shrugged. "It takes a lot of energy to run this whole operation. I think they figure if you manage to make it to the third floor, you're worth the investment to transfigure. Class is easy. But changing your race takes some doing. You're being fundamentally changed at the cellular level. That's a lot of effort for someone who's just going to get eaten by a flytrap on the first floor."

I hadn't thought about it until that moment. *I can change into a different type of creature*. If this was a computer game, I'd do it in a second. I never played humans in games if I could help it. But permanently changing myself into something different? The thought made me ill. It was something I'd have to think about and deal with when I got there.

I grumbled a bit about that three in intelligence. Yeah, I never did too great in math, but I never considered myself a slobbering idiot, either. I could fix most anything electrical after studying it for a bit. My friend Billy Maloney, now that guy was an idiot. Just last week we'd come out of a bar, and he'd peed right on a cop's bicycle while the cop was giving someone else a ticket for drunk and disorderly. *That* guy deserved an intelligence of three, maybe two.

Billy is dead. He was still in jail. He'd had a warrant for failure to appear, so they'd taken him in*. He's dead like everyone else in the world.* I pushed it away.

After I complained about my intelligence score to Mordecai, using the Billy example, he said, "Intelligence told you that bike belonged to a police officer. *Wisdom* told you not to urinate upon it. We all have a wisdom stat, but it doesn't appear on that list. It used to, but they discovered changing one's wisdom greatly changed their personality, so it's no longer adjustable. I do not know what this Billy's intelligence is, but I guarantee his wisdom is not a 5. Worry

not about an intelligence of three unless you're seeking a magic-based class. Your best bet is something that focuses on strength."

That mollified me while Mordecai moved me to the next menu.

"This next screen is the single most important menu in the entire game. Your life depends on these numbers."

It was called Ratings. I clicked on it, and the list took me aback:

Ratings
Views: 0
Followers: 0
Favorites: 0
Patrons: 0

Apparently the first level of the dungeon was off-limits to live viewers, so these stats wouldn't move until I descended to the second floor.

As of right now, no viewers had access to anything that was going on. However, Borant would release an edited highlights reel over the next day or so. If I managed to get shown during the "premiere" of the show or any of the regular update episodes, it would be like hitting the lottery. Featured crawlers always gained billions of views and millions of followers right out the gate.

Given the sheer number of people in the world, I seriously doubted I was going to be featured, so if I wanted to survive, I needed to have what Mordecai called "Chutzpah" and "The 'it' factor."

"You need to stand out. You can't just kill that shambling acid impaler and walk away. You need to kill it with style, with excitement. Maybe you can come up with a catchphrase. During my crawl, I managed to accumulate almost 30 million followers and four patrons. That's the only way I survived."

"Excuse me, a shambling what?"

"A shambling acid impaler. The second floor will be lousy with them. They trounce about on four legs, are green, hairy. Spit darts at you that melt your skin off. Awful creatures."

"Jesus Christ," I said. I still felt as if this was all a dream.

Mordecai snapped. "Hey. Kid. Pay attention. The monsters aren't important. Well, they are. But this part especially is more important."

"Okay, okay," I said, waving him along. "Keep going."

He went on to explain how viewership worked. Once I hit the second floor, watchers from across the universe had the ability to tune into any crawler they wished. Borant would continue to air highlights. So the longer I survived, the better my chances at getting featured. Any time someone watched me for just about eight seconds or so, it counted as a View. This stat didn't help or hurt me, but it was a good indicator of how "interesting" I was.

"You might not like it," Mordecai said, "but pay careful attention when I tell you this. Obtaining Patrons is crucial to your survival. There is plenty of great loot in the dungeon that'll help you survive, but the best loot comes from benefactors. Patrons. Views lead to followers. If you're being followed, it means the viewer has bookmarked your crawler ID. They can look in on you whenever they want. Following leads to favorites. If you're favorited, that's a good thing. It means the viewers are getting live updates on your stats and condition. They get notifications if you're fighting. If someone has favorited you, they really want to know how you're doing. Viewers only get a certain number of favorites, so consider it an honor."

"But," Mordecai continued, "ultimately, it's all about the patrons. Lots of favorites will always lead to patrons. Patrons are *usually* organizations, not individuals. They'll see someone has a lot of favorites, and they'll sponsor you. It's an advertising thing. They sponsor you by purchasing boxes for you. There are dozens of types of boxes, and each type of box has six quality tiers. Bronze, then Silver, then Gold, then Platinum, then Legendary, then Celestial."

"Yeah," I said drily. "You wouldn't let me open my boxes yet. Can I do it now?"

"Hold up, kid," Mordecai said. "We have a process here. We'll get there in a minute." He continued. "Most patrons can only afford, or are willing to, send you silver or gold boxes. Bronze boxes tend to be crap, but anything higher usually has some good stuff in it. Some of the richer patrons may even send you platinum boxes, though the cost for them has got to be astronomical. That said, patrons are the only ones who can send what are called Benefactor Boxes. Those

contain the rarest items. So even a bronze Benefactor Box is better than a plain, Gold Adventurer box. A Benefactor Box may contain items from the patron's home world. You will never find a pulse rifle or automated power armor in any sort of box in the world dungeon, but it's possible to get one from a patron. Does that make sense?"

"None of this shit makes sense," I said. "But yes, I understand what you're saying. I'm on an intergalactic game show, and I have to be an obnoxious showoff in order to get eyes on me. And once I do have eyes on me, I might get a loot box with toilet paper in it. Does that about sum it up?"

Mordecai clapped his rat hands. "Yes! But toilet paper is complimentary. Restrooms are liberally populated throughout the map. It's the only place the viewer cameras can't follow you."

"Are you serious?"

Mordecai nodded. "Oh, I'm serious. The last dungeon Borant managed didn't have rest areas, and the crawlers were pissing and crapping all over the place. Crawlers lose viewers when they're shitting in the middle of a hallway. It's gross."

"And what does Borant get out of this?"

Mordecai's demeanor changed. It was a subtle thing, but he stiffened slightly. His voice took on an oddly formal tone.

"In addition to the mining income we already discussed, the Borant Corporation receives advertising dollars, a stipend from the Syndicate government, and a commission on every credit spent by patrons." He waited a moment, a long moment, before adding, "Also, it should be noted that every time a crawler mentions the name of either the interstellar government or the organization sponsoring the current crawl, the system AI will record the interaction for review. If it is found a crawler is disparaging either of these two entities, especially while on-camera with live viewers, the crawler's experience may be 'accelerated.'"

I nodded. "Got it." I had no doubt that "accelerated" meant nothing good.

We spent the next several minutes going over a few other menu items. I had a health menu like in other games. Overall health was a single green bar, but in the menu, it was a more extensive pie chart.

It indicated any active conditions and debuffs plus I could drill down to specific areas. Healing was sped up in the dungeon. I had recently been cured of several issues I didn't even know I had, like abrasions at the bottom of my feet and on my hands, frostbite, and the start of an infection from when Donut had bit me. Health ticked up on its own slowly based on my constitution level.

Also, if I went down a set of stairs to the next floor, my health points would instantly fill all the way up on their own. Another way to heal myself was via spells, potions, and scrolls. But there was no respawning.

Dead was dead.

After that was my skills menu. This section just went on and on and on. There seemed to be an infinite number of pages. If I didn't have the skill, I couldn't read what it said. It was still listed there, but the words were blurred out. Literally hundreds of pages would scroll by before I saw anything. Mordecai had me change the view to skills I did have, and that list was just as long. I had things like **Breathing: 3. Walking: 4. Operating a Sony Brand RMVLZ620 Universal Remote Control: 1**. The list just never ended. He had me uncheck a box, and most of those skills disappeared. What was left was still several pages long. Then another check, and anything with a skill of one or two disappeared. What was left was things like **Unarmed Combat: 3, Basic Electrical Repair: 6, Swimming: 4**. Nothing was over five other than Electrical Repair. Most everything was three.

"This is a good start," Mordecai said. "I'm impressed, kid. You're proficient with several earth weapons, all firearms. But since you didn't bring any, you'll want to train with some of the dungeon-based weapons. We'll see if you have anything good in any of the boxes when we get to it."

"And you'll train me how to use them?"

"Nope," Mordecai said. "Not my job. There are guildhalls scattered around that'll help you level up the skills—especially magic ones. But the best way is always to practice."

"Is there a store?" I asked. "The AI thing said something about a store."

"That's when you reach the third floor," Mordecai said. "There's a structure to the third floor, and random stores will start populating the map after that. You can also trade with other crawlers or friendly mobs, if you can find any. Mobs on the second floor will start dropping gold."

Next was the magic menu, which was complicated as shit. It was also one of the most surreal parts of this adventure so far. I was given a simple healing spell and a pool of mana points which appeared in my top right underneath the health bar. Because my intelligence was only three, I only had three magic points. The healing spell cost two. Magic points naturally refilled about one every hour.

I had a hotlist of ten spaces along the bottom of my screen, and there I could add potions or spells or other special items. Mordecai had me place the healing spell in spot number one. I could mentally click it to cast it. The spell was only a level one basic healing spell, and it would heal about 20% of my health.

He made me try it, even though my health was already at the top. I cast the spell, and my whole body glowed red, my magic bar went down by 2/3s, and nothing else happened.

"If you were injured or sick, you'd feel much better after that," Mordecai said.

A voice boomed, interrupting the tutorial. This was yet another speaker. Not the game show host that usually spoke, but a distinctly female voice. She spoke almost casually, like a manager addressing a store filled with employees just before they opened for business.

Hello, Crawlers! The dungeon is now sealed. We have a diverse group joining us this season, and we are very happy to have you here. We had just under 13 million human crawlers make it through the gates and into the dungeon. We are already down to under 10 million. A quick note, the entrances to the second floor will not open up until the introductory episode of *Dungeon Crawler World* tunnels, which will be in approximately 30 of your hours. Once that happens, the entrances to the second level will populate. There will be no lag time for the appearance of additional

levels. On behalf of the Borant Corporation I wanted to thank you for volunteering, and I wish you all good luck and a happy crawl.

Ten million people. It was more than I expected. But still, three million additional people dead in a matter of minutes. The number was so huge, it lost meaning.

The announcement made me think of the way the dungeon was set up. The 5-day countdown timer continued to tick away.

"Do we get five days before they destroy each floor?"

Mordecai shook his head. "No," he said. "It's usually more each floor down. Later on, it'll depend on a lot of factors, such as ratings, how many crawlers are left, etcetera. But they usually add about five days each time. So you'll probably have ten days for the second floor and then fifteen for the third. The countdown doesn't start until the previous floor collapses."

"How hard is it to find the staircases?"

"It can be tricky. It's not too difficult for the first few levels, but you'll want to focus on finding items or skills that'll help you find the next entrance down. This first floor is huge, as you can imagine. It's almost the size of the surface of your planet. They won't tell you this, but it's not all connected. It's not like you can wander about and run into someone from China. That'll change once you hit the third floor. You'll see if you survive that long. Starting on the fourth floor, each level will have a random theme and will encompass significantly less area. Entrances will stop populating in random places. They'll be guarded. You'll have to complete quests or defeat bosses to get to them. I had barely made it to floor 11. And when I saw what guarded the entrances to level 12… I knew it wouldn't be worth it."

"What was it?" I asked.

He shook his head. "It doesn't matter. It'll be different here. It's different every time."

From there we resumed the tutorial. We went over the Party menu. If I had been accompanied by a group of people, we could manage our party in this menu. Party members shared experience and were able to access a group chat feature. Anyone who entered

the dungeon at the same time as anyone else was automatically grouped together, and as a result, I had a party of two. Me and Donut.

The cat continued to lounge in front of the fire. It appeared she'd fallen asleep.

"So, my cat," I said. "The system has given her a crawler name and designator. Does that mean she's getting all these special achievements and loot boxes too?"

"Yes. Any biological creature above a certain weight who enters the dungeon is assigned a crawler ID. But one needs at least an intelligence of two to qualify for training, and if you can't do training, your inventory doesn't get turned on, which allows you to access your boxes. Otherwise, they're designated as pets. All the other ones, like wild animals who happen to make it inside very rarely make it past the first floor. We'll get to the pet menu after we open up your inventory, which is the next step."

Now that we'd put about twenty minutes between my earlier mention of Borant, I wanted to continue our previous conversation.

"Before we do that, I have a couple questions about the people running the show."

He paused. "What is it?"

"Are they always listening?"

"Listening, yes. Paying attention, not necessarily. They expect a certain amount of …gnashing of teeth… amongst the crawlers. And we NPCs are required to say the name of the organizers multiple times during the training, so we're mostly ignored. Mostly. You really need to be careful once you start collecting followers. They know they're sadistic assholes, but they don't want you saying it on camera. They take their image quite seriously."

"I'm no math expert, but when the dungeon opened, there were tons of the glowing entrances in my city. They said there were only 150,000 of them seeded around the world. It seemed like… too many for my area."

"They have certain benchmarks they try to reach. The AI closely monitors the launch of the game, but there are loopholes. The entrances are rarely distributed equally. Ten million crawlers upon

the sealing of the dungeon is pretty typical. So however it happened, it wasn't on accident. Like I said, they spend a lot of time preparing for each dungeon."

"Yeah, you mentioned that," I said. "You've been here for decades. Does this show really only air once every 90 years or so?"

"No, not at all," Mordecai said. "Different corporations run each season, which appear about every two and a quarter of your years. My employer usually has about five forward teams working at any given time, and they get chosen to run a season about one in fifteen."

"So with different corporations running each season and different worlds, uh, crawling, then is every season vastly different?"

"Oh yes. The Squim Conglomerate chooses a different game completely, for example. It's a battle royale-style fight. An entire world, and it all comes down to one champion. It's good for ratings, but it doesn't make them much money from what I understand. My company is known for making the most elaborate, most entertaining dungeons."

Wonderful. "And you?" I asked. "Are you stuck here for the rest of your life?"

"No," Mordecai said, smiling sadly. He looked down at the framed picture of the eagle creature I had placed on the floor. "This is my last tour. Once this nightmare is over, I become a full citizen, I receive a moderate stipend, and I am free to make my way into the universe."

"Will you go back to your home planet?"

"No," he said. "It's not open to me."

"What about the people who didn't go into the dungeon on your world?"

He paused. "We really need to get back to the tutorial."

"Okay, but what if someone won the dungeon, made it past level 18. The message said if that happens, they gain control of the world. Maybe your world is under control of one of your people."

The rat creature grunted. "Remember how I said I made it down to the 11th floor?"

"Yeah."

"A handful of crawlers over the centuries have made it that far. One once made it down to 13. One. He died within a half-hour of hitting the floor. He was a human, like you. But from another human world. That's the deepest anyone has ever delved, kid. Level 13."

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"I've just activated your inventory," Mordecai said, waving a hand. "This season Borant is trying something a little different."

"Different good or different bad?" I asked, pulling up the menu.

The only thing listed was a handful of loot boxes with **Ready to Open** next to them.

"Last season, it was a slot-based system. It allowed one to carry multiple items, but it was limited in capacity and had standard weight limits. This season, each crawler is given a dimensional inventory and AI cataloging system."

"What does that mean?"

"It's a good thing. Basically, unlimited storage. And if you can physically lift it off the ground by yourself for about four seconds, you can put it in your space, no matter how big it is. The only rule is you can't store living creatures. They will immediately die. Also, the storage is time-locked, so food doesn't go bad. That's a big one. We had an issue last season with crawlers starving to death. Watching thousands of lethargic, unmoving players as they waited the timer to run out… Yeah. It was no good, so Borant fixed it. Disease and starvation doesn't make for compelling drama."

He produced a single, glass bottle. It was small, like a third the size of a coke bottle. It was red with a cork in it.

"Pick it up and place it in your inventory. A gift from me to you."

I picked it up and examined the item's properties.

Standard Healing Potion.

Increases your health by at least 50%. Doesn't cure poison or other health-seeping conditions such as succubus-inflicted gonorrhea. So remember to wrap it up, bucko.

I pulled up my inventory menu, and an **Add Item to Inventory** button appeared. I clicked it, and the potion vanished. It appeared in my inventory list, which now had both a Potions and Healing submenu. I mentally clicked on it, and the potion reappeared in my hand.

"Good, good. If you add the potion to your hotlist, you'll drink it without having to actually drink. Remember this, because some of these potions taste like shit. If you straight pull it from the normal inventory, you'll have to pop the cork and swallow. Potions and other like items stack up to 999 a slot, so it's best to stick them in your hotlist. And that's pretty much it. There are a few other quirks regarding inventory, but you'll figure them out along the way."

I put the potion back and then added it to the hotlist next to my healing spell.

"Okay," Mordecai said. "Let's take a look at your current notifications… holy tits!"

"What? What?" I said, alarmed, looking around. Donut looked up from her spot by the fire and yawned.

"You have a Legendary Pet Box! Why didn't you say so?"

I just looked at him. The urge to punch him in the face returned.

Mordecai shook his head. "Legendary right when he walks in," he grumbled. "Okay. Yes, yes you do have a lot of boxes. Okay, now that inventory is active, you can pop up your missed notifications. Let's take look."

I had a line of the notifications. I clicked on the first one.

New achievement! You've inflicted damage on a mob.
Hopefully it won't hit back!
Reward*: *It's probably going to hit back.

New achievement! You've killed a mob!
You're a murderer! He probably had a family!

Reward: You can now gain experience. Get enough of it, and you might even go up a level.

New achievement! You've killed an armed mob with your bare fucking hands!

Holy crap, dude. That's kinda fucked up.

Reward: You've received a Bronze Weapon Box!

New achievement! You've killed a mob a higher level than yourself!

You're getting the hang of this. Don't let it get to your head.

Reward: You've received a Bronze Adventurer Box!

New achievement! You've entered a guildhall!

Congratulations. You know how to open doors.

Reward: That sense of fulfillment you feel? That's reward enough.

New achievement! Podophilia!

You've used your bare feet to crush and kill an opponent! Hey! That's *my* fetish! Seriously. Keep doing it, and you'll be rewarded. This will help.

Reward*: *You've received a Gold Shoe Box!

New achievement! Boom!

You've caused a wall-shaking explosion within the dungeon! The last time the walls shook like this was when your mom came over for a visit.

Reward*: *You've received a Silver Goblin Box!

New achievement! Level-Up, Baby!

You've received enough experience to gain a level.

Reward: Leveling up is your job. You don't get rewards for doing your job.

Underneath those were a few additional notifications:

You've gained a skill level!

Pugilism Level 4.

The art of beating the shit out of your opponents with closed fists.

Each level of this skill increases your bare-knuckle damage by 25%.

Level Up! You are now level 2.

Three stat points gained.

Several other skill-based notifications flashed and disappeared before I could read them, likely thanks to my tinkering with the menu earlier. My inventory glowed, and I clicked on it. Several additional loot boxes now appeared on my list.

"You may only open boxes in safe areas," Mordecai said. "All guildhalls are safe areas, but not all safe areas are guildhalls."

"Will they be hard to find? The safe areas, I mean?"

"The safe rooms will always appear on your map, even if they're within the fog of war."

"Fog of war?"

"If you haven't visited an area, it won't show the specifics of the hallways, even if it's in the range of your minimap. The fog of war

covers places you haven't yet visited. The safe rooms will have restrooms, sleeping cubicles, and some will even have food and fountains with healing potions. Getting to them might be hard, but you'll always know where they are if you get close enough."

"Is there a time limit for staying in one?"

"Nope. But don't forget the level itself is going to collapse in on your head after a certain amount of time. The only way to survive is to keep moving deeper."

"Okay," I said, rubbing my hands together. "Hopefully there are some pants in one of these things. Let's start cracking them open."

"Okay," Mordecai said. "You have 10 loot boxes. That's a lot, but not a crazy amount. Usually people come into the tutorial with two or three. You can hoard them, but when you do decide to open them, you can't pick and choose which ones to open. It's an all or nothing thing. There's no real tactical reason to hold onto them since you can't sell or transfer unopened boxes. Also it's important to note that while it's possible to receive unstable or damaged loot, you'll never receive outright cursed loot in a box. But that doesn't mean everything is safe to try on. Always read the descriptions before you activate or wear something. Always, always. No exceptions. Okay here we go. It's going to open them by tier."

The ten boxes all popped out of my inventory and appeared floating in front of me single file. The first few boxes were about half the size of a military footlocker. Each box had a label floating over it. The first to appear was bronze-colored and had a strange, hedgehog-like animal stenciled on the top.

Bronze Pet Box. (1/10)

The top popped open on its own. The box disappeared in a puff of smoke, and a single rolled-up piece of paper and a small pile of what looked like dry cat food appeared on the floor. Text appeared above each item.

Scroll of Heal Critter.

Pet Biscuit X 10.

The items disappeared and entered my inventory. Before I could open the inventory box to read the description of the scroll, the next box appeared.

Bronze Adventurer Box. (2/10)
Potion of Healing X 2.
Common Fingerless Gloves.
After that was
Bronze Weapon Box. (3/10)
Toad Cudgel.
The "toad cudgel" was a stick. It looked like a 3/4's length baseball bat shaped by someone who only had a vague idea of what baseball was.
Bronze Weapon Box. (4/10)
Poker.
This wasn't much better. It was literally a fireplace poker. A wrought iron stick with a screw-on point at the end.
Bronze Adventurer Box. (5/10)
Potion of Healing.
Potion of Mana.
These next two boxes were slightly larger and made of silver.
Silver Adventurer Box. (6/10)
Poison Antidote X 2
Crawler Biscuit X 100
Torch X 20
This next silver box looked distinctively different than the last. Like the goblin murder dozer, it appeared hobbled together with random hunks of silver-colored metal. A goblin skull was etched onto the lid.
Silver Goblin Box (7/10)
Dynamite X 5
Lighter
Goblin Pass
The Goblin Pass took the form of the same goblin-shaped skull from the top of the box. The symbol appeared floating in the air. Instead of adding itself to my inventory, it flew and smacked up against my left inner forearm. I was still wearing my leather jacket, but I could feel it burning against my skin, like I was being branded. The brand also appeared on the exterior of the jacket. The pain quickly abated, and my jacket was otherwise undamaged.

It was time for the good stuff. These next two boxes were bigger yet and glowed with a golden light.

Gold Apparel Box (8/10)

Enchanted Nightgaunt Cloak of Stoutness.

Enchanted Trollskin Shirt of Pummeling.

Beside me, Mordecai gasped the moment the two items appeared. I hoped that was a good thing.

Gold Shoe Box (9/10)

Enchanted Toe Ring of the Splatter Skunk.

A toe ring? A goddamned toe ring? I needed shoes, damnit! Not a toe ring!

I was so irritated by this prize, I almost missed the opening of the final box. The Legendary Pet Box had the same symbol etched on it as the Bronze Pet Box, but this thing was three times the size. It was made of alternating, intricately carved silver and gold patterns. Clockwork gears spun with a ratcheting *click click click* as the box opened. A musical fanfare sounded.

Legendary Pet Box (10/10)

Pet Biscuit X 500

Enhanced Pet Biscuit

"That's it?" I said as the final prizes poofed back into my inventory. "What the hell is an enhanced pet biscuit?"

Mordecai was looking between me and Donut.

"Yeah, kid. You'll want to give your cat that biscuit right now while you're still in the guild."

"What does it do?" I asked. I pulled it out of my inventory. It looked like a cat treat. It was small, smaller than my fingernail, brown, hard, and round with a crumbly texture. I doubted I'd be able to get Donut to eat it. While the cat was always shoving her face with food, Bea insisted on giving her the wet stuff even though it got all over her face. Donut turned her nose up at most everything else.

I examined the treat's attributes.

Enhanced Pet Biscuit.

So, it looks like a regular pet biscuit. It's not.

Feed to your pet at your own risk. What's the worst that can happen?

"Uh, what does it do?" I asked a second time.

"The effects vary," he said. "Regular Biscuits feed pet-based classes for a full day. The pets find them delicious. They smell them, and they'll just gobble them up. So make sure you only pull one out at a time. Enhanced treats have over 100 different possible effects. Half of them are good. The rest are… neutral… or decidedly bad. But if there's a bad outcome, your pet won't attack you if you feed them the treat while you're in a safe zone. Your pet will be teleported outside to a random place within a square mile of here. If you feed it to her while you're out on crawl, and she transforms into a toothed fleshbutcher, you're pretty much fucked. So you should definitely do it now. Either that or save it to sell later. It's worth a couple thousand gold."

Shit. I'd been avoiding thinking about this until now, but what could I do? Donut was a damn cat. It wasn't like she was a mastiff or anything, some sort of pet I could use as protection. Even if I could get her to follow me in the first place, she'd be more a liability than anything.

I felt an obligation to her. I was all she had left in the world. It wasn't logical, I knew. But if I could sell this tiny little treat for a lot of money, I could buy some really useful items. Like shoes and pants.

I rolled the cat treat in my fingers. As awful as it was, it would be best to…

"Ow!" I cried as Donut leaped up and ate the treat right from my hand.

Splat! The moment the cat hit the ground, she was transformed into a wet mess of flesh. She splattered like a hunk of hairy, jellied water.

"Donut!" I cried. "What the hell happened to my cat?"

Waiting… Waiting… appeared over the quivering, shaggy mass.

"Hmm," Mordecai said, coming forward to poke at the blob with his foot. It wiggled. "Transformation. Your creature is being changed

somehow. It didn’t teleport away, so it’s not considered a negative result. Looks like we’ll have to wait. I’ve seen this before a few times. It won’t be long. Maybe five to ten minutes.”

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As we waited for my mutant cat to emerge from her blob, I examined my other loot. The fingerless gloves went onto my hands. Of the two weapons, I liked the feel of the cudgel more than that of the poker, which felt like it would bend and break the moment I hit something with it. I examined the cudgel's properties. The game show host AI described it using a caveman voice.

Toad Cudgel

Big stick for bonking. Bonk toad. Bonk mob. Bonk girlfriend and drag back to cave by hair.

I wondered if the metal pot was still out there. It'd be better than this bullshit.

I placed my hand on the symbol branded onto my jacket. An infobox popped up.

Goblin Pass.

It's a tattoo! On your forearm! Now you'll never get a good job!

Note: Pass tattoos cannot be hidden unless you purchase a coverup sleeve. Will show through any armor you may wear.

Removes automatic goblin hostility. Allows for free passage through goblin-controlled territory in the dungeon. Warning: holding a Goblin Pass will cause natural goblin enemies, such as fairy-class creatures, to deal 20% more damage against you. Still, it looks kinda badass.

I grumbled that the system didn't give me a choice. It just burned it right onto me. I didn't have any tattoos, and I'd never really wanted one. Most everyone I knew had plenty, but I'd never liked the idea. My old man had been covered in them, and it wasn't ever something I associated with being cool.

The black, leathery, and hooded nightgaunt cloak weighed almost nothing. It appeared to be made from the wing of some sort of demon creature. The skin was stretched between rows of long, body-length fingerbones. When I put the hood up, I noticed it had pointed ear things on either side.

Enchanted Nightgaunt Cloak of Stoutness.

The wearer of this cloak gains +4 to Constitution and becomes resistant to poison and ice-based attacks. In addition, the cloak adds Anti-Piercing resistance to all worn armor. It also makes you look like a dollar store Batman. Warning: if a Nightgaunt spies you wearing this, they probably won't be too happy with you.

"This is an extremely valuable cloak," Mordecai said. "But the shirt is better. Much better."

Enchanted Trollskin Shirt of Pummeling.

The wearer of this shirt gains +7 to the Regeneration skill. In addition, all melee-based damage debuffs such as Stun, Knockback, Disarm, and Out-of-Breath are negated. The shirt is also quite stylish. Maybe a little *too* stylish. Unlike most monster-skin apparel items, this shirt will not grant a negative reaction amongst trolls. In fact, lady trolls might just want to haul you away for some one-on-one time if they see you in this.

"That shirt is one of the best under-armor garments for tanking," Mordecai said. "A level-seven regeneration skill means you're back to full health pretty quickly after taking damage. In as little as two minutes. Finding it was a lucky break. This is something that would be in a Platinum or Legendary box."

"You don't have to tell me twice," I said. I pulled off my jacket and slipped the short-sleeved shirt on. It felt cool to the touch and form-fitted to my skin. A couple notifications appeared. I put the

leather jacket back on and then added the cloak. I felt a quick rush of power course through me as my constitution rose from five to nine.

New achievement! Loot!

You're wearing something you found in the dungeon.

Reward*: *You're now a handsome son of a bitch. That's reward enough.

New achievement! Oooh, Magic!

You're wearing magical gear for the first time! You're a wizard, Crawler!

Reward*: *You've received a Bronze Adventurer Box!

The box contained another torch and a pair of healing potions, leaving me with a total of six. I still didn't have any pants. Or shoes. I was wearing a jacket, a cloak, and boxers. I shook my head. I examined the last item, the toe ring.

Enchanted Toe Ring of the Splatter Skunk.

Imbues wearer with +3 Strength and gives +3 to the skill Powerful Strike. Also, it's a toe ring. It's probably uncomfortable and it makes you look like one of those hippie assholes who sit around in a field juggling and hula-hooping all day.

"Powerful strike is a good skill," Mordecai said. "Each level multiplies your damage when you're not wielding a weapon. So at level three, each kick or punch does three times the damage it normally would. With your Unarmed Combat skill and the Pugilism skill, your fists already do much more damage than either of those weapons. You might want to consider a monk class, which will enhance that further."

"So, I could be like a ninja?" I said. I sat down and slipped the toe ring on. It adjusted itself, sliding easily onto my filthy, bloody index toe on my right foot. Like the description warned, it was uncomfortable. I'd never been a jewelry guy. I hopped up and down, trying to get used to it. I felt my strength rise by 50%.

"And just like that, you're almost as strong as any human who has ever lived," Mordecai said.

I received another snarky achievement for putting on jewelry, but no reward.

I started to fiddle around within my skills menu. Despite the heavy filtering, there was a lot of information in there. There was literally a skill for everything. The menu had a search box. I typed in **Frogger**, just to see what would happen. Growing up, my old man had an original, stand up *Frogger* video game machine from an arcade. I had spent hours and hours playing the game when I was stuffed in the basement. My mom locked me in there a lot. Whenever my dad had his friends over, they'd smoke and drink and get loud, and my mom didn't want them "being a bad influence" on me. So instead I stayed downstairs with no television or internet and that damn machine.

The top score one could get on an original machine was 99,990. The game never ended, so you could keep playing past that, and the score would cycle over and over. My record was 879,460.

Sure enough, it popped up.

Frogger – 1981 Video Game Cabinet Version (result hidden due to filters)

Skill: 8.

I grinned at that. I wondered why that skill was hidden by the filters, but things like **Lacing Boots - Skill: 3** wasn't. It probably only included skills useful in the dungeon. I doubted there would be a *Frogger* machine in one of these hallways.

But that wasn't true, was it? Assuming it hadn't been tossed in a landfill, that old *Frogger* machine was down here somewhere. At least the atoms of it or whatever. This dungeon was literally made out of items built by human civilization. I sighed. It was hard to comprehend.

"Really, Carl," a new voice said. It was female, sultry yet pompous at the same time. "If you're going to insist upon wearing that hideous cloak in public, you might want to do yourself the dignity of putting pants on first. I just can't fathom why Miss Beatrice hired you in the first place."

I looked wildly about for the speaker, expecting to find someone dressed like a medieval princess.

Instead, all I saw was the cat.

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"Uh, Donut?" I said, looking down at the cat.

Mordecai stood beside me, mouth agape.

Despite being nothing but a pile of goo just a few minutes earlier, the cat appeared to be exactly the same as before. Maybe she had gotten a little bigger, but not by much. Either way, she was still decidedly a cat.

Except for the talking part.

"First off, Carl, my name is 'GC, BWR, NW Princess Donut the Queen Anne Chonk,' and I'm going to have to insist you call me by my proper title. I will accept just Princess or even Princess Donut but *not* if we are in the presence of high company." She looked at Mordecai as if he was something she had just vomited upon the floor. "I suppose Princess Donut will do for now."

"I see what's happened," Mordecai said after a moment. "You're partied with her, so you can see for yourself. Pull up her stats."

I clicked on the party menu, and then I clicked on Donut's stats.

Strength: 11
Intelligence: 11
Constitution: 2
Dexterity: 8
Charisma: 25

"What the hell?" I said. She was stronger and more intelligent than me. And her charisma was just ridiculous. "What happened?"

"Her stats *were* all one. All except dexterity, which was always eight and charisma which was five. Whatever buff you gave her kept her race but changed her stats. Hmm let me look…. Yes, it's like I thought. Look in her health menu. It shows conditions."

I clicked over, and under **Buffs** it read:

Enhanced Growth.

After an initial boost to four random stats, all additional levels will automatically grant +1 to Strength and Intelligence. Charisma will gain +2 per level. No additional stat points will be received upon level-up.

"Wait," I said. "So she's getting four stat points per level instead of three?"

"Yes," Mordecai said. "And she doesn't have to wait until she picks a class before they disburse. But that boost is a double-edged sword. She's forever stuck with a constitution of two and a dexterity of eight unless she can find some gear that will enhance it or if she picks a race and class that changes it for her. But even then, the points will still distribute as indicated." He grunted. "With a charisma like that, she should consider a bard-based class. Two points every level is going to add up fast. I'm immune to the effects of her charisma. Same with you and other crawlers. But all the other NPCs and mobs won't be. For the first several floors, that number is huge. Bigger than you realize."

"But how can she talk? She's still a cat!"

"I am right here you know," Donut said. "It's quite rude to talk about me as if I'm not in the room. And if you must know, Carl, for me, I hear your speech as it should be heard. And you hear mine as that disgusting monkey grunting you call English. I imagine this other creature hears it as squeaks and vermin hisses. This whole translation system is quite elegant, I must admit."

"I'm gonna have to start the tutorial all over," Mordecai said. "She's not a pet anymore. She's now classified as a regular crawler."

"Not necessary. I heard everything you said to my manservant," Donut said. "Now wave your hand and grant me access to my prize boxes so we can get this farce rolling."

"*Manservant*?" I said.

"He's a little slow," Donut said to Mordecai. "Intelligence of only three. Sad, really. But he's been with the family for a while now, and I just can't see myself letting him go."

"I've activated your menus," Mordecai said. "Oh, wow." He looked at me. "She received a Legendary Quadruped box for being the first cat to enter the dungeon."

I watched as a group of loot boxes lined up in front of her just as they had done with me. She only had five of them. Three bronze ones with a couple healing potions and torches. Next was a silver adventurer box that contained a book and a pile of pet biscuits. The note over the book read:

Tome of Magic Missile

Next came the legendary box. The symbol on the front was of a lion thing. Only a single item came out. A small, jeweled tiara. The cat-sized crown glittered with smoky, dark gems. The deep purple stone in the center swirled internally with clouds, as if the center was liquid.

Enchanted Crown of the Sepsis Whore.

"That sounds ominous," I said.

"Wait until you read the description," Mordecai muttered. The item disappeared into her inventory. The cat sat down and started to groom herself.

"Are boxes custom tailored to the person?" I asked as I pulled up the party menu. I quickly found I couldn't examine items in Donut's inventory. Only items she had equipped.

"Sort of," Mordecai said. "You'll receive items that can be used by your race, but not necessarily your class. So a human barbarian might receive a necromancer staff."

Donut glowed a bright red.

Mordecai turned to the cat, raising his hand. "Ah, Princess Donut, I see you taught yourself the *Magic Missile* spell already. That's good, good. In case you didn't know, tomes will permanently teach you the spell, and scrolls will just cast it once. That other item you received is quite valuable and powerful. But it is also a very dangerous item. Before you decide to put it on, you should take special note that it…"

Poof! The crown magically appeared on her head.

Mordecai lowered his hand, sighing.

"How the hell did she do that?" I asked. I'd had to manually put on my cloak and shirt.

"She's a quadruped, so she has a different user interface than you. She can perform many actions directly from her menu."

Now that it was equipped, I could examine the tiara's properties.

Enchanted Crown of the Sepsis Whore.

Who's a dirty girl? You're a dirty girl!

This is a Fleeting item!

This is a Unique* item!

Imbues wearer with +5 Intelligence, grants the user +5 to the Good First Impression skill. All attacks, including magical attacks, now have a 15% chance to inflict the Sepsis debuff.

Warning! (Seriously though. I'm going to say this again.

WARNING! Read this shit before you put it on.) Placing this crown upon your head permanently places you within the royal line of succession for the Blood Sultanate on the ninth floor of the world dungeon. Removing this item *will not* remove this status. Royal members of the Blood Sultanate will be required to slay the Sultan and *all* other members of the royal family before descending to the tenth floor. You'll only want to wear this if you're a blood-thirsty, raging psychopath.

"That…" I began. "I'm not so sure you should've put that on."

"It's purple," Donut said. "Purple is my color. Do you know how many purple ribbons I've won? Do you know what it takes to get a purple ribbon?"

"What does fleeting mean?" I asked Mordecai. "And why is there an asterisk by 'unique?'"

Donut had received a few more boxes from learning the spell and putting on the tiara. It was all low-tier potions and torches. She sorted through the items now, hissing with displeasure each time she received another torch.

"Fleeting means it'll crumble to dust the moment she takes it off. If that happens, another crown will be generated somewhere else in the dungeon. Now that it's on her, don't let her take it off. If another crawler gets the crown, it'll just be one more person you'll have to kill to get off that floor."

The idea of having to fight actual people hadn't occurred to me. Would that really happen? The thought of it made me sick. I looked at Donut.

"What the hell am I going to do now?" I asked, shaking my head. The tutorial was over, and I knew it. We'd have to go back out there.

"It's quite simple, really," Donut said. "You need to assist me to this 18th level, so I can exit this hellscape and resume my rightful place as liege. I am assuming this rat creature won't be able to travel with us," she lifted her paw and pointed it at me, "so you have been promoted from manservant to bodyguard. Congratulations, Carl."

Princess Donut has named your party The Royal Court of Princess Donut.

Princess Donut has changed your title to Royal Bodyguard.

Princess Donut has changed her title to Grand Champion Best in Dungeon.

"*Really*?"

Mordecai laughed. "She has the highest combined stat total, so she's the designated party leader. As such, she has more control over the party menu. Don't worry. The titles don't mean anything." He paused, suddenly serious. "Listen up, kid. She's quite a bit more powerful than you are right now, so you'll want to stick together. At least until you get to the ninth floor. That… That will be a challenge. You can always leave the party. That crown is on her head, not yours."

Donut walked up to the door and scratched at it. It opened on its own.

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Time to Level Collapse: Four days, 20 hours.

And with no additional fanfare, we left the guild and struck out into the dungeon.

"By the way," Mordecai said as we left. "Now that I've successfully trained both of you, if you enter any additional training guilds, you'll be transported back to this room. I'm now your registered guide, so feel free to come back here if you have any additional questions. You'll lose access to me once you hit the fourth floor."

"Yeah, take care," I said. "Good luck out in the universe once this is over."

Mordecai looked at me sadly. "Yeah, good luck to you, too." He grasped my jacket and met my eyes and then whispered, "It's not worth it, no matter what they tell you. Not until floor 12, and even then, negotiate as much as you can. Remember that."

He slammed the door, and my mind reeled. What did that mean? Was he saying it was better to die than to take whatever exit they offered on floors 10 and 11? Did that even matter? Floor 10. Who was Mordecai kidding? Three million people had died in this place in

the very first hour. I wasn't expecting to survive until the next floor opened up..

"Okay," Donut said, "here's what we're going to do. You're going to walk that way, and if we get attacked by anything, you protect me."

"Wandering aimlessly? That's the plan?" I asked.

"We have approximately 29 hours before these aliens air their television show. That means we have 29 hours to do something absolutely spectacular. But," Donut added, "first we need to find you some pants. I will not be presented to the universe in such a fashion. I can just see the comments now on the Martian social media." She mocked an alien voice. "'Beautiful cat, Blorg. But why isn't her bodyguard wearing pants?'"

I sighed and started moving down the hall. We headed back the way we'd come before, back toward the main thoroughfare. This entire area was scorched black from the explosion of the goblin dozer. The smear of blood from where the dozer had run over the goblin remained. Everything else had been destroyed in the explosion.

"You know, you're not wearing pants, either," I said after a moment.

"Nor am I wearing a cloak that makes me look like I won a participation trophy at the special needs comic con, Carl. I'm a cat. Cats don't wear pants. Don't be so droll."

We came to the conjunction, and I warily looked around the corner. I didn't see anything. This hallway was lit by torches, not the green lichen, so it was much brighter. It seemed completely abandoned in either direction. We stepped out into the wide tunnel.

"Now, I know your simple mind is telling you to just keep…"

"Okay," I said, turning on the cat. "I was struggling with this decision earlier, but this… transformation… or whatever has happened has made this much easier. I'm going to go that way," I pointed east, "and you're going to go any other direction than that. Good luck."

"What?" Donut said. "You want to separate? I don't understand."

"Look," I said. "Mordecai said you're a lot more powerful than I am. Great. That means you'll probably be okay. More okay than me." I leaned in. "But I would rather just get this over with and get squished by a goblin bulldozer than spend another second dealing with this bullshit. Cats are assholes. I get it. But do you know why people like cats, despite their asshole-ness? It's because *they don't fucking talk*. If they did, and they were all like you, they'd all be extinct because we'd have killed you all by now." I pulled up my menu and tried to figure out how to remove myself from the party.

"Wait, Carl, wait. Don't. I'm sorry. Wait."

"What?" I said.

The cat sat on the floor. She seemed to deflate. "I'm sorry. You're right. I… It's just… Have you ever woken up from a long dream, one where you're one thing, and now that you're awake, it takes you a moment to realize that's not who you really are?"

I just looked at her.

"Okay, when I woke up back there, I had all my memories, of all my time being me. Of sitting in that window, looking outside, of watching television all day long, of all the hours in the carrier in back of Miss Beatrice's car, traveling to those horrid yet wonderful shows, of being told what a princess I am. And then, suddenly, my mind looked back on all of it, and I understood what had happened. I *am* a grand champion, Carl. I'm supposed to act a certain way. But sitting in your lap, watching you get fragged over and over in *Call of Duty*? I like that, too. I mean, you really suck at that game, but you keep playing. I didn't realize it at the time, but I liked that."

"So, what are you saying? That you're not a crazy, stuck-up, asshole princess?"

"Oh, I am a princess, Carl. But I'll try not to be too much of an asshole. I need you. And you need me, okay? Look, I'm really scared here. I don't want to be alone. And I know you, and you don't want to be alone, either. I saw you the other day, looking at the map on your computer, and then at those apartments on Craigslist."

"What do you mean?" I asked, but I knew exactly what she meant.

"There was that day when the passes were clear. You could've taken me back to Miss Beatrice's parents, but you didn't want to. You were looking at apartments, making sure they allowed cats. You were thinking about catnapping me."

I just looked at her. It's exactly what I had been doing, but I hadn't even admitted it to myself.

"It wouldn't have worked, by the way. Her dad would've gotten me back right away."

I sighed. That was true, too. Bea's dad was a lawyer out of Yakima.

"Okay," I said. "Let's keep moving." We kept travelling. The minimap showed the cardinal directions, and we headed east. I kept an eye out for any special rooms or other dots.

"Yeah, anyway, I'm not wearing pants because you decided to jump out the window," I said after a few minutes of us traveling in silence. That reminded me, and I felt in my pocket. Yes! A pack of Marlboro Reds. I still had half a pack left. I still had my Zippo. I'd also received a lighter from that goblin box, so now I had two. I had the urge to pull the pack out right then, but I knew I probably wouldn't get any more cigarettes ever again. I had to conserve them.

"If I hadn't jumped out the window, we'd both be dead right now."

"Why did you jump, anyway?"

"Stop," Donut hissed. "There's something down there."

We'd passed by multiple conjunctions and alleys. Everything in this maze was featureless so far. I saw no signs of life whatsoever. We stopped now by a thin alleyway, similar to the one that had hidden the goblin dozer. It was completely pitch black in there. On my map, the alley led down to another conjunction, then several more tributaries. The map only revealed so much of the area, so I couldn't see past there.

There were no red dots or anything like that. Not that I could see.

"What is it?"

Donut leaped up off the ground and landed on my shoulder. I suppressed an *oof*. She wasn't nearly as heavy as she used to be when she did that. Then I remembered my strength was much higher than before. She curled her long, fluffy tail around my neck and glared. A low growl escaped her throat.

"What? What do you see?"

Thwump! Thwump!

Two bolts shot out of Donut's eyes, one after another. They were like laser blasts from a sci-fi movie. I was so surprised that I almost fell backward. Instead, I just stumbled a little. I remembered she had that *Magic Missile* spell.

The first bolt hit the rocky wall of the alley, sending bits of rock and smoke showering. The second was better aimed and traveled the length of the tunnel before splashing against something that howled with pain. It was too far away for me to see what it was, but the moment the missile hit it, a red dot appeared on my map.

"Okay, there it is. Go get it," Donut said.

"Yeah, maybe next time wait until we know what it is before we start randomly shooting at it. What if that'd been a person?"

The creature made a deep rumble that was half bleat, half roar and started galloping down the alley toward us. Whatever it was, it was big.

"That's quite obviously not a person, Carl," Donut said.

Shit, shit, shit. The thing was really booking it now.

"Shoot another missile!" I said

A third magic missile shot forth from Donut, this one hitting it directly in the chest. The creature staggered and cried out in pain, obviously hurt. But it kept coming. In the moment it was lit up by the pulse blast, I could distinctly see what it was. I got a good enough view for the info box to pop up.

Bad Llama. Level 3.

It's a llama, but it's bad. If he were human, he'd be covered in prison tattoos and would be hanging out in front of the Circle K hitting on 14-year-old girls. They might be willing to sell you something if you have good stuff to trade.

You won't want to get hit by their spit.

“Goddamnit, Donut!” I cried, jumping back from the alleyway entrance.

A red, baseball-sized ball of spit blasted out of the hallway and splattered across the floor. It sizzled where it hit, and the stones of the rocky floor turned crimson.

Lava. The llama was shooting lava out of its mouth.

I balled my fists. Mordecai had said my punches were more powerful than either of the weapons I had, but the idea of fighting a fucking llama with my bare hands was ridiculous. I had the fingerless gloves I’d received in a loot box, but they offered no armor protection.

“You’re gonna have to shoot it again!” I said.

“I can’t!” Donut said. “I’m out of mana!”

“Didn’t you get a mana potion?” I cried as the llama emerged.

The damn llama was even bigger than I expected. It was as large as a horse. The creature had giant yellow buck teeth. It turned its scorched and tan-colored head to glare at me. One of its eyes had been blown off by the missile. Black and red ichor poured down the side of its face. It had the debuff **Septic** pulsing over its head. The powerful debuff was similar to poison. It worked faster, but it couldn’t be stacked, and unlike poison, it could be healed with a simple healing spell or potion.

The llama’s health was already about 3/4's gone. Donut howled and leaped off my shoulder as the llama reared back to spit again. The thing’s neck glowed red.

I hit it with an uppercut and a left hook right in the face. I felt bones crunch. My left hand exploded in pain, and I didn’t know if the crunching bones were in the llama’s face, in my hand, or both. Probably both.

It grunted with surprise and unleashed its gob of spit just as his head turned away from me. I felt the heat of the lava ball sail over my shoulder. I stepped in and punched it again. A right jab directly in its glowing throat.

The creature dropped like a sack of hammers. It tried to cry out, but nothing but gurgling came out. I jumped back as the fur and skin around its neck erupted in red flames.

I had ruptured whatever the hell was in its throat that made the lava.

The llama continued to gurgle and make pitiful sounds as its health plummeted. A moment later, it was dead.

The lava around its throat started to rapidly cool, filling the hallway with an acrid, sulfur-like stench.

My left hand was broken. It throbbed in pain, but thanks to my regeneration ability, it was already knitting itself. I pulled up my health menu and looked at the pie chart. I could zoom in on that specific injury, and it gave me a detailed explanation on everything that was happening.

My regeneration skill did a triage of my injuries, healing the most important items first. It was just my left hand along with some abrasions on my right hand. I could adjust the menu and give healing priority to other parts too. After a minute, I was good as new.

"I dealt 71% of the damage," Donut said, "It's telling me I get to pick loot first."

The corpse blinked, and an info box popped up.

Lootable Corpse. Bad Llama. Level 3. Killed by Crawler Grand Champion Best in Dungeon Princess Donut with an assist by Crawler Royal Bodyguard Carl.

Poor Llama skin.

Uncooked Llama steaks X2.

Baggie of trailer park-grade meth X2.

The skin disappeared from the inventory menu along with one of the steaks. The corpse's skin disappeared, leaving just a gross pile of muscle.

"Your turn," Donut said.

"Meth?" I said. I laughed at how absurd it was. I added the rest of the items to my inventory. My inventory added two new menus: **Food Items** and **Pharmaceuticals**.

I had a couple new achievements. One for looting a corpse and one for sharing experience. I received a pair of Bronze Adventurer boxes. Donut got the same, plus a couple additional achievements

for casting her first spell and finally killing something, along with killing a mob higher level than herself.

"That was no good," Donut declared as we continued our trek east. "Sloppy. You can't be injuring yourself every time we get into a minor tussle."

"Minor tussle? We need to be more cautious," I said. "We can't just blindly stumble around."

"No, we need to level up," Donut said. "And we need to do it quickly. I'm starting to think this main road is not the best choice for traveling or fighting."

She jumped down a random hallway and I had to rush to keep up. A few turns later, and we were far from the main thoroughfare. Here, the walls were tighter and the ceiling much lower. The whole place glowed green from the lichen on the walls. Some of the halls curved and met dead ends. But thanks to the map, which built itself as we went, it was easy to keep from getting too lost.

The whole place was eerily barren. Occasionally I heard a screeching noise coming from the distance, and once I heard something that sounded like a man screaming at the top of his lungs, followed by gunfire. But it was far away, and I couldn't tell exactly from where. We traveled like this for what seemed like hours, not coming across anybody or anything except a few random tutorial guilds. And bathrooms. The bathrooms were everywhere.

It was the strangest thing. There seemed to be a bathroom door about once every quarter mile or so. Each doorway was different, and it appeared the doors were taken from actual bathrooms in restaurants and bars and buildings from around the world. Some had the symbol for men or women on them. One had a hand-written sign in what looked like Korean. Another had a note saying it was for paying customers only.

I opened the first four bathrooms we came across, and each one was the same inside. A silver toilet and a roll of toilet paper. No sink, no mirror. Just a toilet and barely enough room to sit down in. No matter how wide or thin the door was, the room was the same each time. After the third room, I began to suspect it *was* the same room. To test it, I took the roll of toilet paper and pulled it out, dipping the

end into the bowl of the waterless toilet. The next one we passed, I opened it up, and sure enough, the toilet paper remained dipped in the bowl.

After I closed the door, I had Donut open it up. She could open and shut doors just by looking at them as long as she was close enough. She opened the door I'd just been in, but this time it was a knee-high cubicle featuring a litterbox.

"Oh good, I gotta wee," Donut said, entering the room and shutting the door. She emerged thirty seconds later, trailing litter all over the place. She looked over her shoulder at me. "You should go. You look like you need to go."

What I really needed to do was sleep. The initial adrenaline rush from all of this was finally coming down, and I was exhausted. I'd only slept an hour or so before I'd woken up last night. *Last night? It was barely five hours ago or so*. In my health menu it listed me as **Fatigued**. It didn't cure itself with my regeneration. We had to find one of the rest areas. Mordecai said they were all over the place. We could set up a temporary base of operations there and explore the area cautiously and deliberately. This aimless wandering was going to get us into big trouble sooner rather than later.

A couple minutes later, we were beset by a group of level two rats. There were five of them, and the screeching, hissing creatures were about half the size of Donut. The monsters weren't too big, but the bastards were *huge* for rats. They bit and scratched, and one even inflicted me with a **Poison** debuff that only lasted for a second before my cloak canceled it out.

I ended up defeating them by punting them against the wall one by one. They hit the wall and exploded like water balloons. Their deaths were over-the-top, overly gory, almost like their bodies contained twice as much blood as they should.

Donut had leveled up to two after the llama battle. It appeared we received experience equal with the percentage of how much we participated in the battle. But the number wasn't exactly equal with how much damage we dealt. I suspected support activities such as tanking and healing also counted, though we didn't have nearly enough data to figure out if that was accurate or not. It also

appeared that simply being in a party with someone and present at the battle garnered a nominal amount of experience. With the rats, I received nearly enough to level me up to three.

Donut, who hadn't lifted a paw to help me, spent the next five minutes bitching about how her "mentorship" should've counted for more experience.

The cat was definitely making an effort to be less abrasive, but she was still a cat. She had a reckless streak to her, and a quick mouth, often making quips before realizing what she'd said. But she was also showing very cat-like signs of affection, too. One time I stopped and leaned up against a wall to rest, and she spent the time purring and rubbing up against my legs. I looked down at her, and she returned my gaze. "What?" she said.

By the time we finally found a safe room, we had participated in ten more skirmishes, all against rats and these large cockroach things called Scatterers. The bugs were the size of and shape of a loaf of bread. We didn't receive any additional loot of interest except multiple rat pelts, and one cockroach dropped an item called a Scatterer Carapace which added itself to my Crafting Items menu. I killed every single one of them with my bare feet. I punted the rats and jumped on top of the cockroaches. The bug mobs crunched like potato chips under my feet.

While I did most of the fighting, Donut now made an effort to fire one magic missile each fight from the safety of my shoulder. Her skill level in the spell went up to three. I spent a moment examining her stats. My view was limited, but I could see she currently had a 17 in intelligence, giving her 17 mana points. Each zap of her spell cost five mana points. For me, the spell points regenerated very, very slowly, making magic almost useless. Donut regenerated much faster, at about one point a minute. I didn't know why she generated the points more quickly, but one a minute was still pretty slow. Most of these fights were decided in seconds.

I hit level three and gained a skill called Foot Soldier, and a second one called Smush.

The Foot Soldier skill increased the damage I dealt by kicking.

The Smush skill was… something else.

The voice reading the skill description was deeper, more throaty than usual. I could actually hear him breathing like he was a dude beating himself off while he said it.

Smush: Skill Level 3

Killing with your feet. Your bare, beautiful feet.

Taking your bare foot, placing it on top of a living, conscious life, and then pressing lovingly down until that life ceases to be. Is there a more noble way to kill?

The amount of pressure you can bring to bear upon an enemy with your unshod foot is increased by 10% with each level of this skill.

I remembered the weird message I'd received before when I'd jumped on the goblin engineer. I'd thought it was just a throwaway joke, like most of the descriptions. But it seemed the AI—or whatever it was that controlled the game messages—really did have some sort of foot fetish. It was fucking weird.

"I guess we're not getting you shoes," Donut said after I made the mistake of describing the skill to the cat.

"Yes, we are. As soon as possible," I said.

"It sounds to me like the computer fancies you," Donut said. "Or your feet, at least. We'll need to take advantage of that. If the system likes us, then maybe it'll go easier on us."

"It makes me uncomfortable," I said.

"Being eaten by a bugbear makes *me* uncomfortable, Carl. So if your boyfriend ogling your tootises keeps these easy-peasy bugs coming at us instead of more of those lava-spitting llamas, then you better buck up, get over your human male privilege, and take one for your princess."

"Take one for my princess," I muttered as she cackled with laughter.

I saw the safe room glowing green on the edge of the minimap, and we angled our way toward there as we continued to argue.

The Scatterers were becoming more frequent, and I knew the main nest had to be nearby. At least I hoped that was what was happening, and that Donut wasn't right. A single level four cockroach scuttled away at our approach, disappearing toward a

large, round cavern that was just past the entrance to the safe room. We didn't pursue it, choosing to head toward safety.

We entered the safe room.

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Entering Safe Room.

We entered the room, and both of us stopped at the entrance, gaping.

"What is this magical place?" Donut asked, jumping from my shoulder, her tail swishing about with excitement. "That's the biggest cat tree I've ever seen!"

"It's not a cat tree," I said. "It's the playground."

We were in a fast food restaurant. It was almost like a McDonald's, but instead of everything being red and yellow, it was white and blue. The playground with the massive slide and tunnel system and ball pit were straight out of my own childhood. The signs on the walls were in a weird language, Polish maybe. Pictures of plastic toys from some cartoon movie indicated this month's prize inside their off-brand happy meals. I couldn't remember the movie's name, but I recognized the hippopotamus and ferret thing. The movie was new, just released.

They had taken a complete, intact fast food restaurant from some random country, and placed it here underground.

We'd come in through a main entrance. Large windows surrounded the empty restaurant, but the glass showed nothing but

solid wall beyond. Three large screens stood directly above the counter where the menu would normally be.

But instead of a menu, the screens contained information about the game in Syndicate common language. Donut bounded toward the play area, disappearing into the colorful children's maze while I read the screens.

The first was a countdown until the level collapse, which was in four days and 17 hours. The line below that read:

Countdown until the premiere of *Dungeon Crawler World: Earth*.

23 hours, 42 minutes.

Remaining Crawlers:

4,322,395.

I blinked at that. Holy hell. It had been 10 million just a few hours before. As I watched, the number just kept going lower and lower.

I looked down at my feet, which were bloody and covered in bits of bug chitin and that white goo that came out of the bigger ones. We'd been lucky so far. We'd found some good gear and had survived several attacks. Weren't these other people working together? It seemed like too many people had died. I shuddered.

I swallowed and continued to examine the signs.

The next screen over read:

Leaderboard:

Leaderboard will populate upon collapse of the third level.

The third screen read:

Welcome to the Safe Room. You are on the First Level.

Rental Rooms currently available: 20

Rental Room price: 0 gold.

Personal spaces will become available for purchase on the fourth level.

Food is available at this location.

Rooms available? I looked at the minimap, expanding it to fill my screen. The restaurant had three exits. There was the door we'd come in through, a second door on the opposite wall that had a

dotted line on the other side and an X over the door. I mentally clicked on it, and a box popped up.

Personal Spaces are not yet available.

That made it sound like I could buy an actual house or base of operations here. But if the floors kept collapsing, did that mean I'd have to buy a new one each floor?

Through the third door, which would've normally led outside, I could instead see a small hallway flanked by ten tiny rooms on each side. Mini hotel rooms, each no bigger than a closet. Sleeping spaces.

That's when I noticed the white dot on the map. I startled, realizing there was a creature standing right next to me, just behind the counter. I waved away the map and looked. A furry creature with a paper hat stood there, barely taller than the counter, which explained why I'd missed him. I examined his properties.

Tally – Bopca Protector. Level 63.

Caretaker of this saferoom.

This is a Non-Combatant NPC.

Bopca Protectors are magical, gnome-like creatures who exist solely to watch over Safe Rooms. They do everything from scrub the toilets to prepare your food. They are surly, smelly, and they never wash their hands.

I cautiously approached the counter. The hairy dwarf didn't move, like he was a statue. His hair was brown, but it had an odd, almost green tinge to it. The creature had so much hair on his face that I could only see his black eyes and his bulbous nose, which was covered with angry, red veins. He smelled vaguely of wet moss. He wore a blue apron, a plain paper hat, and he had a nametag that read, "Tally."

"Hi there," I said.

"Do you wish for food?" he said, his voice louder than I expected. The creature had a Slavic accent. Not quite Russian, but close.

"Uh, what do you have?" I asked, looking back up at the menu board, which hadn't changed. "Is there a list somewhere? Sorry, I'm new here."

“Tally knows you are new here. This dungeon has just opened. It opened without warning, so Tally is not ready. But I am ready enough to make most food for human crawler. Tally is prepared, has been preparing for many of your years to make food for human crawlers.” He leaned, raising up on his toes to look at Donut who was bouncing about in the ball pit. “I am not prepared for cat. But I have milk. Is better than pet biscuit.”

“Actually, she really likes yogurt,” I said. “I’m not supposed to give her too much. Bea gets…” I paused. “Cats need meat to survive.”

“Will you be renting room?” The creature barely moved a muscle when he talked. It unnerved me.

“Yes,” I said. “I know our time is limited, but I need to sleep.”

“I shall give yogurt to cat. I will have meat for cat when you wake. But I can make food for you now if you wish.”

“Sure,” I said. “You really have yogurt?”

“Yes. What is it you wish for?”

I realized, at that moment, that I was starving. “Is there anything you recommend?”

A pause. “You wish me to make food of my choice?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Why not? As long as it’s not any sort of fish. I’ve had enough fish to last two lifetimes.”

Tally nodded by barely moving his chin. “What is your spice tolerance? One to five?”

“Uh, are we talking human spice tolerance? I like spicier, so four. But only if it’s on a human scale.”

“It is a human scale. Now sit. Open boxes. Wait. Tally will bring you food, then you sleep.” He placed a fast food cup and a small paper bowl on the counter and then nodded at a row of self-serve soda machines before turning and waddling toward the back.

My choices at the soda machine were something called Hoop Cola, water, milk, vodka, and something called Warka, which I determined to be beer after I tapped the lever. I was tempted by the beer, but I went with water. I filled the little bowl with water as well. I took a sip, and I was surprised at how cold, how pure it tasted. I shook my head and sat at a booth.

I'd received multiple boxes, including a silver Adventurer Box for finding my first safe room. I spent the next several minutes sifting through the mostly useless loot. Potion, potion, torch, bandages—that was new. They stopped Bleed effects. I didn't know if my troll skin shirt stopped that or not.

It was all the same stuff except for a silver ring I found in the silver box. The ring gave me +1 to my constitution, bringing the stat up to 10.

Donut jumped up on the table while we waited. She drank a bit while I finished examining my loot. She had several boxes as well, including a gold magic item box she'd received for being one of the first 100 crawlers to level *Magic Missile* up to level three.

In the box was 25 potions of mana restoration and a collar charm. The charm was a little silver butterfly. Donut squeaked in delight when she received it. It even had a little ring on it so it'd easily attach to her collar. The charm jingled when it moved.

I shook my head. The game really was tailoring the prizes toward the crawler.

"You don't want to wear a damn bell around your neck. Do you know why people put them on cats? So the birds and squirrels can hear them sneaking up on them."

"It's adorable," Donut announced as the charm poofed onto her collar ring. "And I am wearing it."

I examined the charm's properties.

Talisman of the Slate Butterfly

Those who remember and commemorate the sad tale of the Slate Butterfly are given a boon by the fairies of the world. That story even made *me* cry.

Adds +4 to the Light on Your Feet skill. Adds +1 to Intelligence. Winged fairies will no longer be automatically hostile toward you.

I had no idea what the tale of the Slate Butterfly was, but I had to admit it was a good item. But was it worth the extra noise we would make? I didn't know. I wasn't exactly the king of stealth, either.

The Light on Your Feet skill simply meant she'd be able to pounce higher and farther. She was already a three in the skill when she'd received it, so the charm made her a seven. The moment she put it on, she went bounding back toward the play area and jumped all the way to the top of the plastic tubes, a leap that was twice as high as she'd been able to go before. She spent the next ten minutes with the zoomies, rushing around the play area like she had when she was a kitten.

Shit, that had been what? Four years ago?

"Hey," I called. "Be careful! Don't forget you still gotta land!"

Tally emerged from the kitchen holding two trays. He waddled from around the counter and placed them both on the table. "Eat."

Donut had a simple bowl filled with white yogurt. She returned to the table and sniffed it suspiciously.

"What is this?" I asked, poking at my food with a plastic fork. It smelled delicious.

"Murgh Vindaloo, spice level four. Boneless chicken cubes simmered in velvety sweet and sour vindaloo sauce. Also potatoes and other spices. It is on top of biryani rice, and I have also made garlic and spinach naan. I apologize I do not have lamb. They took my lamb for a mob in preparation for the second floor." He turned to Donut. "Also, Your Royal Highness, I have special ordered a fresh salmon for your meal upon waking. I will have it properly prepared and diced and garnished for you later."

"*Your highness*?" I said.

"Thank you, Tally." Donut said. "Oh, and Tally?"

"Yes, Your Highness?" he asked, bowing slightly.

"Please make sure Carl and I have the best appointed room for our convalescence this evening. That'll be all."

"I'm pretty sure they're all the same," I said. "Also, you don't want a room of your own?"

"Of course, Your Highness," Tally said and turned away.

I looked at the cat, and she blinked and tilted her fuzzy head, her approximation of a shrug. "It's not my fault he sees me as royalty."

I took a bite of the food, and I immediately forgot everything else in the world. It was literally the most delicious thing I had ever

tasted. I'd never been a huge Indian food fan, but holy shit. It was just the right level of heat. I devoured it in minutes.

Tally had returned to his post at the counter and remained there, unmoving.

"Dude," I said. "This was the best thing I've ever eaten!"

He nodded slightly.

"Are you going to be in all the safe rooms?"

"No," he said. "When this floor collapses, I will move to a random floor in the dungeon. When that floor collapses, I will move down until I am no longer needed." He didn't elaborate further.

"Well, I'm thinking we're going to stay here the next couple of days," I said. I fought the urge to lick the plate. Could he really make anything in the world?

The world is gone.

A wave of sadness washed over me, unexpectedly. I took a deep breath. I pulled out the pack of cigarettes from my pocket and was about to light one when a loud, but firm, "Nope," from behind the counter made me put it away.

"We can't stay here," Donut said. "We need to keep moving."

"I have an idea," I said. "I think there's a nest of those Scatterer bugs just next door. I say we spend our time here and try to clear out the nest. Surely we'll get some experience. Once the entrances to the next level down show up, we'll go searching for a staircase. But until then we have a spot to sleep, a supply of good food, and a nearby source of experience. I think this is a good place."

"Okay," she said after a moment. "But we need to come up with a snappy way to kill them. Something exciting, yet cute. Something with zest. I want on that show, Carl."

"We're not getting on the show," I said.

"Weren't you paying attention? Millions of followers! Loot boxes! We *need* to get on that show. Maybe we need a catchphrase."

I sighed.

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Time to Level Collapse: 4 days, 3 hours.

I SLEPT MUCH LONGER THAN I PLANNED. THE ROOMS WERE SMALL, BUT NOT claustrophobic like the dungeon bathrooms or the racks in a Coast Guard cutter. The bed was more comfortable than I expected. The white cotton sheets smelled brand new and faintly like laundry detergent. And while the halls of the dungeon were humid and stuffy, the temperature in the rooms was a bit chilly, just how I liked it. Donut insisted upon sleeping in the room with me. As usual, she slept on my neck.

I didn't dare take off my shirt or cloak, though I knew I was supposed to be safe. Once my head hit the pillow, I was out. I didn't dream, wasn't haunted by nightmares like most nights.

I awakened feeling refreshed and full of energy. I looked at the countdown time, astonished that I'd slept 10 hours straight. I hadn't slept that long without waking in at least five years. It took the literal end of the world to finally give me a full night's rest.

Donut yawned deeply and rolled onto her side as I sat up. "Go back to bed," she said sleepily. "I need several more hours. That is an order from your princess."

"Get up," I said. "Tally is making you food, remember?"

That perked her up.

The bathrooms in the restaurant had stalls for showers with soap and shampoo dispensers. There was also cheap, disposable razors and shaving cream. I finally peeled my clothes off and took a long, warm shower. I stayed until the water no longer ran black. I shaved. There were no towels, however, and I had to drip dry.

My internal clock was already broken. I knew it was nighttime again on the planet's surface, but when I saw the plate with bacon, eggs, and pancakes, I sat down and inhaled it all. It *felt* like breakfast time. It *felt* like a new day.

I wondered about those who'd survived but didn't go into the tunnels. How were they faring? Especially folks in the area of the winter storm. With no shelter, they'd have to build one from scratch. With no electricity, they'd have to make fires. And how much available food would there be? Probably not much. Even most of the animals like chickens and pigs were probably in coops and barns during the collapse.

Across from me, Donut was eating her third plate of salmon pâté.

I'd been deliberately avoiding looking up at the board, but I did now. 4,148,111. How soon before my number would be ticked away?

I tried asking Tally some general questions about the dungeon, but he refused to answer. He'd only answer questions directly relating to the Safe Rooms.

"If I buy a personal space, will it transfer from level to level?"

"Yes, it will," he said. "And from safe space to safe space. Also, it's best to buy all the accessories as soon as you can. Some of the items only upgrade when it goes down a level, so if you wait several levels before you purchase a crafting table, it won't get as strong as one purchased earlier."

Soon thereafter, we left to hunt for some bugs.

Outside, the hall was just the same as before. I looked warily about for red dots, but I didn't see any of the bugs. I stepped a bit from the entrance, and I pulled out a cigarette and lit it, sighing deeply. I counted, and I had nine left after this one.

"Really, Carl. Must you light that? You know how I feel about them."

"Jesus, Donut," I said. "You're worse than Bea."

"While Miss Beatrice and I don't always see eye-to-eye on certain policy decisions of the household, I must agree with her on this one. Cigarettes are disgusting."

"Well, there are only nine left, so you won't have to suffer…"

I stopped dead as the trio of Scatterers rounded the corner, chittering as they approached. It was two level twos and a level four that was larger than the others. This third bug was almost the size of Donut. I wouldn't be squishing this one with my foot.

Scatterer Brood Guardian. Level 4.

Cockroaches that have been baptized in rage and Monster Energy drinks.

Like its smaller brethren, the Scatterer Brood Guardian is a giant bug who wants nothing more than to fuck you up. Unlike his little brother, these guys are dangerous.

Shit. That doesn't sound good.

I really didn't want to fight this thing with my hands. Despite knowing I did less damage this way, I pulled out my toad cudgel and clasped it in my hand while Donut blasted the large cockroach three times with a magic missile. It hissed and rolled back a few times, its health knocked down by half.

"Want me to hit it again?" Donut asked. "I'll have to down a mana potion."

"No," I said, relieved that the missiles did so much damage. "I'll take it."

I stomped forward with my foot, crushing both the smaller roaches.

The brood guardian jumped back up and charged again. It was fast, but I was ready for it. It skittered forward, mandible-antennae things thrashing. I swung the cudgel down at its head. The rounded edge of my weapon bounced off the creature, which hissed and fell back.

The hit didn't appear to do much damage. Plus I had to awkwardly bend down to use it. I quickly switched to my poker to

see if that'd be better. It charged again, and I stabbed with the iron stick. Its giant head knocked the poker right out of my hand, and it went flying.

This place has the shittiest weapons.

I stepped back and snap kicked, hitting the roach right under its little, semicircle head. It squealed. The kick did more damage than the magic missile. I swept forward, continuing to kick at it while it shrank back. Donut leaped off my shoulder with a hiss as I jumped in the air, coming down hard on its back.

The cockroach exploded like a balloon filled with coconut pudding.

"Goddamnit," I said, looking at the goo on my feet.

Donut crept forward and sniffed the remains. It didn't leave anything lootable.

"The level 4 ones aren't too hard to kill," Donut said. "Oh, he just smells awful."

I looked at the map. A couple curves of the halls led to the large room. It looked as if there was a door, too.

"Okay, this is what we're going to do," I said as I went to retrieve my poker. The damn thing was useless, and I shoved it in my inventory. "We'll wait until your mana refills, then we're going to creep toward that main room and peek inside. If it's too much to handle, we'll run back here and rush into the safe room."

"The safe room door won't open if mobs are outside," Donut said.

"We'll be fast."

"That's fine," she said after a moment. "Just remember I can run a lot faster than you."

We ended up killing a couple dozen more of the level 4 Scatterers before we reached the door. We found a hit to the face with a magic missile just before it lunged would stun it. I'd punch down a few times and then stomp the head. Stomping the head almost always resulted in a critical hit. We received several vials of something called Scatterer Hemolymph, which looked like the white goo that came out of them when they died. The system identified it as an alchemy material.

Every once in a while, the Scatterer would get inflicted with Sepsis when it was hit by the magic missile. When that happened, it would turn and try to run off. It would usually collapse and die after it took about thirty steps.

Both Donut and I were level 5 when we got to the door.

For me, the higher levels didn't really mean anything. I received three stat points every time I leveled, but I couldn't distribute them yet. The only thing that helped was that my Pugilism, Unarmed Combat, Foot Soldier, and Smush skills were all level 5 now also.

Because of Donut's special buff, she was growing with each level up. Her strength was at 15. Now when she jumped onto me, I could feel the strength of her claws on my shoulder, even through the leather jacket and trollskin shirt.

"Do you have any sort of slashing skill?" I asked. "You know, something with your claws?"

"Of course I do," Donut said. "My Slice Attack is at level four, and my Back Claw is also level four."

"Okay, good," I said. "You can help if we get into trouble. Your strength is way higher than mine. You should get in there once your magic runs out."

The door at the end of the tunnel didn't have any sort of official sign on my minimap. We crept toward it, going as silently as possible. Donut's little bell jingled with each step. The room beyond was large and round shaped, probably about 1,500 square feet. The door itself was old and grimy with a doorknob that appeared to be hanging on by a single bolt. While it wasn't labeled on the minimap, there *was* a paper sign attached to the door written in Spanish. It looked like some sort of official notice. The sign was old and weathered, and it looked like it had been there awhile.

"No entrar," I whispered, squinting at the sign. "I think that means do not enter. The next part 'por orden del Centro de Salud,' I don't know. By order of something, I think. Can you read it?"

Donut just looked at me like it was the stupidest question she'd ever been asked.

"It doesn't matter," I whispered. "Okay. We're cracking the door and looking inside."

The doorknob didn't work, and the door wasn't fully latched. I pushed it open as slowly as I could. The door screeched, and I cringed.

The room was pitch black. I couldn't see a damn thing. I heard rustling, so I knew there was something in there, but I couldn't see what it was.

Donut was standing completely still, her hair poofed out like when she was freaked out.

"What do you see?" I asked.

"There's a lot of level one and two cockroaches in there. Lots and lots of them. But there's other stuff in there, and I can't tell what it is. It looks like piles of garbage. It smells like that bag you take with you on those days that other guy comes over to the apartment. You know, like socks. But hundreds of them. I don't see anything else. Light a torch and throw it in there."

"Wait, what?" I said. "Are you talking about my gym bag? Some guy was coming over to the apartment when I was at the gym?"

"Focus, Carl. Light a torch."

"Actually," I said, "I have a better idea."

I couldn't believe it. Actually, I *could* believe it. It was my own fault. I should have broken up with her long ago. I felt like an idiot. I also suddenly felt very reckless.

"Get ready to run," I said as I pulled out the stick of goblin dynamite. The red stick was wet and sticky on the outside, like it was sweating. I examined its properties.

The game show voice whispered the description:

Goblin Dynamite.

This stuff is especially volatile. It's so volatile, you probably don't even need to light the wick to set it off. It's so volatile, even loud noises might set it off. Keep it in your inventory until you're ready to use it. Be gentle and don't squeeze too hard or else you might get the…

The AI didn't speak for a good two seconds.

BOOM!

The AI shouted that last word in my head, and I almost pissed myself. I stood still for several moments, my heart thrashing.

"You are a fucking asshole," I whispered up at the air.

"Okay," I whispered to Donut. "Run now. I'm right behind you."

Donut scampered away as I carefully pulled my Zippo. I lit the long wick, which started hissing and popping like a sparkler. I tossed the dynamite into the room, throwing it as hard as I could. I turned, and I ran.

I prayed it wouldn't blow when it hit the ground.

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It blew when it hit the ground.

I'd chucked the dynamite a pretty good distance into the large room, but I was only a few steps away from the door when it went off. *Bam*! The sudden, resounding concussion sent me flying. I hit the stone floor and bounced, sliding. The wooden door splintered, and a jagged hunk of wood ricocheted off my head. Stinking, billowing smoke poured through the entrance. Blood seeped from a cut deep in my scalp.

My vision flashed red, and I received a **DANGER LOW HEALTH** warning. But it quickly abated.

Behind me, I could hear the crackling of fire. I groaned, rolling onto my back as my health slowly kicked its way back up. I felt as if I'd been run over by that goblin bulldozer thing.

Donut appeared above me, looking down.

"Are you dead?" she asked.

"No," I said. "I don't think so."

"Then you better get up. Let's go see what we just killed."

I pulled myself up. Mordecai had said I'd be fully healed in two minutes, but two minutes was a long time when you were in pain. I had over a dozen healing potions now, but I didn't want to waste one just yet. Not when I didn't have to.

The room glowed red. I pulled a torch from my inventory. I went to grab my lighter, but a box appeared above the torch, asking if I wanted to activate it. Weird. It was different than the dynamite. I

mentally clicked **Yes**, and the torch lit on its own. A half-hour timer appeared and then faded as the bright, dancing flames engulfed the top half of the stick.

I paused at the entrance, peering inside. The room looked as if it was the interior of a dumpster. Mountains of trash rose to the ceiling. Multiple small fires burned, giving it a pulsating, red glow. I tossed the torch in, and the room lit up further.

I spied multiple bug pieces scattered about. My map populated with about three dozen x's indicating bug corpses. I didn't see any movement and red dots. I'd also received a ton of notifications, but they were all in the folder.

"I think we killed them all. Do you see anything?"

"Nope," Donut said, strolling into the room. She stopped a couple steps in, looking distastefully at her paw. She'd stepped on something that looked like a dirty diaper. "The only thing that smells worse than trash is burning trash. You made a real mess of this place."

I followed her in. Donut jumped to my shoulder and immediately began licking her paw. I pulled up the notifications as we cautiously moved deeper into the room. The ceiling was higher than out in the hall, almost as tall as the main corridor. Piles of garbage filled the room, stacked at least 15 feet tall. A black garbage bag was ripped open at my feet, and I could see fast food wrappers, soggy Spanish-language magazines, and empty cans within.

Why would they transfer garbage into here?

I stepped gingerly as to not cut my feet, but I already felt as if my feet were changing, becoming less sensitive to the bare ground. Before, I knew this would be pure agony. It was still uncomfortable, but it was getting better. And it was happening much more quickly than it would have before all this happened.

I'd received several skill upgrades just from that one move. Explosive handling. Dangerous Explosive Handling. Goblin Explosives. In addition, I'd received another Silver Goblin Box for killing more than 10 mobs with an explosive and a Gold Crowd Control Box for killing more than 15 mobs with the same attack. I'd

received a huge experience bonus for that, taking me almost up to level six.

I had one more notification, an achievement. I clicked on it.

"Do you hear music?" Donut asked, pausing her cleaning to look up at the ceiling.

New achievement! Boss Babe.

You have struck a blow against a dungeon boss and caused damage to it. Here's a fun fact. For crawlers who make it through the tutorial, this achievement is, by far, most often the last achievement they ever receive. Isn't that interesting?

***Reward*: Let's wait a few minutes before we decide on whether or not to waste a prize on you.**

Shing!

The door, which moments before had been blown to bits, magically reformed itself, locking us in the room. And just to hammer the matter home, silvery, glowing bars of metal appeared, locking it in place one by one with a *clink*, *clink*, *clink*. Three, skull-headed torches appeared, arising from the garbage heaps.

At the far end of the room, something rustled. Something big.

Music started playing, the sound filling the room. It was odd, intense, disjointed. It was like a harp playing with distortion with a heavy beat under it.

The ground rumbled as the announcement came.

Boss Battle!

You have discovered the lair of a Neighborhood Boss!

Put your game faces on ladies and gentlemen! *Aaaand* Here. We. Go!

The AI was louder than usual. He sounded like an announcer at a Monster Truck rally. Normally, I was only really hearing this stuff in my head. This time it was through an actual loudspeaker. It echoed, shaking the walls and the piles of garbage.

"Carl! Carl, I don't like this! Take me from here immediately!" Donut cried. She jumped from my shoulder and started scratching at the door, which would not open. "Carl, open the door this instant!"

I pushed myself against the back wall, waiting for the monster to emerge.

"Donut, get ready!" I cried. "Just start pumping it with magic missiles. Use your mana potions to refill yourself!"

Donut turned and panic-fired a missile, which bounced ineffectively against the sifting garbage pile.

"Wait until we see what it is first!"

The garbage exploded upward in a geyser of scorched trash bags. Bug parts and paper and food wrappers rained. A woman appeared, reaching into the air, screaming as she rocketed up like she'd been shot out of a cannon. She landed with a heavy crash twenty meters in front of us.

Donut and I looked at one another.

This was a human woman, about 35 years old, enormously fat. She wore a filthy and ripped t-shirt and no bra, and her skin was covered in open sores and scabs. A blue pair of sweatpants with the word PINK along the leg appeared to be stretched to their limits. Her black hair clung to her head in clumps. Like me, she wore no shoes.

She was also 15 feet tall.

She spied us cowering, and she screamed again.

Everything stopped the moment she screamed.

She froze, I froze, and Donut Froze. The only thing that kept moving was my mind, which raced.

What the actual…

A mugshot-style shot of my face in a round frame appeared floating in front of me, my name and level written under it. A second image of Donut appeared next to mine.

A huge **Versus** splattered into the air.

The Hoarder!

Level 7 Neighborhood Boss!

Trapped in her pile of rubbish, abandoned by society, the war inside her head has seeped out of her mind and infected both her body and her surroundings. Now nothing more than a garbage troll, the Hoarder is a horrific reminder of what can happen to those who fall out of the light!

Protected by her minions, she'll do anything to keep her precious stockpile safe!

The woman's title—The Hoarder—appeared in a stylized, metallic font with blood splattered around it. It was straight out of a fighting videogame. The moment the description ended, we could all move again. The giantess finished her scream and took a few steps toward us, garbage cascading around her with each step.

Half of the woman's face was burned to hell. She had a health bar over her head, and it was already 3/4's gone. I'd cheated the boss fight, killing her minions and hurting her before it even began.

"Ayúdame por favor," the woman cried, reaching for us. Her voice was deep, beefy. Scared. The giant woman sounded terrified. "No se que esta pasando. Me duele el estómago. No se donde estoy. Por favor, tengo miedo."

"Shit, I think she's a person," I said. "Like she was in her house when it happened, and they turned her into this thing. We should help her."

"Yeah, that'll be a no," Donut said. She shot a magic missile at the woman, who staggered as it exploded against her chest. The tattered remains of the woman's filthy t-shirt burned away, revealing pendulous, stretch-marked breasts that fell over a sagging, equally marred stomach. Her health barely nudged.

"Ayúdame!" the monster woman cried again. She made a gagging noise, and when she opened her mouth, a pair of level two Scatterers came out and charged at us, hissing.

"This is really disgusting," Donut said. She shot another missile at the woman, her third.

"Take a mana potion," I cried.

I punted a cockroach and then stomped the second. A bag of garbage softened the blow, and it didn't die. I stomped again. I cried out as a jagged hunk of metal tore my foot. The Scatterer hissed. *Fuck this*. I reached down and ripped its head right off the body. It came off with a *pop*, sending me flying backward. I hit the ground.

My hand grabbed something. I thought at first it was a bicycle chain. No, a leash. A metal, chain-linked leash. The kind people used for really scary dogs. I snatched it up, pulling. It was still attached to

the mummified remains of a large dog. It yanked out of the garbage like a monster leaping at me. *Jesus Christ*. I unhooked it and pulled myself to my feet.

"Okay," I said, looping the chain in my hand. The woman was scared, disoriented, and she obviously didn't want to be here. But she was also vomiting killer cockroaches at us. Our only real choice was to take her out.

"Distract her," I said. I ran around one of the big piles of garbage, one of the ones holding the skull torches. *Thwump.* Donut fired a missile.

"Hurry up!" Donut cried. "More cockroaches are coming!" The cat yowled. I saw her sail into the air, using her jump ability to land atop the pile I was running around. "Carl, this is not acceptable!"

I rounded the corner, coming at the massive woman from just behind her.

Another magic missile bounced off her chest. She staggered as two more Scatterers emerged from her mouth. She made this awful noise as they emerged, the sound of twenty people vomiting all at once. These were level four bugs, the larger brood guardians.

"I can't drink another potion yet," Donut cried. "It won't let me! I can't fire another missile for a minute!"

Shit. I didn't think about what I did next. I rushed up the pile of garbage behind the woman. My feet screamed as I stepped on what felt like broken glass. I looped the metal leash through the handle. I ran, and I jumped onto her back, slipping the loop over her throat. I slid off of her wet, greasy body, grasping the end of the leash with all of my strength as it pulled taut around her.

She gurgled and started thrashing about wildly. She stumbled backward, falling toward me. I scrambled to my feet, pulling. Her hands moved to her throat as she crashed down, splattering one of the Scatterers. Several other bugs filled the chamber now. Unable to easily get to Donut, they turned toward me while I pulled and pulled.

"You're doing it!" Donut cried.

"A little help here!" The bugs made an angry chittering noise as they descended on me. The poor woman gurgled and thrashed. Her

health moved downward, slowly but steadily.

"My missiles aren't ready yet!"

A level four hissed and jumped at me. I kicked at it, and it scattered back. It lunged again and snapped, taking a bite of my leg. I screamed.

"Use your fucking claws," I cried.

"She's almost dead. You can kill them when you kill her!"

"*Goddamnit Donut*," I cried as a second cockroach bit me.

I stumbled forward suddenly, landing between the two Scatterers.

The chain had broken. I stared stupidly at the remains wrapped in my right hand. *Fuck*.

Thwump. Donut fired a magic missile. It must have let her drink another potion. A cockroach hissed and died. *Thwump Thwump*. The last two went into the woman. She still wasn't dead.

With the chain still wrapped around my hand, I scrabbled up and punched the head of the closest of the brood guardians. Its face exploded, showering me with gore. A notification appeared and minimized itself. I turned as the second jumped at me. I fell onto my back as it hit my chest, mouth thrashing at my neck, its barbed legs scrabbling. I ripped at the creature, and one of its legs came right off like I was pulling it from an overcooked chicken. It squealed in pain as I pushed it off me. I leaped at it, pummeling its back with my chain-covered fist. It shrieked and died. My knuckles ached. *I need brass knuckles. Real ones*.

I whirled around.

The Hoarder lay on her back. Her health bar was all but empty. Steam rose off of her. The broken half of the leash remained around her neck. I had to finish her off now before she puked more bugs. I scrambled toward her.

The woman's eyes met mine as I raised my fist.

"Lo siento si fui una mala persona," she said. She closed her eyes as tears streamed down the non-burned side of her face. The woman only had one, misshapen tooth in her mouth. "No quería que mi hija se enfermara. No quiero estar en el infierno. Por favor. Por favor envíame a Jesús."

"I'm sorry," I said. I punched her right in the nose. I felt it give underneath my fist, almost like it was an aluminum can wrapped in clay. It crumpled and crunched deep inside. I punched again. And again. My fist burned in pain, and I took my own damage with each blow.

A minute later, and she was dead.

Once again, the world froze.

And the winner is, The Royal Court of Princess Donut!

Our two mugshots filled my vision with **Winner!** stenciled over it.

The remaining cockroaches all dropped dead. The door burst into shards. The music stopped. I leaned up against the stinking woman's dead body, and I tried not to vomit bacon and eggs all over myself.

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[12]

"Explain these bosses to me," I asked Mordecai. I fingered the chain wrapped around my right fist.

We found a tutorial guild about a quarter mile from where we'd killed the Hoarder. Her body had only dropped a single piece of loot, a scrap of paper called a Neighborhood Map. It didn't disappear when I looted it, and Donut was able to grab one for herself.

The moment I touched it, about a square mile of my minimap automatically populated. I could zoom out and see all the red dots in the area—there were hardly any now. A couple of rooms with white dots appeared, and upon closer inspection, they were all tutorial guilds, all with Mordecai inside. Other than Donut, there weren't any other blue dots visible in this area.

There was, however, the X of a corpse on the very edge of the giant neighborhood square, right on the edge of the main corridor. This X was different. It was twice the size and pulsing. I hovered over it, and it said. **Corpse of Crawler Rebecca W - Level 3.**

I didn't know how long she'd been there or how she died, but she'd been killed less than 200 meters from the safe room.

"Let's go loot her corpse!" Donut said the moment she saw it on her map.

"I want to talk to Mordecai first," I said. I noted the location of the closest tutorial guild, and we angled over there.

We opened the door to the guild to find Mordecai on his cot asleep. He had that photo of his brother cradled in his rat arm, and a

pile of empty bottles littered the floor. The upset urn had been fixed, and the ashes all cleaned up.

"There are six main types of bosses," Mordecai said after we woke him up. His voice slurred ever so slightly, and I could smell the alcohol on his breath. "Neighborhood, Borough, City, Province, Country, and Floor bosses. There are also others, but those are called elites. You won't need to worry about them just yet."

"So that thing we just fought was the most common type of boss?"

"Yes," Mordecai said. "And now you'll know how to recognize their lair. It'll probably be pretty obvious to you from now on. The neighborhood bosses are the easiest to kill and easiest to find."

"Easy," I grumbled. My now-healed legs and fist still ached with phantom pain. "The one we fought, she was obviously a person from our world. Is it always going to be like that?"

I hadn't understood a word the woman was saying, and I was glad for it. I already had enough trouble sleeping. Mordecai didn't answer for several moments, like he was trying hard to think of a proper response. "No, not always," he said finally. "There will be a lot of… recycling… from previous iterations of the game. Some will be human stock, but most won't be, or even human from this world. Or they will be human, but it won't be as obvious."

"It was quite the disappointing battle," Donut said. "A Bronze Boss box? That deserved a Legendary at least."

We hadn't opened our boxes yet.

"All bosses drop persistent loot, and their corpses stay there for any crawler to pick it up. A neighborhood boss will drop a neighborhood map, as you've discovered. Higher bosses will drop other public items, which I'm not allowed to tell you about yet. But," Mordecai added, "the ones who actually kill the boss also receive an achievement and a Boss Box. Bronze for Neighborhood, Silver for Borough, and so forth. Also, as you can now see, there's a bronze star after your name in all notifications. You'll get a star after each boss you kill."

"Are there harder bosses on this level?" I said. "It's not exactly fair. Most of us can level up, but we don't get anything out of it until

we can distribute the points."

"The first three levels won't have any of the Province, Country, or Floor bosses, but there are some powerful bosses out there. They're meant to be taken on by larger groups than just two crawlers. You can't run from most boss fights, not on the early floors, so be careful."

"Okay, I'm opening my boxes," Donut announced, turning away.

I had 15 achievements and seven boxes to open, including that boss box and the Gold Crowd Control box. While Donut grunted with annoyance at all the torches and pet biscuits, I turned back to Mordecai.

"Is it normal? This number of achievements?"

He nodded. "It's not normal to get that Legendary box you did, but the first three floors are designed to drown you in low-tier loot and achievements and beginner skills. By the time you have to choose a class, you should have a good idea what's going to work for you. Once you hit the fourth floor, the achievements are harder to come by."

"A spell book!" Donut cried when she opened her Bronze Boss Box. I didn't have time to read the description before she glowed, indicating she'd already applied it to herself.

A moment later, Donut cried with rage.

Mordecai grunted with amusement.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Little one, you really must examine these items before you equip or apply them," he said.

Donut glowered. "It's a stupid spell."

"It's a very useful spell," Mordecai said. He turned to me. "She just learned a spell called *Torch*. It makes a curl of light follow you around. The more she uses it, the more powerful it'll become."

"It's a good spell," I agreed.

I pulled up my notifications. I was awash with odd skills, like a skill level increase in dumpster diving and jump attacking. One was particularly interesting:

You've gained a skill level! Iron Punch level 3.

When simple brutality isn't enough. Newsboy cap not included.

With a skill like this, you can always find work as a 1920s street tough or a collection agent for a bookie.

War gauntlets and lumpers will protect your hands and enhance your punching damage without losing your bare-knuckle bonus. Each level of this skill increases the enhanced fist damage bonus by an additional 10%.

If I was going to utilize my bare knuckle skill, I really needed to find something to protect my fists. Breaking my fingers every time I punched something was not a good long-term plan.

My lower tier boxes were all crap. The last three were more interesting.

Bronze Boss Box (5/7)

Tome of *Wisp Armor*

Silver Goblin Box (6/7)

Stick of Dynamite X5

Lighter

Satchel of Gunpowder

Gold Crowd Control Box (7/7)

Enchanted Spiked Kneepads of the Shade Gnoll Riot Forces

Scroll of Confusing Fog X3

Potion of Iron Skin X5

"That tome is a good find, but it costs 5 mana to cast it, and you only have three right now. I would hold onto it until you decide what your build is going to be. It's quite valuable. Or give it to the princess," said Mordecai.

"I'll take it," Donut said, looking up at me. She didn't even know what it was yet. I read the spell's description.

Wisp Armor

Cost: 5 Mana

Target: Self Only

Duration: 5 minutes + 1 minute per level of spell. Requires 5 minute cooldown.

Surrounds your body with tendrils of light. While ineffective against physical attacks, this spell negates 75% of incoming damage from magic-based attacks. Provides temporary immunity to mind-control effects. Higher skill levels increase both effectiveness and duration. It also makes you look all wispy and ethereal and druid-like. A great spell to have if you're a club kid or trying to bang a vegan.

A magic protection spell. That would be useful. I'd hold onto it for now.

The Scroll of Confusing Fog filled the room with a mist that only the mobs could see, and the Iron Skin potion raised my physical armor by 100% for five minutes.

The real prize was the kneepads. While it wasn't pants, I was happy to finally have something to put on my legs. I pulled them out of my inventory and examined their properties.

Enchanted Spiked Kneepads of the Shade Gnoll Riot Forces

Adds 10% Damage Reflect to all equipped armor.

Cancels all Momentum-based attacks.

Made of skin and fur and the spiky things from the back of Thorn Cadavers, these kneepads are both good protection *and* they're stylish. Stylish, that is, if your knees are cosplaying as hedgehogs.

The kneepads were built like slip on knee bracers, so I pulled my feet through each one and pulled them up. They appeared much too small, but they magically adjusted. The spikes were thin, needle-like. Each spear was about eight inches long. They were retractable and appeared to only magically pop themselves out when needed. I

hoped I wouldn't end up skewering my hand if I reached down to scratch my legs.

"Remember when I said you looked ridiculous before?" Donut said, looking me up and down. "Mordecai, darling. Is there a worst-dressed award for the dungeon?"

"Actually, yes. Sort of," Mordecai said. "After the main episode tunnels, a hosted special comes on where a couple commentators discuss the state of the game. They usually do a segment on weird things happening in the dungeon. They do a lot of contestant profiles and such. Sometimes when people win boss fights, they'll pull them out of the game for 10 minutes to do an on-camera interview. The show is almost as popular as the official program, though they'll never let you watch this one."

Donut's eyes got big as saucers. "They interview people?" She looked at me. "Carl, we need on that show. Make it happen."

I sighed. "That's not how this works, Donut, and you know it. And besides, I am not your agent."

"No, no you're not. Miss Beatrice is my agent, and once we reunite with her, *she'll* make sure I get on that show. But she's halfway around the world. I figure we'll have to wait until the fifth or sixth floor before the dungeon shrinks enough for us to find her. I really hope we don't have to wait much longer than that."

I exchanged a look with Mordecai.

"Sure," I said finally. "Now let's get back out there."

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[13]

The first thing we did was angle our way toward that corpse.

I asked Mordecai if we'd be able to loot everything the dead woman had, and he said yes, crawlers drop everything but the unopened loot boxes. Non-crawlers would also be able to loot her body, but they wouldn't have access to her inventory, so the woman likely had some items on her.

"Maybe she'll have some pants for you."

"Unless she's over six feet tall then probably not," I said. Items from the surface didn't magically re-size themselves. Still, I held out hope she'd have something.

"By the way," I added a few minutes later, "those magic missiles of yours run out pretty quickly. You really need to start training with your claws."

Donut didn't say anything for several moments. "I… I've never done anything like that before. I'm scared of getting hurt. What if it hits me back? I don't want to get hit back."

"How is it you can be so reckless and timid at the same time?"

"I can't control my instincts! I'm just a few generations shy of being a ferocious tiger stalking through the jungles."

"I've seen your pedigree," I said. "You're a few generations shy of nothing. Also, your grandfather was also your uncle."

Both of us turned the corner, and there she was.

She was sitting, leaning up against a wall just off the main corridor. She was on the very edge of the Hoarder's neighborhood.

The woman was naked. She had no clothes, no gear at all. The manner of her death wasn't obvious.

She appeared to be about thirty years old. Slight. Asian. Her hair was pulled back into a ponytail. A full sleeve tattoo of koi and a crane decorated her left arm. The bright colors of the tattoo suggested it was recent ink. She had several other, older tattoos.

"I think goblins came along and took all her stuff," I said. I examined her, popping up the info box.

Lootable Corpse. Crawler Rebecca W. Level 3. Killed by Crawler Frank Q.

Apple Core.

I felt as if I was slapped. *Killed by Crawler Frank Q*.

That's when I saw it. A gunshot wound, right in her chest between her breasts, right in the middle of a moth tattoo. It'd killed her instantly, not leaking hardly any blood.

"Oh goodness. This Frank Q gentleman doesn't seem like a decent person at all," Donut said.

I instinctively looked up at my map, looking for blue dots. There were none. Would the dots be hidden if the person was trying to hide? If I wasn't in the area of the neighborhood map, the red dots wouldn't appear unless I was right on top of them. But NPCs always appeared if they were within a couple hundred meters, even if they were around the corner. Could other crawlers hide from me?

Christ, another thing to worry about. A crazy asshole with a gun.

I was suddenly, inexplicably reminded of that day. The last day I ever saw my father.

You're a bully. You're a bully and nobody likes you. It's why mom left.

I was expecting him to get angry, to hit me. But he never hit me, not once. The man just laughed and laughed, and that was enough. *I don't need you to like me. But you will respect me.*

The memory came quickly, out of nowhere. I didn't know why. Nobody had died that day. Nobody had been hurt at all, not physically.

"Maybe Frank Q isn't a human," Donut was saying. "Maybe he's one of those cocker spaniels." She sniffed at the corpse. "Yes, this is

definitely the work of a cocker spaniel."

I sighed. "She's been shot," I said. "Look. That's from a gun."

"Maybe the dog had a gun. If I had a gun in my inventory, I could shoot it."

"No, you couldn't. It wasn't a dog."

One of our neighbors in the apartment had a dog named Angel. A cocker spaniel. I couldn't remember the woman's name, but her dog was always barking her head off. Bea was friendly with the owner, and they were always chatting in the hallway. Every once in a while Angel would burst into our apartment, barking, running in circles. She'd pee on the floor and shriek-bark at Donut, who would sit atop her cat tree and hiss and spit and poof all her hair out.

"We need to be careful," I said. "Keep on the lookout for other players. If we come across any, don't tell them what gear we have. They can't examine it if they're not in our party."

"We are in a dungeon filled with killer cockroaches and drug-dealing llamas. Some imbecile with a gun doesn't scare me," Donut announced. "And they shouldn't scare you, either. We should hunt this vile killer down and bring him to justice."

"Weren't we just talking about this? And this guy doesn't scare me," I said. I looked down at the dead woman. I wondered who she was, why someone like her was outside at 2:30 in the morning on such a night. *I'm never going to know her story. Nobody is ever going to know it*. I wondered how scared she'd been. Only to be killed by a fellow human. He'd looted her corpse, taking everything, leaving only an apple core. It made me irrationally angry. "In fact, I think you're right. I want to find him if we can."

I thought for a moment. "Okay," I said. "Let's stick to the neighborhood for right now since we have the map. We'll hunt down the remaining red dots. We need all the easy experience we can get. Then we'll go back to the safe room and watch the premiere." Mordecai had said the show would air on the screens in the safe room. "After that, the stairs will open up. We'll go hunting for both the stairs and this guy."

"You're not scared of that guy? Really?" Donut asked, looking between me and the corpse.

"No," I said. "Not at all."

"Well then, you're crazy. I don't like you being crazy. *I'm* scared of him. We need to stay away from him. What if he's like one of those murder hobos you hear so much about?"

"Just two seconds ago you said, and I quote, 'Some imbecile with a gun doesn't scare me!'"

"Yeah, that's when I thought you were being a pussy. I didn't realize you were getting all Charles Bronson *Death Wish* on me!"

"How do you even know what that is?"

"You two always leave the TV on when you go to work. I absorbed all that stuff. Miss Beatrice always leaves it on Lifetime and HGTV, and you leave it on that channel that plays the *A-Team* and Charles Bronson movies all day."

"We'll be careful," I said. "Don't worry."

Nearby, a group of three red dots was steadily moving through a hallway. The map didn't say what they were, but based on our earlier encounters, I guessed them to be more of the rats. I suspected we wouldn't see any more Scatterers in this neighborhood.

"Come on, Donut. Let's hunt."

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[14]

The premiere of *Dungeon Crawler World: Earth* was easily the most bizarre thing I'd ever witnessed in my life.

Apparently, alien television shows were presented in a completely different way than a standard, 2D television screen. Viewers were virtually placed within actual scenes, as they happened. This virtual rendition and recap of the moments presented on the show was fully experienced by the viewers, including the smells and physical sensations just short of feeling the actual pain.

However, Tally explained, many viewers didn't like the VR version of the action, so they watched using a method where they had a bird's eye view, and they could zoom in and out and switch angles at a whim.

We didn't have any of that. The show streamed on the center of the three televisions over the fast food counter. Tally came out from around the back to sit with us at the booth to watch.

4,006,002. That's how many people were left when the show premiered. The number continued to steadily tick down while the show aired. It made me sick to look at it, so I tried to tune it out.

"This is not good way to watch show," Tally announced as the title appeared on the screen. The screen jerked around, like I was watching someone play a game on Twitch. The view kept randomly zooming in and out, sometimes focusing on nothing in particular. Sometimes lights flashed for no reason.

It started with a commentator in the top right of the screen. I stared at the orange-hued, four-eyed lizard-like creature as he-she-it, I couldn't tell, breathlessly gave a recap of last season. The sound kept cutting in and out, and I couldn't tell why. The creature sounded like it had gravel in their mouth when they spoke anyway, and even though it was speaking in Syndicate standard, I could barely make out what they were saying. It started with a shot of a planet that looked remarkably like Earth, but with the continents all jumbled up. It zoomed in on the planet, showing buildings that appeared to almost be made of plastic, all on stilts with round, pod-like mechanisms zipping about underneath. The collapse came, but instead of the buildings all sinking into the ground, they swept away, rolling to the side like they'd been sucked up by an invisible vacuum.

Next came a view of a building that looked similar to the Roman Coliseum, only bigger. The arena had multiple floors, mazes, and a level filled entirely with water. On the exterior of the building, which appeared to be the size of an entire city, was written **The Squim Conglomerate Presents, Battle for the Planet Aryl**.

Next showed thousands of furry, gorilla-like creatures screaming and rushing into battle against another group of similar creatures. Later, it showed a single, heavily armored gorilla stick a spear into the throat of a smaller, gray-colored gorilla riding a massive pig thing. The word **WINNER** appeared on the screen.

The winning gorilla fell to his knees and appeared to start sobbing before the screen cut away. A round metal tube that looked like a barrel appeared on the screen for 15 seconds straight. There was no sound. Tally said it was a commercial.

"I do not like last season's version of game," Tally said, shaking his furry head. "They break the people into groups, tell them their loved ones will be safe if they kill others. Then everybody kill one another."

"Are they?" I asked.

"Are they what?" Tally asked.

"Are their loved ones safe if they win?"

"Aye, they are safe, but they are not safe. Is better dead. Squim saps the planet dry. It leaves planet, moves on. No more

atmosphere. People live after the big fight, but they don't live. Not really. Borant at least gives people a chance. Tally's people had chance."

"So, you were a crawler, then?"

"No," Tally said. "Not all worlds are mined or picked for the show. Sometimes they come and offer to take people in exchange for not mining world. They came, and I went. This was very long ago."

"Shush," Donut said. "They're introducing us now."

Next came a view of Earth. Music swelled, sounding almost like mariachi with an EDM beat. Three lines of text scrolled across the bottom of the screen, all in different languages I couldn't read. Another two lines, one going up, one going down scrolled on the right side, shrinking the viewing area. A generic, naked human male and female appeared on the screen, and the next 10 minutes was a discussion of human anatomy with an inordinate amount of time spent discussing male testicles and female ovaries. I still couldn't understand most of what the commentator was saying. Next came a long line of shots of earth, focusing mostly on urban areas. It quickly became clear that the show was cherry-picking the shittier parts of the planet, showing shanty towns and garbage dumps. Bubbling pits of mud, and abandoned buildings. They were throwing in scenes from disaster films. I recognized a shot from the latest *Godzilla* movie. They were going out of their way to make earth look like a nightmare.

Then came the people. They were showing people shooting up drugs, killing each other, a group of kids beating the crap out of another kid, a scene from the movie *Basket Case*, a dead horse for some reason, a scene from that serial killer movie that won Best Picture last year, an elderly woman crying, the kid from the "Charlie bit My Finger" Youtube video.

"Wow," Donut said, shaking her head sadly. "I didn't realize Earth sucked so badly. Disgusting."

"That's not how it really is," I said. I paused. *Not is. Was. The world is gone*. "They're making it look like they're the good guys, saving us from ourselves."

Next came a sky-view version of the collapse, over a dense city I didn't recognize. Next was what appeared to be a CGI rendition of the dungeon forming below the Earth's crust. It only showed the first three levels, which was like an upside down, tiered pyramid.

The next forty minutes was nothing but scenes of people getting killed over and over.

The vast majority of people who entered the dungeon appeared to be from India and Africa and South America. Some of them were in massive groups of 1,000 plus people. I watched them trample each other as they ran from mobs I'd never seen, from spine-covered wolves to shapeless blobs of fire to floating, stingray-like creatures which shot magic missiles from eye stalks, like the alien ships from *War of the Worlds*.

"Why did so many enter the dungeon?" I asked. *I* had entered because I didn't have a choice. Was it the same for the others?

Eventually, they started showing people surviving their encounters. A man with a broadsword cut through a group of floating eyeball things. A group of 10 people, armed with shotguns and bows and arrows, took down a nightmare pile of mouths and eyeballs and flesh. A Borough Boss, the screen said, the first one defeated. It quickly showed all 10 of their mugshots and listed the contents of their Silver Boss Boxes and their Platinum Weapons Boxes they'd received for the achievement. They'd all received magic tomes and enchanted ranged weapons.

Next, they showed a girl about 13 years old with a pair of rottweilers. I guessed she might be from South America somewhere. She wore an oversized soccer jersey that was yellow with a thick blue stripe running across it. The girl wore an angry, determined expression on her face

The dogs ripped a cow-sized spider to shreds. Later, the same girl held a mace in her hand and had a full set of glowing, silver armor. She'd kept the soccer jersey, wearing it over the armor like a tabard. One of the dogs wore what appeared to be a chainmail sweater. The other had gained the ability to shoot lightning when it barked.

We were shown her mugshot and both of the dogs. Her name was Lucia Mar. The dogs were Cici and Gustavo 3.

I still wasn't sure about the naming conventions. I guessed since I was the first Carl in the dungeon, I didn't have my last initial after my official name. And since this Gustavo was a dog without a last name, he had the three because he was the third Gustavo to enter the dungeon without a surname.

After that, it showed a quick rundown of several of the mobs, the images flashing by so quickly I could barely see any of them. I recognized goblins, scatterers, rats, and dozens of the monsters shown in the earlier scenes.

And that was it. The announcer said something about staying tuned for a rundown of this season's rules and surprises and then something else about placing bets, but the screen snapped off and returned to the leaderboard image.

We just stared at the board for several moments.

"That's it?" Donut demanded, breaking the silence. She looked at me, incredulous. "After that epic battle with Hoarder, we received no screen time. This is unacceptable!"

Before she could rant further, an announcement came. It was the same woman who spoke when the gates first closed.

Good job so far everyone. We had 15 borough bosses taken out and over 1,500 neighborhood bosses killed. A pair of crawlers even came across a city boss, but that ended as you might expect. Losses are right on the projected track.

You'll be getting these announcements after each episode. A couple quick patch notes. The *Fire Fingers* spell should be safe to cast now. We've fixed the hallway bathroom bug. So, if you open the door, and someone else enters, they will no longer explode. Sorry about that. Reminder, however, hallway bathrooms are personal spaces, and they can't be shared. We also fixed the unlimited toilet paper bug. Now you're only getting one roll per floor, so if you waste it, you're on your own. We have a long list of fixes with the new inventory system that we're working on. For right now, the two big ones we've already

patched are that you can no longer transport mobs to your inventory in order to kill them. Also, any momentum an item might have while it entered inventory will no longer be preserved. It's now safe to extract items you put into inventory while moving at a high rate of speed. Remember, this inventory system is a privilege, and it's not meant to be used as a weapon. While we love and admire your creativity, any unintentional exploits will be patched, so if you find something that has an unintended feature, don't get too comfortable using it.

We are now populating the staircases down to level 2. Remember, everyone. Only go down the stairs early if you absolutely have to. Once you descend to the next floor, you can't go back up. Also, we're trying something new this season. If you prematurely descend, you are held in stasis until the collapse. So those of you working on your social numbers, keep that in mind. Viewers tend to lose interest quickly, and you'll shed favorites if you're not accessible for a couple days before the floor above collapses. We recommend descending to the next level no earlier than six hours before the scheduled collapse. If you descend during that window, there will be no stasis involved, and you'll actually get a head start over those who came before you. Good luck. Let's have a great 30 hours until the next episode tunnels!

Now get out there and kill, kill, kill!

"Obviously we need to find one of these city bosses," Donut said. "That'll guarantee a feature the next episode. That's what we need to focus on."

I remembered the borough boss from the show. It had taken a group of ten well-armed crawlers to take it down.

"No," I said. "We need to find an exit."

I pulled up my map, hoping to see a stairwell appear somewhere in the neighborhood. There was nothing. I remembered reading once that the earth was just under 200 million square miles. There would be 75,000 entrances down to the second floor. If these

staircases were distributed randomly, we were fucked. Even if the first floor was just underneath the landmasses, and not the entire planet, we were still screwed. I was no math wizard, but I knew that meant the stairs would be hard to find.

Mordecai had said the staircase, like a safe room, would appear on the mini map, even if we hadn't explored that area yet. But even zoomed out, the map only encompassed a little more than a square mile. And when it was in normal mode, down in the corner of my vision, the map was a fourth of that. I couldn't just walk around with it zoomed out because I wouldn't be able to see anything.

We had three and a half days to find the staircase. We needed to cover a lot of ground.

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Time to Level Collapse: Three Days and Two Hours

"We've been here before," Donut said as we turned down the main corridor. "This is where we came into the dungeon."

After having explored much of the area, I was starting to see a distinctive pattern to the hallways. My apartment had been a little more than a half mile from the coast of the Puget Sound. The entrance I'd gone through appeared to be the very western edge of the map. The whole area was a giant grid of equal-sized squares, with the large, wide passages acting as the borders. While the interior halls and tunnels were twisty and maze-like, each section was still a perfect, giant square. And within each square, there appeared to be four neighborhoods.

The Hoarder neighborhood was in the southeast corner of one of those squares. Directly west of that was the goblin neighborhood, right where we'd entered the dungeon. Across the hall was the domain of the llamas. Mordecai had said these first few floors weren't *really* covering the entire planet, and I could see now that he was correct, at least here. The dungeon was really just a condensed version of the city directly above, but more organized. I

wondered what it was like in the more rural areas, if there were any entrances at all.

It appeared mobs didn't respawn in a particular neighborhood once you killed the boss, though mobs from adjacent neighborhoods had started to creep their way in. Also, the level two rats were just everywhere, though I never saw one in the main hall. They were nothing but a nuisance now. They'd see us, charge, and I'd either kick them or stomp them, killing them with a single blow.

Near the northern edge of the Hoarder's neighborhood, we started to run across a new type of mob: slimes.

After our first encounter with those things, we had to turn back. I couldn't fight them, not without any sort of protection for my hands. The first one we came across was a simple level two green slime. Donut and I had both already hit level seven by this point, and I figured it'd be simple as killing the bugs.

Kicking the green slime did nothing but burn my feet. I made the mistake of trying to punch the pig-sized blob, and it almost ate my arm off. As it was, I sunk elbow deep into it, and my right fingerless glove dissolved right off my hand. The right arm of my leather jacket melted away.

It ended up killing itself thanks to my Damage Reflect ability. My arm was red and bubbling and screaming with pain by the time I pulled it out of the green, gelatin mass.

I received an **It burns, dunnit?** achievement for that one.

Thankfully, the steel chain wrapped around my knuckles remained intact. In fact, the links appeared to gleam after the fight, as if they'd been cleaned.

I waited to heal, and we turned around, giving that neighborhood a wide berth.

It was then, as I gazed upon the next neighborhood over, that I got an idea on how to cover more ground as quickly as possible.

I pointed to the neon sign that remained blinking off the main corridor. "Da Tutorial Guild." It looked as it had when we first arrived. "We are headed in there."

Donut: YES O.K. THERE WILL BE MONSTERS IN THERE.

"Stop," I said. "Please stop."

I'd made the mistake of showing Donut the chat feature of the party menu. One could click on the party's name, and a chat option appeared at the end of the list. For me, a virtual keyboard materialized floating before me, but after spending some time with it, I figured out how to just think the words while focusing on the chat window. Apparently Donut, as a quadruped, had a completely different interface.

When the messages came, they popped up with a haptic buzz in my brain, and it startled me every time. Donut spent a good ten minutes sending me message after nonsensical message until I finally told her to stop. She had, until now.

"Using the chat is quite enjoyable to me," Donut said. "Now I understand why Miss Beatrice was always on her phone. I wish it was connected to the internet. I think I'd have a lot of fun on the internet."

"It's good to have," I said. "But you don't need to do it when I'm right here. It hurts my head. Also, don't type in all caps. It makes it sound like you're shouting."

"Okay, fine. Be a grump," she said as we approached the alleyway.

Thanks to Donut's *Torch* spell, we didn't need to carry a light when we entered the pitch-black corridor.

I was expecting another goblin machine to be waiting for us, but the alley was abandoned. The place smelled of machines, oil, and pineapple.

"I'm okay with killing goblins," Donut said as we walked. "But I don't think there'll be stairs this close to the edge of the map. Remember what it looked like on the show? Each floor was smaller. I think we need to head east before we start seeing stairs."

"We're not going to kill the goblins," I said, indicating the tattoo on my forearm, which still appeared on the exterior of my intact left jacket arm. "Not if we don't have to." We eased our way down the alley, keeping an eye out for red dots.

It didn't take long. We turned a corner, and three level two goblins approached, all brandishing pineapple sticks.

“What is with the goblins and their fruit?” Donut asked as they approached, screeching.

“I don’t know,” I said. “It’s weird.”

Before they got too close, I lifted my arm, showing the tattoo. “I have free passage through this area!”

The goblins all stopped at that. The moment I showed them the mark, their dots turned from red to white. They lowered their weapons and looked at one another, as if confused about what to do next. They started gibbering in their language. Finally, one turned toward me.

“Where you get that mark, human?”

I had a carefully-prepared answer. Hopefully they would…

“He blew up one of your filthy tractors and smeared three of your friends all over the cobblestones,” Donut declared. She pointed daintily south. “They’re in that next neighborhood over if you want to scoop ‘em up.”

“Goddamnit, Donut,” I whispered. The goblins stared at us with a slack-jawed gaze of incredulity. “Let me do the talking. I’m the one with the brand.”

“And I’m the one with the 37 in charisma,” said Donut. “They’re not going to care. Watch this.” She started walking toward one of three goblins. “You, sweetheart,” she said. “What’s your name?”

“Uh, I don’t…” the goblin began. “I don’t think I have a name.”

“Most unfortunate,” Donut said. “Hmm. I’m going to call you B.A.” She looked at the other two goblins. “And you guys are Face and Murdock.” She looked back at me. “Remind me why we’re here again?”

“I want to talk to some of the goblin engineers,” I said.

“B.A., be a love and show us to some of your engineers. I do believe they’re the gentlemen who wear culinary items upon their heads.”

“Uh, okay. Yes, ma’am,” B.A. the goblin said.

“Wait,” Donut said.

“Yeah?” B.A. said.

Donut indicated the tiara on her head. “It’s not ma’am. It’s Princess Donut. You got that, B.A.?”

"Um, okay. Okay, Princess Donut." He turned and started marching further north into the dungeon.

"What the actual fuck?" I hissed at the cat. "How… Did you know that was going to happen?"

"It's simple," Donut said as we walked. "Mordecai told me that the higher my charisma is, the easier it will be to get them to do what I want. As long as they can speak and their dots aren't red and they aren't a boss or a really high level, I can control them just like I control you. Mordecai says for the first four or five floors, I can talk anybody into anything. How do you think I've been getting Tally to give me five plates of salmon this whole time?"

As we walked, we passed several groups of level two goblins. We also saw a few types I hadn't seen before:

Goblin Bomb Bard. Level 5.

These bastards are more unhinged and sadistic than those guys who couldn't pass the psych exam to join the military. Bomb Bards are experts with explosives, and they strike with a variety of ranged attacks that'll blow your socks off. If the one you're looking at right now has more than half of his fingers, then he's probably very, very dangerous.

One of the bomb bards glared at us as we passed. The goblin, indeed, had all of his fingers. He tossed a small, glass ball up in the air, catching it absently as we marched past. Each of the level twos on either side of him cringed each time the glass ball went up in the air.

We turned another corner, and we entered a large workshop. At the end of this room was a wooden door, and based on the minimap, I immediately determined beyond that door was the lair of yet another neighborhood boss. It appeared this next room over was almost identical in shape to that of the Hoarder.

I looked about the expansive workshop. We were surrounded by about 25 of the engineers and a smattering of others, including two level seven "shamankas" who stood guarding the far wall. The engineers all wore something odd on their heads, but it wasn't always pots and pans. One wore what appeared to be a hockey

helmet. Another sported one of those padded helmets worn by boxers.

A massive steam engine dominated the western wall, and the engineers crawled about it like ants. Wheels and cogs whirled and chugged away. On the opposite side of the room stood a line of six parked goblin murder dozers. These also crawled with goblin engineers. Multiple tables covered with tools and giant, greasy parts lay scattered about the room. A vast pile of coal stood in the far corner near the boss room.

One of the level sevens glanced in our direction and approached.

She was a female goblin, standing about five and a quarter feet tall, making her tower over the others. She had well-defined muscles and wore a jet-black robe. She carried a wooden staff that, oddly, also held a pineapple at the top, but this one was actually made of wood, a part of the carving.

The goblin's face was filled with piercings. There had to be fifty of them. She looked like one of those body modification people who would appear on *Ripley's Believe It or Not!* It was hard to look at until you got used to it. The woman sneered, revealing sharpened teeth and a forked, pierced tongue.

Goblin Shamanka. Level 7.

In case you're wondering, Shamanka is just a fancy way of saying female shaman. Goblin Shamans are the leader class of all goblin clans, second only to the War Chieftain or, more rarely, the Goblin Warlord. They are without humor and are said, as part of their training, to have to pick two of the following three actions in order to graduate Shamanka University: they have to fuck, cook, and/or eat their own parents. Most don't pick cook. And if that wasn't messed up enough, they specialize in Anguish Magic, a dark magic school designed to focus and enhance damage from other attacks.

"You may have a pass, but you are not welcome here, human," the goblin said. "Not in this place."

I took a deep breath. "I want to buy a vehicle from you guys. Or have you make me one really quick. Preferably something that I can

negotiate down stairs, but I'll take what I can get. We have a lot of ground to cover, and I figured you guys could help."

The goblin looked at me as if I'd just asked her to eat a Twinkie out of my ass.

"You stupid, ugly, excuse for a monkey. Do you really think you can just…"

"Oh, honey, can we discuss what's going on here?" Donut asked, interrupting the goblin. She waved a paw, indicating the jewelry in the goblin's face. "Is it like some sort of performance art? Do you wear all that metal because they made you eat your parents?"

The shaman looked at Donut, a mask of utter outrage on her face that started to melt the moment she met the cat's eyes. It was the weirdest thing. I realized the cat was casting a spell of sorts on the goblin, some sort of automatic charm effect.

"What?" the goblin asked, her voice totally changed. She, to everyone's complete surprise, sat cross-legged on the ground and leaned forward. She discarded her pineapple staff. "What did you say?"

"I mean, I guess I can see what you were going for. You have exquisite cheekbones," Donut said. "But your face looks like an overenthusiastic brillo pad. That other lady shaman down there, she doesn't have nearly as many things in her face. Though, my word, she does have that unfortunate necklace made of bones, doesn't she? But we'll get to her later. So, tell me. Is it a daddy thing?"

The goblin didn't say anything for several moments, but then she put her face into her hands, and she burst into tears. "Yes," the goblin cried. "It's true." Donut walked forward and sat in her lap.

The other shamanka, alarmed at this new development, came running forward. But a moment later, the two magic users were on the ground, sobbing, clutching onto each other. The one with the bone necklace had a line of snot running down her face as she ugly cried about having to eat her father raw.

Donut named the one with the facial piercings Rory and the other Lorelai.

"So, Rory," Donut asked after a few minutes of the goblins sniveling, "how about that vehicle my friend asked for? Is there

something you can do for us?"

Rory wiped her face. "We cannot part with a murder dozer. They are much too valuable, and the chieftain would literally kill us. But I will have them make a human-sized chopper. One with a sidecar." She indicated a line of two-wheeled contraptions leaning up against the wall near the bulldozers. They appeared to be steam-powered bicycles. "But we can't do it for free. You gotta trade something."

"I have all sorts of stuff," I said. I pulled up my inventory. I selected the satchel of gunpowder, and it appeared in my hands. It was a heavy leather sack. I wanted to keep the stuff, but I wanted the transport more.

Rory thumbed over her shoulder, indicating a line of barrels right next to the giant machine. "We got funpowder." I hadn't noticed the barrels before. They all had XXX marked on them. Sparks were constantly showering off the giant steam engine. If one of those sparks landed on a barrel… "To offer goblins funpowder is like offering water to a piranha," she added.

This went on for a bit. I offered torches. Healing potions. Antidote potions. Both the pet biscuits and the crawler biscuits. All of it rejected.

My eyes caught something else on my list.

"How about this?" I asked, offering up the two baggies of meth.

Rory snatched them away. "Is this all you have? Two hits?"

Lorelai scrabbled at Rory's hand, coming away with one of the bags. The goblin opened the baggie, stuck a pinky in, and had a quick taste. Her eyes grew wide. "This is dungeon made," Lorelai said. "He didn't bring it with him from the outside." She looked at me. "Where did you get it? Did they have more?"

"I'll tell you where to get more in exchange for that machine—one that won't blow up on us—plus coal or whatever you need to run it, and some of those grenade things your Bomb Bards carry."

"I don't know," Lorelai began, looking uncertainly at the other shaman.

"Do it," Donut said.

"Deal," Rory said.

Lorelai got up and started screaming orders at the engineers, who looked at her as if she had gone insane. The shamanka sent a blue bolt into the backside of one of the engineers, and they scrambled to work.

"Do you… do you want to come with us?" Donut asked Rory, her voice surprisingly gentle.

Donut still sat in the Rory's lap, and she purred as the green monster stroked her hair.

The pierced goblin sighed. "I cannot. I can't leave the chieftain. He's terrible, soft even, but he's still leader of my clan. My family. And even if I could go with you, I wouldn't be able to leave this floor. If we climb down the stairs, we die. You get halfway down, and your body just dissolves. I've seen it myself."

"So you know how this works? You know what's happening here?" I asked.

The goblin nodded. Her face jingled when she moved. "I know enough. I know we are on the first floor. There are smart mobs, like us, and there are not-so-smart mobs. The deeper you get into the dungeon, the more are smart. In this borough, we are king. Us and the gnolls and the rat-kin and a few others. Most of the monsters aren't so smart."

"But do you know what happens in a couple days?" I asked.

"The floor collapses," she said. "Yes. But it is only you who dies when this happens. For us we go to sleep until the next dungeon opens. We will open our eyes, and it will be the same as it has been. Just another day. But one of these days, one of these days we will wake up, and we will be deeper. That's what they tell us. Kill the crawlers, get better at killing, and you get to go deeper. And one day, eventually, we will be so deep that crawlers will never come, and we will finally have peace. We will have peace and a place to live and breed and have our little ones run free and not worry about killing for survival."

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Goblin Copper Chopper with attached sidecar. Human-sized. Contraption.

Take a junkyard bicycle, add an unreliable steam engine, remove all the bolts holding it together, replace them with chewing gum, and you get the idea. The preferred assault transport of Goblin Bomb Bards, what this contraption lacks in reliability and safety it makes up for in absolutely nothing.

I took a step back and admired the "vehicle." Like the description said, it looked a lot like a crackhead's bicycle. The framework was made of welded-together copper bits of varying patinas. Thankfully they'd made this one a little bigger to fit me, but even then, it was still probably a bit too small to be comfortable.

The two wheels were solid and black, made of some unknown material. The seat appeared to be an alligator skull with white fur lining the top, giving it the impression that the skull was wearing an Andy Warhol wig. The engine sat in the middle of the chassis, thumping. A hopper extended from the engine, opening up near the handlebars. I would have to periodically toss a lump of coal in there.

"What about the water?" I asked. "And how do I turn it off?"

"It's a permacube," the engineer said. "Won't run out until you die of old age. You don't turn it off. Just let it run out of coal. Toss in a lump, and it'll start up on its own after a minute. We don't use the

lesser demons to run our steam engines like some do. This is just as good, and this baby will outlast you." He slapped the side of the bike, and the handlebars fell off, clattering to the ground. He cursed and bent to pick them back up. He started reattaching them to the frame with a wrench.

The detachable sidecar was nothing more than a bar, a single wheel affixed to a colossal spring, and another, smaller, fur-lined skull that was supposed to be the seat. This skull looked like it was from some flat-headed orc creature. A pair of bones provided a backrest. Donut jumped up a few times, circled, sat down, then jumped off. She started demanding some changes of the engineers. They were currently painting the backrest purple after adding an extra layer of fur.

The bike was heavy, heavier than it looked. But thankfully, I could lift it off the ground for just long enough to be able to pop it into my inventory.

"It's not going to blow up on me, is it? That dozer thing exploded after it hit the wall."

"That dozer wouldn't have blown up if you had twisted the relief valve," the engineer said. He pointed to a pair of identical spigots on the side of the bike. "If it gets too hot, twist that one right there, and it won't blow. If the pressure is too high, twist the other one. Don't mix it up, or you make it worse."

"How will I know if it's too hot? Or if the pressure is too high? There are no gauges!"

He smiled, revealing a row of sharp teeth.

"Don't you worry about that, human. You will know. Just listen to the chopper. It will tell you."

The engineer had pointed at that stack of coal that reached the ceiling, telling me to grab all I could carry. I sneaked around the back of the heap and took a metric fuck-ton of the stuff. I had three piles of 999 coal lumps before the heap started to look noticeably lower.

It was time to jet. Both Rory and Lorelai had disappeared while the goblin engineers worked. They reappeared now. Both of them

were blitzed. Rory's eyes were noticeably slitted, and Lorelai danced seductively toward me as we prepared to leave.

"Wanna have some fun before you go?" Lorelai asked, grasping the front of my tattered jacket. Her breath smelled of rotten fish. She'd removed her bone necklace.

"Uh," I said.

"Oh, sweetie," said Donut, "as amusing as I would find it to watch Carl here disappoint yet another woman, we're on a schedule. Banging monster girls is not the narrative we're going for with this story. Maybe next time."

"Sure, but you look me up later, okay?" the goblin said. She reached up and booped me on the nose. "It'd be nice to fuck someone and not have to eat them afterward." She sighed and turned toward one of the Bomb Bards.

"You," she said. "Meet me in my chambers after lights out. And take a bath first."

Rory handed me a bag. I examined it, and it was filled to the brim with dynamite and several types of small bombs and grenades. Remembering how dangerous this stuff was, I quickly added it to my inventory. I'd examine the items from there.

Rory turned to Donut. "Okay, we had a deal. Where'd you find the stuff?"

"The drugs?" Donut asked. "It's just one neighborhood over, on the other side of the road. We got it from one of those llamas."

"I *knew* it!" she said. She turned toward another Bomb Bard. "Gear up. They've been holding out on us. We're rolling on them in five."

I stood, bewildered as all around me, the goblins—from the level two standard goblins to the engineers to the bomb bards—burst into a screeching frenzy of activity. The murder dozers growled like dinosaurs as goblins piled on. Four copper choppers similar to my own roared to life. The bomb bards all donned metal helmets with a German-style spike at the tip. The tips glistened, shooting sparks. The goblins could light their dynamite sticks and bombs just by raising them over their own heads.

One by one, the choppers and dozer transports rumbled away, filled with screaming goblins. A minute later, and we were alone in the room.

"Did that just happen?" I asked, spinning to see if we truly were alone. We were. "Did we really just start a meth war between the goblins and the llamas?"

"Yes, we did," Donut said. "Just like I planned. It went pretty well, don't you think?" She indicated the door at the far side of the room. "So, you want to go in there and kill their chieftain? I could really use another boss box."

I examined the large room we were in. The goblins had abandoned a ton of stuff. Just like that. I didn't see any weapons or armor. But there were piles of engineering supplies. Wires, cogs, dynamite, gunpowder—or as they called it, "funpowder." Barrels of it. I eyed a simple cart used to transport the barrels from one area to the next.

"We need to loot everything we can," I said, looking around. "*Everything*."

"And then we kill the chieftain, right?"

I looked at the door. The last time we'd fought a boss, I'd had to pummel a scared woman to death. I could still feel her face crunching under my fists. We had no idea what was behind that door, but the support creatures of this area were significantly stronger than the ones guarding the last boss room. It'd be dumb to go in there. Really, really dumb.

Besides, it'd be the ultimate dick move after they'd helped us.

"Yeah, and then we kill the chieftain," I said.

Donut hopped up and down, her tail swishing. "This is going to make exquisite television."

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My inventory had about 10 new tabs by the time we were done clearing out the goblin workshop. I took another five piles of coal. We looted tons of tools from shovels to wrenches to hammers. Most of them were much too small to use as weapons, but I would examine them all later to make sure. We had engineering supplies, coils and coils of wick, multiple types of explosives, about fifty gallons of various alchemical liquids, and a pile of those black discs they used for chopper tires. I even took all the tables I could lift. By the time we were done, all that was left were some of the bigger tables, the giant steam engine, a greatly-reduced pile of coal, and a set of barrels with XXX on them, all placed neatly on the cart and tied down with a length of rope.

I'd managed to take almost a ton of the black powder, but it required me using the discarded leather sacks they had lying around. This stuff was distinctly the old-school, coarse black powder, not the more refined smokeless powder used in modern firearms. I wasn't quite strong enough to lift the barrels until they were less than half full. But when they did get that empty, I didn't put them in my inventory. Instead, I lifted the barrels and placed them on the cart.

We placed the cart in front of the door to the boss room. On top of the powder, I placed shovelfuls of nuts and bolts and other metal odds and ends. Then I placed the tops back on the barrels before an errant spark from the still-humming steam engine blew us all to hell.

Donut "directed" the action from the seat of her sidecar. I would put the chopper into my inventory before we proceeded.

"Do you think Rory and Lorelai will be mad at me?" Donut asked as we prepared the trigger. Unlike last time, I wasn't going to use plain goblin dynamite, which was inherently unstable. I found a blob of a C4-like explosive called "Hobgoblin Pus" that was detonated with an actual trigger. There was only a small amount of the material, but the description said it caused a big explosion. I had the sense that it was valuable, probably the real prize of this room. I was going to use it all. Next to the hobgoblin pus was a set of magical triggers. There were only three of the mechanisms, and I had to waste one in order to test it, to see how they worked.

The triggers were both genius and foolproof. You broke the tip off of the mechanism, which looked like a stick of underarm deodorant. You stuck the broken-off part into the explosive, and you pressed the button to set it off. Easy. The detonators were single use, but you could break off up to 10 pieces for each stick, so you could simultaneously blow 10 different bombs. It had a five-second countdown after you pressed the button. The description said the trigger had a range of about ten kilometers.

"Will they be mad? Probably," I said. "But Rory doesn't seem to like this boss guy too much, so who knows? I hope we never find out."

"Do you think this is enough?" Donut asked, looking over the four barrels. "I feel as if it's not enough."

I shrugged. "Black powder isn't really meant for blowing stuff up. But it's good at throwing metal. If he's in there and out in the open, we'll turn this guy into a pincushion for sure. But I doubt the explosion itself is going to be bigger than when that murder dozer blew up. Either way, if this doesn't kill him, more probably wouldn't either."

The plan was a more refined version of what we had done with the Hoarder. From what I could see, the room that this war chieftain occupied was identical in size and shape to the one from the last boss battle. This was still the first floor, after all, so I doubted the guy was *that* powerful. We were going to open the door, push the

cart in, close the door, run until we had several walls between us, and hit the trigger. If we killed the boss, we'd get a notification and a star by our names. If we didn't, we'd keep running. We'd pull out the chopper and put some distance between us and the whole neighborhood and forget this ever happened.

I'd put a hunk of the hobgoblin pus in each barrel, and I added the last of it to the top of the first barrel. I placed the detonator into the pus, sticking half out of it. I tried to make it look obvious, but not overly obvious. If the goblin chieftain had time to react, he'd hopefully spend his last moments digging the detonator out of this chunk of explosive, not realizing we had four more ready to go buried in each of the barrels.

It was a chickenshit way to do it, but I didn't care. Not when one got locked in the room with the boss otherwise.

"You ready, Princess?" I asked.

I stood directly behind the cart, poised to shove. I'd pulled it back a good ten feet, just enough to give me momentum. Donut would open the door using her menu, eyeball the room to make sure the path was clear, tell me to go, then slam the door after I heaved. Hopefully the floor would be flat enough for the cart to travel a good distance.

"Ready," she said. "I'm opening the door now."

From my vantage, I couldn't see into the room, but I heard the heavy creak of the door yawning open.

"Do it!" Donut cried.

I kicked my legs, and I crashed into the cart like it was a football sled. I'd greased the wheels, and the heavy cart moved quickly and easily. I shoved with all my might and watched the cart rocket into the room as the large door slammed.

Donut had already turned and was bolting for the exit on the opposite side of the room.

I scrambled up and followed. We'd practiced this part. We turned three times, making sure we were out of any line of direct blast. I didn't want to wait too long, but we had to put a few large rooms between us in case there was a shockwave that needed to be disbursed. We stopped at the prearranged spot, and I leaned against

the wall, my heart thrashing. I pulled the detonator trigger from my inventory.

"Did you see him? Was there a giant goblin in there?" I asked.

Donut heaved for breath. "Yes. A huge. Ugly. Goblin. My word. I do not like running. He was sitting down, reading a book. Blow it, blow it good."

I jammed the button.

"There sure were a lot of babies in there, too," Donut said in that last moment before the blast.

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"*Goddamnit, Donut,*" I said.

We'd both been knocked over, but unhurt, by the shockwave. It'd been big, bigger than I'd expected. Dust cascaded from the ceiling. A terrible hissing noise followed the explosion. I suspected it was from the boiler of the giant engine. The whistling noise eased over the next several minutes. Occasional, smaller blasts went off. But eventually even those stopped. An entire wall of notifications appeared, most of them achievements. But we had, indeed, killed the neighborhood boss. There was no fanfare this time, but another bronze star appeared by both of our names.

"Were there really babies in there? Like goblin babies?" I asked.

"Oh yes, there were a bunch of them. I only saw them for but a moment, but they were quite cute. Some of them were wearing little oversized jackets, like Baby Yoda. Adorable. I think you hit one with the cart. There were old ones and pregnant ones, too. Did you see your level? We're both level eight now. You're welcome." Donut looked up into the air. "We didn't get to see our faces all big. I suppose they don't do the boss battle graphic thing if you're not locked in the room with them. That's too bad. It's quite entertaining."

"Goddamnit," I said again. I was all about killing as many goblins and monsters as I could, but killing babies? That was pretty fucked up, and I wasn't sure how I felt about it. Actually, I knew exactly how I felt about it. It made me feel like an asshole. I didn't like

feeling like an asshole. I stared at that blinking box of achievement notifications. I sighed. I didn't even want to click on the box.

"What?" Donut said, looking up with what appeared to be genuine curiosity. "It's not like they didn't have it coming. You didn't ask to be here. They're goblins! What kind of vile monster sticks babies in the boss room anyway?"

I shook my head. "We need to get back over there, grab the neighborhood map, and get our asses out of Dodge before the others return. They're probably on their way now. There's no way they didn't hear that. We'll go north, heading into the next neighborhood over."

The workshop had been completely obliterated. All that was left was blackened rubble. The lights on the walls were all out, but the entire north side of the room was a fifteen-foot wall of fire. The smoke billowed. I absently noted that the smoke was being sucked away into the ceiling. The dungeon masters were cheating, offering some sort of ventilation system. Otherwise this entire area would've been filled with black smoke by now. We could only take a couple steps into the room before it got too hot. I looked about. The large tables were just gone. Large chunks of stone had fallen from the ceiling. Donut jumped on my shoulder as I examined the room.

The boiler on the enormous steam engine looked like a baked potato that been peeled open with a bunch of copper sticks coming out of it, like tentacles. A steady cloud of angry steam still hissed from the interior of the wreckage, mixing with the black smoke. The room was ankle-deep in water, and the water sizzled and steamed as it came into the contact with the burning wall.

"We probably should have taken all of the coal from that pile, not just half of it," Donut said. "We're not getting to that dead boss now."

She was right. The coal had ignited, and now our only way into the boss chamber was blocked off.

I was relieved. I wanted that map, but not as much as I didn't want to go in there. I didn't want to see the dead babies and other goblins. I felt sick thinking about it.

I noticed the line of white dots on the edge of my minimap headed in our direction. The dots wouldn't be white for long. Donut's charisma had ticked up to 39 once she hit level eight, but I doubted even that would be enough to save us once they saw what we'd done.

"Let's get the hell out of here," I said. I plotted out a quick escape, leading us into unknown territory. We'd have to fight through a quadrant we hadn't explored yet before we could get to another artery. Hopefully it wasn't filled with slimes or some other mob I couldn't handle. Maybe there'd be a safe room to rest in, to sit back and figure out all of these new achievements. From there we'd take the chopper and try to find a set of stairs.

"I must admit," Donut said as we jogged away. "I do like it when you blow stuff up. I like it a lot."

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Time to Level Collapse: Two days and 18 hours.

NEW ACHIEVEMENT! YOU *MONSTER!*

You have killed an infant! An *infant*!

Okay, okay. Unless you're a complete psychopath, we know you probably didn't wake up this morning and tell yourself, "Today is the day I'm going to slaughter a child." Well let us put your mind at ease. All children mobs who die within this dungeon don't actually perish. They're transferred to a holding area where they're safe and treated nicely and gently until they can be reunited with their loving parents at the end of the season.

Feel better? Good.

***Reward*: These past twenty seconds, when your conscience started to ease? That was your reward. It was also a lie. That baby is dead, and it's dead because of you. You're totally going to hell.**

You've also received a Bronze Asshole's Box.

New achievement! War Criminal.

You have killed more than 20 non-combatants in a single attack!

Question: What's the only thing standing between an innocent child and a happy, fulfilling life?

Answer: You. The answer is you.

***Reward*: You've received a Gold Asshole's Box!**

We'd found a safe room halfway through the neighborhood of the rot stickers. The monsters were small and round. They looked like little, black-hued raviolis that ran on the walls and ceilings and suicide bombed themselves against you. All the ones we'd seen so far were only level one and two, but if they managed to stick themselves to your body, they'd explode. Each blast felt like getting hit with a sledgehammer.

The attacks also inflicted Take Down, an effect that was supposed to knock you on your ass. Once you hit the ground, I guessed, they'd swarm at your head and take you out. The little monsters were everywhere. Thankfully my troll skin shirt negated the Take Down effect.

Donut remained on my shoulder, shooting missiles at the creatures. A single blast took out several at a time. So far none had managed to get to her. She was quick that way. Despite all that happened, she was still a cat, able to jump out of the way at the last second. But just in case, I made her drink one of my Iron Skin potions, which upped her natural armor for several minutes. I drank one as well.

The rot stickers usually focused on me anyway, the bigger and slower target. One landed directly on my inner thigh and detonated before I could get it, the effect equivalent to being kicked in the nads by a horse. I did fall down that time. If I hadn't quaffed the potion, my leg and balls might've been blown clear off. I was only saved because of a well-timed missile blast from Donut.

Thankfully the raviolis made a loud, chittering noise when they approached, and it took them about three seconds to detonate once they attached to your body. Once we figured out how they worked, it was easy to smash and crush them before they did too much damage. As long as we didn't get surrounded by a giant group of them, we'd probably be okay.

This safe room was nothing like the last one we'd entered. This was more like a small waiting area at a dingy bus station or maybe a DMV somewhere. We still had the three screens and the larger bathrooms with showers. Plus a water fountain. A set of five cots with curtains around them lined one long wall. Two empty, curtained areas appeared at the end of the row, and I wondered on that. Had they run out of cots? Or were they privacy areas for those who didn't want a cot? There was no attendant, so I couldn't ask.

My eyes immediately moved to the number flashing on the first screen.

3,594,517.

It had slowed its mad descent toward human extinction, but it hadn't stopped. It made a low, barely audible noise every time it went down. *Clink. Clink. Clink, clink, clink,* like water fast-dripping from a faucet.

I wondered how many of my fellow people had found a place like this and had given up. They were just hunkering down, eating, sleeping, waiting for it all to end. I shuddered.

The third screen read **Limited services at this location**. **Take an experience cookie. One per Crawler per day. You deserve it.**

There was a plate on a table filled with what looked like chocolate chip cookies. Donut jumped up on the counter and picked it up with her mouth. She ate. A **+9.8 EXP** appeared in the air over her head, rising into the air with an audible *ping*, 8-bit style. Being partied with her, I received the other .2 experience. She complained about me "stealing" her experience, and she tried to take a second cookie, but her mouth moved right through the plate like it wasn't even there.

I also ate one of the stale cookies, evening it out.

The 10 experience points were nothing. A single, level two goblin was worth about 50, so this was mostly just a peculiarity of this specific safe room. It seemed every one of these rooms had something different and unique about it, and the weird cookies were this location's quirk.

Looking at the map, I guessed we had about half a mile to go before we reached the next artery. From there we would pull the chopper out of my inventory and head east in search of a set of stairs.

But first, rest.

We had about six hours before the next episode. We decided to take the opportunity to sleep. Afterward, we would watch episode two, and then we would leave. No more fucking around. We had two and half days.

In addition to the two baby-killing achievements, I received several more including multiple explosive-based achievements, rewarding me with several goblin boxes. We both got another bronze Boss Box. I also got a gold Looter Box for storing more than a ton of weight in my inventory.

I received multiple skill upgrades. All of my combat skills had ticked up thanks to the rot stickers, including my Smush skill. My Explosives Handling, Dangerous Explosives Handling, and Goblin Explosives skills rose to 5. I also received a new one:

IED Skill Level 3.

It's one thing to take a grenade and toss it. But it takes a set of brass balls the size of basilisk eggs to actually build a bomb. Especially with the unreliable crap you find down here. Every level of this skill increases the damage yield of improvised explosive devices by 10% and decreases the chances of a catastrophic, premature uh-oh by half.

In addition, I received a popup that told me because my Explosives Handling skill was now five, I would receive additional information from all bomb-type devices when I examined them.

An entire new menu appeared in my interface. It was titled **Demolitions Workshop**. I clicked on it, but I received an error message.

You may only access this menu when you're standing in front of a Sapper's Table. You may purchase this workbench from a Safe Room store.

Interesting. That was something I'd explore later if we ever made it that far.

Donut received numerous skills and achievements from charming the goblins. She received something called a silver Beguiler Box.

Donut opened her boxes first. She received the usual pile of biscuits and torches and potions. From the Boss box, she received her first piece of armor. The Beguiler Box contained a tome called *Minion Army*. She also received the same two Asshole Boxes I'd received. The first contained a tattoo similar to the goblin pass I'd received earlier. The second, silver box contained five potions called **Weapon Oil: Weeping Wound**.

She was *pissed* about the tattoo. Absolutely enraged. I hadn't seen her this upset since Angel the cocker spaniel crunched down and broke one of her jingly balls.

"What gives them the right to just defile me like this? What gives them the right!" she cried. "Oh my god! It's a disqualifying mark. It's a disqualifying mark, Carl! I'm damaged!"

The mark appeared on her back, just over her right shoulder blade. She'd screamed and hissed with outrage when it branded itself to her. It was hard to discern what it was. While it glowed through her fur, she had so much hair that it looked like nothing but a gold-colored splotch. I suspected I would get one, too, in a few minutes. I gently touched it, and it let me read the description:

Desperado Pass.

Great. Now you're running with the type of kids who sit in the back of the bus. What would your mother say?

This pass allows access to the Desperado Club.

Warning: Holding a Desperado Pass negates the ability to obtain a Vanquisher pass.

That was it. It didn't explain anything about what the hell that meant.

Donut continued to bitch about it for several minutes. Finally, she moved on. With a *pop*, the silver, scale armor appeared draped over

the back half of her body. It reached about halfway down to the floor. I couldn't tell how it was attached to her, but it seemed to stay put. It was like a skirt, almost, though it didn't cover her stomach. It had a slot especially for her tail. She started turning in circles, trying to look at it.

"How's it look? How's it look? Does it cover the tattoo?"

"It's fine," I said as I examined its properties. "It doesn't cover the tattoo, not even close, but it looks great."

Enchanted Fae Scale Quadruped Crupper of the Fleet.

Boy is that a fucking mouthful. By the gods.

+2 to Dexterity.

Light and flexible, this scale armor is made from Fae Steel. While not as strong as Elven mail or even good Orcish steel, it's the strongest alloy that fairy folk can wear. It's not the best protection, but it'll make your ass look oh so pretty.

The tome of *Minion Army* taught a spell that cost 50 spell points to cast. It caused hostile enemies to fight for you instead of against you. It was a great spell, but Donut only currently had 24 spell points, so it was useless for now. She tried reading the book anyway, but it wouldn't let her. Apparently you couldn't teach yourself spells you couldn't cast. She pouted for a good minute straight afterward.

"Don't worry," I said. "We'll either trade it in for something better, or you can use it later."

The last item she'd received was that oil, which was something one could apply to edged weapons to make the wound bleed longer.

It was my turn. I also received a ton of crap. More potions, more dynamite, another lighter, a couple smoke bombs, a couple more scrolls of *Confusing Fog*. I received no pants or shoes. I got the exact same items from the two Asshole Boxes, though my tattoo appeared on my goddamned neck. I couldn't even see it, but it burned as it was magically applied.

"It's a dagger dripping blood," Donut said, examining it close. "My word is it ghastly. Miss Beatrice is going to absolutely shit when she sees it on me."

From the boss box I'd received another ring of constitution, this one +2. I put it on my left ring finger, bringing my score up to 12.

From the gold Looter Box I received a single item. A potion.

Skill Potion.

Drinking this adds a single level to the Determine Value skill. Hopefully now you'll realize all those *Magic: The Gathering* cards are nothing more than just meaningless pieces of paper, and you should have spent your money on something with actual value, like a treadmill. Or shampoo.

I immediately added it to my hotlist and drank. Nothing seemed to happen, but when I opened up my inventory, I had a new ability. While this first level of the skill didn't tell me the actual worth of any of the items listed there, it now allowed me to sort them by value, which I did.

The first item on the list was that Tome of *Wisp Armor*. The second was the Chopper. And after that was the single Hobgoblin Detonator I still had. The next several items were pieces of goblin equipment we'd looted from the workshop, including one of the tables, which was listed as an Engineer's Table. The list didn't include the items I currently had equipped. I suspected my troll skin shirt would be the top of the list otherwise.

Finally done with our skills and loot, I decided to take a nap on the uncomfortable cot. Donut, still bitching about the tattoo, curled up with me.

You Monster.

I tried to pry the achievement out of my head. It was just another stupid joke. The game didn't care that I'd killed children. It *wanted* me to kill them. The room was set up for it to happen exactly as it had. We were supposed to kill or otherwise clear out the workshop. We were supposed to either blow up that room or do exactly what we did. It was a trap just as much as the bulldozer had been a trap. And those kids had been placed there, in that room, for that express purpose. They'd existed only to die. I couldn't blame myself, or feel guilty. Donut was right. This wasn't my fault. Not at all.

I looked up at the ceiling. Someone had carved their initials in the cheap tile. AMW. I wondered who they were, and when they'd carved it. If they were alive now. This place had no signs, so I

couldn’t tell where it had come from. It didn’t feel American, but I wasn’t sure. It didn’t matter anymore. This was a place from *my* world. A place these aliens had stolen.

“You’re not going to break me,” I said. “You might hurt me, or kill me, but you’re not going to break me.”

I turned on my side to sleep. On my neck, Donut cuddled closer. Her new skirt thing pushed into my skin, but it felt oddly comforting. She purred so loud it vibrated my teeth.

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I WAS AWAKENED BY THE START OF THE SHOW ON THE TELEVISION SCREEN.

"Day two," the orange, lizard-like announcer was saying. It still spoke in that odd, barely recognizable version of the Syndicate common speech. It was like trying to understand someone speaking with a deep Cajun accent. Sure, they were speaking English, but to my brain, they might as well be speaking Klingon.

"Do you think we'll be on it this time?" Donut asked, scrambling out of bed to sit on one of the chairs. "We blew up half the dungeon! That's gotta count for something, don't you think? My word, I am so excited I could just wee. Actually, I do gotta wee." She scrambled from her chair and headed toward the women's room, which would have a litterbox waiting for her.

But she rocketed back from around the corner just a minute later.

"Carl, Carl! He's here. He's in the bathroom! The *women's* bathroom. The killer! The guy who killed Rebecca W!"

I leaped to my feet. I immediately saw the blue dot on my map, right there.

How? Surely I would've noticed it the moment I woke up. I'd gotten used to keeping one eye on the map. I was always looking out for others. I mentally kicked myself as I rushed forward. I focused on the dot.

Crawler Frank Q.

That was him, all right.

"Come on," I said. I pushed my way toward the side hallway with the bathrooms.

We met in the hall, the man stepping out of the restroom, smiling apologetically. We came to a stop just a few feet away from one another. We just stared for a couple moments, sizing each other up. Donut stood between my legs and started hissing.

He was a tall man, lean, but not quite as tall as me. About forty. I pegged him as either military or a cop based on the way he carried himself. He was a white dude and he hadn't shaved in a few days. Good looking, but not remarkably so. A Seahawks beanie covered what I guessed to be a bald head. He wore filthy, ripped jeans and a black t-shirt. He was also equipped with what appeared to be football shoulder pads, but they were made of glowing black metal, obviously enchanted. The shoulders were spiked. It wouldn't let me examine the properties. He wore heavy boots, which I eyed jealously.

I assumed he had a gun hidden away somewhere, but I didn't see it now. Instead, he carried a massive battle axe over his shoulder. The iron, single-headed weapon looked well-used. He also wore a belt with a line of throwing knives.

I examined his properties as he did the same to me.

Crawler #324,119. "Frank Q."

Level 8.

Race: Human.

Class: Not yet assigned.

He did not have any stars by his name, which meant he'd never killed a boss. But he had something else.

Three skulls.

I knew exactly what the skulls were going to indicate even before I focused on them.

Crawler Killer X 3.

I suddenly felt very cold.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to startle your cat," the man said. He had an authoritative voice. Definitely a cop, or some sort of law enforcement. They taught you to speak that way in training. "That is a cat, right? I thought if I slept in the bathroom, nobody could sneak

up on me. I didn't realize the bathrooms in the safe areas were different than the ones out in the hallways." He paused. "Where are your pants? And your shoes? Have you been walking barefoot this whole time?" He looked me up and down, alternating between me and the cat, a look of wry amusement. "Also, what's up with your name? Royal bodyguard?"

"So you were asleep in there, in the women's room?" I asked, ignoring his questions.

He paused. He tilted his head, as if deciding whether he wanted to answer or not. "Yeah," he said finally. "I hadn't slept in over 24 hours. I found this safe room, dragged one of those cots in there, and I passed out. I must've been out for 12 hours straight. Stupid, I know."

If that was true, then he'd have been asleep when we'd arrived. Hadn't Donut used the bathroom? I couldn't remember.

Carl: Donut, did you use the bathroom before we went to sleep?

Donut: I DID NOT I WENT IN THE HALLWAY BATHROOM BEFORE WE FOUND THIS ROOM.

"I never saw your dot on the minimap," I said.

"You don't see the icons of sleeping crawlers," he said. "Have you ever seen someone outside your party sleeping in a safe room? Their bodies become translucent. If you touch them, your hand moves right through them. Are you from Seattle? I'm still pretty close to where I came in, but I haven't been able to find any staircases down to the second level."

Donut, who had been hissing and growling this whole time, couldn't take it anymore. "You killed Rebecca W!" she shouted.

The man just stared at the cat for several moments. "Holy shit," he finally said. "I thought that's what I'd heard. A talking cat. This fucking place."

Donut hissed in response. Behind us, I heard the clash of steel on the television screen. They'd started showing the day's recap.

"Did you know her?" the man asked. "Rebecca Wong?"

"He admits it! The criminal has confessed!" Donut cried. "I'm gonna hit him with a magic missile." She jumped up on my shoulder

and started to wiggle her butt.

"Wait, wait," he said. He took a step back and held up his hands. "I didn't… It's not what it looks like. I didn't have a choice."

"We didn't know her," I said. "We just came across her body."

He seemed to relax. "Look, I can explain," he said. "It wasn't just her. There were five of them. My partner got one, I got three, and you would not believe the thing that killed the fifth guy. It's a long story. Can you, uh, put down your cat?"

"*Put me down*?"

"That's not what he meant," I said. "Donut. Chill." This was the first living human we'd run across, and I wanted to get his story. I didn't trust him as far as I could throw him, but I wanted to hear what he had to say first.

Donut grumbled something under her breath.

"Where's your partner?" I asked.

He paused. "She's dead. Shot."

After a moment, I nodded. "Let's go to the other room. We're missing the show. We can talk in there."

"Okay," he said. He eyed Donut warily, who made a spitting noise. Her fur was completely poofed out.

"Did you see the last episode?" I asked.

"Yes," the man—Frank—said. He took a seat about 10 feet away, near the exit. He draped his left arm over the chair, trying to appear casual, but I could see his entire body was tense. "There's another rest area about three miles east of here. That one has a restaurant in it. That whole block is now overrun with thorny, creeping plants that will eat you whole. I found this place while looking for the stairs. The rot stickers outside pack a punch."

On the screen it showed a group of about 40 middle-eastern men fighting a borough boss. The creature was an armored, elephant-sized, six-legged rhinoceros-like monstrosity with tentacles on its back. The tentacles seemed to have an ability that turned the men into stone. The monster had been hurt badly, but it ended up killing all 40 of the men. Half of them had been turned to stone. A moment later, the creature fell over and died. The display froze, and **Match Draw** appeared on the screen.

"Tell us your story," I said, "and then we'll tell you ours."

I kept one eye on the screen, which was showing one adventuring disaster after another, and one eye on the man as he recounted his tale. Frank claimed he and his partner, a woman named Maggie, worked for "Customs Enforcement," which was a nice way of saying he was a fed, and he worked for ICE. They'd been in plain clothes, outside in that ridiculously cold weather doing some sort of surveillance on a warehouse. The place was right on the water, supposedly employing a large group of undocumented Chinese workers. When the collapse came, the warehouse disappeared, revealing a group of about 15 men and women who'd been outside, smoking on a patio. Frank and his partner identified themselves, and everyone just started shooting at each other. The dungeon opened up right in the middle of their firefight. His partner, Maggie, stumbled into the stairwell, and it wouldn't let go of her. So he went in with her. Five of the others, for reasons he said he couldn't fathom, followed them in.

He went on to recount a firefight in the hallway. Of a confrontation with their leader—Rebecca W—who'd shot him three times before he got her right in the heart. He'd thought he was going to die, but he'd healed amazingly fast. He'd looted her body and chased down the last one, only to see the man get eaten by a plant monster, a thing that came out of a giant pod. It was called a vine creeper. I'd seen one of them during the show's premiere. From there Frank found a tutorial guild, his wounds were fully healed, and here he was. He'd been using his gun and the ones he'd looted from the others, but he was now out of ammo.

"That one," he said. "Rebecca. Rebecca Wong. She was the boss of the operation. A human trafficker. A modern-day slave driver. We were days away from taking down the whole operation."

"You poor man," Donut said at the end of his story. Her demeanor toward him had made a complete turn. "I am just devasted about your partner."

He shrugged. "I appreciate that." He went up and grabbed a cookie. He ate it, and the **+9.8 EXP** notification dinged over his head.

"Was this Rebecca the one who killed your partner?" I asked. I watched the notification over the man's head fade away.

"No," he said, shaking his head. The man sat back down. "It was one of her goons, the same guy who got killed by the vine creeper. He shot Maggie." The man lowered her head.

The show had moved to the second half of the program, showing humans who were performing well. A woman dressed in snow gear and what looked like a Valkyrie helmet had an enchanted crossbow that shot firebolts. It showed her plowing through a group of dog-faced goblin things. Gnolls.

"Hey," I said. "Since you looted those guys you killed, I don't suppose you have any pants that might fit me in that bag of yours? Or shoes?"

He paused. "Sure, boss. If you don't mind wearing the clothes of a dead man."

Carl: Donut. Do not say anything out loud. Can you see this?

Donut: WHAT IS HAPPENING?

Carl: Don't type in all caps. I think Frank is going to try to hurt or incapacitate us. This is important. Do not react. Do not fight back at all. Whatever you do, don't fire a magic missile. Just let it happen. Trust me on this. I'm going to present an opening. I want to entice him into action.

Donut: WHAT DO YOU MEAN. FRANK IS AN AMERICAN HERO.

Carl: Frank is full of shit. He's lying. I think there might be somebody else in here with us, and they are getting ready to jump us. I'll explain in a minute. We're going to have to run. Get ready.

Donut: I DO NOT LIKE THIS, CARL.

A pair of khaki pants appeared in his hand. They had an enormous blood stain down the side of them. He tossed them to me. "These are the biggest pants I have. I don't know if they'll fit you or not. I have a couple pairs of shoes in here, too, but it doesn't say what their sizes are."

"Thanks," I said. I paused, waiting to see if he would toss me a pair of shoes, but he was making a show of pretending to sort through his inventory. He wanted me to try the pants on first, which I noticed right away were much too small. And they were women's pants. I sighed. *Oh well*.

I stood and turned my back. I made motions like I was pulling my kneepads off.

Everything that happened next occurred over the course of less than a second.

I saw the blue dot appear in the bathroom hallway, just as the woman emerged from around the corner. At the same moment, Donut leaped into the air with a panicked yowl as Frank pulled his weapon from his inventory and fired at the cat.

The woman, pistol aimed directly at my head, also fired.

On the television, Lucia Mar, along with her two rottweilers, Cici and Gustavo 3, tore through a group of red, demon-like monsters. The girl was like a demon herself, savagely swinging her mace.

Donut landed on the table with the cookies. Her body slid, moving through the plate, which disappeared and reappeared as if it wasn't really there. Her feet scrambled as she plummeted off the edge of the table. She hit the floor and bounced back up, screaming at the top of her lungs. "Carl, Carl! Help!"

"I'm here," I said. "We gotta go now. We have less than two minutes."

She paused, looking back and forth between me and the two frozen Crawlers. Both had the word **Naughty** blazing over their head. I recounted my earlier discussion with Mordecai. This was after Donut had eaten the enhanced pet biscuit and while we'd waited for her to transform.

"You said they teleport out of here if she turns into a monster. So monsters can't ever get into safe areas? What if I leave the door open? They won't be able to wander in?"

"Oh, they'll wander in," Mordecai said. "Always close the door. If it's a mob, it'll teleport away the moment it attacks you. But they'll trash the place, too."

“What if Donut doesn’t turn into a monster, but she also doesn’t recognize me? She sometimes bites people she doesn’t recognize. Will she teleport away then?”

“No. It’s different for crawlers. There’s no violence and no stealing in the safe rooms. It’s a strict, ironclad rule. You get three strikes. The first time, you freeze in place for about 100 seconds while you get an automated lecture on playing nice. The second time it’s for an hour. The third time you’re stripped of all your gear and teleported into a mob nest.”

So when Frank Q and his partner—her name really was Maggie. Maggie My—decided to kill us to take our gear or whatever the hell they were doing, they made the mistake of using a safe area as their point of attack. It obviously was their first—and last—attempt at doing it that way.

“But how did you know?” Donut cried, looking between the two frozen people. They had been frozen the very moment they’d pulled the triggers. The bullets didn’t appear to have even left the barrels yet. “Are you psychic? And where did this lady come from? I just don’t understand. This is very distressing.”

“We don’t have time,” I said as I added the pants to my inventory. I had a vague notion to pick Frank up, rearrange him so his gun was facing his partner, but I was afraid the system would count that as an act of violence on my part. “We gotta go now.”

Before we rushed outside, I took a precious second to examine the attributes of Maggie My.

She was about the same age as Frank, so around forty years old, athletic. A white woman with closely-cropped, brown hair. She wore shining, metallic pants and boots. She wore a leather jacket similar to my own—though hers had both of their sleeves. She didn’t appear to hold any weapons other than her gun.

Crawler #324,116. “Maggie My.”

Level 9.

Race: Human.

Class: Not yet assigned.

She had five skulls next to her name.

Between her and Frank, they'd killed eight people. *Eight*. They both had the ability to go completely stealth. I doubted they had been sleeping in the bathroom. They'd likely heard that explosion from earlier and tracked us to the safe room. We'd left a wake of dead rot stickers along the way, a literal path of destruction to this space.

Frank had said people turned translucent when they slept. Was that true? It certainly wasn't true for Donut, but she was also in my party. Maybe they had meant to sneak up on us and kill us in our sleep, but when they realized they couldn't, they'd gone to the bathroom to wait. Maybe the plan was to sneak up on me from behind while I went to the men's room. I didn't know.

We jumped outside, and I plotted a path to the closest main artery. I downed an Iron Skin potion and gave one to Donut, making her drink it. A couple of red dot clusters appeared between here and there. I didn't want to waste time fighting them. The hallway was too thin, the ground too bumpy to use the chopper. Plus, one blast from a rot sticker was likely to turn the powered bicycle into a bomb. So we ran. I wanted to avoid the mobs if we could. Every mob we left alive was one they'd have to deal with.

"Why are we running?" Donut asked. "We can take them."

"I don't know if we can," I said. "They both have guns. He's level eight, the same as us, and she's level nine. Getting to nine is hard, so she probably has a lot of skills. Besides, I *really* don't want to have one of those skull markers by my name. Even if they have it coming, everyone else we meet won't know that. We will never get anyone to talk to us."

"But if we don't stop them, they'll hurt somebody else."

I stopped dead in the hallway. I looked at the cat. It was a very un-Donut-like thing to say. But worse, it was the truth.

"Goddamnit, Donut," I said. I looked back over my shoulder in the direction of the safe room. They'd be awake already by now, though I suspected—and hoped—they wouldn't just come running.

They probably *were* going to hurt somebody else. If they could find someone. But what could we do?

Donut fired a magic missile, killing a group of the regular level two rats that seemed to infest every corridor regardless of neighborhood. The rats sizzled and fell onto their backs. One of them dropped a poor rat skin and a rat steak.

"Don't take that inventory," I said. "Cancel it out."

Donut huffed but complied. She loved looting corpses. The person to kill a mob had first right to loot for a couple minutes after the battle, but if they canceled out the box, the corpse became fair game.

I had an idea, but I didn't know if it would work. We didn't have time, but I needed to test it. I pulled one of the goblin smoke bombs out of my stash, lit the wick, and then quickly added it to the rat's inventory. It let me do it. Like with most games, it allowed me to add items to the corpse's inventory as if it was a chest. The rat had a grid pattern inventory that looked as if it couldn't hold very much. This was how inventory had been for crawlers last season.

I had to see if the smoke bomb remained lit. They'd said that items didn't retain their momentum, but what about this? Thanks to my level 5 in Explosives Handling, now when I examined incendiary items, I received some extra information:

Goblin Smoke Bomb.

Type: Deflagration.

Effect: Opaque smoke over a 10 meter radius for 3 minutes.

Status: Good. 89/100

Emits a stinking cloud of billowing, multi-color smoke that lasts for three minutes before disbursing. Use to either confuse enemies or as a stage prop at a hair metal concert.

It didn't say the bomb was lit. I pulled the bomb out, and to my relief, the wick still crackled and spit. I quickly added it back to the rat's grid. Everything was the same, but the Status had changed to **Discharge Imminent 34/100.**

I then examined my pile of goblin dynamite. They were all out of 50, not 100, and all of them were either in **Detonation Imminent** or **Danger**. It appeared the Danger warning appeared once the status was below 15.

I gingerly removed the most unstable piece of dynamite I had, one that was **10/50** and added it to the rat's inventory without lighting it. I noted, despite me handling the dynamite as carefully as I could, it'd gone down to **9/50**. *Jesus*. I was lucky I hadn't blown myself to bits earlier. This next one was at **13/50**. I lit it and then quickly added it to the rat's inventory.

If they followed, they'd likely come down this same hall. That guy had picked Rebecca W's corpse clean, including her clothes. People who did that were the type to loot everything. If they came across the rat, hopefully they'd think we'd been in too much of a hurry to stop and loot for ourselves. Rats didn't normally drop stuff other than skin and meat. It was suspicious as fuck. But, maybe… maybe we'd get lucky. If Frank did pull the three items out of the rat inventory, it would literally blow up in his hands.

For now, it was the best we could do.

"Okay," I said, nervously looking over my shoulder. I remembered they could go invisible, at least on the map. "Let's go."

We turned, and we kept running for the artery.

"How did you know?" Donut asked as we continued to jog.

"He was lying. He was lying right from the start," I said.

"So he's not a federal agent?" she asked. Her breaths were coming in wheezes, but the hallway was close.

"I don't know," I said. "I think he might be. He talks and acts like a cop. But his whole story was bullshit. That Rebecca woman was a level three. He said they'd gotten into a firefight right away, but that couldn't be true. She had that apple core *in* her inventory. That meant she'd gone to a tutorial guild and gotten her inventory turned on. And then he ate that cookie, and I saw he received 9.8 experience instead of 10, which meant he was in a party with someone. Someone alive. Also, he had his arm draped over the chair, and I could see he was twitching his finger. He was typing into the chat. He hadn't figured out how to use it with just his brain."

Donut stared up at me as we ran.

"How is it you're James Bond when it comes to strangers, but Miss Beatrice could date three different guys at once, and you had no idea?"

"*Three* different guys?"

"Well, you were one of them, so two, I guess. Then again, it's three if you count Angel's owner. Does it count as cheating when it's with another woman? There's so many human nuances I don't understand."

"Of course it counts as cheating," I said. *For fuck's sake.*

"But you were always watching those videos on your iPad with the two women rolling around and cleaning each other. Would it have been cheating if Miss Beatrice let you watch?"

"We're not having this conversation right now, Donut."

We reached the hallway and I pulled the chopper out of my inventory. This would be the first time we would actually drive the thing. I tossed a lump of coal into the hopper and prayed it wouldn't explode on us. As we prepared to leave, the dungeon reverberated with an announcement. It was the daily update.

Hello, Crawlers. Another excellent, exciting day! We are very happy to have you with us, and we hope everyone is having a great time. You're really bringing it, and we at Borant truly appreciate the enthusiasm you're giving to this production.

I have a couple of announcements. First off, we want to assure everyone that we have quashed all the bugs with the new toilets. Both the exploding issue and the, ah, unfortunate suction issue with some of the units have been resolved. There is absolutely no need to be afraid of them. Those of you who have been using the hallways to relieve yourselves, please stop. We don't want to have to start using punitive measures.

A couple additional patch notes… We have added support for all of the languages that were missing from our library. So for those of you who are hearing this and finally understanding what I'm saying for the first time… welcome. You'll figure the rest out I'm sure. Also with the languages, we've implemented full cross support for native speech. So now Mandarin speakers will understand English speakers and so forth.

The Feral Rabies debuff is now curable with a health potion or spell. And the contagion is no longer airborne. Sorry about that, New Zealand.

We have removed the Blender Fiend mobs. The mob's difficulty level appears to be too high. Their collective gets stronger each time they, uh, blend, and after working their way through a group of 15,000 crawlers in a single day, we've been forced to take action to prevent a premature extinction event. Rest assured they will be re-introduced on a lower floor. The Street Preacher neighborhood boss has been upgraded to a borough boss. In addition, we have tweaked the strength levels of a few dozen other mobs, too many to mention here. So just be aware of that.

One last note. A lot of crawlers are heading into the stairways prematurely. Again, it's your choice, but it's probably best for you to get as much experience as you can. And just so you know for later, we won't feature you on the recap episode if viewers can't tunnel into your feed. So if you hit the stairs three or four days before a collapse, you are going to miss out.

That's it for now. Keep up the good work, and kill, kill, kill!

"We didn't get to see the rest of the show," Donut said. "Do you think we were on it?"

"I doubt it," I said. I eased onto the alligator skull seat. Underneath me, the whole bike rumbled with potential energy. It had pedals like a bicycle, but it also had a throttle. I had to move the bike by pumping my legs, but once I reached the speed I wanted, I turned the throttle, and the bike would lock that speed in place. It was a strange setup.

The engine built into the chassis was already getting hot. I would have to spread my legs out to keep from getting burned to hell. I sighed. I really, really needed pants.

Donut jumped up into her sidecar seat. She started licking her paw as we zoomed off down the road, trying to put as much distance between us and that neighborhood as we could.

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Time to Level Collapse: 47 hours

If Frank and Maggie found my trap, I didn't receive a notification. The best case scenario was that they were both dead, and I didn't get credit for it. Of all the achievements in this game, Crawler Killer was one I wanted to avoid.

I did not receive any sort of achievement or skill for setting a trap, and it was a safe bet that'd be a thing here. I took that as a good sign. Donut and I did, however, receive an achievement for our "fight" with Frank Q and Maggie My.

New Achievement! Bitchmeat!

You've been attacked by a fellow crawler in a safe zone, and the system has been forced to save your ass. That usually suggests you're either really annoying, or you snore.

If this were a prison, you would now be my bitch. Wait…

***Reward*: Bitches don't get rewards.**

I laughed. For the first time since we'd entered this ridiculous game, I laughed at one of the stupid notifications.

The ride was significantly smoother than I anticipated. We got about three or four miles per lump of coal, and I had an almost endless supply.

We only managed to travel east for a single junction before we hit a wall, and we were forced to choose between north and south. If the map in my head was accurate, we'd hit the edge of Lake Washington above, once again proving that the dungeon didn't truly circle the planet. We went south, traveling down a rough approximation of the I-5 corridor for a short time before passages that went east and west started re-appearing. I strongly suspected we needed to head east and inland before we saw any stairwells. But the problem was directly east was a large mountain range up above, and if the dungeon had been desolate before, it'd be downright abandoned here. Not for another 100 miles.

We decided to resume our trek east anyway, heading further away from the western edge of the U.S. coastline.

We drove for hours, seeing no sign of people or mobs or stairwells. It was difficult to gauge how fast we were actually moving, but I guessed it was about 20 miles per hour. My **Chopper Pilot** skill rose steadily as I drove. Once I hit level 5, the throttle actually allowed me to increase our speed.

I didn't want to go too fast, but I felt it was important to find a denser area of the labyrinth. From what little I'd seen on the show, I knew there were areas different than this. I had the sense that these giant squares were nothing more than just filler, like the randomly generated terrain at the edge of some maps in open-world games.

As we drove, I made Donut keep her map on full screen so she could better scan the area, looking for points of interest. We saw fewer and fewer training guilds out here, but they were there. The bathrooms continued to be all over the place, and rest areas dotted the maps, too.

My thoughts wandered to my father. If he could only see me now, sitting on this thing, holding my legs out so they wouldn't burn on the side of the glorified moped. He'd laugh, call me a damn fool. He'd been a motorcycle guy. Not a full-time, leather-clad biker. He was more of a weekend warrior.

I hadn't talked to or heard from the man in over 12 years. Not since he'd abandoned me that day, leaving me all alone in the world.

Before today, I'd never been on a motorcycle in my life, not that this thing really counted as one. I had a bicycle now that I sometimes rode to work if the weather was good, but I'd never even ridden on a dirt bike, let alone anything more powerful.

We stopped once to use a restroom that appeared just off the main corridor. Once we entered the hallway, we were beset by a group of bipedal, raccoon-headed monsters that were as tall as my knee. These things were called Scat Thugs, and the ones here on the edge of the corridor were all level three. They were about as strong as regular goblins and were armed with needle-like spears. A pair charged me and got skewered by my knee pads. I took all their spears as loot, which were useless to me, but hopefully I'd be able to sell them later.

We used the bathroom—thankfully neither of us exploded—and we headed out on our way.

But the short excursion taught me something important. Those mobs were right there, barely twenty feet from the edge of the never-ending artery. We hadn't seen their dots until we'd stopped the bike and approached the boundary of the alley. The fog of war encroached tighter upon us the faster we were going. That was important to know. We needed a skill or a spell or some sort of special ability that would allow us to navigate better. We were literally driving blind, and I didn't like that. It was only a matter of time before we drove headfirst into a trap.

We decided to go back on the road, heading deeper east. I moved slower.

And then, after several hours, we finally saw something new.

I stopped the Chopper, examining the spray-painted sign on the wall.

"Two crossroads east, three south. Stairs + People."

It was written in English in red, runny spray paint. I ran my hand across it. It didn't come off on my finger, but it had a tacky texture. The paint was only hours old.

"Do you think it's a trap?" Donut asked.

"Maybe," I said.

Now that we'd stopped, I could see several x's on my map, indicating mob corpses just down the hallways. We ventured in to get a better look. These were white, horned goat things with mouths full of fangs. I examined the first one.

Lootable Corpse. Chilly Goat. Level 4. Killed by Crawler Brandon An with an assist by Crawler Chris Andrews 2.

Inventory is empty.

I examined all the goats in the area, and I counted 15 different names who had either killed or assisted in the slaying of the mobs. The goats had been sliced, fried with spells, and I saw several broken arrow shafts, though the arrow heads themselves were all gone. Some of the monsters were literally smashed flat, like the person had an enormous hammer.

"I'm pretty sure it's not a trap," I said. "Let's go find them."

The spray painted notifications continued the closer we got to the area.

Right where the sign told us to go was a T-junction. I coasted to a stop. The Chopper made a *chug-chug-chug* noise. It would need another lump soon. I was getting good at understanding its sounds and vibrations. My ass was killing me, and my legs ached. On the ground was an arrow, pointing left, which was further east.

Looking at the map, I could see this area was different than any place we'd entered before. The east and west roads didn't continue straight, but they curved away, indicating we'd come to the edge of a massive circle.

I suddenly had an uneasy feeling about what might be at the center of this area.

"I see the stairwell," Donut said. "If you zoom out the map, it's right on the edge of what we can see."

Sure enough. In the area immediately south, and presumably in the center of this giant loop, there appeared to be a stairwell. I hovered over the white square on the map, and it simply read **Stairwell to Floor Two**.

I didn't see any other blue dots or anything else. Just the empty expanse of the fog of war.

"Look, there's something written on the ground," Donut said, pointing down the left hallway.

After a minute's hesitation, I stored the chopper, and we went toward the sign on foot.

"This road is safe. We are gathered a mile and a half this way. DO NOT go deeper into the spiral or you will activate the borough boss."

Shit. Mordecai had said the bosses wouldn't be guarding the stairwells until the fourth floor.

"I wonder what's in there," Donut asked, looking at the solid wall to our right.

Just as she said it, the wall rumbled as something rushed past on the other side. It was like we were standing on a train platform. Whatever it was, it was something fast. Something big.

Very, very big.

We walked on foot. After about a quarter mile, a rounded portcullis appeared on our right, leading toward the center of the circle. The cross-beam gate was lifted about halfway up the floor. We'd be able to slip under and go deeper into the loop if we wanted. There appeared to be another ring just inside. The graffiti had called it a spiral. Looking inside, I could see another doorway just down this wide, interior hallway. So it was more like a round maze than a spiral.

If we slid under the gate, it would no doubt slide closed and trap us.

"Let's wait a second," I said. "I want to see what it is."

We didn't have to wait long. The creature, whatever it was, rushed by in a flash, too fast for me to get an info box. It rolled like a ball. It was pink, fleshy, and it was the size of the entire hallway. It was like a nightmare Pac-man monster. It made a terrible grunting noise as it rocketed by, shaking the walls. The stench of sewage wafted up as it passed.

"My heavens," Donut said, crinkling her face like I'd tried to feed her vegetables. "This is going to be unpleasant."

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"Let's see if we can find who's making these signs," I said.

We passed three more of the rounded entrances before we came across the encampment.

It was a full quarter turn from where we started, at the end of another artery. My heart swelled when I saw the sheer number of people there. There were about forty blue dots gathered at what appeared to be a drawbridge leading into the round maze.

My enthusiasm waned when I saw the manner of people waiting for us.

Almost all of them were still level one. And they were elderly. Not cool grandpa dude at the club elderly. But holy-crap-I-love-you-gam-gam-but-how-the-hell-are-you-still-alive elderly. Most of them were in wheelchairs. Those who weren't had walkers. Most were in robes and caps, and piles of blankets littered the hallway. They sat gathered together. Most appeared to be asleep.

Another older woman stood apart from the group. This one was pushing 70, not 100 like the others. She stood stiffly, her black eyes watching us. This woman was wrapped head to toe in an endless amount of scarves, and her skin was like a relief map of a shriveled prune. A red checkered trapper hat with ear flaps sat skewed on her head. She leaned on a shopping cart filled to the brim with blankets and other odds and ends including a plastic pink flamingo that had an arrow stuck in its head.

I remembered the stairs I'd had to descend, and I wondered how they'd managed to get the wheelchairs and shopping cart down here.

I caught sight of a group of younger, more able-bodied crawlers. One of them, a chubby black guy, saw us approach and waved. He came jogging up.

"Oh thank god," the man said. "Did you see our signs?"

"We did," I said. I examined his properties.

Crawler #12,330,671. "Brandon An."

Level 6.

Race: Human.

Class: Not yet assigned.

He had a single bronze star by his name. The man wore a heavy winter jacket despite the heat. He had a gigantic hammer looped over his shoulder. The weapon was comically big. The round head was almost as wide as the tire on my Chopper. It glittered, obviously made of some sort of magical, lightweight metal. He didn't appear to have any other armor or gear.

"We?" the man said, frowning as he examined my properties. He took a hesitant step back, as if he was startled. "Is there more than one of you?" He looked down at Donut, and his frown deepened.

For a moment I was afraid that I had received a skull next to my name without realizing. But then I remembered what my real title was. It didn't say my name was Carl. It said I was **Royal Bodyguard Carl**, and Donut was **Grand Champion Best in Dungeon Princess Donut**.

I could only imagine how that looked to someone meeting me for the first time.

Another man approached, this one was **Chris Andrews 2**. He was also level six. The two men were clearly brothers. He was taller and less stocky. Chris wore a metal skullcap but didn't appear to have any weapons.

"Yes we are *we*," Donut said. "I mean, really. I am right here. Rude."

Chris and Brandon just looked at each other. Then Brandon burst out laughing.

"I'm sorry man," he said to me. "I didn't realize. I saw your name, and I thought…"

"Yeah," I said. "You thought I was a nut. She talks. She also probably has higher stats than anybody else here."

Brandon went to a knee and patted Donut on the head. She looked simultaneously outraged and thrilled that he had touched her. "Well it's nice to meet you, Princess Donut. I'm sorry if I offended you, pretty girl. I've never met a talking cat before."

"It's quite all right," Donut said, mollified. "Apology accepted."

We walked back toward the group. Despite what I had seen earlier with the goat corpses, it appeared there were only four people here in fighting shape. Both Brandon and Chris were level six. A round Hispanic woman—**Yolanda Martinez 13**—was around fifty years old and only stood about four foot 11. She was level five and carried a bow and had a quiver hanging over her shoulder. The quiver was so big on her, it almost dragged on the floor. She was in medical scrubs, and she wore a plastic ID on her breast. It read "Meadow Lark. Yolanda. CNA."

The fourth was another woman carrying a longsword. She, too, wore scrubs, though she also wore a magical cloak. Her name was **Imani C**. I guessed the woman weighed about 90 pounds, if that. She looked to be about 20 years old. Her terrified, hollowed-out eyes suggested she had seen some shit.

All four of them had a single bronze star after their names.

Imani also had skulls.

A lot of skulls.

On the interface, it was one big skull followed by two more regular ones. When I hovered over it, it said **Crawler Killer X 12**.

She was also level 10, the highest we'd seen so far.

Donut: CARL IT IS ANOTHER VILE MURDERER.

Carl: I don't think so, not this time. Also, I know you don't have to type in all caps. I've seen you do it before. It makes you sound like you are yelling.

Donut: I AM YELLING CARL.

"We are the night staff at an eldercare facility in Wenatchee," Brandon was saying after I introduced myself to the others. Yolanda

greeted me with enthusiasm. Imani said nothing. "We had a fire alarm and were forced to go outside because *someone*," he eyed the woman with the shopping cart, "started a barrel fire outside our building and caught it on fire."

I examined the woman with the shopping cart. She was obviously homeless. *We're all homeless now*. She stood there, looking off into space, gnawing on a blackened fingernail.

Crawler #7,450 "Agatha."

Level 2.

Race: Human.

Class: Not yet assigned.

"Anyway," Brandon said. "We had to evacuate the building, all 250 residents out into the freezing cold right when it happened."

I looked at the group, counting for the first time. There were a total of 38 people here, including the four workers and Agatha.

"There were 250 of you?" I asked, looking the group over.

"Yeah," Brandon said, more quietly. "Not everyone came down here. And not everyone who did is still with us."

He went on to explain what happened next.

The fire started and quickly engulfed the outside of their building. Luckily, the fire had been on the side of the cafeteria, in an alley area where Agatha had been camped out. Nobody had been hurt by the blaze itself, but evacuations at elder facilities were always an especially dangerous affair. It was no simple task to get everyone out.

The local police and fire department had arrived by the dozens. Firefighters assisted with the fire and with handing out blankets to the freezing residents and workers of the facility. They'd been in the process of getting the keys to a nearby elementary school to get everyone out of the cold.

"But how did you get them down the stairs?" I asked.

Brandon looked, again, at Agatha. "The entrance appeared right in the street, literally in the middle of the group. A bunch of folks fell in. There were stairs just like you said. But then Agatha over there pushed her cart right onto the stairs like she was… well I don't know what the hell she was doing. But the stairs transformed into a ramp.

It *wanted* her to come on down. A long, easy ramp. Agatha was the first to voluntarily go down there, cackling like she always does. Hollerin' she'd saved all our lives. The folks who fell in when it opened, we never saw them again." He shuddered. "They weren't there when we got to the bottom."

"Did you go because of the cold?" I asked.

He eyed my naked legs. "We didn't mean to go all the way in, but it was warm in there, you know what I mean? So I pushed a few residents right into the entrance where the ramp wasn't so steep, so that hot air was blasting up on them. I figured we could wait there until we knew what we were going to do. Only a few of the cops and paramedics remained after the collapse. They just took off running in all sorts of directions, like they had some place better to go. But some stayed, and they helped me bring the residents into the warmth. It let me do it. We moved several over, but then, after we'd moved about half the residents into the warmth, it just stopped letting me leave. My foot was trapped. My brother wasn't even in the hole, but when he grabbed my hand, it wouldn't let him move, either. And it started hurting after a minute. It only stopped when we moved down the ramp. When we got that twenty minute warning, when it said anyone lurking in the stairwell wouldn't get out? We just went in. We didn't have a choice."

"What about the cops and paramedics?"

"We had about twenty guys with us, including a couple firemen and cops who decided to go in. Most didn't. We all helped getting the residents inside the hall." He pointed over his shoulder, indicating the artery that led to this quarter of the circle. "It was right there, just around that corner where we came in. Most of these folks haven't moved hardly at all since we got here. We've been bringing them food from a safe room that's about a mile away."

"Where are the cops and firefighters now?" I asked.

He nodded at the circle. "Most went in there when we first found this place. The gates closed, then about five minutes later, the gates opened up again, and those guys were just gone. Our tutorial guide lady, Mistress Tiatha, she said all borough and city bosses will have stairwells for the first four or five levels. But there will be a bunch of

other stairs in random places, too. A couple of us went out searching for them, hoping we could find a stairwell that's easier to get to than this one. This was just a while back." Brandon cast a nervous glance at the elderly patients. He leaned in and whispered, "They're all dead. You can see when they die on the party menu. They all got picked off by something that'd been hunting them one by one. Even Doctor Gracie, and she was a damn MMA fighter. Us four? We're the last of the non-residents left. Us and Agatha."

I turned to regard the large group of elderly patients. Looking upon them gave me a terrible, sinking feeling. *They shouldn't be here*. This wasn't going to end well.

Agatha had pulled a blue IKEA bag from her shopping cart. She produced a can of metallic silver spray paint from the bag. She hobbled over to the wall and sprayed a giant circle, then turned it into a happy face. Then she leaned in and sniffed the wall, muttering something to herself the whole time.

"Don't waste the spray paint, Agatha," Brandon called.

"It's mine!" Agatha said, clutching the IKEA bag to herself. "You stole it from me."

"And you stole it from Stan's," Brandon said. "Just… Just don't waste it, okay?"

"Have you thought about moving all these folks to the safe room?" I asked. "It has to be more comfortable than the hallway."

"It's already full," Brandon said. "It's a damn Waffle House from Alabama. Can you believe that? The place has a capacity of 30 people, and my brother Chris has been helping the more coherent, more mobile ones get over there. There's this gnome thing in there that's cooking them food and singing. They all love it." He smiled sadly. "Those folks at the Waffle House. They made a vote, and they decided they're not coming out. They're treating it like a giant party."

"He doesn't talk much, does he?" I asked, indicating Brandon's brother, Chris.

Brandon shook his head while Chis looked at me impassively.

"He's not exactly mute," Brandon said. "But he don't say too much. Growing up, our mom thought he was slow. They put him in a special school because he never spoke. But he's not dumb. He does

talk. Think of him as Silent Bob. If he says something, you better listen."

Brandon nodded sagely.

I hesitated. "And her?" I asked, indicating Imani. I watched as she helped a woman to a nearby door. A bathroom. She made the woman open the door herself. The floor outside the bathroom was stained red. I shuddered, remembering the exploding "bug" from the announcements. After the woman was safely delivered to the bathroom, Imani turned and helped a man in a wheelchair take a sip of water. Yolanda also moved amongst the others, talking softly.

Brandon shook his head. "We got attacked once, right after we found that tutorial place. I… I don't really want to talk about it, man. But Imani, she had that sword, and several of the residents, we were taking them in groups to Mistress Tiatha. They can't move so quick. It was for the better. Letting those things burn them, that'd been much worse."

I nodded. I had questions, but I knew some things were best left unasked. It wasn't lost on me that her high level was probably a direct result of her having to kill 12 of her former patients. And she'd probably gained a loot box or two.

"These people still can't walk? So the dungeon's fast healing and all those healing spells and such don't work?"

"Oh, it's amazing," Brandon said. "But it's a curse, too. All of these folks have been cured of hundreds of their little ailments. Not a one of them brought any of their medications with them down here, and it's been okay. But at the same time, they ain't getting any younger. Or stronger. And those who've lost memories or cognitive function, that hasn't been fixed. It's like it cured anything that's going to kill them, but it didn't make them better than they were, either."

I sighed, turning my attention to the large, rounded entrance to the maze. There was a short bridge, an entrance about three times the size of the smaller portcullis entrances that peppered the way, with a raised, giant gate big enough to allow a pair of goblin dozers through side-by-side. It led to another, round courtyard with three

exits. The walls shook as the monster sped by, but it didn't appear to enter this courtyard area.

"So, what's the plan?" I asked.

"The original plan was to gather as many people as we could and then storm the maze. We think it's shaped like a spiral. But nobody was coming, so they went looking for other exits. And that didn't work out so well. Now it's just us, and we can't kill that thing. Nobody even knows what it is."

"And then what?" I asked. "Even if we had free passage to the stairs…" I let it hang.

"I know, I know," Brandon said. "But I just can't leave them. I was hoping, maybe if we could get them all down to the second level, then we could do the same thing for the third level. And then they'd all get to choose a class and maybe they wouldn't be, you know…"

"Useless?" Donut asked.

I nodded. I felt for the guy and the other three. Would I have stayed, continued with my duty? Even when it was so damn hopeless? What a nightmare. I thought I'd had it bad, but these guys… The world was over. There was no hope for these poor people they'd been in charge of protecting. This harsh environment wasn't meant for the weak, the frail.

Yet to these four—Brandon, Chris, Yolanda, and Imani—the idea of giving up their duty wasn't even a question.

I spent some time recounting our story, including our clash in the last safe room. I told them of our two encounters with neighborhood bosses.

"I can do something similar with this boss," I said. "I think I can build a bomb that'll go off on its own when the monster hits it, that way we don't have to get locked in there to fight."

"It won't work," Yolanda said, coming up to stand with us. "You know those little doors, the ones that let you see the monster? They're protected somehow. I thought to try to hit it with my bow, but the arrow bounces right off. I poked at it with my finger, and it feels like thick clay. It even glows blue if you touch it. They look like entrances, but they ain't. I think *mayb*e you can go in that way if

you push yourself really hard, but I wouldn't try it. And I wouldn't be pushing no bomb through that. The only way in is through this big gate here. And the monster doesn't go into that first room. So you can't hurt it without first getting locked in."

"But we don't know for sure," Brandon added. "Once the gate closed, we couldn't see in there at all. We couldn't hear. We couldn't talk using the party chat, not with the ones in there. It was like they'd been cut from the party."

I sighed. We had two choices. We could leave these guys and hope to find another set of stairs somewhere. Or we could fight the borough boss here.

Neither choice was appealing. Whatever that thing was, it would be almost impossible to kill. I remembered that scene from the latest recap episode. It had been forty against one borough boss, and it had slaughtered them. We didn't even know what the hell the monster was.

I looked at the clock. We had 40 hours. Geez. Had it really been that long since we'd run away from Frank and Maggie? There would be another show in 10 hours. We'd done nothing today except travel a hundred miles or so from where we started.

And speaking of Frank and Maggie. I had a terrible realization. "Your people, the ones who died while looking for more stairs. Which direction did they go?"

"Mostly west, toward Seattle. They would've been north of where you were. I remember where we killed the chilly goats. That was the farthest out my brother and I had gone. We separated from the group right around there and headed back here."

"And how long ago did the last one disappear?"

"It was earlier today. Barely five or six hours ago."

I looked down at Donut, thinking. It could've been them, Frank and Maggie. But that would mean they'd gotten to this area before us. That didn't make sense. We were pretty far from where we'd last encountered them. Could there be another group of crawlers killing people off? Or was it a monster? Without finding their bodies, we'd never know.

Behind me, one of the elderly women started sobbing. Another, a man with a back so curved his chin rested against his own chest, scooted forward on his walker and patted her on the back. The hunch-backed man was wearing a veteran's cap. He had been US Army Special Forces once upon a time.

If I'm gonna die, I might as well do it in the pursuit of a worthy cause.

"Are there any other rest areas around here?" I asked. "Ones that aren't full?"

"Yeah, we know of two. One of them doesn't have anything in it except a vending machine that hands out wrapped candies. They taste like piss but give you a +1 boost to your dexterity for ten minutes. The machine only works for you once a day. The next place is further down. It's a Taco Bell from Peru and has full facilities, including coffee." He leaned in. "And beer. Good beer."

"What about the mobs near there?" I asked. "Also, how about training guilds?"

"We've cleared out the next two quadrants. Some of the other guys killed the first neighborhood boss. They said it was like a giant, demon man in a suit made of skin. We got the second boss. All of us here were in on that fight. That one was a floating crystal thing, but it shattered when I hit it with my hammer a few times. The next area after that, next to the Taco Bell, is still crawling with monsters. They're lizard creatures. They jump and bite and poison you. I got hit once, and I thought I was going to die. The poison ran out on its own just before it killed me, and that was only because I kept taking health potions. We didn't want to mess around in that neighborhood after that. But there are a couple training guilds in the area."

"Okay, good," I said. "This is what's going to happen. Donut and I are going to spend the rest of today grinding. If you can manage to pry a pair of those rattle cans from Agatha over there, I'll take them with us. I'm going to try to level up my skills as much as possible. You guys should do the same. Be wary of any other crawlers. Especially ones with the skulls by their names. We're going to watch episode three, get some sleep, and then we're going to come back here. And then all of us—Me, Donut, and you four—are

going to go into there, and we're going to fuck that boss up. We're going to get your people down those stairs. Sound like a plan?"

"And how are we going to do that?" a new voice asked. It was Imani, speaking for the first time.

I grinned. "Don't worry. I have an idea."

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"So, what's this grand idea of yours?" Donut asked as we walked away. With her new skirt-like crupper combined with the butterfly talisman around her collar, she jingled when we walked. "How are we going to kill that thing?"

"I have no fucking clue," I said. "But we need them to train. It's our only choice. It took us a full day to find this set of stairs, and we are almost out of time. It's better to face the enemy you know than the one you don't."

"We don't know this enemy," Donut said. "Wait, what are you doing?"

I'd come to the first of the spray-painted signs pointing toward the encampment. I took the can of red paint they'd given me, and I sprayed completely over it, covering it up.

"Did you see that Imani's level?" I asked, standing to see if I could still read it. "She was level 10. And that was partially because of she'd been forced to kill all those people."

"So? Are you saying if someone else comes, they might kill all the old people? Just to get experience? Oh, Carl darling. Nobody is quite that evil," Donut paused. "Are they?"

"I don't know," I said. "And I don't want to find out, either."

"But what if a big group of good guys comes through? And they miss it because you covered it up?"

"Look where we are, Donut. We were lucky to find these people. There aren't any big groups of good guys, not in these parts. It's only sharks and minnows. Now come on. Let's find that Taco Bell."

"So which one are we?" Donut asked as we trekked off.

I didn't answer. I couldn't.

Brandon said they'd put dozens of signs up all over the place. As we headed north, I either defaced or changed all the ones I could find. There was no way I'd get to them all, but it made me feel better.

I was busy changing a sign from saying "2 blocks south" to "12 blocks south" when Donut lifted her head, sniffing. "Two more rats around the corner."

A moment later, their dots appeared.

"Your sense of smell is getting better," I said.

"No, I think the rats are getting stinkier," she said.

We'd killed at least 30 rats between here and the encampment. These rats were bigger and fatter than the ones we'd fought earlier. They were all level three. Before we'd left, I'd quietly asked Brandon if they'd looted the corpses of the folks who'd been killed right when they'd entered the dungeon. He'd been horrified at first until I explained that I needed pants and shoes. He'd given me directions. They'd looted the extra wheelchairs, walkers, and canes, but they hadn't touched their clothes. It would've required them to physically remove them. The thought made me ill. It also gave me a new burst of hatred for Frank Q and Maggie My, who had stripped the body of Rebecca W. They'd probably removed the clothes of the other ones they'd killed, too.

When we got to where the elderly folks had died, all that was left was piles of bones and shredded clothes, nothing usable. I picked up the gnawed remains of a slipper, tossing it down with disgust. The rats had devoured everything else, tearing through the corpses like a hurricane. And now the rats in the area were bigger.

We turned the corner and entered a new quadrant. A pair of humanoid creatures with loincloths and crude clubs saw us and hopped in our direction, hissing. These were three-foot-tall lizard monsters, like Brandon had stated, the tallest of them almost as

high as my hip. They looked like upright Komodo dragons from the waist up. Small but muscular. Their legs were long and bent, kangaroo-like and scaly.

Troglodyte Pygmy – Level 2

Oh, these fuckers. With an intelligence just shy of an oft-dropped toddler, the standard troglodyte pygmy warrior would be harmless if it wasn't so damn fast. Or venomous.

Brandon had warned me about their special attack, so I was ready. Donut hit the first with a magic missile while the second leaped right at me, hissing and baring his giant fangs.

I hit it with a right hook, my chain-covered fist smashing its head, changing the creature's trajectory so it splattered against the wall of the tunnel. It exploded like a damn tomato. Donut's target had practically vaporized under her single missile strike. Her *Magic Missile* spell had risen to level five, and she now had the option to choose how many mana points to put into each casting, from three to six. Her intelligence was currently 24, meaning she could fire eight missiles if she kept the power setting at three.

I poked at the burnt-out husk of troglodyte with my bare toe. It'd only been a few days, but I barely felt the ground now when I walked. Random rocks still hurt, but not so much as they would've before. "That didn't look like a three-mana missile."

"That was a six," Donut said, sniffing at her handywork. "They really need to make this less disgusting."

"If it's a level two monster, a three will probably one-shot it," I said. Neither dropped any loot, but I took their clubs.

"If it's about to bite my face off, it's getting a six," said Donut.

We spent the next hour hunting down and killing all the troglodytes we could. The level threes were called Troglodyte Bashers and the level fours were Troglodyte Virtuosos. The Bashers were twice as big, making them almost human-sized. They didn't have any other special abilities, and they had more regular legs. The virtuosos had a tongue attack that surprised me at first. They were the same size as the level twos, but they could shoot their tongues almost fifteen feet. The thin, wet tongues stung like a whip, inflicting

poison, which was immediately canceled thanks to my nightgaunt cloak.

Donut and I were starting to become adept at fighting as a team. She'd wait for an opening to fire her missiles, and I'd move in to finish them off with a kick or a punch. I could tell just by her stance when—and where—she was going to move. She jumped on my shoulder with ease, using my height to fire on her targets from above. She'd hide behind me, easily slipping between my jacket and cloak, hanging on my back with her claws to avoid a poison attack. Well, any attack really. We didn't level up yet to nine, but we were well on our way. It seemed after level eight, the amount of experience it took to hit the next level was absurdly high. We were plateauing. Even though I couldn't distribute my stat points, my fighting skills were steadily climbing, giving my attacks more and more damage. The difficulty would probably start all over again when we went down a floor.

If we went down a floor.

After killing a Troglodyte Basher, all that was left from one of Donut's missile strikes was the lizard's head, rolling about like a lumpy soccer ball. She jumped down and idly batted at it while I caught my breath. With a single swipe, the skull flew across the hallway and shattered into the wall, leaving a crack in the stones.

"You need to practice with your claws," I said looking at the damage. "My strength is nine, and yours is 18. You are literally twice as strong as I am, and I'm pretty damn strong now. You could probably swipe through steel if you just tried."

"Fighting with one's claws is just so inelegant," she said. "It's not ladylike."

"And shooting lasers out of your eyes is?"

"Oh my, yes. With my *Magic Missile* I don't get blood on me like a common house cat. I don't end up matted and filthy. I can't even imagine it. I'd end up looking like Ferdinand."

"Who the hell is Ferdinand?"

"Nobody you'd know."

I sighed. "Just think about it, okay?"

She didn't answer.

We found the troglodyte boss room after a couple hours of grinding through the hallways. This one was a little differently shaped than the others. The room was a long rectangle with what appeared to be a smaller room at the entrance, meaning I wouldn't be able to pull off my bomb-from-afar method of boss killing. The highest mob in this area was a level four, meaning—hopefully—the boss wouldn't be too strong. Probably a level seven or eight.

It was dangerous, but if we couldn't handle a floor one neighborhood boss by now, we'd have no chance against whatever was guarding those stairs. We decided to go for it.

We hesitantly approached the boss room. The front door to this one was one of those glass, automatic sliding doors, though I couldn't see inside. The sign on the door was in English. It said, "Open 24 Hours" and "Fitness, Weights, Gains."

I grabbed a cigarette and lit it. It was my second to last one. I took a deep drag.

We stepped inside.

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Like the door indicated, this was a high-ceilinged gym. Where we entered was a small receptionist's desk with a turnstile. Signs hung on the wall filled with slogans like "Today is the day you gain" and "Excuses don't lose calories" and "Release the beast." The place smelled of sweat and oil and testosterone. From around the corner I could see racks of fitness equipment. While not tiny, the place was much smaller than the last boss room. I didn't dare throw a dynamite stick in here.

A loud, deep grunting filled the gym, followed by the familiar *ching* of metal weights crashing together.

A level two troglodyte hissed at us from the counter, and Donut jumped to my shoulder and slammed him with a missile. He fell over, dead.

"Hey, was that a three power? He didn't explode."

"Yes, it was. I'm conserving my mana."

The automatic door slammed shut behind us, and the well-lit room turned red.

The familiar music started to play as I pushed my way through the turnstile. The boss battle message blared, almost identical to last time. Our mugshots floated into the air, and we were announced as we rounded the corner. Six of the level-three Troglodyte Bashers filled the room, working the machines. A trio of the Virtuosos stood in the opposite corner.

And then there was the boss.

The monstrosity stood across the room, admiring himself in the mirror as he curled a pair of absurdly large dumbbells. The creature stopped when we entered the room. He dropped the weights. The pair embedded themselves halfway into the floor with a reverberating *crash*. Wood splintered up all around where they fell. The beast slowly turned in our direction, and the world paused the moment his eyes met mine.

Ah, fuck, I thought as the face of the creature zoomed big on my interface.

Versus…

The Juicer!

Level 9 Neighborhood Boss!

With a body enhanced by the finest anabolic steroids the dark web has to offer, the Juicer spends his days pushing iron, snapping necks, and crying that his pimple-infested sac is a third the size it once was. Having reached a plateau, rage now fills his enlarged heart. All he ever wanted was to gain, but right now he'll settle on bringing out…

The music hit a crescendo with a dun, dun, *dun*!

…the paaaaain!

"The cheese factor on some of these descriptions is just horrifying," Donut muttered. "It's worse than that *Knight Rider* show you love so much."

Once again, this creature was a person from our world, though without the description it wouldn't be quite as obvious. It was like they'd taken a Troglodyte Basher and merged it with a contestant from a bodybuilding contest. And then inflated his muscles well past what a normal body could sustain. He was a couple of inches taller than me. He still had the lizard head, and a scaled body and tail. He wore little black shorts and nothing else, revealing a preposterously muscled physique, covered in tributaries of bulging veins as thick as my finger. The thing was so shredded, he was like a kid in a snowsuit who couldn't put his arms down. His trap muscles made him look as if he had tumors sprouting from the edge of his shoulder to halfway up his scaled head. His thighs were the size of beer kegs,

forcing him into a ridiculous, wide stance. He waddled when he moved.

"Bro," the monstrosity croaked. "I need a spot, bro." He pulled a round, metallic free weight from a rack. The disc was the size of a manhole cover. With a twist of his waist, he threw it right at my head. The giant weight burst into flames as it rocketed toward me.

"Holy fuck!" I cried as I jumped out of the way. Donut leaped in the other direction. The weight crashed into a treadmill and exploded, shattering the mirror behind it.

I activated my scroll of *Confusing Fog* as the other troglodytes descended on me. The effect was immediate. A thick, wet fog filled the room, temporarily blinding me before it faded before my eyes. Water beaded over everything, making the ground slick. I could still see the outline of the cloud in the room, but the opacity of the effect was halved. I knew the troglodytes couldn't see a thing. The scroll didn't say how long the effect lasted, but I suspected it wasn't long. We had to act fast.

The troglodytes, blinded, started running into each other and the scattered gym equipment. The Juicer picked up another weight and chucked it in a random direction. "Bro," he groaned. "Bro, I can't see."

I rushed toward the group of bashers as yet another weight crashed against the squat rack, knocking it on its side with a mighty clang. We'd decided ahead of time that I'd take out the support creatures first if I could while Donut dealt full-strength headshots to the boss. I leaped over a glute machine, punching down into the wide-eyed, confused face of a Basher. These guys took at least four or five punches to stay down. My fist burned as I tore through them.

I swept the leg out of the final Basher, and he tumbled, hitting his head on the padded chair of a chest press. As I caved in the side of his head with my fist, the fog cleared, just as quickly as it had come.

Damnit. I read my second scroll as I scrambled away from a flaming disk. It smashed into the same chest press, sending flaming hunks of metal in every direction like shrapnel. I cried out as my exposed hip exploded in pain. Blood geysered down my leg. I cast

my *Heal* spell just as the fog re-filled the chamber. The *Confusing Fog* had lasted barely fifteen or twenty seconds, and I only had one scroll left.

Donut bounced back and forth around the room, launching at the Juicer, who was content to stay where he was and hurl metal at us. The powerful magic missiles were having an obvious effect on the boss monster, but his health bar was still in the green by the time Donut had to drink a mana potion. The Juicer grunted every time the missiles hit his head, followed by a bellow of rage. He'd pick up another weight and toss it in Donut's general direction. She was smart enough to move after each blast. The weights flew through the mist like comets.

In addition to avoiding the attacks by the boss, Donut had to dodge the random tongue lashes from the Virtuosos. She tried to keep a machine between herself and the poison-dealing monsters. Only I had the anti-poison resistance, and if she got hit, we'd have a hard time keeping her alive until she'd be allowed to drink an antidote potion.

Both my leg and my hand healed as I launched myself toward the other side of the room at the three Virtuosos. One blindly shot his tongue, and it smashed into a chin up bar machine next to me. I grasped the tongue with my left hand before it could recede, and the lizard made a strangled cry as it tried to retract but found he couldn't.

He retracted anyway, getting dragged across the room toward me. His large mouth clamped down on my fist. I cried out in pain. I banged the head against the side of a machine, but the body remained firmly attached. Its dozens of sharp teeth were embedded in the bones of my arm. The Virtuoso wasn't dead, but he was literally choking on my fist. He seemed just as desperate to get free of me as I was. His body weighed barely anything, and it flayed desperately as it dangled off my arm.

I reached the other two lizards just as the fog began to clear again.

"I'm almost out," Donut cried behind me.

I snap kicked one in the stomach, and he doubled over. I smashed down with my foot, breaking his neck as I whirled on the third, hitting him with a right cross. I took my left fist, which was still inside the mouth of the first troglodyte, and I pummeled the third to death.

The lizard affixed to me also died during the beating, and his body broke off at the neck with a disgusting *snap*. The teeth remained painfully attached to my left wrist, like I was wearing a bizarre boxing glove made of troglodyte head. Bits of gore and bone still hung from the neck hole. I whirled to face the boss.

The Juicer's health was about 2/3s gone. The entire top half of his body was blackened and scorched. I could no longer see his beady eyes glaring at me.

"Bro," he said. "Not cool. That was my bro." He picked up another weight and flung it at me. I dove out of the way. It hit the wall, shattering. Shrapnel cut into me. Burning little pieces of metal peppered the side of my head. I fell backward over another machine, my ankle getting caught in the wire. I read my final scroll of *Confusing Fog* as I extracted myself. Another weight rocketed toward me, whirring over my head like a buzzsaw. It exploded behind me.

More metal chunks cut into me. My health plummeted into the red. I mentally clicked a health potion from my hotlist as I peeled the skull off my wrist. It was like trying to free a boiled egg from its shell. I had to break the head from the jaw to free my hand. The skull clattered to the ground. After I drank the potion, I noted I had a 15-second cooldown before I could drink another. Donut's cooldown was much longer, closer to two minutes. I didn't have time to wonder why we were different.

The fog filled the room, and I rushed at the boss.

This is a terrible idea, I thought as I approached from behind. The monster was bent over, feeling blindly for another weight from the rack. He'd pulled all the weights off of one pole, but there were more right below it. Blinded, he couldn't see what to grab.

I grasped at a barbell that appeared to have about 250 pounds on each side. I grasped the stop and ripped half the weights free,

which clattered to the ground near my feet. I held onto the barbell before it could tumble forward off the bench. I brandished the lopsided, makeshift weapon like a giant mace. Before, lifting 250 pounds plus the bar would be next to impossible. I normally benched 230 pounds—which was a respectable amount. With my strength now at nine, I could still feel the weight, but I lifted it easily. It was enough to be awkward and maybe too much to just regularly walk around with. But I knew I could easily swing it, and I did, as hard as I could, at the monster's scaly head.

Crash. My whole body shuddered, as if I'd swung at a solid wall. The boss staggered, falling on his side, dropping the weight he'd managed to pull free. The bar trembled, and the three weights fell off the far end. I smacked him one more time with the much-lighter bar then tossed it. I picked up one of the 100 pound weights at my feet, lifted it over my head in both my hands, and smashed down on the Juicer. I smashed, and I smashed. His health bar slowly descended as he cried out.

"Stop, ow! No, bro! It hurts!"

Just when I thought he was done, about to die, he twisted, his giant arm shot up, fast as a snake strike, and it grasped my wrist. It felt as if a steel shackle had wrapped around me. *Oh fuck*, I thought as I dropped the bloody, dripping weight—which bounced off the monstrosity's stomach. He took his other hand and grasped my neck.

"This is gonna hella burn," he said, sitting up. The fog cleared, and his eyes focused on me. Despite being lizard-faced, a row of pustules circled his eyes, like zits that had grown up through the scales. He stank of sweat and burned flesh and Axe body spray. He started to squeeze, and I knew I was dead. My health bar plummeted.

A magic missile slammed into the Juicer's back. This was a weak one, and the monster barely acknowledged it with a grunt.

"Hold on, Carl!" Donut cried. She emerged, flying through the air, claws out like a tiger pouncing on unsuspecting prey. She landed directly on the monster's massive, bulbous shoulder, and she bit down hard on his vein-covered neck as her rear legs scrabbled at his

back. Tendrils of green and red tissue went flying, as if she were a potato peeler gone haywire. She bit through one of the veins on his neck, vampire-like. Blood sprayed as if she had struck oil, soaking Donut, who gurgled in response.

The giant hand at my neck went slack, and he slapped backward at Donut. He barely hit her, a glancing blow, but she rocketed off the creature's back as if she'd been shot out of a cannon. She hit the far wall with a sickening *crunch*.

"Donut!" I cried. I scrambled to my feet, wheezing for breath as the monster reached for his shredded back in obvious, agonizing pain. Blood sprayed from his neck as if she'd sheared off a water spigot. The blood just kept coming and coming, an impossible amount.

The Juicer looked at me, eyes surprised, as if he hadn't realized I was still alive.

"I'm proud of you, bro," he said. "You fought through the pain."

I hit him with a weak jab, and that's all it took. The boss, whose health was already all but depleted, crumpled onto his back. I smashed his solid head with my foot. The system seemed to release whatever supernatural protection it gave to bones and flesh once the creature was dead, and his head caved in easily under my heel. It felt as if I'd stepped into a rotten watermelon. I didn't pause to look at the carnage. I rushed across the room toward Donut.

She lay in a bloodied heap on the floor, her leg bent in the wrong direction. Her health bar held nothing but the barest sliver of red.

"Donut," I cried, coming to my knees before her. "Goddamnit, Donut. Don't you do this to me."

She gasped, not dead. The cat was entirely soaked in blood. But she was alive! I worriedly watched her health, terrified it might go lower. Sometimes when you were injured, it continued to decrease, just like on the surface.

The **Winner!** graphic appeared on my screen, and the music stopped as I plunged into my inventory. I had to wait 10 frustrating seconds for the bullshit to clear before I could find what I was searching for.

I had a scroll of *Heal Critter*. I read it, but it didn't work on her. The scroll evaporated from my menu with an error message. **No Valid Target Available. You just wasted a valuable scroll, dumbass.**

I couldn't cast my heal spell on her, even if I did have enough Mana points, which I didn't. Instead, I pulled a healing potion out of my inventory and uncorked it, ready to pour it into her mouth.

I paused. She'd taken a mana potion just a few minutes earlier. She had a much longer potion countdown than I did. It probably had something to do with our constitution levels. I couldn't examine her and tell where that countdown was, if it had run out or not. Would it hurt her if I tried to feed the potion to her early? I didn't know. Any damage now would surely kill her.

I quickly pulled a second healing potion and decided to test it on myself. Using the quick slots, it wouldn't allow me to take a second potion, but surely the game couldn't stop me from doing it manually.

I downed one health potion, which brought my health back up. This was my first time actually physically drinking one. It tasted oddly like kiwi juice. The bottle disappeared with a *poof*. The fifteen second timer appeared, and I drank the second potion before the timer was done.

You have been poisoned!

Poison effect nullified.

"Goddamnit," I growled. I leaned over Donut, rubbing her soft fur. "Stay with me," I said.

Crack! The cat murmured in pain as her broken leg magically set itself. The sliver of health grew longer. She was healing. Getting better.

I sighed, relief washing over me. She would heal on her own, but it was going to take a while. I'd wait another five minutes before I risked giving her the potion, which would ease her pain.

"Carl, Carl is that you?" Donut asked after a minute, lifting her head pitifully. "Did we get it?"

"We got it, Donut," I said. "*You* got it. Don't move. Just rest for a minute. You saved my life."

"I have been grievously injured in battle," she said. "In saving you, I have made the ultimate sacrifice. I can feel my life fading away, Carl. I'm circling that last bend into the drain. This is the end. I used my claws like you said, and I have perished as a result. Miss Beatrice is going to be most displeased with you." She coughed twice, two coughs that sounded suspiciously fake. "Tell her I fought bravely. Tell her I fought to the end. Find Ferdinand, tell him I loved him. I loved him ever since I first saw him."

Her health suddenly rocketed back up on its own. She'd taken one of her own health potions. I sighed, relieved.

"The light, I think I see the light," she croaked as I sat back and crossed my arms. Her eyes were clenched shut in mock pain. "This mortal coil is shed."

"Oh, get up," I said, looking about the room. "Help me loot all this crap."

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After snagging the neighborhood map, I spent some time grabbing all the weight equipment I could carry. There was a lot of it. Free weights and dumbbells littered the room. I took them all. I grabbed multiple weight benches, which weighed nothing once I removed the bars. I broke down a door I hadn't noticed earlier, and within were several mats and heavy medicine balls and various pieces of broken gym equipment along with some wrenches and other tools. All into the inventory, including the broken door. I then took everything off the office counter on the receptionist's desk, including a laptop computer with a dead battery, and a cabinet filled with paper files.

"Why are you even bothering?" Donut asked, having fully recovered. She frantically attempted to clean the blood off of herself. She was caked. She needed a shower and a brushing. The brushing part was going to be a problem.

"If we can lift it, then we take it," I said. "It only takes a second. The system is really good about categorizing it all. For some things, like that cabinet, it's faster to pick the whole thing up and add everything into the inventory than it is to search it. For example," I held out my hand, and a half-full bottle of Johnny Walker Black appeared. "This was hidden in that cabinet somewhere. The inventory system lets me keep it all together, and it lets me take things out of it, too. It's great once you figure out how to work it.

We don’t know what will be useful and when, so if it’s not bolted to the ground, it’s going into the bag.”

Our next stop was a nearby training guild. Thanks to the boss being a higher level than expected, we both hit level nine. The wide expanse of experience needed to hit level ten spread before us. We also both had piles of loot boxes to open.

“Three stars I see,” Mordecai said as we entered the training guild. He paused, his eyes going glossy for a moment. “You took out a level nine boss on your own? Most impressive!”

“Yeah, it was a dumb idea,” I said. “Not knowing what we’re going to face really sucks. It’s hard to prepare for fights when you’re going in blind.” I sat heavily in the chair while Donut leaped for the fireplace and paused her manic cleaning to open her boxes.

The rat creature nodded. “Let me examine the fight notes, and I can tell you what you can improve upon.”

He grunted after a moment. “Okay, a couple things are clear. First off, brilliant move killing the goblin boss. Those guys are tough, but they aren’t as hard as that thing you just fought. That’s a new one to me.” He shook his head. “The Juicer.”

“I think it was somebody from our world mixed up with one of those troglodytes,” I said. “He wasn’t as lucid as the Hoarder lady had been. They’d done something to him to make him say all that dumb shit. The bosses are caricatures, exaggerated stereotypes. It’s like they’re being controlled by an AI, but their consciousness is still rattling around in there, too. It’s really bizarre.”

Mordecai nodded. “It’s what they do. Right now across the universe, every eye is focused on earth. Programs about your culture are reaching all the corners of the galaxy. The bosses are a part of that. It’s like this every season. Anyway, let’s look at your performance. When you hit it with that heavy weight, you did the same amount of damage as you would’ve with your fist. You need to understand how powerful your bare knuckle skill has become. It’s just as good right now as any unenchanted weapon you may find. I understand it’s not convenient sometimes, but I recommend sticking with the bare hand attack. Also, you wasted those *Confusing Fog* scrolls. Next time, have the party member with the highest

intelligence read any scrolls if you can. Your intelligence of three made it so the fog only lasted fifteen seconds. Princess Donut's intelligence level would've resulted in the fog lasting for 120 seconds per scroll."

"Damn," I said. "Also, is that why she can't take potions so often? Because her constitution is low?"

"Yes," Mordecai said. "That shred attack of hers is very powerful, but it's useless until she gains more armor and more health. You're lucky she hadn't broken her neck. Picking a class or a race with a high base constitution will help, but not much. She'll need to load up on items that enhance it, and those tend to be less common."

I looked at Donut, who was hissing with rage at the piles of torches that kept appearing in front of her. She'd received yet another spell book in the Bronze Boss Box, but she hadn't read it yet. Most everything else appeared to be the same old crap with a couple exceptions. She got a bracelet from a Silver Adventurer box she'd received for finally dealing melee damage. The bracelet added +2 to her dexterity stat, bringing it to 12. She equipped it, and it wrapped snuggly around her front leg.

She also received a dozen *Heal* scrolls from a Silver Survivor's Box. That one was rewarded to her because she'd ended a boss battle with less than 5% of her health. The scrolls were good to have because there was no countdown between reading each one, and even better yet, we could use the scrolls on each other.

She looked up at us. "I am already one of god's most perfect creatures, so I won't be changing race when the opportunity arises. I was born a cat, and I will die a cat. In fact, I'm going to have to insist that Carl choose a cat race as well."

"I am not going to change into a cat," I said. "In fact, I've been thinking about it, and I decided I'm going to stick with human."

Donut did her approximation of a shrug and glowed as she read the magical tome.

"Did you at least read the description first?" I asked. "What was it?"

Mordecai nodded. "That's a good one. *Puddle Jumper*."

"What does it do?" I asked.

"She can teleport herself and up to three others to somewhere else that is within her line of sight. It will be especially useful if you come across rivers of lava or other impassable locations. Higher levels of the spell allow her to go further. If she manages to hit level 15 with the spell, it works almost as well as *Teleport*, one of the most powerful, most important spells to have in this dungeon. It costs 20 mana to cast and has a ten second delay and a five *hour* cooldown. It's not good as a combat spell with that long of a delay, but it's still great to have."

"What we really need is the ability to heal each other better," I said.

"Yes. Yes, you do," Mordecai said. "There are a lot of methods out there. Those twelve *Heal* scrolls are good, and I suspect you're about to get a few more. But for now, I would avoid letting Donut use her melee attacks unless it's absolutely necessary. Her strength stat is phenomenal for this floor. But it'll start to catch up to her later. She was at strength 18 during that fight. By way of comparison, the Juicer had a strength of 25. She's in the wrong body to properly utilize that stat for hand-to-hand combat. Plus her health is simply too low. For now." He nodded at the cat, who had resumed her hopeless self-grooming. "And you, little one. Your Dodge skill is level four. Keep working on it. Once it hits five, it'll be much easier for you."

"Look," I said, "the real reason we're here is because we've only found one set of stairs down, but there's a problem."

Mordecai's eyes widened as I told him about the others and the borough boss.

"The solution is simple," he said. "Skip the boss and keep searching for another set of stairs. They're out there, and most aren't guarded."

"We drove for a day straight before we found this one," I said. "I'm really worried this is our only chance. Do you know what type of monster that is? Do you have any tips?"

"If I did know what it was, I wouldn't be allowed to tell you. I have a very specific, rigorous set of rules I must follow, especially when it comes to bosses. Come back here after the fight, and I'll

happily sit down with you and analyze the battle and tell you all the boss's stats. But if I tell you about the boss ahead of time, it's considered cheating. You don't want to be caught cheating. I *can* tell you that it's madness to face a borough boss with only six crawlers."

I sighed. All of this talk about future levels and choosing a race and class was a waste of time. None of that was going to matter if we didn't manage to make it past the first damn floor.

"Is there *anything* you can tell me?"

Mordecai thought for a moment. "Tell me, what does that Juicer boss have in common with that bad llama mob you fought earlier?"

I shrugged. "They're both drug addicts?"

"No, not that. How did you kill the llama?"

"I throat punched him, and it made his head melt off."

Mordecai nodded. "And the Juicer? What attack, do you suppose, took him down?"

"It was a combination of several things, but probably when Donut bit his neck and tapped directly into his blood stream." I laughed as Donut glowered at me. She still looked as if she'd tried to reenact that final scene from *Carrie*.

"That's exactly right," Mordecai said. "Most of these creatures have a weakness. The throat for the llamas, the high-pressure vein for the boss. Sometimes it's obvious, sometimes it's not. The Hoarder, for example. I can now tell you her weakness was the bugs coming out of her mouth. If you'd killed one before it had fully emerged, the next cockroach in line wouldn't be able to get out. It would've choked and killed her."

"I never really thought of it that way," I said.

"Look for a vulnerability, and once you find it, exploit it. You haven't yet walked into a boss battle completely blind like you say. There have been clues every time. There will always be clues. Look for them."

There will always be clues. What did we know about this borough boss?

I thought about that as I sat down and examined my new achievements and boxes.

In addition to the boss box, it was mostly the standard stuff. My bare knuckle and other fighting skills all ticked up to six, including my Smush skill. My Iron Punch rose to five. I received random achievements for riding the chopper for more than five hours. Another for having killed more than a 100 wandering monsters in the maze. I'd received a Bronze Survivor's Box for having less than 10% health when the boss died. I received five more of the Heal scrolls for that one, leaving us with 17 of them. Most of the other prizes were the standard bronze or silver adventurers boxes. Potions, bandages, biscuits. I did receive a random cowboy hat, which I tossed into my inventory.

I also was awarded an interesting achievement:

New achievement! Two Chicks at the Same Time.

You killed two mobs at once using only their own bodies against each other. On a brutality scale of *Bambi* to *Martyrs*, that is a solid *Seven*.

***Reward*: You've received a Gold Brawler Box!**

I also received another Gold Looter box for storing more than 10 tons worth of crap in my storage.

The boss box contained a pile of ninja stars.

Enchanted Shuriken of Bloodlust (x100)

Small, low-damage throwing stars. These bad boys aren't anything special upon first glance. They're the same black stars you wannabe ninjas purchased at the knife shop and the swap meet when you were kids. The same throwing stars you'd drill into the drywall of your room until your mom caught you and took them away. And while these shuriken don't have the ability to turn you into a ninja, nor do they have the capacity to make your mom stop drinking, they are enchanted with a Bloodlust enhancement. For every monster you damage with a shuriken from this set, the damage against that monster type rises by 8%.

I looked at Mordecai. "When it says the damage increases by 8%, does it mean 8% from the original amount, or 8% compounded? That's a big deal after a while."

"Huh, I don't know," Mordecai said. "Hang on." His eyes went glossy as he presumably entered some sort of tutorial-guide-only help menu.

"Good news. It's compounded," he said after a minute. "So each hit will be 8% higher than the previous amount. The bad news is, the stars are very fragile."

That sounded pretty awesome at first, but I suspected it wasn't that great of an enchantment. It'd take a long time to power them up. I'd have to do a ton of throwing to make them worthwhile. I only had 100 of them. I'd have to collect them back each time. And if they broke a lot, then I might only get one chance to really use them.

The gold Looter Box contained yet another skill potion. It was once again a Determine Value skill tonic. I drank it, leveling the skill up to two. I couldn't see a difference in the menu. I suspected I'd need three more before it became really useful.

The brawler box contained the best item of the lot. After my shirt and cloak, it was easily the greatest loot I'd won so far in the dungeon. It was exactly the type of weapon I'd been hoping for.

Enchanted War Gauntlet of the Exalted Grull. (Right-Handed)

+3 Strength (In Fist Mode Only)

+1 Dexterity

+ 2 Skill Levels to Iron Punch.

+ 1 Skill Level to Powerful Strike.

2% chance to Stun enemy upon a successful hit.

Item is a wrist bracer that transforms into a spiked war gauntlet made of orcish steel when the hand is shaped into a fist or wields a hilted weapon for more than two seconds at a time. This item on its own does not negate the bare knuckle skill bonus.

Warning: if you use this weapon to strike adherents of the war god Grull, you have a 1.5% chance to transfigure your target into the deity himself. Trust me on this. You don't want to do that.

A bigger, redder, WARNING. Remove this item before you jerk off.

"Hey, Mordecai," I said as I removed the chain and slipped the charcoal-colored bracer over my wrist. "How can I tell if someone worships Grull?"

He grunted. "Equine-class creatures worship him. So if it's a horse or a centaur, or a tikbalang, then he might worship Grull. Creatures like that bad llama might also pray to him, but not until after the third floor. The biggest tell is that they smear blue makeup all over themselves and won't stop talking about wenches and dying gloriously in battle." Mordecai paused. He looked up nervously, as if not sure he should say this next part. "And, just so you know, Grull isn't a real god. There are no real gods in this game."

"Does that really make a difference?" I asked.

Mordecai was suddenly solemn, and I didn't know why. He looked at me, intense. "You said you worry that some of these bosses and mobs are like you, here against their will." He pointed downward, indicating the lower levels. "That's not always going to be the case. *Especially* later on. Remember that. There are no gods here. Just those who pay for the privilege."

"Okay," I said, trying to make sense of what he was desperately attempting to tell me.

"What the goodness is a tikbalang?" Donut asked, pausing in her cleaning. "It sounds like some sort of disease a sailor would get."

"Do you know what a horse is?" Mordecai asked, looking up. He seemed relieved for the question.

"Of course."

"They're like that. But meaner."

I closed my fist. Two seconds ticked by, I felt a haptic buzz all up my arm, and with a *whoosh*, my hand turned into a spiked hunk of metal. I had to clench my fist really tight to make it work, which was good. The last thing I needed was this thing appearing when I didn't want it to. I examined the malevolent-looking gauntlet. There was nothing ornate about it. It was black, angular with multiple, gleaming spikes. A tool, nothing more. It felt heavy on my hand, but not too heavy. No more breaking fingers when I punched something.

I felt the extra strength ripple through me. I released my fist, and the gauntlet vanished in a puff of smoke that smelled of burned hair.

"Awesome," I said.

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Time to Level Collapse: 6 hours 30 minutes.

"Are you ready?" I asked Brandon as we poised at the entrance to the borough boss chamber.

"No," he said, smiling sadly. He clutched onto his massive war hammer for a moment. It disappeared into his inventory. The giant weapon could only get in the way during the first part of the plan. Donut perched on my shoulder while the others crowded behind us.

We didn't have time left for any more training, any more preparation. It was now or never.

The third episode of *Dungeon Crawler World* hadn't offered any additional insight. Donut and I had sat in the Taco Bell watching it on the screen while the proprietor, another Bopca Protector named Sebastian, sat next to us and brushed Donut's hair with one of his own brushes, which he'd gifted to her after her third shower. Her insane charisma of 41 caused the level-21 NPC to practically fall in love with her the moment we entered the safe zone. I sipped on a delicious Peruvian beer and picked at my T-bone steak as we watched crawlers by the dozens get slaughtered while the host breathlessly described the action.

The second half of the program had zeroed in on five different groups of adventurers, including that woman with the magical crossbow and Lucia Mar with her two rottweilers. The other three groups were larger, including one that comprised of 150 African soldiers armed with AK-47s. All of these groups, if the show was to be believed, were just moonwalking their way through the dungeon. All of them had found stairwells down already and were camping near them, waiting for the clock to tick to exactly six hours before they descended.

Much to Donut's dismay, we were once again snubbed by the program. I didn't care. I was much more occupied with that number. I couldn't get it out of my head.

2,552,085.

From thirteen million to this in just under four days. A cataclysm. Every single one of those numbers was a person, someone who had lived, breathed, hoped, laughed. And they were just gone. The announcement hadn't offered any additional insight, either. Another, more stern warning about using the hallways as a bathroom. A litany of changes regarding spells and power levels of mobs, none of which affected us. After sleeping for a few hours, we headed back to the encampment, and I related my dubious, off-the-cuff plan to the group of crawlers who had all appeared shocked that we'd actually returned.

"Here we go," I said now, stepping across the drawbridge and through the giant archway.

Brandon, Chris, Yolanda, and Imani followed. We hesitantly entered the round courtyard to the spiral maze.

"No, Agatha, don't!" I heard a voice behind me. It was Yolanda, yelling at the woman with the shopping cart, who'd wheeled up behind us.

The woman didn't listen to Yolanda and pushed her way into the entrance hall, cackling with delight. "You're not doing this without ol' Agatha."

"We don't have room for you, Agatha!" Yolanda yelled. "Get back!"

"Crazy bat," Brandon said. "You're gonna get us all killed."

"I think that roly-poly is the one that's gonna get us all killed," Agatha said.

"Shut up. Everybody shut up," Imani said, raising her hand. "Listen for the monster."

"Don't worry," I said. "It's going to announce itself at any moment."

The gate behind us slammed shut as music rose. Metal bars magically appeared, locking us in.

This was different music than usual. Faster, more frenetic. An EDM beat mixed by a DJ hopped up on Adderall. A deep bass reverberated the ground.

The lights flickered, then went dark. A moment later, they came back on, filling the area with the purple hue of a blacklight. Neon lights appeared on the ceiling. Lasers ripped across the hallways, flashing in beat with the music. We'd stepped into a rave. The sound of rock scraping filled the room, louder than the song. I turned in a circle, trying to find the source.

It was the walls of the courtyard, I realized. They were sinking into the ground, leaving us exposed.

B-B-B-Boss Battle!

The voice was distorted, even louder than last time.

You have discovered the lair of a Borough Boss!

Ladies and Gentlemen, it is time for the main event! Are you ready? Can you feel it coming? I SAID ARE YOU READY?

I want you to put your hands together.

Aaaand here. We. Gooooo!

I grimaced as I waited for the walls of the round courtyard to finish sinking into the earth.

I turned to Brandon. "Get ready." I had to shout the words.

The man nodded. Sweat beaded on his forehead. Behind, the three others spread out. Chris and short Yolanda both looked absolutely terrified. Imani clutched her sword in two hands, looking grim. Agatha stood there, seemingly oblivious, scratching a hair between her two bulbous eyes.

Our seven mugshots appeared floating in the air, one by one. I noted we were in three groups. The **Royal Court of Princess**

Donut. **Meadow Lark**. And Agatha was just **Crawler Agatha**. The giant **Versus** slammed into place. The metallic word was in a silver font instead of a bronze one this time. The words burst into flames, and even though this was supposedly virtual text, I felt a blast of heat.

And that's when we saw it.

With the wall fully retracted, a hallway spread before us, like we were standing on the landing before a tunnel in a subway, but without the drop. The round tunnel was about as wide a single lane freeway, about fifteen feet tall. The creature roared by right in front of us, startlingly fast, moving from right to left. It was massive, made of flesh, rolling like a pinball. It stank of sewage and rotten meat. It grunted and squealed, a high-pitched, angry pig noise. The flesh was pink, rippling, covered in eyes and random hairs and tusks. But there was something else there, too. Random flaps of black and white cloth were embedded in the flesh, mixed in with swaths of red-sequined fabric.

"What in the holy hell is that?" Brandon shouted. "It looks like there are…"

The world froze.

The
Ball
of
Swine!
Level 15 Borough Boss!

Also known as the Porkchop Express, the Ball of Swine is one of the rarest, most deadly battle formations of the Tuskling. Encompassing at least 30 Tuskling knights and their lady loves, a Ball formation requires a specific set of circumstances to create. Combine a gathering of Tuskling aristocracy, add an alcohol-fueled, sexually-charged orgy of war lust, and sometimes, just sometimes, the wild, ancient battle magic that permeates their war-torn world casts the spell, forming the ball. The Tusklings, the ruling class of the Orcish Supremacy, shape into an inseparable sphere that rolls onto the countryside. The ball of pork won't stop its

night of terror until it has crushed the poor, the weak, and the lesser citizens under its unstoppable weight.

Plucked directly from a Tuskling High Caucus moments after it formed, this particular ball has been transferred here to this dungeon for *your* entertainment, ladies and gentlemen. The magic of the ball won't allow them to stop until every last drop of Crawler blood is squeezed right out of their human bodies!

The world unfroze, and the ball continued its trajectory, rolling away down the path. Ahead of me, more walls moved and shifted, grinding loudly. The walls and entranceways were creating new paths, guiding the massive ball in our direction.

"Wow," Donut said from my shoulder. "I'm feeling really ignored right now. Why is it always human this, human that? Why can't it be 'blood squeezed out of their human and feline bodies?'"

Looking to my left and right, I could see what was about to happen. With the lowering of the walls, a new path opened up, and we were on it. The heavy, pounding music was deliberate. We could no longer feel the oncoming train of the giant pig ball. At its current speed, it would circle around onto us in a minute, maybe less.

"Move!" I cried.

"Where?" Brandon called.

"Away from here," I said.

I pulled the first of several spike strips from my inventory and dropped it on the ground before rushing forward. We moved toward the long, wide path the ball had just rocketed over. A moment later, the ball rushed past again, right where we'd been standing, missing Agatha and her shopping cart by inches. The woman cackled with joy as the squealing wind blew up the flaps on her hat.

In the brief moment it passed by, I caught sight of a tuskling face jutting from the center side of the ball, spinning like an ornamental car rim. The orc creature was large and meaty from what I could tell. It held a tusked, wild boar of a face that was twice as wide as a person's. The face had four tusks. Two long, curved tusks and a second pair further back, crossed in front of its ugly face. This one was female, I guessed. Purple eyeshadow ran from the top of its

bulbous, black stare. Her crossed tusks were pierced in multiple places. She also appeared to have a giant, purple flower on her head, but the flower was pressed into the pink flesh of the ball, completely flattened. Her mouth was open in a constant, angry squeal.

Above the monstrosity appeared a health bar. It was fully green, but the spike strip had damaged it for at least a single point. That was good.

A wall rose into the air, blocking us from going back the direction we'd just come.

Our plan hadn't anticipated that the walls were going to change. Looking at the ground, I could see a groove had formed onto the stone, multiple, concentric circles leading toward the center of the small arena. Some of the grooves led directly into walls.

Amongst the grooves, dozens of long, straight lines crisscrossed the ground at right angles. This was where the walls would go up and down. We needed to find a flat area wide enough for our redoubt. The deeper we went, the closer to the stairs, the more quickly the pig ball would circle around.

"Look for solid hunks of ground. Big ones with no grooves!" I called as I threw a second spike strip onto the ground. "And go!"

An entranceway to the next ring appeared about ten feet behind us. "Move!" I cried. We rushed for the small gate, Agatha going in first. A hunk of stone started rising from the ground as I rushed through, stumbling.

"There!" Imani called, pointing to a large square on the ground through a second doorway, yet another circle deeper. It was like a gap in the path, designed to encompass two circles at once.

"Go!" I cried, rushing forward and dropping a third and a fourth strip. Despite the heavy bass, I felt the ball hurtle past on the other side of the wall. High-pitched squealing rocketed away like the whine of a racecar. *It's getting faster*.

We rushed to the center of the square. This chunk of the floor was like a railroad switch, a place where the ball could change paths. The space was about 15 feet by 15 feet with no crevices. Perfect.

"It's coming from this way," I said, pointing right. "I think it needs two loops to get here. Let's do this. Just like we practiced. Go!" I pointed at Agatha. "You, sit your ass down on the ground in the middle, and don't move."

"I ain't leaving my… Hey!" Agatha cried as I grasped the heavy cart from both sides and lifted it into the air, wasting a few precious seconds to put it into my inventory.

"Thief!" she cried. "Thief!"

"Agatha, he'll give it back. Sit down!" Yolanda cried as she started pulling her V-shaped braces from her inventory.

I ignored the screaming, crazy woman as I pulled the heavy goblin table from my own inventory and placed it on its side. All around me, the others went to work. We'd been practicing this for hours. We'd gotten it down to less than 20 seconds for the main structure, and another 20 to put it all together. Hopefully that was enough time.

It had taken us almost five hours to build the pieces of the redoubt, or as Brandon called it, "The Speedbump." Brandon and his brother weren't nurses at the facility. They were the maintenance guys, and these dudes knew what they were doing. They didn't normally work after hours, but they'd been there that night, pushing overtime, trying to fix an oven that was on the fritz before the morning staff showed up to make breakfast. I had described my idea. I spread out a bunch of the looted goblin tools for them, explained exactly what I wanted to do, and we went straight to work.

We created a portable, modular fortress. Consisting of tables, weight equipment, and loads of other odds and ends, the angled, four-foot-high structure looked like a lopsided tortoise shell when it was completed.

We didn't have any sort of welding equipment, but the goblins had hand-cranked drills and large, toothed bolts designed to screw into the holes the drills created. They also had these small, half-moon saws that cut through steel with alarming ease. We removed the legs from the workshop tables then bolted new ones on, utilizing the load-bearing legs from the weight equipment. The tables were

designed to sit solidly at a low angle when we put them on their side. After, we bolted weight benches onto the sides of the tables, like attaching shutters to the edges of a door frame.

Both Brandon and Imani had received items that gave them boosts to their strength, and they each had two sections of wall to place. The pieces were large and unwieldy, and heavy as shit, but when placed down in the correct order—Imani, then Brandon, then Imani, then me with the largest piece, and then finally Brandon—the multiple pieces slid together, bolts moving into precisely-placed holes. Brandon and I moved to the roof—made of the cross bars of weight racks—while Chris and Imani twisted massive, fist-sized butterfly bolts, affixing the pieces together. Yolanda pulled the rest of the angled braces out of her inventory, sliding them into place one after another, moving in a circle around the circumference of the pentagon-ish defense.

"This is just like something they'd do on that show, *The A-Team*," Donut had exclaimed when we'd practiced this earlier. "Or maybe *MacGyver*. The real MacGyver with the hair and the stargate. Not that abysmal remake."

"I liked that show," Chris had said as he worked. It was the first and only time I had heard him speak.

"Which one? *The A-Team* or *MacGyver*?" Donut asked. "Or do you mean the remake? Please tell me you don't mean the remake."

Chris never answered.

Once the top was bolted into place, Brandon, Imani, and I moved to the last, crucial part. The braces for the roof: five heavy-duty barbell poles designed to hold more than a thousand pounds of weight each. I discovered if I held my hand in just the correct place and called the heavy pole from inventory, it wedged itself perfectly between the roof and ground, solid as a concrete pillar.

Our mini fortress had a usable area of about ten by ten feet, and we had to move about on our hands and knees. It was tight when it was just the six of us, but with the addition of Agatha, who continued to wail about her damn shopping cart, we could barely move without slamming each other. And because she'd joined us, we didn't have room to place the final, center pole.

I looked worriedly at that center cross-section of the roof just as Donut exclaimed, “Here it comes!”

If this boss had any sort of fire or lightning or acid attack, we were absolutely fucked. So far it seemed each boss only had one main attack, and this one’s was pretty obvious. It rolled right the fuck over you.

My kneepads had an attribute that canceled out momentum-based attacks. But if my experience with videogames was any indication, one couldn’t count on that sort of thing when it came to bosses. Plus there was no way I was going to test it.

Once, as a kid, I was riding down a country road with my mom and dad. They’d been fighting, as usual, and I’d climbed into the very back of the SUV, as far back as I could get. I’d oftentimes do this, staring out the rear window as the world whipped by, pretending like I was in the cockpit of a spaceship. On this day a large, yellow truck was behind us. It was one of those box trucks, a Penske, something people rented to move.

It happened so fast. One moment, I was staring up at the guy, who was getting so close to my dad’s ass that I had to crane my neck up to see him, and then, the truck was just stopped, pulling away from us, the top peeled off like a sardine can. We’d gone under a bridge, and the truck was too tall. As I watched, the sides of the truck fell away, spilling furniture and boxes all over the road with a resounding *crash*! The main cab of the truck tilted violently to its side, broken away from the rest of the body. My dad heard the accident, looked up into the rearview mirror, muttered, “That’s a shame,” and just kept driving as my mom yelled at him to stop. He didn’t.

That’s what I was hoping would happen here. This massive ball of flesh filled the hallway, from the ground to the ceiling. My forward section of the redoubt was wider, giving a more gradual angle, just enough to wedge the ball between us and the ceiling nice and tight.

Like Mordecai had suggested, I needed to look at the clues. Those strange entrances dotting the side of the arena were there for a reason. It was so we could catch a glimpse of the monster. All I

could see was that it was big, round, fast, and shoved tightly into the tunnel.

My first idea was to build a solid wall, but as we observed the ball from one of the many portcullis entrances, the track forced the monster directly into a 90 degree angle. It bounced right off, barely losing speed as it turned away. *There will always be clues.*

It never lost momentum. It just kept going and going. So we needed to stop it somehow, and we needed to be in a position to do something about it once it did. I was hoping it'd hit our structure and get wedged in good. From there, Imani would stab, Donut would shoot missiles, Chris would cast his spells, and the rest of us would jab our makeshift ninja-star-tipped spears up into the boss until its health ran out.

Most of the goblin tables were made of thick, hefty steel, which was why they were so damn heavy. The wide table we used for the front of the redoubt also had a pitted wooden covering. Brandon, Chris, and I had spent a good five minutes throwing fifty of my ninja shuriken deep into the wood, adding black spikes to the ramp. Spikes that would hopefully damage the boss each time they pierced its flesh. Unfortunately, only about 20 of the stars remained unbroken.

That part had been Brandon's idea. I'd shown him the shuriken and allowed him to read the description.

"These things are way more powerful than you realize," he'd said, voice filled with awe. "Do the math. Compounding damage means if you poke something 200 times, it's like literally millions of points of damage."

"I don't do math," I said. "But I do know we ain't poking anything 200 times with these things. Look." I pulled a single star out. I'd tested it earlier to see if I had any sort of ninja skill. It'd received a single chip, and the red enchantment had faded away. Mordecai wasn't kidding when he said these things were fragile. They were clearly meant to only be used once, tempering their value.

Despite their fragility, we'd used several of the stars to create the spike strips, nothing more than a pair of stars placed between two pieces of bolted-together wood. They'd survive one or two stabbings

before breaking. The strips wouldn't be stopping the monster by themselves, but each time it rolled over one, the amount of damage inflicted on the boss would increase by 8%.

"Brace," I cried, grasping onto the wall as the monster barreled toward us, impossibly fast.

Crash!

The entire structure shuddered and slid with a horrifying *screech*. All four of the ceiling braces popped out of place and went flying. One bounced hard off Yolanda, throwing her over. The terrible stench filled the now-dark chamber. An unending, high-pitched squealing filled the air.

We'd done it.

The ceiling sagged, bending ominously as dark squares of flesh pushed through the empty spaces of the lattice pattern. The ceiling was going to break. We were going to be crushed. The ball had managed to squeeze itself between the top of the tunnel and our fortress, the massive pressure pushing down against our defense.

"Stab!" I cried as the stick appeared in my hand. It was half of a chin-up bar with a goblin clamp at the end, clutched onto a tied-together cluster of three stars. I hoped they'd be less likely to break if bunched together. I jabbed upward, poking the flesh. It felt as if I was doing nothing. Next to me, Imani struggled to get her longsword angled and through the holes in the ceiling. She was pushing her sword all the way in and pulling out, over and over. Pigs squealed, blood rained. The music quickened. To my left, bolts popped from holes, shooting off like bullets. One clobbered Agatha, who didn't appear to notice despite a well of blood that appeared. She was still screaming something about her shopping cart. Above, the pressure grew. I stabbed, and I stabbed.

And then, just as the top collapsed, I pierced upward and there was a mighty *Pop*! like a balloon.

Tuxedoed male and female tusklings in glittering, formal gowns rained down upon us as our ill-fated fortress collapsed. The lattice-patterned ceiling broke into pieces, the metal clanging and bending where it was bolted together. My hobbled-together spear was caught in one of the ceiling's holes. It ripped out of my hands as I was

violently crushed onto the ground. I arched my back, protecting Donut under my body. Squeals and screams and hollering filled the hall as my minimap turned into a mass of red dots.

A fat, heavy orc crashed into me, and we both rolled, tangled in pieces of ceiling. Donut yowled and leaped away. The ninja star-covered tabletop lay broken to my right. A handful of stars still glowed red, and the creature rolled onto them, squealing with pain. I pulled myself to my feet just as Donut leaped onto my shoulder. She was screaming something incoherent, shooting magic missiles point blank at the tusklings, who rocketed backward with each hit.

I stepped on the squealing tuskling, smushing him deeper into the shuriken-covered wood. His health bar dropped, slowly at first and then just plummeted away as the exponential damage bonus kicked in.

Half of the creatures were already dead.

I caught eyes with the next closest tuskling, a male in a tuxedo. He was unarmed and completely disoriented. He held what appeared to be a wine flute in his hand that was miraculously unbroken and still full of alcohol. The creatures were odd, much shorter than I had anticipated. They had large, wide bodies and torsos one and a half times as bulky as a regular human. Their large, warthog heads sat too close to their shoulders, making them look neckless. But from the waist down, their bodies were comically short. The beasts only stood about four and a half feet tall. I quickly examined his properties as the tottering creature pulled the wine flute to his mouth.

Tuskling Knight. Level 4.

When it comes to the Tuskling, their titles are about as accurate as their dating website photos. The once-mighty warriors conquered the Orcish Supremacy hundreds of years ago, defeating all the other clans. They are now shells of the mighty warriors they once were. The honorarium "Knight" roughly translates to "Overweight, alcoholic bureaucrat who spends his days making new laws to oppress the poor and his nights drinking and getting pegged." Knights and their slightly-more dangerous female counterparts, Tuskling

Courtesans, are only worthy adversaries when they come together to form an ancient, Tuskling battle formation known as a "Ball of Swine."

I formed a fist.

"On my back," I called to Donut. She was out of magic missiles, and she'd already taken a mana potion. She dove under my cloak, hanging onto the back of my jacket like a backpack. She'd pop up when she'd regenerated enough mana to cast another missile over my shoulder.

I pulled my arm back and punched the fat, tuxedoed knight with all of my strength. The pig man's health was already in the red, and his face caved in under the crushing blow of the spiked gauntlet. He dropped, still clutching onto his glass of wine. Half of his snout remained attached to my fist.

Miraculously, I didn't feel a thing. I only felt the impact in my arm. Not my hand.

"*Yes*," I said, whirling on my next opponent as I shook the gore free. A female. A Courtesan. The men were all level four, and the women were all level five. This one was slightly taller and fatter than the others. She wore a glittering red gown with multiple leather straps looped over and around her like a vest. It was like some sort of weird BDSM getup. She, too, was looking around, dazed, and screaming in confusion. It seemed they had no memories of their time in the pig ball. They were victims, just as all the other bosses had been.

But their dots were red, time was running out, and they weren't human. I took a step forward, and I swung. The punch knocked her health down halfway. She hit the ground with an *oof*, raising her arms to block the blows. I kicked at her savagely, screaming, maybe crying. I kicked and I kicked until her health bar went away.

Behind the woman, Imani was also screaming, swinging her sword as tears streamed down her face. She stood over the prone form of Yolanda, whose health bar was alarmingly low. Brandon had retrieved his giant maul, which glittered with lightning when he swung it. Chris twirled an ethereal, magic spear. The spear was a spell he could cast. It lasted for five minutes.

Agatha hadn’t moved, but she stood once the walls fell away. Blood gushed down the side of her head, her eyes wide as she watched the action. She clutched her hands together.

All of the internal walls had retracted once we’d popped the swine ball. We’d gone from a tight hallway to a wide-open field. The purple-hued arena spread around us, the size of an entire quadrant. The music still beat, and colorful lasers shot through the space like we were in a massive, 1980s themed roller rink. The roof raised the closer it got to the center. A bright light shone at the very center of the dome. The stairs. A red forcefield surrounded the stairwell.

I knew exactly what had to be done to get that forcefield to drop.

There were more of the tusklings than there were of us, but they were shocked and confused, having been transported from their own world to this place.

They were weaponless, they were untrained, and they were slaughtered.

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The last tuskling to fall was different than the others. She was a level eight, a "Tuskling Dominatrix." She fell after being crushed under Brandon's hammer.

The music stopped, and the lights returned to normal. The world froze. The **Winner!** notification appeared. Behind me, Chris fell to his knees, and he hung his head low. We just looked at each other, nobody saying anything. Imani fed Yolanda a health potion, and the woman sat up, wobbling, holding the side of her head. Agatha shuffled toward me, shaking her fist. Half of the woman's head was caked in blood, and she didn't seem to notice.

"Give it back!" she cried.

"Here," I said. I pulled the shopping cart into existence a foot off the ground, and it crashed down loudly.

"Hey," she cried. She clutched an Ikea bag off the top and peered inside, as if afraid I'd stolen something. She poked suspiciously at the pink flamingo at the end of her cart.

"You know, you can put all of this into your own inventory," I said. "You don't need to wheel it around."

"She hasn't gone through the tutorial," Yolanda said. The small woman, who still had blood all over her own face, pulled out a cloth and cleaned off Agatha's. "She doesn't have an inventory yet."

That didn't surprise me. What did surprise me was that Agatha was level two, not one. How had she done that? She wasn't in the

Meadow Lark party. That meant she must have killed a mob. I wondered what the story was there. Actually, no, I realized, looking at Agatha now. She'd hit level four, thanks to the boss. She hadn't done anything, but she'd been in the room, and that counted for something at least. Donut and I were both now level 10. Halfway to 11. We'd received a ton of experience, more than I'd expected. Imani *was* level 11 now. Chris and Brandon had skipped level seven altogether and were level eight. Yolanda had jumped from five to level six.

I didn't even want to think about how all that experience was distributed. It seemed there were a dozen different calculators running all at once to figure it out. It gave me a headache.

"We need to find whatever the boss dropped," I said.

"It's over there," Donut said. "The Dominatrix lady has it. I already got mine."

For the first time, I looked about, taking stock of the damage we'd dealt. All of us had managed to survive relatively unscathed, but this section of the room and everyone in it looked like someone had spilled a giant can of Spaghetti-o's on us from above. The crushed and disemboweled tuskling bodies lay everywhere, mixed in with the shattered pieces of our fortress.

"That didn't go as expected," Brandon said. He shook his hand, spraying blood everywhere.

"We're alive," I said as I reached down to loot the persistent item from the tuskling's corpse.

The AI seemed to be doing a whispery David Attenborough impersonation as he read the description of the item:

Borough Field Guild.

Ahh, look at you. The intrepid explorer. Alone. Lost. *Afraid*.

But there is no reason to be frightened. Not today, not now. Not when the trusty field guide has added monster types to this area of the map. Now when you gaze upon the unknown, that fear is somewhat lessened. Instead of delving into the strange, mysterious dark, being devoured

by an unseen horror, you will now know exactly what it is as it chews upon your tasty innards.

I blinked at the description, then I pulled up my minimap, zooming it out. Sure enough, now the individual quadrants were outlined. Most of my screen was filled with the large arena, but the very edge of a few adjacent quadrants ringed the exterior of the map. I mentally hovered over one to the far southeast, in an area none of us had ventured. The fog of war obscured the hallways themselves, but when I hovered over it, a tooltip popped up.

Mobs Level 2-5. Axebeak.

That would be extremely useful, but like with the neighborhood map, the area was limited. Plus one had to actually get to the center and kill the boss to get the information. I wasn't certain exactly how big a "borough" really was in this game, though I suspected the area shrank the lower one went.

"Hey, are you kids doing okay?" a voice called. It echoed in the large chamber. I turned to see an elderly man edging his way into the room with his walker. The walker made a *click, click, click* each time he pushed his way further into the chamber. "We heard a loud noise, and the gate disappeared! Oh my, it smells something awful in here."

"Randall, don't come in here!" Yolanda called, jogging toward the man.

I turned my attention back to the carnage. I gazed at the hoofed feet of the tusklings and sighed. They had no shoes, and their legs were much too short. I picked up a loose tuxedo jacket. It was like a tent, and it was covered with blood. It smelled like hot diarrhea. I put it into my inventory.

Brandon came to stand next to me. The guy looked shell-shocked.

"It's weird, isn't it?" I asked, indicating the carnage. "They're from another world. They're aliens, right? But they're wearing tuxedoes. Tuxedoes are from earth, not wherever they're from. I don't get it."

"I asked our guildmaster, Mistress Tiatha, the same thing," Brandon said. He reached down to pick something up from the floor.

It was a sharp tooth. "One of the mobs we had to fight early on were little, fire-breathing monkeys wearing lederhosen. You know what I'm talking about? That weird German pantsuit shorts things with the hats. They look like waiters at an Octoberfest tent?"

"Yeah, I know what you mean," I said.

"Well, anyway. She said the Synd…" He paused, looking at the ceiling dubiously. "The big guys, they not only seeded our world with the people millions of years ago, but they keep people here the whole time. Sometimes they're actual humans, but from other worlds. And these guys were steering culture. Inventing stuff, writing books and songs that already existed. She said every world comes out with their own unique culture and language, but some things are universal."

"But why?" I asked. "What do they get out of it? It seems like so much effort."

Brandon shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe they think we'll integrate better if we already have some sort of common ground, but I don't know. We probably won't ever know. We only see what they let us."

I looted the corpses of the tusklings I'd killed myself. There was some jewelry that wasn't enchanted including a ruby necklace that seemed pretty valuable according to my inventory list. I took that weird leather thing from the woman. The system labeled it as a **Pig Harness**. There wasn't any other loot in my pile. I saw Imani holding what appeared to be an enormous strap-on dildo with two fingers. She dropped it on the floor with a look of disgust. Donut hopped over and took it into her own inventory.

She looked up at me. "Everything, right?"

I nodded. "Everything."

I salvaged all the ninja stars I could find and all the remaining pieces of the redoubt. I had a new tab in my inventory labeled **Worthless Garbage**.

I also spent a few minutes surreptitiously looking around the arena for the remains of the party that had gone before us. Their X's didn't appear on the map, just as they hadn't with the elderly folk Imani had killed. I didn't know why. There was probably a tight time

limit on that sort of thing, but I didn't know for certain. This game had so many damn rules, I couldn't wrap my head around it.

Finally, Donut and I approached the stairwell. The forcefield was gone. The timer was at five hours and counting.

I looked back over my shoulder at the others. Brandon was talking quietly with his brother while Yolanda and Imani had started bringing the others into the large room. Chris jogged off as I watched. I knew exactly where he was going. He was headed toward that safe room. He'd tell the 30 folks waiting that they could leave if they wanted to.

"What do you want to do?" I quietly asked Donut.

"Whatever do you mean?"

"We're going to go down those stairs, and it's going to be a whole new floor with new challenges. We can either stick with these guys, or we can keep doing our own thing."

Donut looked up, her large, yellow eyes boring into me.

"Oh, Carl. How is it I know what you're going to do before you do?" she asked.

I looked at the gathering group of elderly folks, and I nodded. *Shit*.

"Goddamnit, Donut," I said. She was right. Of course. What was the point of living, if I couldn't live with myself?

I reached into my pocket and I pulled out my last cigarette. I looked at it for a long moment. I popped it into my mouth, and I lit it. It tasted like ash.

"I suggest we do what we've been doing," Donut said. "It doesn't have to be one or the other option. We set up a place for them to remain safe, and then you and I go out and do our own thing. We can keep our own party and set up a group chat with the others. I know how to do it now. When we find the next set of stairs down, we go get them and bring them with us."

I grinned down at the cat. "I knew there was a good kitty in there somewhere."

She bristled. "If it were up to me, I'd leave them all. But I know you're a softy. Besides, if we get them down to that third level, we'll need someone with thumbs if you're going to turn into a cat."

"I'm not turning myself into a cat," I said. "I couldn't even if I want to, anyway. Mordecai said so." I dropped the cigarette, unfinished. I ground it out on the floor. I went to a knee and patted her. She let me.

"By the way," I asked as I stroked the cat. "I've been meaning to ask you. Who's Ferdinand?"

Donut pulled away at that, her tail swishing. "I have no idea whatever you're talking about. Whoever that is, he sounds like someone awful. Wait… where's Agatha?"

I looked about for the woman. I didn't see her. Had she gone outside? I turned toward the stairs, and I noticed they weren't stairs at all, but a long ramp. *Shit. The woman is going to get herself killed.*

"Okay, here's the plan," I said to Brandon later, after we finished examining the stairwell. "We're going to go down there and make sure the area is clear for you and your people. Do you need our help with your people?"

"No," Brandon said. "We got it. You don't want to go and open your boxes first?"

"I do," I said, "but the closest place to do it is pretty far, and I don't want to tempt fate. We'll go down and try to find the closest safe room. Our guy said they're just as easy to find on the second floor as the first. Once we do, we'll carve a safe path to it."

"Okay then," Brandon said. He held out his hand.

"Thank you. I mean that." I shook it. He then went to his knee and scratched Donut. "You too, Princess Donut."

"Of course, sweetheart," she said, pushing her head against his hand.

"Oh," Brandon said, "and try to find Agatha if you can. She's a crazy asshole, but she's our crazy asshole."

I nodded. We turned and headed toward the stairs. I looked at Donut. "You ready?"

She flipped her tail, and I followed her down the ramp.

At the bottom of the stairs-turned-ramp was a door almost identical to the one we'd used to enter the dungeon. I stared at the giant carving of the fish man. *Go fuck yourself* I thought as I put my hand against the door. I pushed.

But instead of the gate opening like last time, there was a flash of light and a moment of disorienting nausea, followed by a quick feeling of falling.

And then suddenly Donut and I were standing in a plush room staring at a strange, round door. All of my status bars had disappeared. I turned in a circle, bewildered. There was a couch that appeared to be made of blue crushed velvet. I stood upon a soft, thick carpet, also blue. There was a strange sense of motion to the room, and I immediately knew we were on a boat. I could tell right away from experience that this vessel was large, but not huge. Maybe 100 feet. At the far end of the room was a bar with an honest-to-goodness fruit basket sitting on it. Sitting next to the basket was a stemmed bowl filled with what seemed to be cat food. Instinctively, I made a fist, and my gauntlet appeared. Only partially relieved, I unsummoned my weapon.

"What the fuck is this?" I asked.

But the second the words came out of my mouth, I knew exactly what this was.

Donut was literally hopping up and down, her tail ramrod straight. "Carl, Carl! It's happening! It's really happening!"

Just as my addled brain was coming to terms with our sudden change of scenery, the door irised open. A woman wearing a simple black dress stepped in, clutching onto a tablet. She was human, but clearly not from Earth. She was absurdly thin. Not anorexic. She just seemed more *squished* than a regular human. She stood about five foot five, so a normal height, but her head was only about 3/4s as wide as it should be, making her appear almost elf-like, but without the prerequisite pointed ears. She seemed to be about my age, and her features were Asian, but with long, blonde hair she kept in a tight bun.

"Hello Carl and Your Majesty, Princess Donut," she said, speaking in Syndicate Standard. Her voice was light and musical. Almost

cartoonish. “My name is Lexis. I am an associate producer for the program, *Dungeon Crawler After Hours with Odette*. Congratulations on that last battle, and congratulations on making it down to the second floor. Odette would love to interview you two, on air, regarding your progress so far.”

Donut squealed with pleasure.

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[PART 2]



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"Okay," Lexis said as I sat down on the couch, my head spinning. I was still covered in blood, and I suddenly felt very, very dirty. "We'll be ready for you in about twenty minutes. Please relax and avail yourselves of the complimentary treats." She indicated the bar. "Okay?"

"Okay," Donut said.

I still couldn't believe it. Actually, I could believe it. Five nights ago I'd gone to bed, and everything I'd been worried about was so stupid, so petty, so… small. We were about to be interviewed on a program that would be seen by *trillions* of people.

"A couple of things," Lexis continued, talking fast. "I know this is probably disorienting to you, being your first interview. Right now, you are standing in what is called a production trailer. It is located on the surface of your planet. You are still technically in the game even though you can't use your menus. Like safe rooms, production trailers have their own rules, too many to discuss now." She reached forward and touched my shoulder. She felt hollow, almost weightless. Like a bird. "I am really here right now with you. However, my engineer and I are the only other people here. When you walk through that door." She pointed over her shoulder, indicating the oval-shaped entrance that opened and closed like a camera shutter, "you're going to walk onto a studio set. From what I understand, this setup should be very familiar to your culture. This studio, including Odette and the entire audience is not really there.

The couch is there, but everything else is virtual. They are filming from a location very far away. I'm supposed to tell you it is similar to the holodeck from your television series, *Star Trek*, however you won't be able to touch anything. Any other guests, even fellow crawlers will also be holo, at least for this interview. You are the only crawlers in this particular production trailer. I will tell you when it's time, and you will walk onto the set. You will wave, and you will proceed directly to the couch next to the desk, Your Majesty sitting closer to Odette. Do not approach the audience, or you will run into a wall that you can't see. That room is not as big as it appears. Questions?"

I just stared at the woman. I hadn't felt this out of my element since the moment the dungeon first opened.

"Makeup?" Donut asked.

"Not for this interview, Your Majesty," Lexis said. "The audience will have just watched a highlights reel of your time in the dungeon followed by the entirety of that last boss fight. It will appear as if you walked straight from the fight to the stage."

"Got it," Donut said. "So we address her as Odette?"

"Correct."

"Live or taped?"

"It's taped, though it will be tunneled in just a few short hours."

"What's the tone of the show? Is it more editorial or more fluff? What works better with your audience? Do you want us to be serious and more technical, or should I just let Carl be Carl?"

Donut was asking these questions as if she'd been doing this her whole life.

A smile tugged at the corner of Lexis's mouth. "This is a private production about the crawl. It won't be censored. The more entertaining you are, the better it will play."

"Got it," Donut said.

"Hold up a second," I said. "What do you mean by 'private production'?"

Lexis turned to me. "The main program, *Dungeon Crawler World: Earth* is owned by the Syndicate Government, and this season it is produced by the Mu… The Borant Corporation. Syndicate rules allow

for private production companies to produce their own programs as long as they pay for the production themselves and pay an advertising stipend. This particular show, *Dungeon Crawler After Hours with Odette* will tunnel immediately after the main program. It is produced by the Titan Conglomerate with production assistance by over a dozen participating, independent systems. It is the largest, most-tunneled private program in existence. The host, Odette, is the most-beloved interviewer and program host in the history of the galaxy. So try to make a good impression."

"Wonderful," I said, leaning back. "Just wonderful."

Next to me, Donut was shaking with excitement. Literally shaking.

"Anything else we should know?" Donut asked.

"Nope," Lexis said. "Just be yourselves, have fun with the questions, and you'll be fine."

"Thank you, Lexis," Donut said. "That'll be all."

"Great," Lexis said. She hit a button on her tablet, turned, and strode out of the room.

I looked at the cat sitting next to me, and I wondered, not for the first time, if this was all a dream. An hour and a half earlier I'd been certain I was about to die, and now I was aboard some sort of yacht from another planet, ready to be interviewed on an intergalactic talk show.

"Okay," Donut said the moment Lexis left the room. She started to frantically clean herself. "Let me do all the talking unless Odette asks a question directly of you. I just can't believe it. I am so excited!"

"Just, be careful, okay?" I said. I stood, moving toward the odd door. It did not open on its own. There were no windows, but there was a small door by the bar. I pushed it open, revealing a bathroom with a litterbox. Above the toilet was a round porthole about the size of a dinner plate. I stood upon the toilet, straining on my tiptoes to peer outside. It was dark, and I couldn't see a thing except the glint of the moon off relatively-calm water. Stars shone in night sky. I felt an unexpected longing at the sight of the stars. I put my hand against the window to see if I could push it open. Whatever this

was, it wasn't glass. There didn't appear to be a way of escape. I wondered what would happen if I formed my gauntlet and punched the window as hard as I could.

Probably nothing. And even if we did escape, then what? We were in the middle of the ocean in the middle of winter, and I still didn't have pants.

"Careful of what?" Donut asked from the other room.

"These people aren't our friends," I said, coming back into the room. I took a banana from the fruit basket, peeled it, and took a bite. "Don't forget that."

I attempted to put the rest of the fruit and the basket into my inventory, but my menus weren't working at all.

There was no garbage can in the room. An oversight. I tossed the peel on the counter.

"Do you want this cat food?" I asked, sniffing it.

"Are you crazy?" Donut said. "And get it all over my face?"

There was a little bag sitting behind the bowl of wet cat food. Purrfect Cat Treats. They had done their research. I picked up the bag and shook it. Donut was on the counter a half a second later. "Okay, but just one."

I took an apple and bit down as Donut ate her fifth treat. The apple suddenly reminded me of the dead, naked form of Rebecca W. I put it back in the basket, no longer hungry.

"Carl," Donut said as she crunched down on another treat. "Out there with all the punching and the grunting and the disgusting, exploding goblins. That is your world." She made a motion with her paw, indicating this room. "This is mine. I know this might be difficult for you to understand, but I have been doing this my entire life. Every cat show I have ever done is an interview. I was bred for this. Let me do my thing."

"You didn't talk before," I said. "And having a judge stick her finger up your ass is not the same thing as being interviewed for a television show."

"I have never had anybody ever stick anything up there, thank you very much. Really, Carl. Don't be so crude. This is why I'm to do the talking."

"Okay, you two," Lexis said, coming into the room. "Let's go."

"Don't be surly. You can be surly sometimes," Donut whispered as we lined up outside the door.

A small *ping* emanated from Lexis's tablet. The door irised open.

"Go," Lexis said, putting her hand on my back, pushing. "Smile and wave. Smile and wave!"

I was propelled out of the room, Donut walking in front of me with her tail swishing back and forth as we moved from the small room onto a giant, brightly-lit set.

I was momentarily blinded as we stepped out. And even though we hadn't really moved off the surface, I was briefly overwhelmed. *I am seeing something from another world. Holy shit*.

I heard the audience before I saw them. They were going *berserk*. Hoots, hollers, and animal-like trills filled the room, shaking the floor. I realized, belatedly, that I had stopped. Donut, seeing I had stopped, also paused, but she made it took like it was on purpose. She circled, sat down halfway between the door and the couch, and she rolled on her side, hopping up onto her feet, and swishing her tail. Her armored skirt poofed out with a little jingle as she hopped. The cheers got louder.

I used the moment to look about the room. It was just as Lexis had described. It was a black stage with a space-themed nebula background. The colorful, spinning cloud of blue and red space dust and the dots of distant stars filled the back wall. Odette's desk was, well, a desk. It sat next to a couch identical to the one in the waiting room. "The green room," Donut had called it, even though it was blue. The set could've been from any earth talk show, with a couple of glaring differences.

There were no visible cameras. The lights seemed to come out of nowhere, appearing and disappearing without any sort of physical source.

The audience was mostly in shadow. It was a large room, with seats and something else—viewing pods of some sort—stretching up in a stadium pattern. I watched as some of the audience members vanished, flickered, and reappeared. The crowd was a shadowy sea of aliens of all types. Humans, pig-headed orcs similar to the ones

we'd just killed, and eagle-headed creatures like Mordecai's true form. Bug-eyed, expressionless gray aliens. Tentacled things. Dozens of others, too many to take in. The viewing pods were filled with murky water, and I caught sight of what might've been a kua-tin, though much thinner than the image in the door carving.

And then there was Odette.

Looking upon the woman, it was difficult for my brain to put it all together. I kept thinking *what the fuck? What the fucking fuck*, over and over. Part crab, part praying mantis, part centerfold for *Juggz* magazine's "Freaks of Nature" issue. I just stared, not able to tell if I was looking at one creature. Or two. Or five.

But then she moved, and something clicked in my brain, allowing it all to come together.

Odette was a naked crab-taur wearing a bug mask.

The lower body of the woman was entirely crab. Black and red with a lumpy shell and multiple, chitinous legs. The shape and makeup of the shell was that of a king crab, but the size of a brown bear. Her body seemed completely separate from the rest of her form. The legs crowded one another, unable to tuck themselves underneath the desk. The legs seemed to twitch on their own accord. Malevolent, ready to strike. Her triangular bug head was black with mirrored, compound eyes the size of footballs. Twin antennae spread from her head with a span over at least six feet, as wide as the crab body.

But the oddest part of this woman was her torso.

Her naked, ebony body, from her stomach to her neck was that of a plus-sized, human model who had bribed a third-world plastic surgeon into enhancing her breasts well beyond anything that could ever be considered natural. Or sexy. Or anything other than what-the-fuck. The colossal breasts sat atop the table like a pair of pigs suckling against their mother. Her nipples faced downward, her areolas absurdly oversized, even on the massive breasts, each the size of a DirectTV satellite dish.

There was no conceivable way, even as big as she was, that her body could sustain those ginormous breasts without her back breaking like a twig.

Jesus. No wonder this show is so damn popular.

Donut looked up at me, her yellow eyes pleading for me to move.

I took a deep breath, plastered a smile on my face, and I waved. Then I walked toward the couch.

Odette calmed the crowd as we settled down. She waved her human-like arms at everyone to be quiet. She had long, fake nails that curved like claws. They were painted blue, matching the couch. Her body moved oddly, rising up and down as the crab body readjusted itself. She raised herself up as we sat, making it so her chest didn't block the audience's view of her praying mantis head.

They'd placed a large pillow on the seat so Donut could sit atop it. The cat jumped up and sat straight.

"Welcome, welcome," Odette said, her voice surprisingly feminine, though she sounded older than I expected. "Your majesty, it is a pleasure to have you here."

"Thank you so much, Odette," Donut said. "The pleasure is all ours. Carl and I have both been looking forward to meeting you. When I first heard about you, I couldn't stop thinking, *I really want to get on that couch and meet her*." Donut turned to face the crowd. Her voice had gone up a pitch, sounding nothing like her regular speaking voice. "And meet all of you guys. I dare say, what a great-looking audience. I'd much rather be here than with those filthy goblins. How's everybody doing tonight?"

The couch vibrated with the sound of the crowd's pleasure.

"You enjoying the show?" Donut asked.

Again, screams.

"Now, let me ask you something," Odette said. She turned and leaned in. Her massive breasts barely sloshed over, as if she had some sort of accordion system connecting her chest with the boobs. "So you might not realize this, but we've been watching you two from the beginning. You might not be getting any love on the official program, but you two are quite the sensation. We are so excited to have you on the show tonight. But something that people want to know is about your title, Princess Donut. So you are earth royalty?"

No. No, no, no, I thought. *Don't*.

"Why yes I am, Odette," Donut said. "Now, you have to understand, Earth has a ruling class. The humans." She glanced sideways at the crowd and lifted her paw. "Thumbs. It's all about the thumbs." The crowd laughed. "But amongst cats, which is what I am, we have what's called an elective monarchy. But it's really just a beauty contest. My full name is 'GC, BWR, NW Princess Donut the Queen Anne Chonk.' I wouldn't think of boring you guys with all of my titles." She leaned toward the audience and stage whispered, "GC stands for Grand Champion."

I realized I was staring at Donut as if she'd just sprouted a corndog from her forehead. I had to consciously make an effort to close my mouth. *An elective monarchy?* Where the hell did that come from? Who was this cat, and what had she done with Donut?

Odette nodded. I could not read any sort of expression on her bug face. "And you've won this beauty contest?"

Donut flipped her tail, and I swear to god the cat fucking winked. She looked right into the middle of the crowd and asked, her voice seductive. "What do you think?"

The crowd roared.

"I love it. You two are so adorable. I'm so happy to have you here with us." Her bug gaze focused on me.

Ah shit.

"So, Carl, before you came on, I promised my audience I'd get you to say it."

I looked at her blankly.

"Say what?" I asked.

"You know," Odette said. She waved her hand as if she was trying to coax it out of me. "Your catchphrase."

This is not real life. This can't be real life. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

Odette turned toward the audience. "He doesn't know what I'm talking about." She laughed. They laughed. "I'll tell you what. I'll give you a hint."

A screen appeared, floating in midair in front of me. It was me and Donut, from above. It was a scene from early on. We were peering into an alleyway, and a moment later I leaped back as a

blob of lava rocketed out toward us. I screamed, "Goddamnit Donut!" The scene changed. I was being attacked by a pair of cockroaches while Donut watched from a pile of garbage. "Goddamnit Donut!" I screamed. The scenes kept changing, over and over, each time ending with me saying the same thing. I'd said it at least fifteen times.

Odette cocked her head at me. "Figure it out yet?"

I sighed inwardly, doing my best not to let my dismay show. "Goddamnit, Donut," I said.

Boisterous cheers followed.

"Now let's go back to one of those clips we just watched," Odette said. "I was hoping to get some insights from you guys."

"Of course," Donut said.

That scene with the cockroaches reappeared. I heard my voice call out, "A little help here!"

It was the final moments of our battle with the Hoarder. My stomach dropped, watching that scene from above. The camera focused on my own face. I was stricken with how scared I looked. The blasting music from the fight was gone. The giant woman was gagging and sobbing, and the visceral sounds shook my bones.

"She's almost dead. You can kill them when you kill her!" Donut cried on the video.

The clip ended, and the audience was screaming with laughter.

"Now, Carl," Odette said. Her breasts made a slight sloshing noise on the desk. "What're you thinking here, when Donut wasn't helping you?"

"It happened so fast," I said. "I wasn't thinking anything."

"And you, Donut? You saw him there, surrounded. You're stronger than him." Odette waved her hand, and our stats appeared floating in the air over us. "Wow. A lot stronger than him."

"Yet here we are," Donut said. "Carl handled it like the champion he is. And besides, darling. If he was in real trouble, I would've certainly helped. Like I did with that juicy boss we faced." She looked at me. "What was his name? Juicy? Juiced? The Juice? Now *that* was a fight, wasn't it?"

The crowd roared their approval.

We talked for about five more minutes. Odette would ask a question about something that happened. Donut would answer. She had the crowd eating out of her paws. Odette asked me about my pants. They showed Donut asking if there was a reward for worst-dressed in the dungeon, and it showed me standing there, looking pitiful in my knee pads. The words WORST DRESSED appeared floating over me. I pretended to laugh.

"So, what's next for you two? Do you intend on staying with team Meadow Lark?" Odette asked.

"That's the plan for now," Donut said. "It depends on what we find on the next floor." She flicked her tail a few times. "But I want to tell you something, Odette." She stood on the chair, facing the audience. "I promise all of you. You guys are going to want to follow me and Carl. You're going to want to favorite us. Because whatever it is we face, we're not just going to kill them."

"No?" Odette asked, amused.

"Oh no. We are going to kill them big. We are going to kill them with *style*."

Thirty seconds later, and the audience was still screaming.

Odette had to shout over her own crowd. "We are out of time, but thank you so much Carl and Her Royal Majesty Princess Donut! Good luck to you two! I will see you all next time!"

The throng continued to go berserk. She'd stolen that line from Mordecai. "Kill them with style? Really?" I whispered.

But Donut didn't answer. She hadn't heard me. She stood on the edge of the pillow, standing like that damn lion from the *Lion King*, her chest heaving with pride as she looked back into the holographic mass of adoring fans. Her eyes sparkled. I suddenly had a feeling of dread. That look. That hunger. That was dangerous. She'd had but a single taste, but I could already tell. She was addicted to this. To the crowd. To the cheers. It was going to be a problem.

"Goddamnit, Donut," I muttered.

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The lights of the studio flipped all the way on, and the audience snapped away. The studio remained, but the bleachers were just gone. Odette remained behind the desk.

"Great show everyone," Odette said, looking up at the ceiling. There wasn't anybody else in the room that I could see. She looked over our shoulders. "Give us five, Plexis. Watch the packets and ping me if one of those AIs sticks their nose in here. I want to talk to our guests for a minute without anybody snooping."

I turned to see Lexis standing at the door that led back into the green room. "Yes, ma'am," Lexis said, backing into the other room. The door closed.

Odette looked down at Donut. "I do that, too. Pretend to not really remember someone's name. You should see them preen when I suddenly do remember. You, Donut, are a natural. Great job. We had that Lucia Mar and her two mongrels on stage before you, and that little psychopath does not know how to work a crowd. One of her dogs mauled my producer. It's a nightmare. God, I gotta get out of this thing. Give me a moment."

I watched in horror as the alien reached up and removed her own head. But it wasn't a head after all. The praying mantis skull was actually a helmet. It pulled away to reveal a human woman, approximately sixty years old. Her eyes were just a little wide for her face to pass as someone from earth. A moment later, the woman's crab body skittered back, and the chest with the enormous breasts

remained attached to the desk. Her whole torso peeled away, revealing a dark shirt. She wore a necklace with a heart on it. If it weren't for the crab body and the eyes, she'd look like any other human.

"What the hell?" I said, looking at her. "Is the body fake, too?"

"Everything you see is fake," Odette said. "This is show business."

There was a loud crack, and I watched, fascinated as she pulled herself from the crab body using her two arms. The crab collapsed with a clatter, like it had just died, its legs curled in on themselves.

Odette did not have any legs. Her body stopped right at her stomach. A flat disk zipped up from under the desk. She pulled herself onto the platform, and she floated in midair, able to control her movement. The legless human zoomed around the desk and came to hover in front of the couch. Her magical wheelchair emanated a slight buzzing sound.

"Much better," she said, sighing. "People think it's the same crab each time, but it's not. We keep a whole nest of the things out on the ranch, and we have to kill a new one each time I go on camera. We don't advertise that, lest we raise the ire of one of the many animal and mob rights protest groups."

"Of all the things to dress up as," I asked, still looking at the bizarre pair of body-less breasts sitting on the table. "Why… that? I couldn't even tell what that is."

"Oh, you will," she said. "That entire getup was my armor when I was like you. It was what I was wearing when I reached the stairwell for the thirteenth floor. It's how people know me."

"How was that boob thing armor?"

"Young man," Odette said. "This gear you have now, this loot? It's nothing compared to what's coming."

"Mordecai… Our trainer guy. He said only one person ever made it to the 13th floor, and it was a dude. He died," I said.

"That's true," Odette said. "I never went down the stairs. I'd struck a deal. That's a long story, and it's not for today. But I'm glad you brought up Mordecai. That's who I actually want to talk to you about. I know this is his last crawl. I'd like for you to tell him to seek me out when this is all over."

"Mordecai? How do you know each other?" Donut asked. "Were you on the same season?"

"They couldn't have been," I said. "Odette is human, and Mordecai is a bird guy. They're from different planets."

"They're called skyfowl," Odette said. "And my season was long before Mordecai's. I was his trainer. In fact, that's how I found you. I keep an eye on him, and I watched you guys as you stumbled into his guild room."

"His trainer? Wow," I said. "That must've been a really long time ago."

"It was," Odette said. "So, can I count on you?"

I shrugged. "Sure, we'll tell him."

She nodded. "Thank you. Now, I'm going to give you guys some advice. Don't talk about this out loud once you go back. The mud skippers won't like it."

"Mud skippers?" I said. "You mean Bor…" I paused, looking at the ceiling.

"They can't hear you in here. But don't say that phrase in the dungeon. Mud skipper. They attempted to get it listed as hate speech by the Syndicate a couple cycles back. Hardly anyone called them that until they made a big deal about it. But yes, that's what I mean. The kua-tin. Borant. Nobody likes the kua-tin, at least not their system of government. Borant is a different story. Some of those folks are okay. All they want is to put on a good show. I'm sure they were incensed when they were forced into this early release."

I looked at Donut. "We won't say anything," I said.

"Good. First thing. You're going to step onto that second floor, and in a day or so, you're going to find your social numbers have gone meteoric. Those people are following *you*, Carl and Donut. So when you go down to the third floor. You," she pointed at Donut, "need to stay as a cute, cuddly cat. They'll tempt you with some very powerful creature races. Going viral early is both a blessing and a curse. People are in love with Donut the cat. Not Donut the saber-toothed void leopard. Don't change your race, whatever you do. I've seen it happen dozens of times. They change, and their numbers

plummet. It's why nobody sponsors a crawler earlier than the fourth floor now."

"I wouldn't even consider it," Donut said.

"That's my girl," Odette said.

"And me?" I asked.

She shrugged. "People are used to seeing humans, so it's not as crucial for you to stay the same. As long as it's not *too* different. If she stays that tiny little thing, she's going to need to be protected. Mordecai will be the one to lead you through the process of picking a race and class. There'll be a lot of information. He won't be allowed to steer you, at least not overtly, but if I taught him anything, it's how to help you decide for yourself. I don't know what's going to be on the table—it's different every season. Listen for his clues. He knows what he's doing. He's going to do his best to guide you."

"Okay," I said. "Thanks."

"Also," she added, "if you want pants, you should probably stop bitching about not having them."

"So, it's like I suspected," I said. "The loot boxes aren't really random."

"Of course not," said Odette. "It's even written into the rules. Look at me." She floated back, holding out her arms. "I lost my legs to a Fiend Scythe on the eleventh floor. I was all but dead. I dragged myself to a safe room, opened my boxes, and I received this," she poked a black belt around her waist, just above the line where her legs were gone. "In a *gold* box. This is a legendary item, at least. It allows me to attach body parts of other monsters to myself. I had to drag myself back out there and kill that crab first, but I took its body as my legs. And I continued on my way."

"Your legs don't grow back?" Donut asked.

"No," Odette said. "Not if they're completely severed off. But that's not the point. People were watching me. I had five sponsors, a record at the time. Me dying alone in a safe room was not good for anyone involved. They didn't care if I lived or died, as long as that death was glorious. So they gave me the perfect item to compel me to get my ass back out there and at least try. Yes, this is a game.

Yes, there are controls in place to make it fair. Sort of. But more importantly, this is a for-profit venture in the entertainment industry. And if you staying alive means more profits, then you'll find your loot to be a lot more convenient. But if the AI senses screwing you over will make the show more interesting, you better believe it'll fuck you right in the ass at the worst possible moment. Don't ever forget that. You can't count on anybody but yourselves."

"So, no more complaining," I said. "At least not out loud."

"Not when it's funny for you to not have pants." She turned to Donut. "Or when someone hisses every time they get another torch in one of their boxes."

Donut swished her tail angrily. "I have 230 torches in my inventory. It's absolutely ridiculous."

"One last piece of advice," Odette said. "Never trust someone unless you know what they're getting out of it. Never trust someone if their motivations aren't clear. Mordecai, for example. He won't tell you this, but the season doesn't count against his indentureship unless one of his crawlers makes it to the fourth floor."

" we don't make it, he's stuck until next season?" I asked. So if

"He's stuck until the next *Borant-sponsored* season, which'll be at least another seven or eight seasons after this one. And with the political environment as it is, a lot of people aren't certain Borant will be around that long. All indentureship contracts get frozen during a bankruptcy seizure action."

"Wait, what?" I asked.

She waved her hand. "That's not something you need to worry yourselves over. Concentrate on the crawl."

Donut jumped down from the couch and ran to the far wall. She stopped about halfway across the room, her face smushing against an invisible barrier. It appeared the studio went deeper than it really did. She put her feet up on the invisible wall, making it look as if she was standing on two feet. "Carl, look," she said. "This room is quite odd."

"Remember what Lexis said?" I called out to her. "We're not really in the studio. That's the far end of the boat. Be careful."

I turned back to Odette. “Whatever you guys did to her is wearing off,” I said.

The woman nodded. She didn’t even deny it. She was also watching the cat pounce around the end of the room. “In many ways, she’s still a child. It’s part of the reason why so many are enchanted with her. It works well in the dungeon. But for interviews, sometimes they need a little nudge.”

I bit my lip. I didn’t know if I should be angry or not. “What did you do?”

She shrugged. “It’s nothing insidious. It was in her cat treats. It’s temporary. It increased her wisdom and a few confidence stats by a point and a half. Not much. It makes for a better interview. It’s no different than drinking a glass of strong wine.”

“I thought wisdom wasn’t a stat anymore,” I said.

“Oh, honey. Everything is a stat. Just because you can’t see it doesn’t mean it’s not really there. But you’re more right than you realize. None of these top-tier stats you see are real. Not truly. A higher intelligence doesn’t mean you’re smarter. It means you have more mana points. It means you can remember things better. It’s really a mish-mash of a hundred other stats all combined.”

Donut came back, her tail swishing. “This room is much smaller than it looks.”

“So how about you, Odette? What are your motivations?” I asked as I stood from the couch. It was time to go. “For helping us, I mean. You said not to trust anyone until you know what their motivations are.”

The older woman smiled. “My audience loves you. The longer you stay alive, the more money I make. And there is nothing I love in this universe more than money. Now get back in there and try not to die.”

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Floor Two
Views: 0
Followers: 0
Favorites: 0

"There's nobody on my list," Donut said. "I don't have any followers yet."

We'd been on the second floor for about five seconds. Thankfully, Brandon and his crew hadn't come down yet. We still had two hours until the collapse, and I suspected they were waiting to see if Chris could convince the thirty folks holed up in that Waffle House to come down. I wouldn't expect to see the first ones emerge for another hour.

"I don't think it gets turned on until after the recap episode," I said. "And Mordecai said it updates slow anyway." Tonight's episode coincided with the closing of the first floor. I was hoping we could find a safe room before then.

The episode was usually a little more than an hour long, and after that, Odette's show would air. And if that show was as popular as they'd implied, the views would start rolling in. I knew, deep

down, that this was probably a good thing. The more fans, the better chances we had. But I still had a terrible, ominous feeling that all this attention was a mistake. There was something to be said about being anonymous. Quietly efficient. That wasn't going to happen, not here, not when I had Donut with me.

Looking about, this second floor was set up similarly to the first, but instead of emerging at the end of a main hallway, I could see that we were in the middle of a quadrant. The floors here were white. The lichen on the wall had an orangish tint to it. The walls, instead of stone, were made of cinderblock. I punched the wall with my gauntlet to see if it would break. A large crack appeared, but it wouldn't break further, like it was magically protected. I punched another nearby block, and the same thing happened. It cracked easily, but it didn't break more than that.

"Well this is boring. How are we supposed to set the intergalactic internet on fire when the second floor is the same as the first floor?" Donut asked.

"Mordecai had said that would be the case. It's not until the third or fourth floor where things start to get weird."

"Hopefully the monsters will be more exciting," Donut said.

"They'll be similar. Just a little harder."

"Look, look," Donut said. "When you zoom out the map, top right corner. Northeast."

I did, and immediately saw what she was looking at. The icon sat in the midst of the fog, but there it was. An overwhelming sense of relief washed over me. I didn't see any safe rooms or tutorial guilds yet, but at least we had this.

Stairwell to Floor Three.

"Let's work our way toward there and see about clearing that quadrant out," I said. "Keep an eye open for safe rooms."

I saw the X on the map the moment we turned the corner. My heart leaped, afraid that this was going to be the corpse of Agatha. But it was a smaller X. One of a mob.

I hovered over the spot, and it read **Corpse – Level 2 Brindle Grub.**

"Level two. That's good. I wonder if Agatha killed it?" I said. We wouldn't be able to tell until we were closer. A few more steps, and a pair of red dots appeared in the same hallway, between us and the body. They seemed to also be moving toward the corpse.

"Okay, be careful," I whispered. I peeked around the corner. There the mobs were, a pair of fuzzy, cat-sized monsters with no legs. Bugs with similar black and brown coloring to Donut. These were large, fat worms. They didn't appear to be moving too quickly, also level two. They were the same type of creature as the corpse.

Brindle Grub. Level 2.

Have you ever found a dead, bloated, and decomposing body? Have ya poked it with a stick just to see what would wiggle out? Perhaps rubbed it with your bare foot? You know you've wanted to. Well, wonder more. Here on the second floor, rats are yesterday's news. Brindle Grubs are now all the rage, and janitor duty falls unto them. The more monsters you kill in an area, the more the grubs eat. The more the grubs eat, the bigger they get. Once you start finding them in the pupa stage, you best move on. Grubs are easy to kill. Their older siblings are not.

"You take the left one. I'll get the second," I said as Donut jumped to my shoulder.

We strode around the corner. Donut blasted the first one with a full-power *Magic Missile*, and the thing exploded, leaving nothing but a white mess of goo. They had the same sort of squishy innards as the scatterer bugs from the first floor.

"Get ready with a healing scroll in case their blood is acid or something," I said.

I formed a fist, rushing up. The second grub was making a pitiful squeaking noise, trying to get away at a turtle's pace. I smashed down with my gauntlet. It was like punching pudding. A toddler could kill these things.

The bug goo didn't appear to be toxic. The bugs didn't offer any discernible experience, either. These seemed to be much less dangerous than the rats. I wondered what sort of monster they turned into.

We moved to examine the smushed remains of the third corpse. It was as I suspected.

Lootable Corpse. Brindle Grub. Level 2. Killed by Crawler Agatha.

Vial of Brindle Grub Hemolymph. (Alchemy Material.)

It looked as if she'd run over the thing with her shopping cart. It took about ten minutes before a corpse became lootable by other crawlers, and that was the only indication of how long ago this had been. Her head start was several hours by now thanks to our interlude on the surface. I took the vial.

Donut jumped down and sniffed at the corpse. She made a disgusted face. "Repulsive. I see a couple more red dots one hallway over."

I looked at my map, and the red dots weren't there. A blink, and then they appeared. I'd been noticing that recently, that Donut could sense active monsters a few moments before I could. I suspected it had something to do with her race, but I wasn't certain. These dots were moving quickly down the adjacent hallway.

"Those aren't grubs. If the bugs are like the rats, then we haven't yet met the mobs of this quadrant." I took my foot, and I smashed down on the remains of the corpse that Agatha had killed. I smashed and crushed, smearing the innards all over the place until the X disappeared on the map.

"Carl," Donut said, looking between me and the splattered remains. "Are you quite all right?"

"Did you read that description of the grubs?" I said as I wiped my foot on a cinderblock. I could barely feel the bottom of my soles. The sides of my foot were still as sensitive as ever. "We can't just leave corpses lying around. Even their own corpses. Not in this part of the dungeon. From now on, we do our best to leave as little behind as possible."

She crinkled her nose. "I don't feel as if that's an efficient use of our time. My people aren't going to enjoy watching me desecrate the dead. This is just revolting. I'd much rather you not do this."

"Your people aren't going to enjoy watching you get killed by whatever these things grow up to be."

We continued down the hall, turning a junction, then another, angling toward the other red dots. These guys were moving in what looked like a patrol pattern. I suspected if we continued further in that direction we'd find their base and the neighborhood boss. That wasn't something I wanted to tackle just yet.

"Let's go get these things already. It's taking much too long," Donut said, hopping up and down. With her collar charm and crupper, she sounded like a bell.

"Goddamnit, Donut," I said. "You're a cat. You need to work on your stealth."

The creatures paused, then they both stopped in the hallway and started moving quickly in our direction.

"See?" I said. "We need to see what the mobs are before we force confrontations."

I stepped out, waiting for them to round the corner. Donut returned to my shoulder.

She was starting to reply to me, but she squealed in anger the moment the mobs appeared. She dug her paws painfully into my shoulder as she tensed. She fired off two rapid-succession missiles. Both of the creatures hit the ground, their health moving into the red. Barely. They got up and continued toward us snarling and snapping.

And barking.

The AI approximated a terrible Australian accent.

Danger Dingo. Level 5.

These aren't the cute, cuddly, baby-eating puppies from the land down under. No, mate. The Danger Dingo features a stronger body, sharper teeth, and a penchant for black metal bands such as Dimmu Borgir and Satyricon. Where there are dingoes, their Kobold riders and slave masters usually aren't far behind.

"*Die*!" Donut screamed, shooting two more missiles. Both of the monsters fell over, dead and steaming. She'd used 24 of her 26 mana points in seconds. She sat on my shoulder, breathing heavily.

"So," I said, looking down at the corpses that continued their forward trajectory, sliding to a stop at our feet. "Not a fan of dogs,

are we?" These guys didn't look much like regular dingoes. First off, they were huge, about the size of mastiffs. They each had a fur pattern on their faces that looked like heavy metal corpse paint. Their fangs were absurdly long and sharp, giving them an almost prehistoric look. Both dropped "Poor Dingo Pelts" which Donut looted.

One of them also dropped something we hadn't seen yet. A pair of gold coins. Donut snatched them away before I could examine the money's properties.

"I must admit, I did get a little carried away there," Donut said. With a swipe of her claw, she ripped the dingo's head right off. She kicked it, and the head exploded against the wall. Once again, the corpses on this level were significantly more fragile once they died. I watched as she gingerly and matter-of-factly tore the corpses to shreds, careful not to get any gore on herself. She kept saying "Ew, ew, gross, ew," as she did it. She wasn't quite successful keeping the blood off of her, and by the time she was done, both her forward legs were soaked red.

"What happened to not wanting to desecrate a corpse?"

"Cocker spaniels deserve to have their corpses desecrated."

"Those aren't…" I stopped myself. I wasn't going to argue with her. She knew perfectly well these weren't cocker spaniels. She was just playing for the camera.

"Let's back out of this area for now." I indicated the curved hallway. I could see a few larger rooms ahead, and I suspected we'd be knee-deep in dingoes and kobolds if we went further.

As we approached the main hallway, I didn't see any further signs of the dingo mobs, but we did find a couple more dead grubs. And plenty more living ones. The things were everywhere, and we had to kill them by the dozens.

"There's a safe room," Donut said. "It's right off the hallway."

I looked, and she was right. It was in the wrong direction from the stairwell, but it was close.

We headed that way, edging into another quadrant. This one was filled with floating brains with tentacles tangling under them. They looked like jellyfish. They were called "Mind Horrors," and were all

level four. They used something called a psionic attack. Donut wasn't affected at all by them, but I was. I could feel them before I saw them, their presence causing an almost debilitating headache. But they were physically weak, and they moved slowly, like little miniature blimps. I could punch them out of the sky before their mental attacks lowered my health more than a few points. Their brain-shaped bodies had the consistency of a jam-filled kickball. They bounced when they hit the ground, sometimes splattering.

I didn't want to go further into this neighborhood, but we cleared the way to the safe room.

The room, unfortunately, wasn't one of the restaurants with a Bopca Protector, though the chamber itself was much bigger than any other safe room I'd seen. It appeared to be some sort of storm shelter. The signs on the doors for the restrooms were in French. The television screens were attached to the walls on one end of the cavernous room. About fifty dusty cots were pushed up against another wall. There was no food, no cookies, no vending machines. Just bathrooms, showers, and sinks.

But there was something I'd never seen before. A mailbox, attached to a pole in the ground near the wall with the televisions. It was a standard black mailbox with a little red flag, the kind someone out in the suburbs would have in front of their house. I immediately moved to the box and tried to open the little door, but I received an error message.

Why would someone send you mail?

"Weird," I said.

The number of boxes and achievements we'd received was less than usual, but I still had quite a few. Several of my battle stats had also ticked up. I sat down on one of the cots and examined my achievements as Donut did the same.

New achievement! Borough Boss!

So, you've stumbled into the chamber of the second-weakest type of boss. If you survive this, it means you are in

the top 5% of all crawlers. Too bad only the top .25% make it past the next tier.

***Reward*: Yeah, no.**

New achievement! Bully *and* a Thief!

You've stolen property from a fellow crawler who is a lower level than you. What's next, tough guy? Kicking puppies?

***Reward*: You've received a Bronze Asshole's Box.**

That one confused me for a moment until I realized I'd gotten it for taking Agatha's shopping cart.

New achievement! Battlefield Construction!

You built a structure and deployed it in battle. And your mother thought you were wasting your life away while you spent all those hours eating Doritos and playing Minecraft. If only she could see you now. Too bad she's probably dead.

***Reward*: You've received a Silver Mechanic's Box!**

For this next one, the AI once again used his sexy voice. I cringed.

New achievement! This Little Piggy Went to Market!

Oh yeah, baby. You have killed more than five opponents during boss battles using your bare feet. You are making daddy very, very happy.

***Reward*: You've received a Platinum Shoe Box.**

"What the fuck, dude," I muttered at the ceiling. I shuddered. I eyed Donut, who was already opening her boxes. I wasn't going to tell her about this one. Still, a platinum box? That almost made it worth it. Almost. I couldn't wait to see what was in the "random" loot box.

A few more achievements popped up, all concerning us defeating the boss. Killing a borough boss. Killing a borough boss with a mixed group. Killing a borough boss in under 10 minutes. Killing a borough boss with more than 10 minions. None of the achievements offered any good loot except the silver boss box. After that, there was only one achievement left:

New achievement! You found stairs!

You have found a stairwell down to the next floor. They say the cream rises to the top. So what does that say about you?

***Reward*: This barely qualifies as an achievement. Your reward is that you're alive to read this.**

Next, I moved to loot boxes. The items appeared one by one, rapidly appearing and disappearing into my virtual bag. I went into my inventory, selected the **New** tab, and inspected the items one at a time.

The asshole box bestowed five gold pieces and three little pieces of paper. **Drink Ticket (X3) – Desperado Club**. When I examined the little red paper, all it said was **Redeem at the Desperado Club for a free "drink."** I stared dubiously at the quotation marks around "drink."

The silver mechanics box contained a really interesting item. A tool. I pulled it out of my inventory and examined it. It looked like a silver, oversized lollipop with a button on the handle.

The Goo-Inator 3000.

This is a shaping tool. May only be used at a workbench. Assists in shaping materials into something else. You might

want to keep the business end away from your face.

That sounded pretty cool, but I wouldn't be able to use it until I bought a personal space, which I couldn't do until the fourth floor. For now it would have to sit in my inventory and wait.

Next up was the prize from the silver boss box. I'd received 100 gold coins and a potion.

Cheat Code Potion

Warning: This item has a short shelf life.

This item will expire shortly after it was generated. In other words, this isn't something you can hoard. Don't be a wuss. Drink it now.

Causes one, recently-used combat or magic-themed skill to increase by three. Choice is random and permanent.

A red, flashing timer appeared at the bottom of the description. It was down to 17 minutes and counting. *Shit*. I added it to my hotlist and drank.

I felt a crackling sensation in my mouth, like I'd just downed a whole packet of Pop Rocks.

Your Pugilism Skill has been increased by 3! Your Pugilism Skill is now level 10.

Damn. I had a pile of bonuses now, all relating to unarmed combat. With the combination of my Iron Punch and Powerful Strike skills, plus my unarmed combat bonus and my pugilism skill, my fists packed just as much damage as Brandon's lightning maul. I knew the skill levels would come more slowly now, but I could probably punch a steel beam and put a dent in it.

At the same time, I knew my progress wasn't anything special. Not compared to some of the others from the last recap episode. That Lucia Mar kid was completely decked out in magical gear. She had an obvious dexterity bonus. The kid was running on walls and doing flips and shit already, splattering monsters with her mace. The crossbow woman with the Valkyrie helmet was also crazy strong, likely twice as powerful as me. I'd watched in awe as she picked up a bear-sized, slobbering tentacle monster and threw it into the air, shooting it twice with her repeating crossbow before it exploded.

They were giving us these incredible upgrades, but I also knew the monsters were going to keep pace with our progress. And while I felt overpowered, a part of me feared I was actually falling behind.

I had one last item to examine. "*Goddamnit*," I muttered under my breath. I pulled it into my hand and examined its properties. It was a little black folder with a zipper. I zipped it open, revealing multiple, miniature tools.

Enchanted Pedicure Kit of the Sylph.

This kit contains 12 essential items for proper foot care.

The magical enhancements of this item may only be imbued within a Safe or Personal Space.

Warning: All of these enhancements require you to remain barefoot.

Why? Because you know why.

From a pumice stone to a cuticle pusher, this personal hygiene kit will keep your feet both luscious and in perfect fighting shape. Nightly care of your feet and toenails will result in the following bonuses:

+15% Damage to bare-foot attacks for 30 hours.

+3 to the Smush skill for 30 hours.

+Unbreakable buff (feet only) for 30 hours. This buff keeps your pretty little metatarsals nice and unbroken.

+Celestially Nimble and Tidy buff (feet only) for 30 hours. Not only will your tootsies look nice, bright, and shiny, but any traps set off by footfalls will now prompt an alarm and have a 5-second delay before being triggered.

I sighed. That very last buff was a great prize. Other than the goblin dozer, we hadn't dealt with any traps yet. Mordecai had mentioned them, but I didn't know when they would start showing up. We were going to need more than just a five-second warning, but this was better than nothing.

I looked at the kit dubiously before shoving it back into the inventory. I had no idea what most of those little metal items did. Would I have to use all of them to turn the enhancements on? How long would it take? Beatrice could literally spend hours in the bathroom poking, prodding, and plucking at herself. Donut usually

sat on the counter in the bathroom with her, meowing for attention. Which meant Donut had watched her do it a number of times. I was going to have to ask the cat if she knew how to use the items. Shit.

I watched as Donut trotted over to the mailbox, leap so she was standing on top of it, and then sit down as the front of the box opened up on its own. A tome floated out and hovered before her. It vanished as she added it to her inventory.

"What the hell was that?" I asked.

She poofed her chest out. "Thanks to that boss box, I am now a member of the Dungeon Book of the Floor Club. I get one spellbook per level, which is mailed to me."

"What? Really? That's way better than what I received. What book did you get?"

Instead of answering me, her body flashed with light. She'd read the book, giving herself the spell.

"Ew," she said after a moment. "What an awful spell. We really need to save these book things instead of wasting them."

"Goddamnit, Do…" I caught myself. "You know this. You have to read the description before applying it to yourself. What is the spell? What does it do?"

I couldn't examine her spells, so I had to rely on what she told me. I knew she had four spells, not including this new one. She had the heal spell everyone started with, *Torch*, *Magic Missile*, and *Puddle Jumper*, which she'd only tried once. She also had a tome of *Minion Army* she couldn't yet read, and I had that tome of *Wisp Armor*.

"It's called *Second Chance*. It costs 10 mana to cast. I can raise a monster from the dead. It has to be a lower level than me. They will fight for us for as many minutes as the spell's level. The level is one, so it'll only last for a minute."

"Holy crap," I said. "That's badass. It's a necromancy spell!"

"It's disgusting," Donut said. She shuddered. "The dead are gross enough. It's much worse when they're moving around. It probably groans and stuff, too. You know how I feel about groaning."

I had a quick memory of being slashed at once while Bea and I were getting busy. It wasn't very funny at the time, but we'd

laughed about it later. Donut had gotten banned from the bedroom during sexy time after that. She'd howl at the door, and we'd have to put music on to drown her out.

"Whatever happened to killing them with style?" I said, trying not to laugh.

"One doesn't have to resort to gore-themed violence in order to be stylish."

"Yeah," I said. "But imagine raising one of those dingoes back from the dead and using it to kill another dingo. And then raising that one too. You'd be like the Lucia Mar kid with her two dogs, but yours will be zombie dogs."

Her eyes got huge. "This is the best spell ever."

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[31]

BRANDON AND CREW WERE STILL BRINGING PEOPLE INTO THE SAFE ROOM AS the next episode premiered.

Right when the show started, the timer finally ran out. The world rumbled, and the ground under my feet shook. The shaking lasted but a second. I stopped and gazed at the number on the television screen. It flashed, going from just over two million to **1,292,526**.

More people had made it down to the next level than I expected. Still, those numbers. Those goddamned numbers. I wished we didn't have to look at them. In that brief moment, as I helped push a woman—her name was Elle McGibbons—in a wheelchair into the storm shelter, over 700,000 people died. A third of the remaining crawlers. The first floor had claimed a little more than 10 million people.

"Thank you, honey," the woman said as I rolled her to the others. "Can you put *Divorce Court* on the television? My Barry used to watch that show. It reminds me of him."

"I don't think that show is on anymore, Mrs. McGibbons," I said.

"That's okay," she said.

Above the number with the remaining crawlers, the countdown to level collapse blinked a few times then reset. Six days and counting.

"Six days?" Brandon said, coming to stand beside me. "Mistress Tiatha had said it would be ten."

"Yeah, our guy said the same thing," I said. "At least we know where the stairs are this time."

As the scenes of carnage played out on the television—they were showing a man and a woman running from a three-headed baboon—I took stock of the room.

We'd only gained six more residents from the Waffle House safe room, meaning 24 of them had elected to stay behind. I thought about that for a moment. *Good for them*, I decided. They'd gained a measure of control in those last few moments. They went out on their own terms. Brandon said they'd all been singing when he'd last seen them.

Agatha remained missing. Chris sat in the corner, his head low. He might've been crying. I wanted to give the man space. Imani and Yolanda worked their way around the residents. Yolanda helped them to the bathrooms while Imani handed out crawler biscuits.

Donut paced the floor in front of the television screen, waiting for the second half of the program. We wouldn't be able to watch Odette's show, and we still didn't know if we'd get any airtime on the main program.

"After everyone sleeps, I was hoping to get your help with something," Brandon said.

I already knew what he was going to ask.

"You're going to send them all down the stairs to the third floor early."

"Yes," he said. "They can't train, so there's no point in keeping them here."

"What about you?" I asked. "Your levels need work."

He shook his head. "We talked about it. All of us are going to go down. We'll take our chances on the third floor. We don't want to risk getting separated."

On the screen, a woman screamed as her arm was bitten off by a monster that looked like an eggplant with teeth.

"We'll scout the way and clear it out for you," I said.

"Thank you," Brandon said.

"Did you get anything good in your boss box?" I asked. He now had a bright, silver star next to his name in the interface, along with

the rest of us.

He grinned. "I got a magic boomerang. Chris got some book of the club thing. Imani doesn't tell us what she gets, and Yolanda received a new type of quiver."

"There's something I've been wanting to ask you about Agatha," I said.

"Everyone, quiet! Quiet!" Donut called. "It's time for the good part!"

The screen focused on that group of men from Africa. Their party name was "Le Mouvement." They'd gone from 150 to about 80 after some internal strife. Several of the members sported skulls by their avatars now.

The show had helpfully added a graphic showing how much ammunition they had left. The 80 men were down to under 500 rounds. Hopefully they were training themselves in other weapon types.

Lucia Mar and her dogs obliterated a nest of brown, shaggy monsters before descending the stairs. I knew right afterward she'd been whisked away to appear on Odette's show. She'd been on stage just before us, where one of her dogs had attacked a producer. The woman with the Valkyrie helmet had teamed up with a group of three more women. They worked together to kill a yeti borough boss thing before using the stairs to descend.

And just like that, there we were.

Beside me, Donut gasped as we appeared. We were on screen for less than 15 seconds. The program was playing scenes from multiple groups of crawlers, rapid-fire, all of them fighting bosses or running toward the stairs as the timer ran down. I knew some of these scenes must have played out just thirty minutes earlier.

It showed us huddled underneath the redoubt as Donut screamed, "Here it comes!"

The view changed to the ball of swine rolling up the ramp, getting stuck. It moved back inside our miniature fort as the brace broke and smashed Yolanda in the head. It showed the ball break apart, and then it cut to Donut screaming as she fired magic missiles

point-blank into the tusklings. It ended with Imani making a sour face as she dropped the strap-on dildo on the floor.

All of our mugshots appeared. A moment, later, the show moved onto another group.

"They didn't put Agatha's picture on the screen," Yolanda said. "Does that mean she's dead?"

"I think that's exactly what it means," I said, my voice grim. There was no way the crazy old woman could survive down here on her own. Nobody had said it out loud yet, but we were all thinking it.

"Wait," Chris said. Brandon's older brother had a deeper voice, and it surprised me when he spoke. This was only the second time I'd heard him speak. "There's more to it. She was edited out of the scene. She was next to me under the speedbump, but she wasn't there when they showed it."

"Oh yeah," Brandon said. "Weird."

"What does that mean?" Yolanda asked.

"Who the hell knows?" I said.

Donut was ignoring all of this as she hopped up and down. "Two shows in one day, Carl. Two shows! Maybe there is more, too. Do you think we're on more shows?"

I sighed. "Donut. You need to stop obsessing over this. It's dangerous. It's going to get us killed."

"I'm not obsessing," she said. "What makes you think I've been obsessing?"

"People like you because of what you've been doing," I said. "If you start playing for the camera, they're going to like you less. And if you die, you won't be remembered at all. So try not to think about it."

"I don't know what you're talking about, Carl," she said.

The show wrapped up. And a moment later, the announcement rattled through the storm shelter.

Hello crawlers.

Welcome to the second floor. Congratulations to all of you. We have just under 1.3 million crawlers still in the game. That number is slightly lower than our projections, so we are speeding up the second floor timer to the minimum

legally allowed by the rules. You have six days to find a staircase down. Once again, we urge you all to wait until the last possible moment to descend.

As soon as this announcement ends, you will find that follows and favorites will be turned on for our viewers. The numbers will populate slowly on your interface, so don't be too disappointed if you don't see anything just yet.

We have improved how patronage works this season. This is a major change, so please pay attention.

All crawlers are now limited to three patrons, and all three spots will be up for auction for one day immediately upon the induction of the fourth floor, then fifth, then sixth floors respectively. Your benefactors may so choose to transfer their patronage to other parties at their own discretion starting on the seventh floor.

All patronage spots will become available at a bid of one credit, meaning this season virtually all living crawlers will have patrons.

But, be warned. Any bids the patron pays *above* the standard patronage fee will be reflected in loot box discounts for that patron. Any funds *below* the fee will be reflected in additional costs to that patron for loot boxes. In other words, the more your patron pays for you, the more and higher-quality Benefactor Boxes you may receive. The higher your social numbers, the better your chances at receiving the best loot. Your tutorial guide should have more details and will help you if you have any additional questions.

Finally, we must say we are disappointed in the disrespect we are being shown regarding the bathrooms. As of this moment, if any human-born crawler intentionally urinates or defecates anywhere outside a designated bathroom area, they will be immediately and swiftly penalized in the form of a Rage Elemental plucked from the 13th floor. This elemental will kill them and everyone in their party before they can get their pants back up.

That's it for tonight. Have fun out there, and remember to kill, kill, kill!

Brandon turned to Yolanda. "You better tell Jack not to pee in the hallways anymore."

Yolanda had gone pale. I hadn't even realized that this was a problem. Jack was one of the guys who used a walker, not a wheelchair. He wore a Cincinnati Bengals hat and was always poking at the female residents, saying, "You still alive, Marybeth?" None of them were named Marybeth.

"I have a few adult pads left. I'll make sure he puts one on," Yolanda said.

"Their reasoning for speeding it up doesn't make any sense," Imani said.

I nodded, agreeing. "If anything, it seems like they're trying to get rid of us faster."

"Carl, Carl! I have a follower! My first follower!" Donut cried. "Another! A view! I have a view!"

"Yeah," I said. "You know that viewer is watching you right now. So maybe you should stop acting crazy. We talked about this."

Donut stiffened, her eyes going wide. "You're right," she said. She sat down and licked her paw, suddenly looking nonchalant. "That was quite the battle today, don't you think, Carl?"

She said this in a weird, stilted, I'm-trying-to-act-casual-but-I'm-not-very-good-at-it voice.

I sighed, and it took everything not to say my catchphrase out loud*. She's going to get used to it. It's new, so you gotta give her time*. After Odette's show finished airing, I knew those numbers were going to skyrocket.

This was going to be a long night.

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Time to Collapse: Five days, ten hours

Views: 69 Billion
Followers: 635 Million
Favorites: 149 Million

As we approached the quadrant with the stairwell, we could now see that there was a tutorial guild and another saferoom just beyond the stairs. The plan was to probe the monsters, see how difficult they were. If it was something we could handle, we'd clear them out. Once we found the boss room, we'd make a judgment call on how to proceed. After that, we'd escort team Meadow Lark into the stairwell.

We'd gone to sleep and woken up with our social numbers in the stratosphere. Donut's views and follows were about equal with my own, but her favorites were twice as high. It made sense. Mordecai had said people only got a limited number of favorites to use, and Donut was the more entertaining member of our duo. I was okay with that.

I tried not to think about it. We had important work to do today. Even Donut, thankfully, began to pay attention to the task at hand as we saw the first few red dots appear on our map. She'd been saying some motivational bullshit about seizing the day and fighting for the honor of our elders, but I think even she realized she was being annoying. A couple followers had ticked away, and you'd have thought that someone had stabbed her in the face with the way she'd reacted.

The dots were just off the main thoroughfare. The main arteries on this floor weren't as wide as they'd been one floor up, and the ground was less even. Within the actual quadrants, we had to watch our step. The concrete floor was cracked and splintered. Little sharp rocks were everywhere.

I kicked a rock away. Below, my shiny toes glittered. I'd tried to get Donut to show me how to use the pedicure kit, and she'd laughed at me. It was Imani, of all people, who'd sat down with me. The stoic nurse pulled the tools out one at a time, matter-of-factly explaining how they worked.

The buffs all activated after about fifteen minutes of work. I didn't need to use all the items. I just had to make a show of it. But now my feet glittered, and while the sensation wasn't any different than it had been before, I could sense the unbreakable aspect of my foot bones. I knew if I dropped a boulder on my toes, they wouldn't splinter. It'd still hurt, but they'd remain intact and unscarred and as pretty as ever for the psychotic AI.

I peered around the corner at the monsters. There were three of them sitting in a wide room lit by torches. They sat in a circle, playing dice. They were small, troll-like humanoids with oversized heads. Each had hook noses, ruddy cheeks, and mouths with only a few teeth. They wore tattered green overalls covered in patches. Each had pilgrim style, buckled shoes. Much too small for me.

If it wasn't for their mottled skin and curly black hair, I'd think they were a type of goblin. All three of them had runny noses. They coughed and sneezed and snorted and rubbed their sleeves with their arms as they played their game.

All three of them had slingshots on their laps. Ranged weapons. I didn't like ranged weapons.

Unvaccinated Clurichaun Rev-Up Consultant – Level 3

If you hear banjo music, run.

Clurichauns are distant, hillbilly relatives of the Leprechauns. And while the Leprechauns are said to guard vast piles of gold, the only thing Clurichauns might hoard are Polaroids of their own sisters sitting on the can and questionable business schemes. This particular sect is of the unvaccinated variety. Don't let them sneeze on you.

WARNING: This is a fairy-class mob. Mobs of this class inflict 20% more damage against you due to your goblin pass.

I eased back around the corner.

"Man, I really wish we could figure out a way to turn their dots white. Then we could use your charm skill."

"Do they have wings? My butterfly collar charm causes winged fairies to like me."

"I don't think they do," I said.

"Maybe if we capture one, we can talk to it," Donut said.

"I'd say that's a good idea," I said. "But not with these guys. We need to kill them from a distance. They're toxic. I'm pretty sure they inflict something like your sepsis debuff on us. Let's try hitting them with three magic missiles, super quick. Do a four power for each one and see what happens. If they don't go down, hit them again."

Donut nodded and jumped to my shoulder. "Ready," she said, all business.

We popped around the corner. *Thwap, thwap, thwap*.

Donut struck each one with a headshot. They didn't even know what hit them. They died where they sat.

"How many mana points do you have left?"

"Fourteen," Donut said.

"Do you want to try your new *Second Chance* spell? It costs ten, right?"

I didn't have to ask her twice. Donut's whole body glowed a neon purple. A moment later, one of the clurichauns twitched. It glowed

purple, matching Donut's hue. It stumbled to its feet and just stood there, its scorched and blown-in head listing to the side. A moan emanated from its wet, snotty mouth. On my shoulder, Donut shuddered. A one-minute timer hovered over the undead creature. A clear liquid oozed out of the hole in its head. It moaned again, this time louder.

Undead Minion of Crawler Princess Donut – Unvaccinated Clurichaun Consultant – Level 1

It continued to sway, not moving from that spot.

"This is most unpleasant," Donut said. She made a sound like she was going to retch. "I do not like this, Carl."

"I wonder if they'll always be level one," I said, fascinated. "Can you control it?"

"I don't know," Donut said hesitantly. "I don't have any sort of controls." She made a kind of uncomfortable whimpering noise, something I'd never heard from her before. "You," she said, calling to the zombie. It didn't seem to react. "Rip up the dead bodies of your friends."

It swayed there for another moment. The countdown was down to 25 seconds. Then it went to its knees and started taking apart one of his companions. It reached into the stomach and just yanked a line of intestines out like a magician pulling streamers from a hat. They just kept coming and coming. The zombie groaned with an almost sexual pleasure. I felt a twinge of sickness gurgle in my own stomach.

"Yeah, that's really gross," I said.

The zombie clattered over, dead once again a few short seconds later. It'd left its job unfinished.

I eyed the remains dubiously. I knew we needed to destroy the corpses, but there were only so many ways the game could warn me that these guys were toxic. I didn't even know if getting close enough to loot them was a good idea.

Before I could protest, Donut jumped down and looted them anyway. As a quadruped, she could pull the loose, non-slotted items like the slingshots and the dice into her own inventory without actually touching them as long as they weren't too heavy or too far.

I had to physically pick them up, which meant getting close to the contaminated bodies.

"Each of them has a clay jug of something called toilet-grade moonshine," Donut said.

"They're like the llamas," I said. "They probably sell the stuff to the other mobs."

We decided to forgo destroying the corpses for now. We'd angle back on our way out and kill any grubs skulking around the area. I contemplated just blowing the bodies up, but that seemed like a waste of perfectly good explosives. I could probably concoct something that would burn them. I had gallons and gallons of flammable liquid. Their moonshine would probably work, too. But it would take some thinking and trial and error. I really needed to get my hands on something like a poleax I could use to chop things up from afar.

"Did they have any slingshot ammo on them?" I asked as we crept deeper into the hallway.

"Yeah. They have little bags of rocks," Donut said.

"Give me one of the slingshots and a couple bags. I want to try it out."

It look me about three seconds to realize I wasn't going to be a deadly wielder of the slingshot any time soon. But I was going to practice. I needed some sort of ranged weapon, one a bit more subtle than my usual stick of dynamite. As a kid, I'd had a slingshot, and I'd been pretty good with it. I used to set toy cars up on the edge of the fence and try to hit them.

The memory suddenly turned sour. I remembered my dad, finding my slingshot. He and his friends had played with it, breaking the band. He'd promised he'd get me a new one. He never did.

For the next hour we cleared out all of the clurichauns along the outer ring of the quadrant. And by we, I mean Donut. So far, all we found were the level three version. After each skirmish, Donut would raise one of them from the dead, and I would practice hitting him with the slingshot.

The weapon did hardly any damage at all, though I was getting good at consistently hitting the monsters in the head. My Slingshot

skill eventually raised to three, but it didn't want to budge past that.

Donut's skill in the *Second Chance* spell also rose to level three. The zombies weren't any more powerful, but the monsters now hung around for three minutes instead of one.

Donut looted something unusual from one of the bodies. A pamphlet entitled **Rev-Up. Make Money. Be Your Own Boss. Move to the next floor down**. It didn't appear to be magical. It was just a regular, trifold pamphlet.

"Let me see it," I said. The colorful front showed a group of three, laughing, female clurichauns holding jugs of the moonshine. Several little phrases covered the pamphlet, written in Syndicate Standard. Things like "You're the Boss Now" and "Your own hours" and "It's not a pyramid!" and "Safe!*"

Inside the pamphlet was a wall of text of mostly gibberish about the benefits of becoming a "Rev-Up Moonshine Consultant." On the right was a picture of a pyramid with, "It's not a pyramid!" written all over it.

The bottom of the brochure stated, "See Krakaren or one of her downline consultants and learn how you can Rev-Up your life today!" On the back page it read, "Coming soon! Rev-Up Smoothies! Portable! Delicious! Invigorating!" The entire line was crossed out with "Discontinued" written under it.

"Do you think we can become consultants?" Donut asked after she spent an inordinate amount of time reading the pamphlet. "It says as business owners we gain power over ourselves and can seize our own destinies."

"That doesn't even mean anything," I said. "They're just making fun of pyramid schemes. You remember when Bea wanted to start selling those leggings? It's like that." The closet in Donut's trophy room had been filled with boxes of the things. Donut had gotten into one of the boxes and peed in it. I smiled, remembering. Bea had raged at the poor cat.

"It's not a pyramid, though. It says so right here."

"Come on," I said. "These things are hostile toward us, so it wouldn't work anyway. I think these pamphlets are for other mobs

on this floor, not crawlers. Besides, we can just kill them and take it all for ourselves."

Donut put the pamphlet away. "Yeah, that does seem easier. We won't have to pay our upline or make the initial seed investment when we do it that way."

As we finished our circle of the outer ring of the quadrant, I was forced to kill one of the clurichauns with a punch to the head. Donut missed a shot, and the little monster came running right at me, impossibly fast. It didn't bother with its slingshot, opting to grapple. It gurgled, sounding pug-like, clawing at me with little, pocked hands. I formed a fist, but it happened too fast. My gauntlet took two seconds to form, which was a long time when one was having to react. My first, bare-knuckle hit stunned it. I hit it a second time, this time with the gauntlet, and the monster went flying, his head caved in. When I opened my hand, my fingers were covered with a lime green, oily residue.

Warning: You've been infected with the Taint.

"*Fuck*."

A blinking, five-minute timer appeared. In a panic, I pulled up my health screen to see what that was.

The Taint.

Having the Taint is like having the giggles. Or like having the time of your life. But instead of it being a good thing, you are balancing on the precipice of death. You may not heal your health using any method while you are inflicted with the Taint.

Receiving the debuff scared the ever-loving crap out of me. I could deal with poison and several other attacks thanks to my armor, but we had no protection against this type of assault. Our heal spells, potions, and scrolls didn't help. We needed something to ward off stuff like this. In those five seconds before I could read the description, I was genuinely scared I had received something that was going to kill me.

On its own, the debuff wasn't a big deal. I simply had to wait it out. I suspected it was part of a one/two punch. They first inflicted you with the taint, then they hit you with something else that

seeped your health away. If that was the case, it didn't matter if these guys were only level three. They were dangerous.

"We're not fucking around with these guys anymore," I said. "Let me think a minute."

We'd collected 25 jugs of the moonshine. Donut gave me one, and I examined the large, clay container.

Rev-Up Toilet-Grade Moonshine

Type: Accelerant.

Effect: Highly flammable liquid. Explosive fumes.

Status: Will not activate until introduced to flame.

At 180 proof, this moonshine will take the hair off your chest and then put it back on. The Rev-Up version is distilled using two types of sugars: the slime trails left behind by the passage of the Brindle Grub, and a secretive, proprietary source. Created exclusively on the dungeon's second floor by the Rev-Up company, jugs of this concoction are highly sought after by the drinking establishments that populate the third, sixth, ninth, twelfth, fifteenth, and eighteenth floors. Drinking a swig (defined as 1.5 ounces) of this "potion" will immediately cause you to gain the Shit-Faced debuff, has a 50% chance to render you Blind for a period of 30 hours, a 5% chance to immediately kill you, and a 45% chance to permanently raise a random stat by two points.

"It does say they're valuable," Donut said. "Do you think we can really sell them if we don't become consultants?"

"That's what it sounds like," I said. "Other than that tiara of yours, this is the first time we've really seen anything that clues us in about the deeper floors."

Donut indicated the tattoo of the dagger on my neck. "The Desperado Club," she said. "Maybe it'll be on the next floor. I bet they'll buy them all from us because we're members of the club! We'll be rich!"

"Maybe," I said. "We'll see if we have any jugs left when we're done."

"What do you mean?" Donut asked. "What are we doing with them?"

I grinned. “I don’t suppose you have any extra torches?”

Carl’s Jug O’ Boom

Type: Incendiary Tossable

Effect: When lit and tossed, results in a small explosion, followed by burning splash damage over a wide area. Flames will burn for 15 seconds per level of attacker’s level of Incendiary Device Handling.

Status: Inert until torch is activated.

Created by an unstable, pantsless man who talks to a cat, Carl’s Jug O’ Boom takes the bigger-is-better approach when it comes to hobgoblin fire bottles. Burns hotter, bigger, and faster than your normal Molotov Cocktail. The use of a standard torch instead of a cloth wick makes these devices much more stable. Just don’t drop it once it’s lit, lest you find yourself doing a Joan of Arc impersonation.

I received a host of achievements after I finished the bottle. I read the description again and sighed.

“Carl, look, they named it after you!”

“Yeah, Donut. I see that,” I said.

“Do you think everybody will see it like that?”

“I don’t know. I hope not,” I said.

My Incendiary Device Handling skill had jumped up to five immediately upon the construction of the “device.” All I had done was open up the jug, pour a splash or two out until it was about 3/4's full, added a couple ounces of goblin oil from my inventory, and then stuck a torch in the hole. The short, tapered torch fit perfectly into the mouth of the jug, sealing it like a cork. It was almost like it had been made for it.

We tested one just to see if it would actually work. The clay moonshine jugs seemed pretty solid, and I was afraid they wouldn’t break. The bottles had “Rev-Up” written on the side of them.

The cool thing about torches was that I could just look at them and mentally select **Activate**, and they would start burning. No lighter required.

I lit the torch, grasped the jug by the little round handle, and tossed it high in the air, arcing it toward a group of three, dead clurichauns.

Whoosh! The jug shattered easily. The explosion itself was insignificant, but the angry flames splashed like water over a wide area, crackling and hissing angrily, glowing blue. We had to step back.

"Wow!" Donut cried, hopping up and down. "Would you look at that!"

The flames reached the ceiling, and we had to step further out of the room due to the heat. When it finally died out a minute and fifteen seconds later, all that remained in the room was blackened, crumbly husks of bodies and ash.

"Well, that's pretty damn cool," I said.

We sat down and made ten more of the devices. After the fire, the room smelled oddly of whiskey and toast. Most of the jugs were already about 3/4's full, which was good. I didn't have to waste any of the moonshine.

Out of curiosity, I examined the jugs in my inventory and compared their value to my other explosive devices. The jugs were pretty high on the list, just above the smoke bombs.

The full, unaltered jugs of moonshine were more valuable, however. In fact, they were near the top of my list, just above the Engineer's Table I still had, the only intact table I had left after our construction of the redoubt.

These things were much less dangerous—to me at least—than the sticks of goblin dynamite. But they were a little *too* good. We lost the ability to loot the corpses when they burned away, meaning we lost our ability to get more jugs. We moved toward the staircase. We decided to incinerate every other room, which would keep our jug supply stable. We continued our pattern of Donut raising the dead and me practicing with the slingshot which slowed our progress but gave us some much-needed training. My slingshot skill remained

constant. However, I received a few other skills, including Aiming and Steady Hand. Donut's skill in *Second Chance* ticked up to level four.

We finally came across a new type of mob just outside of the boss room, which was thankfully separate from the stairwell. This room was big, and like the goblin workshop, filled with dozens of the little assholes. There wasn't any sort of giant machinery, but a tube ran along the ceiling from the far boss chamber to the center of the room, curving down into what looked like a filthy, aluminum bathtub. There were piles of the bottles, both empty and full in the room. The snot-covered level threes were taking the jugs and tipping them into the tub to fill them up. At the far end of the room was a doorway guarded by a pair of small, floating creatures. These weren't clurichauns, but small, fat fairies who buzzed about with a pair of hummingbird wings. They looked like miniature, winged soccer moms. I peered around the corner and examined their properties.

Laminak Rev-Up Consultant Elite – Level 6

The second tier of the Rev-Up empire, these Laminak consultants don't need to speak to a manager. They *are* the managers. They run their business with a brutal efficiency. It is said if one of their underlings falls behind on their sales quotas, they punish them by requiring them to take a sip of their own product. Those that survive are repurposed as workers for the filling room, or worse, as still engineers, working directly under Krakaren herself.

These mobs do not have any special abilities other than immunity to most health-seeping attacks. Having survived years drinking their own product, it is said their essence is especially valuable, prized as a shield against disease.

In a dusty corner of the room stood what appeared to be a pair of child-sized stationary bikes, the kind gyms used for their spinning classes. There was some sort of goblin-style pulley system attached to it, but I couldn't tell what was going on from here. A banner hung from the ceiling in the same corner, but it was only attached by one end, and it dangled vertically, forgotten. The banner read, "Rev-Up Smoothies! Invigorating!"

"Okay," I said. "We need to kill everyone in the room, but if we want to keep those jugs and that moonshine, we can't blow them up or burn them out. Plus it sounds like we can get something good from the corpses of the laminak things."

"Goodness me," Donut said. "How can we do that?"

We peeked again around the corner, keeping low.

"Do you think you can jump over there?" I asked, pointing at the far wall with the two fairies. "Using your spell, I mean."

"Oh, yes. Definitely."

I nodded. "Good. Here's the plan."

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THE TWO BIGGEST PROBLEMS WITH DONUT'S *PUDDLE JUMPER* SPELL WAS THE cooldown and the mana cost. Once cast, she couldn't do it again for five hours, which meant once she was in that room, she couldn't teleport out.

Secondly, it cost 20 mana points. She only had 26 mana, and while she had plenty of mana restoration potions, she still had that awful two-minute cooldown between potions. Her points were restoring themselves more and more quickly, but it was still too slow to count on it for combat. She was going to be woefully underpowered, so if something went wrong—and something always went wrong—the only thing she had going for herself was her speed.

We decided I would stay behind during this part of the assault. With my extra fairy aggro, we weren't certain what would happen if we both showed ourselves. The plan was simple, but it made me nervous, mostly because I didn't have any control. This was my idea, but the cat was doing all the heavy lifting.

"If you get in trouble, I'll toss a smoke bomb," I said. "Just jump and run, okay?"

Donut nodded. She was putting on a brave face, but I could tell she was also anxious.

"Okay, let's do this," she said.

We moved back to the corner, peering around the edge. Donut cast her spell, which had a ten-second countdown. She flashed, her form starting to fade until she disappeared with a loud, wet *pop*.

She reappeared at the far end of the room, right between the two laminak fairies. She started rapidly speaking with them as all the clurichauns in the room jumped to their feet and turned to attack.

The soccer mom fairies were winged, therefore Donut had the ability to turn their dots white, removing their hostility. The problem was that only two of them were the airborne-type fairies. The other 40 or so were not. We were hoping Donut could talk to the two fairies, using her charm like she did with the goblins. The fairies would then tell their subordinates not to attack Donut.

From my side of the room, I could see that the two fairies had, thankfully, fallen under Donut's charm. I couldn't hear what they were saying, but like the goblins, they'd been turned right away.

One of the fairies yelled at the clurichauns, speaking in Syndicate Standard. "Get back to work!" she called. "This is a client, not an enemy." The dozens of monsters looked at each other and reluctantly returned to their stations, but all of them kept their eyes on Donut, all grumbling and looking uneasy.

Donut: CARL THEIR DOTS AREN'T TURNING WHITE ONLY THE TWO FAIRIES.

Carl: Okay, we planned for this. Don't wait. Go for plan B.

Donut: IT IS CALLED PLAN PIED PIPER NOT PLAN B.

Carl: Goddamnit, Donut. Just be careful.

Despite her charisma being an outstanding 43, we still didn't know how well this whole charm thing worked. It was clear she wasn't some sort of walking mind control goddess, at least not with monsters that were programmed to dislike her. As with everything else, there was more to it, a hidden balance I couldn't see. It worked great with white dots, but getting the dots white was still a mystery.

But that was okay. We'd prepared for this contingency. Instead of talking them into giving us all the moonshine, we had plan B. Plan Pied Piper.

Donut confidently stepped into the room, walking in my direction. She kept a wide distance from the toxic clurichauns, but she headed toward me. The two fairies followed. Sparkles trailed in the air as they bobbed up and down.

"It's just horrible," Donut was saying. "It's like someone came in and slaughtered them all. I, for one, was devastated. At first I thought it was one of those filthy crawlers, but then I saw one of those dogs with the painted faces. The dingoes."

"The kobolds?" one of the fairies said, sounding perplexed. "Why would the kobolds attack us? We get along fine with the kobolds."

"Come, come see," Donut said. She looked about the room. "All of you should come."

"They need to stay and work," the fairy said. The pudgy fairy swept her hair out of her eyes. Both of them wore an inverted bob haircut. The one doing the speaking wore what looked like a pantsuit made out of leaves. The other was in a dress made of the same materials.

Donut stopped and looked directly at the fairy. "No, they should come, too. All of them."

"Everybody come on! We're taking a break!" the fairy said.

"A… a what?" one of the clurichauns asked.

"Just come, the princess wants to show us something."

I pulled away from the corner and rushed down to the next chamber. In the center were three dead clurichauns. We hadn't firebombed this room, though one of them had been zombiefied. I moved into the next hall down, just outside of the room. Like with most of these rooms, the entranceway was a small room of its own, like a foyer with a raised, rounded ceiling. A pair of brindle grubs were in the hall further down, inching their way toward the corpses. *Jesus*, I thought. These things were everywhere. I rushed over and stomped them both down and returned to the foyer. I waited for Donut to Pied Piper the group into the chamber.

Carl: Donut, I am in place.

Donut: WE ARE COMING.

"Look at this, just look," Donut was saying a minute later as she strode into the room. She gave the dead monsters a wide berth,

walking into the chamber. “Come, everybody, gather around. Take a look.”

I could hear them crowding into the room as I leaned against the wall, hidden behind the entrance to the next hallway down. I pulled two boom jugs from my inventory and held one in each hand.

“This was not a dingo attack,” one of the fairies was saying. “One of them has been hit with necromancy magic.”

“No, no, come look at this, Caroline,” Donut said. “It’s in the hallway over here. Tell your workers to stay here. Uh, it’ll be good for them to look at what happens to those who don’t, uh, work hard or something.”

“Okay,” the fairy said. She started shouting orders at the crowd of grumbling clurichauns.

A moment later Donut and the two fairies floated into the dark foyer, moving past me. Donut stopped just as the two fairies noticed me standing there.

“What’s this?” the pantsuit fairy said, floating away with surprise. She was smaller than I realized, no bigger than a crow. The laminak looked just like a miniature, 40-something woman. She carried no weapons.

“Carl, I’d like you to meet Caroline and Max. It’s okay, ladies. Carl needs to show you something.”

They were looking down at the pair of jugs in my hands.

“Where did you get this?” the other fairy asked. “And what did you do to our product?”

I grinned. “Let me show you.” I mentally clicked **Activate** on both the torches, stepped to the side to the room’s entrance, and I tossed both jugs in at the group of 40 monsters stupidly staring back at us.

The hands of the pantsuit fairy started glowing red just as Donut leaped into the air and snagged the laminak like she was catching a bird. The cat’s crupper jingled and poofed out like a skirt as she fell. Donut clasped the fairy between two claws as she chomped down. She shook her head, breaking the fairy’s neck.

The second fairy zipped up to the ceiling of the entrance hall, lightning fast, out of reach, screaming as I swiped at her, trying to

catch her in the air. *Damnit*. I wanted to kill them without hurting their fragile little bodies.

"Not fair," the fairy screamed. The air crackled with her passage. She sounded desperate, on the verge of tears. "Not fair! We were going to move down to the third floor." Her hands also glowed red, and she fired a magic missile right at me.

It hit me square in the chest, and I flew backward, slamming onto my back, sliding a few feet into the room with the raging inferno. A note flashed. **Warning: Damage Enhanced**. It felt as if I'd been kicked by a damn horse. My vision flashed red, this time a health warning. I felt broken bones in my chest just as the searing heat threatened to catch my hair on fire. I clicked a healing potion as I scrambled to my feet. My chest crackled as it mended itself. I pulled myself back into the hall, out of the raging heat, the breath still knocked out of me.

The plan, plan B at least, had gone off without a hitch until now. The fairy remained up on the ceiling, screaming down at Donut, shooting magic missiles down at the cat, who was doing a much better job at dodging them.

After a moment, the fairy seemed to run out of mana. She continued to scream down at us. She was trapped as long as Donut and I each guarded one of the doors to the foyer.

"You can jump that high, can't you?" I muttered.

"Probably," Donut said, out of breath. "Or I can hit her with *Magic Missile*. I have much better aim than she does. I can hit her with a three power, and it probably won't hurt her body too much. She's level six, after all."

"Missile her if she runs," I said, pulling the slingshot out of my inventory.

It took ten shots before I hit her. The rock caught her in the wing, and she dropped a few feet before recovering. Her health barely went down. She was a quick little fucker. She kept screaming for someone named "Damien" to come help.

Damien never came.

"She's going to regenerate her mana before you get her," Donut said. "Hurry up, or I'm going to do it."

I aimed and fired, trying to anticipate where she was going to be. The rock clipped her in the wing again, and she cried out in pain, dropping again.

Donut leaped into the air and caught her before she could recover. They hit the ground with a *crunch*.

"Honestly, Carl," Donut said, spitting the dead fairy onto the ground next to the other one. "Must I do all the work?"

"I'm training," I said. I indicated the room behind me, where I'd received experience for killing 40 monsters all at once. "Besides, I just hit level 11."

"Me too, actually," Donut said.

My Slingshot skill remained at three, but my Aiming skill went up to four.

Both of the fairies dropped 25 gold pieces, and each had five brochures in their inventory.

The description said their "essence" was valuable, but the only thing that remained was their bodies.

Laminak Rev-Up Consultant Elite Corpse (Alchemy Material)

"Damnit," I said. I'd been hoping they would just drop potions, something to protect us against the Taint disease.

Donut didn't want the corpses in her inventory, so I took them both. When I pulled them in, their bodies disappeared, but their clothes and wings remained on the ground. I took those, too.

"We didn't get a good potion, but that was still pretty awesome," Donut said as we headed back toward the filling room. "My first solo mission. I bet I'd be fine crawling this dungeon all by myself."

I nodded. Still, I couldn't help but feel like an asshole. The feeling wasn't as bad as I'd felt after the whole thing with the goblin babies, but there was something inherently distasteful about using Donut's charm ability to kill things. Yes, these were monsters that wouldn't hesitate about killing us. But like with the goblins, once Donut turned them neutral, we saw a part of their personalities one didn't normally see with monsters.

We were going to move down to the third floor. Jesus. Her voice had been filled with such longing, such despair.

I remembered what Mordecai had said, that the mobs in deeper levels weren't going to be as sympathetic. I really hoped so. I needed to remember who the real enemies were. The Syndicate. Borant. The kua-tin. I felt bad about killing monsters who were nothing more than pawns, but the fact was we needed to get as strong as we could. It was us or them.

"You're not going to break me," I whispered. It'd become a mantra.

"What?" Donut asked.

"Nothing," I said.

We walked into the large room. I went to work grabbing all the empty and full jugs I could. I grabbed another two tables, including one called an "Alchemy workstation." By the time we were done, we had 80 empty jugs and another 60 full ones.

I decided against filling the empty jugs with the moonshine from the tub. The metal container was bolted to the ground, so I couldn't take the whole thing, and I feared just touching the liquid would have some sort of nasty effect, like blinding me. Or worse.

The liquid continued to drip in from the next room over.

The door to the boss chamber looked like the entrance to some sort of community center. It had "Live, Laugh, Love" written on the top of the door in little cutout, wooden letters. Under that was a schedule of events. The next event scheduled was for noon on the day after the collapse. It read, "Good news, everyone! Little Breannlyne has the chickenpox! Potluck Pox party here at noon. No peanuts. Let's get that immunity!"

"I think we should probably just leave this boss alone," I said. "There might be more kids in there. And if there's a moonshine still, it'll probably blow up just as easy as that goblin engine. We only have one hobgoblin detonator left, and I don't want to waste it if we don't have to. If we just toss dynamite or a boom jar in there, we might not get away in time. I bet the explosion will be big. It's not worth it to just go in there and fight face to face, not when we don't have a real defense against that taint debuff. We don't know how many of those things there will be."

I was afraid Donut was going to protest, but she didn't.

We moved to the corner of the room. I pulled the "Rev-Up Smoothies! Invigorating!" banner off the wall. It was made of a cotton-like cloth. I put it in my inventory as I moved to investigate the two stationary bicycles.

A pully ran from the tire to a small, flat platform welded onto the front of the bike. A little, black, segmented wheel, no bigger than a half-dollar coin sat in the middle of the platform. Weird.

I noticed a pair of dust-covered, wooden boxes tucked away in the corner. I picked one up, and the top slid off. I examined the contents. It was filled with empty, clinking glass containers with screw-on lids. The box held twelve of them. Also shoved into the box was another, similar black lid with little blades on it.

I examined the little lid using the tooltips.

"Oh," I said. "I see. It's a blender. A bicycle-powered blender. It looks like it hasn't been used at all." I pulled one of the glass tubes out and unscrewed the cover. I could screw the bladed cover onto the glass and pop the whole thing onto the platform. If I turned the pedals on the small bike, it'd turn the blades, supposedly blending whatever was in the glass. Then I could flip it over, remove the bladed cover and replace it with the original top, leaving me with a glass bottle of whatever I decided to blend.

Like a smoothie.

We had something similar, though not bicycle-powered, in our apartment.

I peeked in the second box, and this one only held six glasses instead of twelve. The bladed part of the blender was missing. A sheet of paper sat in the box, and I pulled it free.

Rev-Up Immunity Smoothie Recipe.

"Holy crap," I said. The recipe only required two items. "No wonder they discontinued this. Gross."

"What, what?" Donut asked.

"This is all game setup," I said as I started putting all the items into my inventory. One of the bikes was bolted to the ground, but the second wasn't. I picked it up and pulled it in. "You're supposed to find this and make the recipe. If you make the smoothie, you'll have immunity from the Taint debuff and something called the

Vigorous Measles. And then you'll have the proper protection to fight the boss." I swallowed. "It's really gross, though. I don't want to go in there. I think we should just take these…"

I never finished the sentence.

The door to the boss room blasted open. A pair of pink tentacles, each at least fifteen feet long, reached out, swaying into the room. A terrible, ear-splitting screech filled the air, followed by a second screech. Then a third and a fourth.

Each octopus-like tentacle was covered with mouths. Dozens of them. Each mouth was wide, big around as a frisbee, but human-shaped with bright, red, human lips. There were no eyes or other facial features. Just a cacophony of screaming voices, saying nothing. Just screaming.

Familiar music started to play, barely discernable under the constant shrieks.

At the far end of the chamber where we'd walked in, bars dropped down, locking up the room.

"What the hell?" I cried, backing against the wall. "This isn't a boss chamber!"

A new achievement appeared, and it announced itself before I could wave it into the folder.

New Achievement! Wait, Bosses Can Leave Their Rooms?

Welcome to the second floor, bitches.

***Reward*: This shit plays great on the recap episode. If you scream loud enough, maybe you'll make the show.**

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Krakaren Clone!

Level 10 Neighborhood Boss!

First off, this isn't *the* Krakaren. This is *a* Krakaren. For every one that is killed, Krakaren Prime births two more.

Part of a collective mind intent upon destroying any semblance of scientific progress in the universe, the Krakaren is the only communal brain entity in the galaxy who actually gets stupider as time moves on. Consisting of multiple, shrieking tentacles, members of the Krakaren cooperative spend their days birthing their disease-laden minions, creating and selling harmful products, attempting to debate scientific experts, and proselytizing to the weak-minded, all in an attempt to… Well, nobody knows what the hell their end goal is.

Even Eris, Goddess of Chaos, doesn't want anything to do with these crazy assholes.

The moment the description ended, a portion of wall above the door broke open, and a third tentacle burst into the room from the next chamber over, swinging blindly about.

"Carl, Carl, what are we going to do?" Donut cried, pushing herself into the corner. "It's huge!"

The first two tentacles retracted, and a pair of clurichaun consultants came out of the door, looking wildly about.

"Shit," I said. "Keep them away! I need to make a goddamned smoothie!"

"What about the tentacles?" Donut cried.

I eyed the tentacle sweeping about the ceiling of the room. It kept smashing into the pipe that led to the tub of moonshine.

"Don't attack the boss yet. I don't think it can see. Focus on those guys." I pulled a glass smoothie container into my right hand. I pulled a jug of unaltered moonshine from my inventory into my left. Donut leaped onto my shoulder and shot a pair of magic missiles, nailing both of the clurichauns, who dropped dead at the doorway. A third hesitantly peeked out, looking for us. Donut got him right in the head, and he also collapsed.

I pulled the cork with my teeth, and I filled the smoothie container a third of the way with the moonshine. Thankfully it had a little line on the glass. I didn't know how exact this had to be.

Directly above us, the cinderblock wall broke apart, showering us with rock. A tentacle burst forth, screaming. It scrabbled, swinging at nothing, swaying just feet over our heads.

Above, the mouths dripped with goo. I jumped out of the way as snot splashed near me. Moonshine sloshed out of the glass, and I had to pour a little more in.

Jesus fuck. I tossed the jug toward the entrance, and it shattered, splashing moonshine. A moment later, another tentacle once again burst from the door hole, sending the three dead clurichaun flying.

I pulled the corpse of the laminak from my inventory. I held the limp, naked, wingless body in my hand. It was still warm. Her little, dead eyes stared up in her final shock at having been snatched out of the air by Donut. The sensation was odd, like holding an anatomically-correct doll of a pudgy, middle-aged woman. I didn't have time to think about it.

I shoved her, headfirst, into the glass container. Her shoulders were a little too wide to fit, so I had to push. The shoulders cracked, and I used my finger to ram her all the way in there, like trying to stuff a Cornish game hen into a thermos. I produced the blender top with the blades, and I had to push hard to get it to screw into place.

"Carl, what in god's name are you doing?"

"It's the recipe," I cried. I screwed the container onto the blender platform. It attached with a *click*. I sat atop the much-too-small bicycle, my knees as high as my chest. I prayed the bike wouldn't break. I prayed my spiked kneepads wouldn't activate, impaling my own chin.

I recited the recipe out loud. "You fill a third of the glass container with moonshine, add one corpse of a laminak fairy, blend until pink, drink warm or chilled. Each smoothie contains ten doses."

"If you think I'm going to drink that…"

Across the room, yet another tentacle appeared, this one on the ground. The next tentacle to break through would be right here. I spun my legs. The bike protested at first, but it quickly gained steam, spinning like a regular blender. Within the little glass container, the dead fairy stared back at me, spinning until she was sucked away, the concoction first green, then red, and then pink. After a moment, it started to sparkle.

I pulled the glass bottle off the top just as another two clurichauns entered the chamber, squeezing past the single tentacle that still reached about the room. The tentacle wrapped around the metallic tub and squeezed. It crumpled like a beer can.

Above, a glob of snot fell, splashing off my head and oozing onto my face.

You have been inflicted with the Taint.

"Damnit!" I really need to start sticking my hood up.

"Run," I said. "Toward the back of the room."

Behind us, the wall exploded, sending the lone bike flying. It shattered into pieces when it hit the floor.

As I ran, I examined the smoothie in my hand.

Rev-Up Immunity Smoothie.

One part moonshine, and one part fairy, this smoothie offers 10 doses for the price of one! Each sip of this delicious concoction imbues the following effects:

Temporary immunity to all health-seeping conditions and debuffs.

Temporary protection against all communicable diseases.

Inflicts the Buzzed debuff. (Plus 3 Charisma. Minus 1 Dexterity. Plus Shaky Cam debuff. Plus Truth Serum Debuff.)

I didn't have time to think about it. I took a sip.

It tasted as if I'd taken a drink directly from the diseased asshole of an incontinent skunk. It took all of my strength not to vomit.

"Stick it in your hotlist and drink," I cried, shoving it at Donut as we reached the end of the room. It disappeared from my hand. She didn't argue. She glowed as the potion took hold.

A pair of icons flashed, indicating my immunity. The taint debuff didn't go away, however, which meant I couldn't heal myself. But at least now I couldn't be inflicted with the death measles or whatever it was called.

"Death measles," I heard myself say as I ran. "Now *that's* funny."

It wasn't funny. I laughed again. *What the hell is wrong with…*

"Ow," I cried as a rock bounced off my head. My health flashed, my bar moving further down than it should've. I'd been hit with a damn slingshot, and the damage was enhanced because of my stupid goblin tattoo.

I was woozy, and I realized it was the Buzzed debuff. *Whoa*. I had to consciously keep myself from falling over. If this was Buzzed, I'd hate to see what the Shit-Faced debuff felt like.

I pulled an angled, still-intact section of the redoubt from my inventory, putting the shield up as we reached the back corner of the room. Five tentacles smashed about, and a pair of clurichauns rushed at us, both of them shooting rocks, which pinged off the steel table.

"What's your mana?" I asked.

"Sixteen," Donut cried, her voice slurred. She popped up and fired a missile at a clurichaun. She hit him in the shoulder, but he still went down. "Now twelve. Die motherfucker! Die!"

I barely had time to parse that Donut was also drunk as a screaming tentacle smashed against the table, rocketing us both against the back wall. My health, already in the red, moved further down. The monster didn't seem to realize what it hit. I watched as it grasped on the last standing clurichaun, wrapping around him. The

mouths stopped screaming, all revealing long, sharp teeth as they pulled the shrieking monster back into the boss room, chewing. It returned a moment later, blood dripping from the mouths, which resumed their caterwaul.

Four more clurichauns rushed into the room. Another tentacle emerged, pushing through yet another hole in the wall.

This tentacle was different. Instead of mouths, it was covered in hundreds of tiny, little orifices. The longer, thinner arm reached into the room and made a *psst, psst* noise, like a spray bottle. A fine, green mist filled the chamber.

You've been infected with the Vigorous Measles!

Infection negated due to immunity!

"Don't fire any more missiles," I said. My head swam.

"If we die, I want you to know that I love you, Carl," Donut said. "I don't love you as much as I love Miss Beatrice, because she's, you know, she's my person. Or as much as I love Ferdinand. But I love you."

"Focus, Donut," I said. I tried not to let what she'd said sting. But it did. Who the fuck was Ferdinand anyway? *Bea was giving you up, Donut. She was giving you up, trading you in for a younger model*. But I didn't say it. Not out loud. Now was not the time for that conversation. Never was the time for that conversation, not anymore. But especially not now. Not when Bea was fucking dead.

"See that Clurichaun there," I said, pointing a shaking hand. "Raise him from the dead."

Two of the clurichauns running at us cried out as they were picked up and crushed by their own boss.

I leaped up, stumbling away as yet another tentacle reached for me. I ducked, and it sailed past.

I was suddenly on the ground. When I'd ducked, I just kept going down. I pulled myself up and kept running.

I formed a fist, and I rushed at the two remaining monsters. I kicked one, who went flying, and then I drunkenly swung at another, connecting with his giant head with a right hook. I pulled back, an ear attached to my spike. I dropped to the ground as a tentacle swooped over my head.

Ahead of me, a clurichaun zombie rose up, groaning.

"Tell him to hold this over his head and run into the boss chamber," I cried. I pulled a boom jug from my inventory as the zombie stood there, swaying, looking at me. For good measure I pulled the most stable stick of dynamite I had and shoved it down his overalls. Probably a bad idea, I thought right after I did it.

Oh well.

The zombie grabbed the jug on Donut's instruction and held it over his head, like that guy holding the boombox in that *Say Anything* movie. I lit the torch and sent him on his way. He turned toward the doorway, which was currently empty, and he ran. He barely missed being swept away by another tentacle, and he reached the door just as a seventh tentacle broke through the wall and five more clurichauns emerged, who all stared, unmoving, at the zombie rushing right at them. They moved out of the way, uncomprehending what was happening.

I turned in the opposite direction and ran toward our small shield. I dove behind it, barely dodging another tentacle that swooped right over my head. As I jumped behind the metal shield, Donut yelled, "I thought you said the explosion was going to be too big to use it in here!"

I looked at my health, already perilously low. Donut didn't have a scratch on her. I pulled the alchemy table out of my inventory, putting it directly over us, placing us within a clamshell. I felt as if I was going to vomit. My head continued to swim.

"It probably is," I said. "And I'm probably about to die, but I think you'll be okay."

"Carl, no," Donut said. "No!"

"It's okay," I said. "Go back to Brandon. They'll watch over you." I wrapped myself around the cat.

"I don't want to do this without you," Donut cried. "Carl, I lied before. I won't be fine on my own. I need you. No, no!"

I couldn't answer her before the explosion came.

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I WASN'T DEAD.

I was deaf. I was blind. I was in a fuck ton of pain. I couldn't feel my legs.

But I wasn't dead.

I gasped for air. My health indicator blinked, the lowest it had ever been. My eardrums had been blown out. My entire face felt burned, my eyes included. The pain was overwhelming, like hundreds of claws pulling at me from different directions at once. They were still pulling, ripping pieces of me away.

The Taint still had a minute left before it would run out. I wasn't out of danger yet. I could feel Donut standing on top of me. I could feel the vibration of her voice. She was shouting, pawing at me desperately.

"If you're saying something to me, I can't hear you," I said, shouting the words.

Donut: YOU HAVE TO STAND UP. THE ROOM IS ON FIRE. WE KILLED THE BOSS. THE DOOR IS OPEN, BUT THE FIRE IS GETTING CLOSER. HURRY.

"I can't. I think my legs are broken. I can't feel them." I pulled up my health UI, looking at the damage to my body. The entire pie chart was blinking red, all except my feet. My health was at 6% and still ticking downward. I was bleeding internally. I had third-degree burns on my face. My legs were broken where the table had smashed into them.

A moment later, I felt myself moving through the debris. I realized it was Donut, dragging me by my cloak, pulling me from the room. My whole body screamed with pain. A blinking message warned I was about to pass out.

Donut: CARL, YOU NEED TO WORK ON YOUR CARDIO. YOU ARE MUCH HEAVIER THAN YOU LOOK.

"Ten seconds before you can heal me. Get scroll ready," I croaked as darkness descended.

I awakened, my body screaming. I felt everything inside of me repair itself. Donut had used one of the healing scrolls, possibly at the last possible second. I jammed down on my healing spell also, which sped up the process. I felt my hearing return, my sight restored. The burn on my face smoothed out.

I didn't move for several moments, sitting there, staring up at the ceiling of the hallway.

"You saved me again," I said to the cat, who sat next to me, desperately cleaning herself. I still didn't dare move, not trusting the bones in my body not to break again.

"That's what I do," she said.

Donut: I DON'T WANT TO SAY THIS OUT LOUD, BUT OUR VIEWS WENT WAY UP. ISN'T IT GREAT?

I groaned, rolling onto my side. My one-armed jacket was now scorched to hell. My cloak and other magical items didn't have a scratch on them. I looked down at my toes, and they sparkled.

"I think I was saved by that damn pedicure kit," I said. "The table should have severed my feet right at the ankles. Instead it bounced off and broke my legs. I would've bled out."

The fire in the expanded boss chamber eventually died off, leaving nothing but melted slag. We wandered in.

The alchemy table I'd used as the top part of our shield was undamaged. The other table, the redoubt piece that I'd used here as a shield, was now shattered and scorched.

"Huh, weird," I said. I touched the alchemy workshop table, and it was cool to the touch. I pulled it back into my inventory. I had two such tables now, designed to be placed inside of personal spaces. This one and the Engineer's table. It seemed they were indestructible.

This was a bug. A bug I could exploit. I couldn't say anything about it, though. Not out loud. Had the table's invulnerability saved us? I was going to need to pay attention to the nightly list of patch notes to make sure they didn't fix this one. In the meantime, I'd use it to our advantage.

The ductwork on the ceiling hung in tatters, a few pieces still clinging to the chamber by braces. The severed, skeletal remains of tentacles lay scattered. The ground was hot to the touch. Donut jumped to my shoulder.

"Let's get the neighborhood map," I said, hesitantly moving toward the main boss chamber. I cringed, afraid we'd find more dead babies.

I shouldered past the long, crumbling skeleton bones to behold the lair of Krakaren.

"It smells like that time you tried microwaving Fancy Feast in here," Donut said.

"I was drunk," I said. "And you ate that shit right up."

More tattered ductwork filled the room. There had been banners on the wall, but I could no longer read them. I didn't see anything that could be construed as baby skeletons, which was a relief. Dozens of clurichauns had been in here along with a few splatters that might've been laminak fairies.

The mechanical remains of a moonshine still sat in the corner, like I suspected, but it appeared the machine was much smaller than I had guessed it might be. It was probably why I was still alive. I'd assumed the thing to be huge. And explosive.

The remnants of copper tubes snaked from the machine to the main, dead body of the Krakaren monster. She'd been huge, twenty feet tall at least, an immobile, octopus-like creature. Her stinking, dead body leaned against the back wall as we stared at it. Half of her head was burned away, but it seemed she had a beaked mouth

and a group of eyes. Black streaks ran down the massive corpse, like running mascara. She stank of rotting seafood.

They'd taken some sort of cosmic octopus creature and combined it with your average, suburban, anti-vax, let-me-talk-to-your-manager mom. At least that was my impression. The door on the outside of the room, this whole ridiculous storyline with the MLM moonshine certainly made it seem that way.

But there was more to it, too. I suspected the Krakaren "collective" or whatever they called it was a real thing. Sort of. This whole time it had seemed they were just combining absurd stereotypes from earth with random monsters just to fuck with us. It came to me now as I stared up at this thing that they were doing the opposite. After all, this was all really for the benefit of the audience, not us. They were taking something familiar to the viewers, like these interstellar, dumbass octopus monsters and combining them with an earth analog in an effort to both teach the watchers about earth culture and to lampoon interstellar cultures and creatures they felt deserving of scorn. Kind of like the way cartoonists would sometimes personify rats and snakes as scumbags. Or foxes as shady, used-car dealers.

Or Persian cats as princesses.

A massive cage filled half the room, still intact. The creatures within had mostly burned to slag, but I could see that it had been filled to the brim with brindle grubs. They were all dead.

"We never got to see the boss up close," Donut said as I moved near enough to loot the neighborhood map.

"Something tells me this isn't the last time we'll see this one," I said as the twists and turns of the neighborhood populated onto my interface. "Ah, fuck."

"What?" Donut asked.

"Look at the map," I said.

At least 50 red dots filled the area. All of them slow-moving. Brindle grubs. It was like they could sense a battle, and they converged on an area. Killing them wasn't a problem. They didn't fight back. I could literally run over them and kill an entire hallway of them in seconds. But that was a lot of them. A whole lot.

I planned out the path to the tutorial guild. It wasn't far. Just a few hundred meters away.

"Let's go talk to Mordecai," I said.

"That bitch really said that?" Mordecai said, outraged, after I told him about Odette's offer. "She wants me to seek *her* out? I would rather spend another 2,000 years in this room than exist in the same solar system as her. I'd rather meet a woman, sire children, and then devour those children than have anything to do with her again."

"So that's a no, then?" Donut asked.

Mordecai was no longer a Rat Hooligan. He'd shapeshifted into a much larger, hairier, and obsidian creature called a Bugaboo. He was like a bear with no neck, with enormous, owlish eyes, and comically skinny legs. His long arms were also absurdly thin compared to the rest of the seven-foot-tall creature. He looked terrifying and cartoonish at the same time. I'd almost punched him right in the face when we first entered the room. It took a solid ten seconds for me to realize that this was still Mordecai.

I examined his properties now.

Mordecai – Bugaboo. Level 50.

Guildmaster of this guildhall.

This is a Non-Combatant NPC.

You know that creepy, unkempt guy who lives on the corner? He doesn't seem to have a job. Has a van. Hangs out at the park with a pair of binoculars? Yeah, you get the idea. Solitary monstrosities that never settle in a single place, Bugaboos may be found anywhere on the dungeon's lower floors, often lying in wait for Crawlers to pass by so they can jump out and… do things to them. They'll tell you they just want to cuddle. That's probably a lie.

"That's quite the monster they chose for you," I said.

Mordecai nodded. "These guys are pretty depraved. They have them on the first and second floors, but the third floor will be filled

with them. Don't wander near alleys at night."

"At night?" I asked.

Mordecai waved. "I can't tell you about that." I looked up at him, but he winked at me. I understood.

"So, Odette," I asked. "You don't like her? Is there something we need to be worried about?"

Mordecai took a long, deep breath. "Odette cares about Odette. She is smart, she is cunning, and she is more self-centered than that thing at the center of the galaxy. But her current gig, it is perfect for her. She can be very useful and helpful to you. Until you're not."

It's funny, that's pretty much the exact same thing she'd said about the game's AI. I didn't say that out loud.

"If she invites us back on the show, should we go?" I asked.

Mordecai grunted. "Oh, you should go. Her program is one of the few I would recommend. Not that they'd give you much of a choice. Speaking of shows, there's someone who wants to speak with you. I've been asked to ping her once you showed up here. She'll arrive in about ten or fifteen minutes."

"Another show?" Donut asked. She'd just started combing through her achievements and boxes. She didn't seem to have gotten anything noteworthy except one item. Her boss box contained an **Enchanted Fur Brush of the Ecclesiastic** that worked in a similar fashion to my pedicure kit. As long as someone brushed her for ten minutes every night, she'd receive an extra two points to her constitution for 30 hours. It was better than nothing, but even with the buff, her constitution was only four.

"She'll explain who she is when she gets here," Mordecai said. He leaned forward and whispered in my ear. "Do not upset this woman. She has a lot of power over your fate."

I swallowed. I had a feeling this wasn't going to be a good thing.

"I have several questions," I said, settling into the chair.

Mordecai settled uncomfortably across from me. Before, the chairs had been too big for him. Now they were too small. "Let's hear it."

"You said it'd probably be ten days, but it's six," I said.

"Is that a question?" Mordecai asked. He shrugged. "This is the first time I've ever seen it lower than the maximum. The minimum is one day longer. They gave a reason in the last announcement. That's all I can say about that." Mordecai lifted his eyes, looking up at the ceiling.

"Can viewers see us in this room?" I asked.

"Yes," Mordecai said. "Like I said before, the only place they can't follow is in restrooms. They can only hear or see you, however. Not me. Only those with press credentials can see or hear me. Those like Odette. Most people know this and only watch if you have a good loot box to open."

Shit. I hadn't thought about that. Before, Mordecai had been more forthright, but we also hadn't been under a crazy amount of scrutiny, either. Getting straight answers out of him was now going to be more difficult.

"Do you know who Damien is?"

Mordecai looked as if I'd just slapped him. "Who told you that name?" he hissed. "Did Odette tell you about him?"

"Whoa," I said, holding up my hands. "Not Odette. It was a mob. A fairy. She called for him just before we killed her."

Mordecai relaxed. "Those damn fairies. They're always getting themselves in trouble. Damien is a location manager. Each 'City' area has one. There are only three for this floor. He is my manager's manager. You're not supposed to see or know about him. I'm only allowed to tell you about this sort of stuff if you ask directly."

We spent some time talking about the borough boss fight and the last fight with Krakaren. I asked him what her weakness was, and he smiled, telling me he wasn't allowed to say, which really told me my theory was correct. It wasn't the last we'd see of that particular boss.

I asked him about Agatha, about them editing her out of the boss battle. He waved it off. "They probably didn't want to confuse the narrative." Again, I could sense there was more there. I tried not to let my frustration show.

I told him my theory about how they were combining real aliens with earth stereotypes.

Mordecai looked equally frustrated. He paused, as if thinking hard. "That's mostly correct. Again, it's not really something I can discuss. But this isn't exactly some big secret, either. Some of these monsters are made by AI, some are simply the actual creatures from their world—the tusklings and the Ball of Swine, for example. And some, like you've deduced, are created by a team of writers. Like with anything that's been put together by a team, what you end up with can vary wildly. Those llamas, for example. They are unique to your planet, and I don't recall anything in your culture that suggests they should be anthropomorphized as drug-dealing gang bangers. Someone just thought it'd be an interesting combo. Not everything will be social commentary."

"It's usually just stupid," I muttered.

"It's entertainment," Mordecai said, once again reminding me of something Odette said. There was a much deeper story there, between those two. I wondered if I'd ever learn.

"Also, I've been meaning to ask you about this tattoo on my neck," I said. "The Desperado Club."

"Nope," Mordecai said. "Off limits. You'll learn about the third floors soon enough. Sorry. Now, you better open your boxes before Zev gets here. Once she's here, the cameras *will* turn off. Cameras will always turn off when kua-tin are around."

Shit. "Okay," I said, opening up my folder.

My IED and Explosives Handling and several other explosives-based skills had leaped to seven thanks to my creation of the Carl's Jug O' Boom. I also received a pretty strange achievement:

New achievement! *Dungeonpreneur*.

You have invented a stackable weapon, device, or potion. You will be memorialized for eternity with your name in the *Dungeon Codex*. Just don't let it go to your head, Elon.

***Reward*: For every kill made with this device by other crawlers, you will receive a single gold coin. If you survive the dungeon, you will continue to receive this benefit—even during future seasons—at the current gold to credit exchange rate for the remainder of your natural life. Our lawyers made us put that last part in, but between you and**

me, we both know you're going to die, and we're going to keep using your hard work for our own benefit.

Interesting. It was too bad nobody else would ever use these things. The main ingredient—the jug of moonshine—was probably pretty rare. And those jugs were more valuable when they were left unaltered.

I received a bunch of the usual stuff plus a couple hundred gold coins, bringing our hoard to just over 1,000 coins. I went over it all. More potions and torches and biscuits. I had enough food now to feed an army for a month straight. I received a couple goblin boxes and took in more dynamite, smoke bombs, and lighters. I received a bronze crowd control box and added two scrolls of *Confusing Fog*. This time, I would give them both to Donut.

I opened the boss box.

Don't say anything. Don't say anything out loud.

I couldn't help it. I looked up at the ceiling.

"Really? Fucking really?"

Behind me, Mordecai laughed, but a moment later he added, "Whoa, that's actually a really good prize."

It was a white pair of boxers covered in little red hearts.

"*Goddamnit*," I muttered as I examined them.

Enchanted BigBoi Boxers.

Have you ever read an *Incredible Hulk* comic and thought to yourself, *everything rips off of his body except his pants? No way*. Well, spoiler alert. You're not wrong. Size-altering and were-creatures, such as the BigBoi are required to wear enchanted, self-sizing items lest they wish to turn the dungeon into a nudist colony when they transform. That means everything they wear requires an enchantment. Everything, including their naughty little undies.

+ 2 to Constitution

Wearer may cast a level 15 *Protective Shell* once every 30 hours.

"Don't look," I said, and I pulled my scorched and threadbare boxers off and slipped the new ones on. The old ones fell apart in

my hands. The first thing I did was open the spell menu, find *Protective Shell*, and move it to my hotlist.

Protective Shell

Picture yourself in high school. Now picture all the girls who would never get anywhere near you. It's kind of like that, but on purpose.

Cost: This is an item-based spell. This spell does not require mana to cast. If you unequip the associated item, you will lose access to this spell. The cooldown will not reset.

Target: a 3-meter radius sphere centered around the right hand of caster + 50 centimeters of radius per level of Intelligence. (Current radius: 4.5 meters)

Duration: 5 seconds + 1 second per level of spell. (Current Duration: 20 seconds.) Requires 30-hour cooldown.

A favorite of frontline tanks and castle guards, the expensive and rare *Protective Shell* spell shields the caster and anyone within the sphere from a mob's physical presence or physical attacks. This spell does not protect against magic or against non-corporeal entities. Unlike the more popular *Shield* spell, this spell does not move with you. This spell's area of effect remains static once cast, unimpeded by your physical surroundings. So if you use this spell only when you really, really need it, you're probably only delaying the inevitable by a few seconds.

"I had that spell during my crawl," Mordecai said. "It saved me more than once. It has a fantastic secondary effect. Since the spell doesn't move once cast, you can..."

Warning: You may not wield your weapons while in the presence of Admins. Any attempted violence against an Admin will result in your immediate execution.

The stern message came out of nowhere, and it was spoken in a different voice than any one I'd heard before. Like with the boss battles, it wasn't voiced in my head, but over an unseen loudspeaker.

Donut immediately jumped to my shoulder.

There was a loud *pop*, and a new creature appeared in the room, standing in a puddle right in front of me.

A kua-tin.

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All of my menus disappeared. My entire HUD snapped off. It was just like it had been when we'd been transported up to the production boat floating on the surface.

I just stared at the person, uncomprehending for several seconds. *Are you kidding me with this shit?*

It was a kua-tin. A female kua-tin. An actual representative from the Borant Corporation. I remembered the massive carving of the fish creature on the doors, and I compared it to this beast. Before, I'd seen similar sea creatures in the audience at the taping of Odette's show. I now knew that those were *not* kua-tin. Those people were very different. And while the gigantic relief carvings on the doors did an adequate job portraying the aquatic race's features, it left one important detail out.

This kua-tin stood about two feet tall. She was barely tall enough to reach my knee. I examined the woman's properties.

Zev – Borant Corporation Assistant Communications Representative.

This is a Dungeon Admin.

That was it. No additional information, no snarky AI talking about mudskippers.

It took me several moments to take in her outfit.

Zev looked like an astronaut from a 1950s sci-fi comic. She wore a round, glass helmet filled with water. A pair of tubes snaked from the back of the helmet to a bulky backpack. The water bubbled like

she was in a portable fish tank. The rest of her humanoid fish body was hidden inside of a white, mesh spacesuit. The whole getup was half space-age, half old-school deep diving suit.

"Good evening, ma'am," Mordecai said, standing straight.

"Hello, Mordecai," the fish woman said, her voice amplified through a little speaker on her outfit. "It's nice to finally meet you face-to-face."

There was something about the woman that suddenly made Mordecai visibly relax, but I couldn't tell what it was. There might have been an exchange I couldn't hear. I just didn't know. Even Donut seemed to notice. The cat kept looking back and forth between the tiny fish and the large guildmaster.

"Ma'am, I must say. I haven't seen one of these water suits in centuries," Mordecai said, walking around the woman. "Most kua-tin wear rebreathers around their necks. You can barely see them."

"I've been assured the armor of this device is second to none. If one of my fellow employees wishes to enter this godsforsaken place without any proper armor, then that is on them."

"Ma'am, I don't want to sound rude. But can you move in that thing?" Mordecai asked.

"No," she admitted. "Not really. If you must know, this is my first foray into a dungeon, and I wanted to be safe."

"So you're really here," I said. I resisted the urge to reach down and tap on the glass.

"Yes," she said, looking up at me. "Other corporations may utilize holos for their training guilds and admins, but Borant prefers a more fins-on approach."

"You know you're in no danger while you're in a safe room," Mordecai said. "The mobs know not to attack you. And the AI negates all attacks inside of safe areas. Unless you're planning on going for a stroll, ma'am, I wouldn't worry about it."

"Yeah, well tell that to those twelve workers in Site Prep. Did you see this morning's update? They were swallowed whole! Or that human admin who didn't realize the no-urinating-in-the-dungeon rule applied to everyone. They said all that was left was splatter on the floor."

I had no idea what was going on with this exchange, but Zev seemed to realize she was talking in front of a pair of crawlers. She returned her gaze up at us.

"Anyway, I wanted to do a meet and greet with you two," Zev said. "This will only take a quick crutch of your time."

"I don't know what that means, but go ahead," I said.

"My name is Zev, and I work within the Borant Corporation's communications department. I am a liaison between Borant and privately-owned and operated programs who wish to ren… borrow crawlers for their shows. We have identified several individuals and teams who have gained early popularity. As is probably no surprise to you, you two are on that list."

On my shoulder, I felt Donut's claws sink deep into me. The cat was shuddering with pleasure.

"We've already been on one show," I said. "*Dungeon Crawler After Hours with Odette*."

"Yes," she said. "I am aware. Certain production companies are allowed to pluck crawlers away between stairwells. But if they want to transport crawlers to their sets at any other time, after boss battles for example, they must arrange it through our office. Usually these requests are granted automatically, but once crawlers reach a certain level of notoriety, the number of requests can become a bit overwhelming. We generally don't want our crawlers to leave the game more than twice a floor. As you've already received over two dozen interview requests from this most recent boss battle alone, you have automatically been entered into the Crawler Assisted Outreach Program. In other words, you've been assigned a PR Agent. Me."

"You're our agent? Our PR agent? You get us gigs?" Donut asked, voice full of wonder.

"That's right," Zev said. "From now on, all interview and panel requests will filter through me. I have opened up a special chat channel so I can send you messages through your interface." Zev looked about distastefully. "Also, they make me come down here and talk to you directly after interviews for a debriefing."

"This is absolutely fabulous," Donut said. "Can we provide advance riders? Like with makeup and green room requirements?"

"How about a more important question," I asked. "Can we refuse interviews? Last time we didn't have much of a choice."

She nodded. "I will always ask you before whisking you away. But," she leaned in, and her entire outfit creaked ominously, "Odette has already contracted with our office. She gets first right of refusal for each floor opening. You're already locked into those interviews, and as long as you keep your numbers up, you will go on her show. That means I'll try to schedule one additional interview for each floor down. You can refuse what show you go on, but I'm afraid you'll be obligated to pick something. We might move to three interviews for the lower floors depending on how it's going and whether or not the party keeps insisting on accelerating the game. And if you survive, of course. But whatever happens, I promise I will do my best to get you quality gigs."

"What about now?" Donut asked. "Do you have something for us now?"

"Yes," she said. "There are a few options, but for this first one, I went ahead and chose a program for you. It's a little less serious than Odette's show, but it will hit a demographic that you aren't yet trending in. Plus it's a round-table style discussion, and in this program all crawlers get a parting gift. Sometimes it's a joke, but it's usually something useful."

"A gift?" Donut said. "Carl, we get a gift!"

"Wait, are we doing this *now*?" I asked.

"No," Zev said. "I'll ping you when it's time. It'll be at minus six plus one full."

"Minus what?" I said. I felt a sudden, unexpected wave of rage at the fish woman. It came out of nowhere, and I didn't know what set it off. *She's just a goddamned pawn like everyone else. It's not her fault*. Still, I couldn't help it. She was a kua-tin. The enemy. The *real* enemy. And I couldn't do anything about it. *Take a deep breath*. "We don't understand your time reference."

She sighed. "Six hours before the next recap episode. Not the one tonight, but the next one. So, in about forty hours. Since you'll

be doing your Odette interviews between floors, I figured it'd be best to schedule your second appearance right in the middle of the floor's timer. It'll keep interest up. Also, you should try to line up a major boss battle right as the floor closes like you did last time. That really worked in your favor."

That rage, which I thought I had successfully held back, bubbled up and out. "Goddamnit. God fucking damnit," I said. Mordecai raised his hands in alarm, rapidly shaking them, trying to get me to stop. I didn't care. "We are, quite literally, fighting for our lives here. We are not willing participants, and I am getting sick of pretending we are. We are going on these *fucking* interviews not because we want to, but because we have to." The fish looked up at me through her helmet, eyes wide. "Zev, ma'am, whatever the hell I'm supposed to call you so you don't send a lightning bolt up my ass, I don't want to get in trouble with you or Borant or the Syndicate or whoever else is running this bullshit. I am doing what you have asked. I am killing monsters, trying to level up, trying to survive. I will smile, and I will joke, and I will put a proper face on when I go on these shows. But, fuck. You have already taken everything from us. Do not ask us to give more than what we have. We are not going to fight or survive on your schedule."

I sat there, my chest heaving, glaring down at the fish. The world seemed frozen. Mordecai looked terrified. Donut, who remained on my shoulder, butted her head against the side of my own. She purred, a deep, silent rumbling. Her reaction surprised me.

But not as much as Zev's reaction.

"Look," she said, after a moment. "I know. Okay? Nobody in this room is an idiot." She pointed at Mordecai. "The moment I appeared, he was terrified of me. Once he saw I wasn't wearing a party badge, he relaxed. When I'm done here, I go back down to the production headquarters, and I will have to face my boss who *is* a member of the party. If I do or say the wrong thing, my entire family will be wiped from the universe. You're going to go out there and face mobs who know people like you are prowling the halls, trying to find and kill them. They, the sapient ones? They live in constant fear of you guys. We are all parts of the same, inexorable machine. All of us are

afraid. Yes, your place in this really sucks. It's not fair. You know it. I know it. The cat knows it. But believe it or not, I am on your side. The better you do, the longer you survive, the better *I* do. So when I tell you that you should do something, you best listen because I know what I'm talking about."

Nobody moved or said anything for several seconds. We just stood there, looking at one another.

"This is just like that scene in season three of *Gossip Girl* when Chuck and Blair break up over the hotel," Donut said.

I turned to regard the cat on my shoulder, and I burst out laughing. I couldn't help it. It wasn't funny. I'd never watched that damn show. Yet I laughed, and I had a hard time stopping.

"No it's not," Mordecai said a moment later. "How do you even get that from this?"

Zev turned her fish gaze to my cat, then Mordecai. "I can't believe it. You two have watched *Gossip Girl*? Nobody on my team has watched *anything*, except that old show *COPS* and *Judge Judy*. We've been stuck here for 15 solars with nothing for entertainment but earth-based programs, and I've had nobody to talk to about them."

"Oh, Honey," Donut said, jumping down from my shoulder to sit next to the fish. "I have seen everything. Season five, the car accident?"

"No, stop, you're going to make me cry," Zev said, waving her fish arms. I thought, *fish can cry*? They started rapidly talking with one another about the show. Bea used to sit up and re-watch the series over and over again. She'd clutch onto Donut and sob every time.

"That was dangerous," Mordecai whispered to me as Donut and Zev continued to talk. "She's about as low-level as you can get and still be an Admin, but you need to control your temper. She has the power to end you. All kua-tin are dangerous, party members or not."

"What the hell is the party?" I asked, also whispering. We both took a few steps back. He was right about my temper. I rarely lost it. But that didn't matter right now. This was a rare opportunity, the ability to talk to Mordecai with nobody else listening.

"It's a political party. They're called the Bloom. Now everyone just calls it the Party. Ultra-nationalism. The closest thing you have in your history is maybe Axis Japan with a good splash of Nazi Germany thrown in, but even that's not quite right," he said. "When I signed my indentureship contract, the Bloom represented less than 15% of the votes. Now they control the whole kua-tin system government. They've run it into the ground. The whole system is bankrupt. They've recently started requiring all kua-tin to wear a badge indicating if they're members or not."

"Jesus," I said.

"Listen carefully," Mordecai said, looking nervously down at Zev. "We don't have time to get into the details, but Borant is being forced by their own government to end the game as quickly as possible. You need to be especially careful not to upset them."

"I don't understand," I said, alarm rising. "I thought they started it early to stave off a bankruptcy seizure action or whatever. That's what Odette implied. Wouldn't they want to keep it running as long as possible?"

He nodded. "That's what everyone thought at first. They're doing a cash grab with the new patron system, but they don't get that money, or any money, from the advertising or the tourism funds or elite monster sponsorship or anything else until the season is over. They need that cash as soon as possible. But they also first need to raise enough. Their whole system is balancing on a wire. They need the game to be entertaining and profitable, but they also need it to finish much more quickly than usual. The committee has already issued a warning, putting Borant on notice over the 'bugs' that keep occurring, like the issue with the bathrooms and the overpowered mobs. One too many violations, and Borant could lose everything. There are protections in place, plus there is push-back within the company itself. But the kua-tin government is working extra hard to get you killed."

"That's just wonderful," I said. Zev looked up at me, as if surprised I was still in the room. Mordecai saw this and took a few steps away.

"I think it's time for us to get back out there," I said to Donut. "We need to finish clearing this quadrant out, and then we need to escort team Meadow Lark to the stairs. I want to get it done before the next recap episode."

"We will talk more later," Donut said to Zev.

"Or, we can talk over chat!" Zev said. The fish's demeanor had completely changed. "Tell me you've watched *Riverdale*."

Donut gasped.

"Nope," I said, reaching down to scoop the cat up. "You two will talk all night."

"Wait one crutch. I have to leave before you can," Zev said as I put my hand on the door handle to the dungeon. "It's the rules. I'll ping you regarding the next interview." And without further fanfare, she disappeared with a *pop.* Water splashed over my feet as she disappeared.

"There's more I want to discuss," I said to Mordecai. All of our menus snapped back on, the HUD flickering like a booting-up computer. I pulled at the door. "But it is getting late. We'll be..." I trailed off as I glanced at the minimap. Why had the map changed color?

The door opened all the way, and a waist-high pile of grubs fell into the room.

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Mordecai shrieked in rage. "Out! Out of my room!" He kicked at the monsters, punting them like oversized footballs out into the hallway.

"Gah," I cried, jumping back. "Why aren't they teleporting away?"

"They won't until they attack," he said. "Not on their own, at least." He was scooping them up by the armfuls, tossing them back out into the hall. But it was useless. For every two he tossed out, four more got in. Eventually he gave up and slammed the door, trapping several dozen in the room. He waved his hand, and they all disappeared. He wiped his hands on his fur. "There."

There were hundreds of them in the hallway. Thousands of them. I just stared, dumbfounded. They kept coming and coming.

They're following us, I realized. Where the hell were they coming from, though? Up until now, it had seemed all the dungeon's monsters were pre-seeded. Once we killed all the monsters in an area, that was it. The area was safe. These guys were being spawned somewhere nearby. They had to be.

I leaned against the door and zoomed out the map to view the whole neighborhood. Thousands more of them were crawling their way toward us. They seemed to be coming from the south, from a direction we hadn't yet explored. The hallway with the stairs wasn't yet infested. But it would be soon.

"What the hell is this?" I asked Mordecai.

"I've never seen anything like this, not on the second floor," Mordecai said. His eyes had gone glossy, which I recognized as him

searching through his special menu. “Yup, as I suspected.” He looked at me, his shaggy face looking grim. “They’re being spawned.”

“Yeah, no shit,” I said.

“Every floor has a waste disposal system,” he continued. “So far you’ve seen rats and the grubs. The more dead bodies they eat, the stronger they get. It’ll be something different the next floor down. They’re supposed to home in on corpses, but if none are nearby, they’ll hunt crawlers. That’s what they’re doing. These guys don’t attack, but they’ll still swarm at ya.”

“But why are there so many of them?”

“It looks like the system is spawning anywhere between one to 15 of them when a corpse is created. It usually doesn’t do that unless there aren’t any janitor mobs nearby. You killed a lot of mobs in that last battle, so here they are.”

“We didn’t kill *that* many! Plus, we’ve been destroying the corpses.”

“They probably had a couple hundred grubs in that cage in the boss room,” Mordecai said. He paused. “Yes, there were 750 of them. All fried. Plus you killed another 85 clurichauns between grinding away and the boss battle. Destroying the corpses only keeps them from leveling up. It doesn’t stop them from being generated. You, my friends, have been set up. You’ve fallen into a trap. Good news is they’re easy to kill. The bad news is these little buggers don’t give any experience. At least not the level-two ones.”

“Wait,” I said. “This even works on themselves? So for every grub we step on, 15 more will appear?”

“Sort of,” he said. “There’s a per-quadrant limit. If you kill all 5,000 of the grubs out there, 75,000 aren’t going to appear.”

“Do you know what the limit is?” I asked, looking at the map. The entire area blinked red, centered on us.

“Uh, yeah,” he said. “You’ve already hit it. It’s 5,000.”

Fucking hell. “Is it like this everywhere? Across the whole dungeon?”

“It looks like it,” Mordecai said. “It’s to keep people from camping out in one area for too long. As long as you keep moving, it

shouldn’t be an issue.”

Carl: Brandon, can you see this?

We’d set up the chat, but we hadn’t really used it yet.

Brandon An: Loud and clear. You guys doing okay?

Carl: We have an issue. It’s not a huge deal yet, but it will be soon. Let’s get your folks moving toward the stairs now. We’ll meet you in the hallway outside this quadrant.

Brandon An: 10-4. We’re on our way. Wait until you see what we built.

They were barely 3/4's of a mile away, but with that crowd, it’d take a couple hours at least for them to get set up.

“Come on, Donut,” I said. “We need to carve a hole back to the other team. At least these bastards are all the level-two grubs.”

Even Donut cringed the moment I said that out loud.

We started by tossing firebombs in the halls, then moving forward, but after a while I realized it was just a waste of good moonshine. The level twos by themselves were literally harmless. I could pick one up and put it on my lap, and it didn’t do anything. They were large with scary-looking mandibles, but they didn’t bite or attack or anything. They just sort of squeaked and wriggled. And for every one we killed, we were just generating another. Plus, if we didn’t properly destroy the body, we were increasing the chance of getting these guys to level up.

The problem was they were so thick in some places, it was impossible not to step on them with my bare feet, crunching them down. I tried my best to avoid them, but for every one I killed, I smeared down with my foot, crunching until the X went away on the map. The moment it died, its friends all turned on it, taking bites from its body. Even when I completely destroyed it, they continued to chew and lap up the remains. I took that as an ominous sign.

If had to step on more than two or three grubs in a hallway, I tossed a boom jug in behind us. Better safe than sorry.

"This is taking forever," Donut complained from my shoulder.

"We're almost there," I said, pushing a grub away with my foot. This last hallway was mostly clear. Only forty or so of them. Brandon and crew were making record time, he said. They were almost at the rendezvous.

Once we hit the main hallway, we were all going straight to the stairwell. I plotted a path starting a few alleyways north, so we only needed to get them through a pair of grub-infested intersections. As long we moved relatively quickly, this would work.

And once they were down the stairs, we'd carve our way north, punching back into the neighborhood with the danger dingoes and kobolds. From there we'd head back to the saferoom, watch the evening's show, sleep, and then hop on the Chopper and spend the rest of the time grinding away in different neighborhoods until it was time to hit the stairs. Hopefully we'd find a different exit, but if not, we'd come back and firebomb our way to the stairwell here.

Donut: CARL, PEOPLE ARE GETTING BORED WITH THIS! MY FOLLOWERS HAVEN'T GONE UP IN FIVE MINUTES.

Carl: For fuck's sake, Donut. Don't worry. I'm sure something awful is going to happen any second.

We exited out into the main hallway. The moment we did, the grubs behind us seemed to lose interest in following. They just stopped, settling down. It was creepy as hell.

I saw the wall of blue dots coming down the hallway. It looked as if it was all of them, so we went jogging toward them. I stopped and laughed the moment I saw the parade.

Imani and Chris were both wearing leather straps across their chests that I recognized as pig harnesses from the tuskling courtesans. They strained as they pulled all of the others behind them.

They'd built a parade float. That's what it looked like. They'd taken the wheels from multiple wheelchairs that no longer had owners and affixed them to long pieces of wood. I had no idea where the wooden platforms had come from, but I knew Imani and Chris both were as obsessive about looting everything as I was.

Using some of the goblin tools, they'd hobbled together the contraption.

Looking more closely, it was more like a train or a set of rollercoaster cars. There were a total of 39 people being pulled, most of them sitting upon their own chairs, which sat locked in place, two by two. The ones who normally used walkers sat cross-legged on the boards, watching wide-eyed as they were pulled along. The giant centipede was ten cars long, and each section held four people. The individual cars were attached to one another by a set of glowing metal chains. The same chain attached Chris and Imani to the rest of the train. It seemed it was one chain, running from Chris, through all the cars and back up to Imani, about 300 feet long.

"It's more maneuverable than it looks," Brandon said, jogging up. "We made it from the safe room to the hallway easily. Chris says once they get going, he barely feels the weight. The only problem is that the cars are too wide to fit through the safe room doors, so we have to stage it all in the hallway. There were a lot of those grubs, but we ran right over them."

"Where'd you get that chain?"

"Imani had a scroll called *Yog's Special Chain* or something like that. She just got it from some Gold box, I don't know what for. She could pick any length up to something crazy, like 1,000 feet. It's light as a feather, but the chain only lasts for 30 hours. This whole thing was her idea, though Brandon designed it. He even added ramps so they can get on and off easily."

"Hey, you have an extra star by your name," I said.

He nodded. "You know the Mind Horrors? The floating brain things? Yolanda, Chris, and I went to clear them out. I remembered what you said about needing to train, so I figured we better. Yolanda would shoot them from down the hallway, deflating them before they could hurt us. The boss room was this abandoned warehouse thing. The boss was a giant blimp. We took it out pretty easily thanks to Yolanda. That's also where we got all this wood."

"Did it come out of its room?" I gave him a quick recap of what had happened with Krakaren.

"Christ, dude. Our boss battle was much easier. It never left his lair."

They were lucky to be alive, but I was glad they'd spent the time training themselves. Yolanda was now level nine, equal with both the brothers. Imani was still level 11, and she didn't have the extra bronze star.

"Imani didn't go with you?" I asked.

"No," Brandon said. "Someone had to stay with the residents."

"Any sign of Agatha?" I asked.

"Not a one," he said. "But with these grubs, I'm not surprised. They devour everything. We saw a few level threes on our way up here."

"Yeah, we need to get moving," I said. I pointed to an alleyway. "Guys, down that way," I called to Imani and Chris. They nodded and turned.

"I see a safe room down that way. What's in there?" Brandon asked.

"I don't know," I said. "We haven't checked that one out yet."

This hallway was only a few meters from the edge of the quadrant. It bordered the one with the kobolds, who we hadn't yet seen. I kept a wary eye out for dingoes. Some of the residents clapped their hands with delight as we turned into the hallway. Mrs. McGibbons, the one who earlier wanted to watch *Divorce Court*, looked down at me as they passed. She was on the very last train car, this one only carrying three riders. She was the only one on the platform in a wheelchair. The other two were men with walkers, both sitting down.

The name over the woman said **Crawler #12,330,800. "Elle McGib."**

"Hi Carl," she said.

"Hi Mrs. McGibbons. You remembered my name today," I said, moving to walk alongside the train.

"This reminds me of the tunnel of love," she said. "Back in my time, my Barry and I used to always go to the carnival. We'd eat the cotton candy and throw darts at the balloons. We'd go in the tunnel

of love. Back then it was a boat. I'd let him touch my boobs, but only on the outside of my sweater."

I laughed.

"I loved my Barry, but he wasn't the prettiest man to look at. If you were in the tunnel of love with me, I'd have let you do more than touch them on the outside of my clothes."

"Uh," I said. "Thank you?" I couldn't think of a better response. The old woman cackled. Behind her, Yolanda barked with laughter.

"You've been hit on twice now," Donut said. "Once by a meth-addled goblin shaman and once by Abraham Lincoln's grandmother. I can't wait to see who you attract next. Five gold coins says it's some sort of bog witch with a beard."

Yolanda had told me earlier that this woman was 99 years old. I looked up at her. Ninety-nine years. She'd lived an entire life. Had a husband, whom she'd clearly loved. It seemed obscene that she'd be here in this place. I thought of the others who'd spent their final hours in a safe room, singing. *We should have made them all stay. This isn't a kindness, keeping them safe.*

Donut jumped from my shoulder and landed on the woman's lap. The cat's crupper and butterfly talisman jingled when she landed.

"Oh, hello pretty kitty," the woman said. She started petting the cat. Donut purred loudly.

"Bring that pussy over here," one of the men said. He laughed lewdly. The man seemed even older than Mrs. McGibbons. He wore a Bengals hat too small for his bulbous head.

"Don't be crude, Jack," Yolanda said.

I moved forward to walk alongside Brandon, Chris, and Imani, keeping my eye on the map. Yolanda kept up the rear, walking with her bow at the ready. "We're taking a left two intersections down, right past that safe room. We'll have to cross through an infested area, but I'll firebomb it."

The mass of red dots was already starting to shift toward us. Thankfully they were painfully slow. I could take a nap before they'd reach this hall.

"Carl, thank you," Brandon said. "You are helping us to your own detriment. You are a good man."

I smiled. "If we get to the point where we don't help each other anymore, that's when we stop being human." I felt something catch in my throat, and I coughed.

Zev (Admin): Carl, that was great. Can you say that for me again, but this time, don't cough.

I stopped dead. My neck tingled with goosebumps. I knew we were being watched and followed, but having someone actually comment in my mind was one of the most unnerving sensations I'd ever felt.

Carl: Are you kidding me with this? No, I'm not going to say it again. Have you been watching this whole time?

Zev (Admin): You and my other clients. This save-the-elderly storyline is playing great with most viewers. That said, about 20% of the focus group thinks you're wasting time and being stupid. "Dead weight," I think was the term some of them have used. But most of them understand what you're doing. Donut is right, however. It's a little dry. Maybe you can… Oh shit, oh fuck. Carl, Donut. Run. Run to the safe room now.

"No, Jack, Jack, no!" Yolanda called.

I turned to see Jack, Cincinnati Bengals hat sitting cockeyed on his head. He'd stood to his full height, using the wheelchair with Mrs. McGibbons and Donut as a brace. His pants were down to his ankles, dick out, pissing directly on the wall.

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THE NEXT SEVERAL SECONDS SEEMED TO HAPPEN IN SLOW MOTION. DONUT was the first to react. She jumped up, claws out, as if she meant to decapitate the elderly man. She pulled back at the last moment, instead pushing off his shoulder and sailing through the air, flying until she landed three platforms down.

Yolanda also reacted, just a fraction of a moment behind Donut. She didn't pull her attack. An arrow sprouted from the side of Jack's skull, pinning the hat to his head. She'd been forced to shoot him, but it didn't matter. She'd reacted too late. The now-dead man fell off the trailer and to the ground, still pissing in death. The curved pee stain on the dungeon wall started to sizzle and boil. Smoke rose directly from the point of contact. I realized I was running, running *toward* the back of the train. Behind me, Brandon shouted. The safe room was only a hundred feet away. Chris and Imani were already picking up speed. The second man on the last car, Randall, went flying off the train as it lurched forward. He hit the ground with a loud, painful *crunch*, his walker flying over his head just as the monster appeared.

"Holy fuck!" I cried. "Donut, run!" I continued to sprint toward the thing.

Purple and black smoke kept hissing and spitting from the wet stain on the wall. The monster coalesced, coming into existence ten feet behind Yolanda and Randall, just above the prone form of the

now-dead Jack. Yolanda hit the monster with two arrows, and the shafts just shattered against the smoke. It didn't even form a health bar, indicating she'd done no damage whatsoever.

The thing was fifteen feet tall and just as wide, made of fulminating, sizzling black and purple smoke. It had six legs, each gleaming with obsidian claws the size of rakes. The claws seemed to be the only corporeal parts of its body. The legs were all the same, but the two forward claws were longer, finger-like with extra joints. A flickering, horned skull sat amongst the smokey mass, its eyes made of glowing red fire that poured smoke. It was the skull of some sort of animal, maybe a colossal badger, but with curved, goat-like horns. It roared, and the ground shook.

Rage Elemental – Level 93

The first recorded summoning of a Rage Elemental, blah, blah, blah. If you are reading this, you likely don't give a shit about the monster's (rather interesting and tragic) history. You're probably running. It's not going to matter. The almost-indestructible Rage Elemental is said to only dissipate after it has claimed 666 souls.

In other words, you are fucked. Absolutely, bite-the-pillow, fucked.

A magic missile bounced off the monster's head, and a health bar appeared for a half-second before disappearing. *It's self-healing*.

I came skidding to a stop as the train rocketed past me. Donut landed on my shoulder. She was screaming something about not running unless I ran too. Yolanda stood over the fallen form of Randall. The creature was still growing, the last of the black and purple mist twirling around it.

"Fog!" I yelled. Donut, who had read my mind, activated her scroll of *Confusing Fog* at the same moment.

The monstrosity finished forming just as the wall of fog billowed into the hallway. The creature fell to all six legs. The monster spun toward us, impossibly fast, its movements cleaving through the cloud like a boat cutting through waves. It ripped at the dead form of Jack, and the man's body shredded. It leaped forward, clawing at Yolanda and Randall.

I never got to know Yolanda Martinez as much as I would've liked to.

But I didn't have to know her very well to know who she was. I knew she was a quiet, sweet woman who'd been a nurse her entire life. She'd worked sixty hours a week for years to pay for her son to go to college. Her husband had owned a landscaping company. At only 4'11, the woman had a presence much bigger than her stature suggested. There was a warmth about her, something I'd never felt as a kid. Just being in her presence imparted a feeling of longing in me, something difficult to describe. Like I wished I could relive my childhood, but this time, I'd have her as my mother, and she would have never, ever left me.

When the apocalypse came for Yolanda, she didn't once waver in her dedication to her patients. She was quick to laugh, quick to smile.

And even though Yolanda Martinez was just as terrified as the rest of us, she stood her ground against a force she couldn't possibly hold back.

She lived her entire life as a hero. She died as one, too.

One moment they were there, the next they were gone. Through the still developing cloud of confusing fog, the monster's claws ripped forward, cutting through the nurse and the elderly man as if they weren't even there. Yolanda's body disintegrated in a red cloud of ribbon-like flesh like she was a knitted sweater that had been unraveled all at once.

The monster didn't even break stride, it came for us despite the fog. It swung a mighty claw just as I smashed down on *Protective Shell*.

The monster flew back, as if it was a charging dog that had reached the end of its leash. The transparent, glowing, semi-circle shell spread around me, completely filling this section of the hallway, floor to ceiling.

The rage elemental hissed and squealed with fury as it went flying back, skidding. It jumped up, charging again. Its badger head made it through the shield, but the moment its giant claws touched

the force field, it rebounded yet again. It seemed the sharp tips of the monster's claws couldn't make it through the protection.

"Holy shit!" I cried. I hadn't expected that to work. "Run!" Donut leaped off my shoulder as I turned and rushed toward the others, who were struggling to get everyone into the safe room. The individual cars were too wide for the entrance. Imani and Chris were bodily pulling people off their chairs and tossing them into the open door.

The round shield remained firmly in place, and I felt an odd *pop* in my ears as we left its area of effect. The spell was only going to last 20 seconds, and I'd already wasted five of them being dumbfounded.

About halfway to the door, the ground disappeared underneath me. At least that's what I thought had happened, at first. I fell, but I fell upward, crashing into the ceiling. A few feet in front of me, Donut flipped in midair, deftly landing upside down.

In front of me, the very last train car flew upward, and the remaining resident—Mrs. McGibbons—cried out as she also slammed up into the top of the hallway, wheelchair crashing upon her like she'd been dumped face first down into a hole.

My shoulder crunched, but I slammed a health potion before the pain could hit me.

Gravity had been reversed. The elemental had cast the spell, but it hadn't reached all the way to the safe room door. That last platform, connected by Imani's magic chain, remained attached to the rest of the cars, and it dangled upward, having dislodged its only remaining rider.

I didn't look back. I pulled myself to my feet and kept running, but now I was upside-down, running on the ceiling of the hallway. We rushed toward the crumpled form of Mrs. McGibbons, who groaned and rolled onto her back, feebly pushing the wheelchair off herself. It rolled a few feet forward and reached the edge of the spell's effect. It clattered to the ground. She opened her eyes, and upon seeing that she was now stuck to the roof of the hallway, she started to cry out in fear. Her health was deep in the red.

"I got you," I said, picking her up. I pulled her over my shoulder like a sack.

Ahead of me, Chris and Imani were ushering the last of the residents into the room. I could see Brandon just inside the door, moving them out of the way. Imani was screaming Yolanda's name.

Donut took a step toward the door, and she plummeted off the ceiling, also having reached the edge of the spell's effect. She, once again, landed easily.

"Be careful, Carl!" she called up to me.

"Get the wheelchairs, then get inside!" I cried as I pulled a health potion and shoved it in Mrs. McGibbon's hand. "Drink this."

I anticipated where the line of gravity was, and I tried a desperate flip maneuver in an attempt not to be upside down when I fell. It didn't work. I shielded the crying woman's body as I landed, once again, in a painful heap on the ground right next to the wooden platform. I groaned and smashed down on my own *Heal* spell.

Behind me, the rage elemental roared as the spell dissipated. It rocketed down the hall at us, claws raking up stones as it ran. It ran on its four back legs and reached forward with its two forward arms, which somehow made the beast seem even more horrifying.

"*Shit*," I scrambled to my feet. Donut hit it with another magic missile before turning and bolting toward the door. Chris and Imani pulled their last resident in.

I ran. The ground shook as if a locomotive was bearing down on me. Ten feet. Five feet. One foot.

I jumped at the door, banging into the frame and ricocheting inside just as the monstrosity's forward claws swiped at me, missing by millimeters. It squealed in frustration, continuing its forward momentum as it slid down the hallway.

I had a quick sense of déjà vu, of the goblin murderdozer also missing me by inches.

I handed Mrs. McGibbons to Brandon, pulled a boom jug, and returned to the hallway. I lit and tossed it at the backside of the still-turning elemental before I jumped back into the room and slammed the door.

We could hear the monster's screams through the thick walls. It made a sound that was part pain, part rage, part the end of the fucking world. I knew there was no way I could've really hurt it, but I felt a wave of satisfaction at that horrific, penetrating sound.

A moment later, the door pulsed, creaking worryingly as the elemental attempted to get in. It screamed and thrashed and pounded, throwing itself against the impenetrable door with all its might.

"Jesus," I muttered, reaching down to grab my legs. I closed my eyes, unable to get the sight of Yolanda and Randall out of my head. "Jesus," I repeated, out of breath.

I turned to survey the room. We stood in what appeared to be a dusty, no-way-they-passed-the-health-inspection chicken restaurant. Big Shot Chicken, the sign said. I'd never heard of it. A Bopca Protector stood behind the counter, looking distastefully at the large crowd.

Mrs. McGibbons hadn't taken the potion I'd given her, but she still clutched it in her hand. I watched as Brandon helped her drink it down. She continued to cry as her health rose.

Most of the residents were on the ground, weeping for help. They'd been savagely tossed into the room. Imani, tears on her cheeks, was helping them one-by-one to the booths so they could sit and recover, administering healing potions to those who needed them. Donut had saved several wheelchairs, but there was no way we had enough now. Chris, his head low, turned to also help. Donut jumped to my shoulder, and her whole body was shaking.

"Fucking Jack," Brandon said, growling the words. "He knew. We explained it to him."

Zev's message echoed in my head. This was a mistake. Helping these people. *All we are doing is hindering our own training and delaying their inevitable deaths*. It would've been kinder to have left them on the first floor rather than subject them to this terror.

I looked up at the screens.

Time to Recap Episode: 1 hour 40 minutes.

Time to Level Collapse: 4 days, 20 hours.

Remaining Crawlers: 1,033,992

"You saved me," Mrs. McGibbons said, sitting up on the floor. Ninety-nine years old. I didn't think I'd ever met anyone that old before. Not a human, at least. "Thank you. Thank you so much."

I smiled weakly. "Of course," I said.

"Jack was always an ass," she continued. She made a clucking noise. "Poor Yolanda. She was such a good kid. And Randall. Dumb as a pigeon, that one. But he deserved better than that. At least it was quick."

"Do you think it's gonna leave?" Donut asked.

Behind me, the door continued to smash and rock under the onslaught of the screaming rage elemental.

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[39]



Views: 212 Billion
Followers: 4.4 Billion
Favorites: 793 Million

THE RECAP EPISODE STARTED WITH A CLOSE-UP SHOT OF JACK'S PURPLE, veined, and uncircumcised dick, huge on the screen. The headline screamed, "Trapped! Meadow Lark and The Royal Court of Princess Donut in Peril!"

"Wow," Donut said. "Yours isn't nearly that big. Or oily looking. And it doesn't have that hat thing."

If looks could kill, the glare Imani shot at the cat would've ripped her in two.

"Goddamnit, Donut," I muttered before realizing I'd said it. "Not now."

The screen showed, in slow motion, Jack pulling it out, turning to the wall, and peeing. It switched to Yolanda's horrified face, then Donut leaping for him, claws out. It showed the arrow piercing him right in the temple, of the player-killer skull icon slowly starting to form over Yolanda's head, and then the man falling from the platform.

"I can't watch this," Imani said, getting up and turning away.

A "See what happens next!" appeared on the screen. Then the show started. As promised, it was a compilation of people getting surprised by bosses leaving their rooms. I noted two different scenes with Krakaren bosses. The shots kept coming and coming, of people getting slaughtered.

I eased back in the chair and took a bite of fried chicken. A part of me registered that the food was downright delicious, but I could barely taste it. Donut sat at the table being lovingly groomed with her new brush by the Bopca Protector. The constitution buff had activated many minutes earlier, but she demanded he keep brushing.

This safe room, like the first one we'd visited, had 20 rooms for rent. They were still free on the second level. People slept in all twenty of them.

Outside, the rage elemental continued to scream and smash at the door. It hadn't let up, not for one second. The thing seemed to have an endless supply of energy.

I already had a plan on how to deal with it. I'd discussed it over chat with Donut. I'd have to wait at least a full Syndicate standard day—another 28 hours—before we'd be able to do it. That was how long the cooldown for my *Protective Shell* spell was.

The problem was, this plan required us to abandon team Meadow Lark. Not just the elderly folks. All of them. I sighed, unable to concentrate on the show.

Zev disappeared off the chat after the skirmish in the hallway. Donut, who'd apparently been chatting with her non-stop, was worried about the kua-tin. I didn't care. I was dreading our obligation to go on this talk show. We'd have to go onto the show before we left here.

A wave of grubs descended upon us. I didn't know what was going to happen once they reached the hall with the rage elemental. I was hoping perhaps they'd distract the creature, cause it to wander off. I suspected we wouldn't get that lucky, but I had hope. Looking at the map, I guessed we'd find out just as the show ended.

Donut and I both received a pair of achievements after our fight with the rage elemental.

New achievement! What goes up…

You have been struck with and survived the dreaded *Reverse Gravity* Spell. Well, you fared better than Albert II, the first earth mammal to reach space alive. He was a rhesus monkey, in case you're wondering. He went up just fine. He didn't stick the landing.

***Reward*: You can now tell people you're more durable than a monkey named Albert.**

New achievement! Like a Moth to the Flame.

You attacked and caused damage to a mob that is more than 75 levels above your own. The fact that you're reading this suggests you're the luckiest fucker in the dungeon. Just remember, luck goes both ways, like your mom.

***Reward*: You've received a Platinum Lucky Bastard Box!**

Both of us received a similar item in the platinum box. It was a lottery scratch-off ticket, just like any scratcher ticket one could buy at a gas station or a liquor store. The tickets themselves were different. Donut's was red and green and had a small graphic of a troll-like creature throwing gold coins in the air. It was called **Dungeon Gold Rush**. She had six spots to scratch off. She immediately moved to scratch it, but received an error message telling her she couldn't use the ticket in a saferoom. I made her hand it over so I could read the description.

Dungeon Gold Rush!

Scratch off one spot, and depending on the symbol revealed, your next attack against a mob will have varying effects! Guaranteed laughs! One hour cooldown between scratches.

I flipped the little cardboard ticket over, and it revealed about twenty different symbols. Most of the results were good, like **Mob drops 5,000 coins** or **Damage against Mob is doubled**. But a few of the symbols offered some not-so-good choices. Like **Mob splits in two**. Or **Mob is invulnerable for 30 seconds**.

"Yeah, don't use this," I said. "Not until we talk about it some. The last thing we need is you scratching off a symbol that'll quadruple the next mob's strength."

The cat sighed. "Or, I can scratch off a symbol, and I will get 5,000 coins, Carl. Why must you always be so pessimistic?"

"Donut. Like it said, luck goes both ways. We'll talk about it later."

"Fine," she said. I placed the ticket in front of her, and she huffed as it disappeared into her inventory. "What does yours do?"

My ticket was the same size, but it only had five spots to scratch off. It was red on one side and pink on the other. A small, cartoon dragon sat in the corner, holding a spoon. The dragon's tongue was out, licking its lips. I read the description.

Fireball or Custard?

Scratch off a spot in the midst of battle, and this zany ticket casts a spell at the closest red-tagged mob! Each spot has a 50/50 chance. Will it cast a level-15 Fireball? Will it cast a glob of delicious, healing Strawberry Custard? Who knows! Either way, the results will be a hoot! Thirty minute cooldown between scratches.

"I love custard!" Donut cried after I showed her the ticket. She looked up at the Bopca Protector, whose name was Qwist. "Get me custard."

"Yes, Princess. Right away, Princess. What flavor?" the Bopca asked.

Donut had finished the custard by the time the show premiered. She'd chosen strawberry, turned her nose up at it, and went with a vanilla. We watched now as the disaster porno half of the show ended and the next part started. It was nothing new. The African warriors had finally run out of ammo. Several were using their AK-47s as clubs, but a few now had bows and arrows or swords. Lucia Mar was tearing her way through the dungeon. She had four player-

killer skulls by her name now, but they didn't show why or how that had happened.

Interestingly, I noticed for the first time that neither of her rottweilers had any skulls or stars by their names. It was because they were pets, I realized. Donut had originally been listed as a pet, but she'd transformed into a crawler early on. Weird.

The crossbow-firing Valkyrie woman and her ever-growing crowd of female warriors were also killing their way through the dungeon. They'd named their group Brynhild's Daughters. The woman's name was Hekla, and the announcer gave a short history of her home country of Iceland. The AI was throwing loot at her to emphasize the Nordic shieldmaiden persona she was forming, including a ridiculous, glittering breastplate that seemed more apt for the cover of a harem fantasy novel than appropriate dungeon armor.

"She's amazing," Donut whispered. "We should hook up with her group."

"Something tells me I wouldn't be too welcome," I said.

The show ended with a short description of the issues with the bathrooms and some bullshit explanation why they had been forced to implement the rage elemental trap.

"Yeah because piss is worse than blood and guts and whatever that is that comes out of the grubs," I said.

It replayed the scene from the beginning of the episode with Jack whipping it out. It continued, showing Yolanda's death in gruesome, slow-motion detail. It showed me flying up to the ceiling, then hopping to my feet and running upside-down, Matrix-style. Then me picking Mrs. McGibbons up and making it into the room with a millisecond to spare. I jumped out of the room brandishing the boom jug.

The show paused, showing the recipe of the Carl's Jug O' Boom. My mugshot appeared briefly with **Added to the Dungeon Codex** stamped over it.

The scene resumed, showing me tossing the jug at the back of the monster before slamming the door. Its health plummeted almost 25%. The six-legged, black badger skull thing screamed, momentarily stunned by the attack. It took a good ten seconds

before it recovered, jumping up and resuming its attack against the door. It shrieked in ear-splitting fury as it healed itself. The healing moved much more slowly, I noted, thanks to the napalm-like effect of the boom jug.

It ended with Donut saying, "Do you think it's gonna leave?"

The show snapped off, and nobody said anything.

"He really did have a weird-looking dick," Chris said after a moment.

Imani walked up to him, wrapped her arms against the large man and started laughing and crying at the same time.

Hello Crawlers,

Short message today. The dungeon is humming along nicely. Thanks again for your support. We have a lot of interest already in the new patron-bidding program. So please keep up the good work!

We have a few changes to announce.

If you've watched the recap episode that just aired, you can see our penalties regarding the bathrooms have been a rousing success. The penalties will remain in place for the remainder of this floor, but I'm happy to announce they will be removed upon the collapse of this floor. Thank you everyone for your cooperation.

The Satan's Lil' Hedgehogs mob have been removed and placed on a deeper floor. Their armor-piercing quill attack has been deemed too strong for this floor by the system AI. Apologies to all those affected. We've had a few complaints about the proliferation of the grub mobs. This is not a bug and is by design.

Finally, due to the abundance of Crawlers camping in safe rooms upon the collapse of the first floor, we've been forced to make a difficult decision. From now on, all safe rooms and safe areas will close one hour prior to floor collapse. Any Crawler who is in a designated safe area will be teleported to just outside that area at one hour prior.

As always, kill, kill, kill!

On the message board, a new timer appeared, just below the **Time to Level Collapse** timer.

Time to Safe Room Closure. It was one hour faster than the level timer.

I met eyes with Brandon, who looked stricken. At that moment I knew he'd been thinking the same thing as me, that it was time to just give it up.

Donut: Our views! Carl, our views!

Outside, the door stopped bashing itself in. It was oddly quiet. I looked up at the minimap. The mass of grubs had reached the hallway, and the elemental finally noticed them. It left the door and tore through them as I watched. It followed the line of red dots around the corner and disappeared down the hallway. I had a moment to think, *shit, we should've been ready to run*, but it was over in less than a minute. The thousands of red dots were just gone.

The description stated the elemental dissipated after it claimed 666 souls, whatever that meant. I was hoping that the grubs counted toward that number.

They didn't.

The elemental returned to the door, thrashing and smashing, trying to get back in.

If we had run, it would have followed us. Even if we'd used the Chopper, there was no way we'd have gotten away. Not unless we'd split up and gone in different directions. And even then, it probably would've gotten us.

The map seemed to flicker for a moment, and a long line of Xs appeared where the grubs had all died. Already more red dots appeared, moving toward their fallen brothers and sisters.

On the map, near the stairs, just a quarter mile away a group of fifteen red dots sat. I hadn't noticed them before. I hovered over the icons.

Grub – Pupa Stage.

A counter, currently at just under 10 hours, was ticking away next to their names.

I remembered the scene from the recap episode. The level 93 mob, after sliding down the hall, had been hurt by my boom jug. It'd taken almost a quarter of its life away before it healed itself.

Then, I remembered something else. It was something Rory the shamanka, the one with all the piercings on her face, had told us. I hadn't thought much about it at the time. I looked down at Donut.

Carl: The plan has changed. We can't wait for my shield to cooldown.

"Come on, Donut," I said out loud, pushing a table away in the corner of the restaurant. We were going to need a lot of space.

"What're you doing?" Brandon asked, standing from his table.

I pulled a bunch of items from my inventory, piling it on the floor. The round free weights clanged loudly as they hit the tiles.

"I need your help," I said.

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We still had some cans of Agatha's spray paint, and I painted "Mother of All Bombs" on the side of the contraption.

It took us about five hours to finish building the launcher. Brandon pointed out MOAB actually stood for "Massive Ordnance Air Blast," but his brother said, "Don't be that guy."

"It doesn't matter," Brandon said. "The name is still wrong. When they say 'Mother of all bombs,' they mean one giant bomb. Not whatever this thing is. You should call it the Bomb Chicken or something."

"It's too late," I said, indicating the spray paint. "I've already named it. Besides, I like the name. It's a play on words."

"Well, I'm going to call it the Bomb Chicken whether you like it or not," Brandon declared.

I'd discovered something interesting while building the device. This should've been obvious earlier, but it hadn't even occurred to me. In the safe room, all of my sticks of dynamite were harmless. I could pull them out, and under status they had **Inert While in Safe Room**, followed by a parenthesis stating their real status. Their status still ticked down while being handled, and I didn't want to tempt fate enough to find out what would happen when that status reached zero, but I was relatively certain they wouldn't blow.

Brandon stepped back now, admiring our work.

"Do you really think this is going to kill it?" he asked, suddenly serious.

"Not a chance," I said. "That thing is level 93. It ain't going to like this too much, but there's no way it'll be enough. The babies will slow it down, though."

Brandon gave me a sour look. "If it's not going to kill it, then why are we doing this?"

"It's all part of the plan," I said.

"Wait. What, exactly, is the plan?" he asked. He waved at my contraption. "I thought this was the plan."

"Like I said, it's part of it, but it's not all of it. I can't tell you the rest," I said, pointing up at the ceiling, which had become the universal gesture for "The assholes are listening."

Since this scheme involved using a dungeon exploit, I wanted to keep it in my head. Even Donut didn't know the full extent. Mordecai told us that the viewers couldn't see our private chats, but Borant and the dungeon AI could. I didn't want to risk them changing the rules on us at the last second.

Because that would really suck. Not that I'd live long enough to complain about it.

We needed to get safely into the hallway. So the first component of this insane scheme was also one of the most terrifying parts.

My first suggestion was to wait for the grubs to regroup and get close enough for the rage elemental to go hunting them again. But the grubs were painfully slow, and more and more of them were hitting the pupa stage, meaning they were no longer moving around.

Imani came up with a bold solution. "Why don't we just open the damn door?" she said.

This was hours ago, right when we started building the MOAB.

We all looked at each other. I immediately grasped what she was saying. The idea was horrifying, but she was right. We were in a safe room. Mobs would teleport away. Not far away, according to Mordecai, but they would still be ejected.

"Well, shit," I said, putting down my goblin riveter. "Maybe we don't need to build this thing at all."

So we tested it. We moved everyone to the other side of the restaurant, near the entrance to the sleeping chambers. I didn't know what was trembling more, me or the door. If we were wrong about this...

I walked up, and I hesitantly reached for the exit. The moment I turned the handle, the door burst inward, and a giant claw raked at me, coming at my face as I flew back into the room.

Thwum. The sound of the monster teleporting away was odd, like that of an electrical generator turning on.

"Holy crap, that worked," I said, sitting up. My eyes searched the map, looking for it. I didn't see it anywhere.

But a moment later, my relief turned to dread as I saw the dot rocketing toward us. It'd come from the main hallway. "Shit, it's really booking it. It remembers where we are."

"Keep the door open," Imani said. "See if the dungeon sends it further away this time. Or if it learns."

It was maybe 90 seconds before it entered our hallway again. It killed any grubs it passed, but it seemed to ignore the ones in the pupa stage. It roared and shrieked, came to the door, and once again tried to swipe at me.

Again, it teleported away. This time it came from another hallway down, but it appeared to have still been teleported out into the main hallway. We tried it several times. Each time, the elemental took anywhere from 75 to 120 seconds to return. It was clear the monster was unintelligent, nothing more than the single-minded embodiment of rage. We eventually closed the door, not wanting to create any more grub corpses.

I sighed, going back to work on the MOAB.

Now, hours later, it was finally time to put my idea to the test. I was less confident about this than I was with the whole portable fortress idea. That time I knew we faced a mob meant to be killed. This was different. This was something meant as a punitive action, a punishment. It wasn't meant to be fair, to be survivable.

The chopper hummed merrily away, aimed directly at the exit to the chamber. With Donut's sidecar, it was too big to get through the door. We'd been forced to remove it. Instead, we added the newly-

built bike trailer, affixing the tall MOAB to it and adding the equally-tall seat for Donut behind the launcher. She'd have to duck in order for us to leave the room. She sat there now, facing backward, a look of grim determination on her fuzzy face, like a tailgunner in a WWII bomber.

"I think I like Bomb Chicken better, too," Donut announced.

"Too late," I said. I nodded at Imani, who stood at the door, ready to pull it open.

"Okay," she said. "I'll count down from three."

Donut: EVERYONE IN THE UNIVERSE IS WATCHING THIS. I JUST HIT ONE TRILLION VIEWS, CARL. ONE TRILLION.

"Focus, Donut," I said, not bothering to use the chat.

"One!" Imani yanked the door open. The massive, terrifying rage elemental lunged, and as always, teleported away. The space where it had occupied shimmered, crackling like superheated air.

I pushed hard on the pedals of the bike, and we rushed into the hallway. Everything out here was blackened and turned to ash. It smelled like burning garbage, reminding me of the Hoarder's chamber. There was no sign of the train cars or the remaining wheelchairs and walkers that had been abandoned. The only thing that had survived was the long, 300 foot length of glittering, magical chain, which I had grabbed earlier.

Behind me, Imani slammed the door. I pedaled down the hall, turning the throttle. The trailer was built using broken hunks of wood, and the spare chopper wheels we'd looted from the goblins. I could barely feel its weight. It squeaked loudly, but it didn't bounce under the press of the MOAB. We passed the nearby intersection and furiously increased speed until we reached the next one down, another two hundred meters away. We angled ourselves so we faced this new hallway, and we waited.

"Here it comes," Donut said a moment later. The dot appeared, and the elemental rushed down the distant hall, moving like an earth-destroying meteor sent from the heavens.

"As soon as it rounds the curve, we go," I said. We had to make sure it saw us. If it stopped at the door again, we'd have to loop

around to gain its attention, using the closer hallway. I didn't want to do that. The less corners we had to take with this trailer, the better.

Far down the hallway, a little more than a quarter of a mile away, it appeared, running full tilt.

I didn't have to worry about whether or not it was going to see us. It saw. The horned badger skull skidded to a stop, looking in our direction. It shrieked with indignation and resumed its gallop, headed straight at us.

Holy shit that thing is fast. I pumped my legs.

"Go! Go!" Donut cried. Thanks to my Chopper Pilot skill and the help of the throttle, we could reach top speed in seconds. It still felt as if we weren't moving at all. The bike could go about 25 miles per hour before it got too hot. The elemental was like a cheetah. Unimpeded, it would run us down in seconds.

We hurtled down the hallway. "Fire the first baby!" I cried.

Brandon was correct that the title MOAB was misleading.

The apparatus wasn't a bomb at all, but a device designed to launch bombs. Multiple types of bombs.

"It's the bombs' mother," I'd said. "Get it? And we can name the bombs its babies."

None of them had been impressed.

"You need to stick to punching things and blowing them up," Donut had said. "Leave the creative to me."

The device wasn't complicated, but it had to be precisely built, especially here with the bumpy hallways. It was little more than a curved, ski-jump-like ramp made from a pair of spare-part chopper wheel wells, with a pair of half-pipe channels at the end to keep the "babies" steady, and tiny, shock-absorbing front-wheelchair coasters for the very end of the ramp, keeping the end of the conduit inches from the ground.

As a kid, I'd had something similar for my matchbox cars. You dropped the cars into the top, and gravity took care of the rest. They'd plummet down the waterslide-like ramp, gaining speed, hitting the ground at full throttle. If you built the ramp correctly, especially the part at the end, the cars would ease onto the flat

surface, still accelerating by the time they were halfway across the room.

It'd taken us several hours to get this correct. We had very little space to test this in, but thanks to the know-how from Brandon and Chris, I was confident that the babies would work as intended.

We knew this monster had at least two attacks. The claws and the reverse-gravity spell. We also knew that the gravity spell had a somewhat limited range. So in order to get to our destination, we needed to keep the elemental far away long enough to get there.

"Bombs away!" Donut cried. She pulled the wheeled, back-heavy bomb from her inventory. It fit perfectly into the grooves, and she gave it a nudge. It rocketed down the ramp, hit the ground with a bump, and continued straight. From our perspective, it zoomed away. It didn't rear up like I had feared.

"Brandon, you beautiful son of a bitch!" I yelled as I watched the first bomb roll away over my shoulder.

I'd wanted to put the weight in the front, but Brandon had insisted that was a mistake, that the bombs would flip. Instead, he'd drawn with his finger on the table, explaining how to weigh them down. He'd then gone off on some Isaac Newton math bullshit. He'd said the babies wouldn't go as far back as they would've if I'd been sitting still. He talked about some *Mythbusters* episode where they shot a soccer ball out the back of a moving car, and the ball had dropped straight to the ground. I told him I didn't care as long as the bombs were far away from the chopper when they went off.

After several frustrating, failed attempts to automate the launching process, we'd come up with a solution. Once Donut was seated at the correct height, she could pull the "babies" out of her inventory, and they'd emerge right on the platform. Each bomb was the size of a snowboard, but it was shaped and weighted like a champion pinewood derby car. Wheels had suddenly become a precious commodity, but we had something almost as good: free weights. A lot of free weights of different sizes. When tightened and greased properly, they became very effective wheels.

This first baby—"Baby Uno"—was different than the others. It was heavier and bigger. It contained three boom jugs, a clay jug

filled with nothing but goblin oil, and a small jar of gun powder. The last of my hobgoblin pus sat in the middle of the bomb, and I held the magical trigger into my hand now, waiting for Donut's signal.

We had four types of babies: baby uno, boom jar babies, shredder babies, and, finally, oh shit babies.

The oh shit babies consisted of two boom jars with a full-sized gunpowder satchel wrapped in dynamite. Those remained in my own inventory, too dangerous for Donut to touch. They were a last resort, and I prayed we wouldn't have to use them here.

I watched the red dot stream down the hallway, approaching the corner. Far behind us, the heavy bomb coasted to a stop.

"Hang on," I cried, and I jammed on the detonator. There was a maddening five-second delay. I turned my attention forward. "Oh fuck."

We hit the first intersection, filled with the grub pupae, a dozen of them. "What the hell man," I cried, dodging the giant mounds. I wasn't expecting them to be this damn big. Donut cried out as the trailer bumped ominously. Each mound was about the size of a human standing erect. Red and yellow lights flashed underneath the wet, pulsating sacs.

"Drop the bola!" I yelled.

We had two levers next to Donut's chair. The red one and the black one. We'd originally designed these as bomb launchers before we gave up, deciding to just use the more-stable inventory system. But we'd still built two chambers on either side of the MOAB. Donut pulled the black lever, and the bottom of the chamber slid away.

Imani's chain, with heavy weights at either end, dropped away, snaking through the chamber. The monster, hopefully, would get its legs tangled in the thin, unbreakable link. It probably would only impede it for a second or two, but every second counted.

Behind us, the bomb detonated with a ripping, screaming roar. Dust cascaded off the ceiling. It had blown a half-second too late, hitting the monster in the back. I didn't dare look behind me, but I could see on the map it had propelled the monster halfway down the hall, even closer to us. The red dot of the elemental rolled to a stop.

"Drop the boom babies," I cried. This next hall was filled with grubs, mostly level threes, which I hadn't yet fought. These were larger, about twice as big as the regular grubs. They had long, pointed tails that they whipped ineffectively up at us as we passed. The level threes were too big to just run over with the chopper, and I had to dodge them.

Cow-Tailed Brindle Grub. Level 3.

The final form before they hit the pupa stage, the Cow-Tailed Brindle Grub is finally able to defend itself, kind of like the way a toddler holding a plastic baseball bat is able to defend himself.

"The cars are going to hit the grubs," Donut cried. "They're in the way!"

"Do it anyway," I yelled, increasing speed. Below me, the chopper became dangerously hot.

"Bombs away," Donut cried. I heard the distinctive clack of the bomb's wheels locking in place. The torch sizzled as Donut activated it, and it rolled away down the launcher ramp.

Sure enough, the wheeled bomb hit a group of grubs and flipped, crashing and then detonating. A wave of heat washed over me, but I didn't take any damage. We were going fast enough. Barely. The entire hallway lit with blue flames.

"Yes!" Donut cried. "Burn, baby, burn!"

Further behind, the elemental resumed its pursuit. It stopped yet again a moment later. It'd been ensnared by the chain. The monster roared in anger, shaking the very foundation of the world.

"Away," Donut called, dropping another boom baby. Then another. Then a third. We continued to carpet bomb the hallway behind us. If the jugs didn't ignite on their own, Donut hit them with a low-powered magic missile once we were far away enough. She only had to do that a couple times. Most of the cars hit grubs and flipped.

"Whoa!" Donut yelled.

The whole back of the trailer flew up into the air, almost knocking me from my seat. But it crashed down a moment later. A just-launched boom baby flew into the ceiling and exploded.

The elemental had cast its spell, but we'd been too far away. Behind us, the top of the chamber erupted in flames. My head and back burned, and I took a small amount of damage. Donut cried out in pain. She healed herself a moment later with her spell.

"Hold on," I cried. We were almost there, but I had a sharp left coming up. I could see this hallway was filled with more of the pupae. "Like we talked about! Drop a shredder, wait a second, then do another boom."

We screeched around the corner, the trailer skidding. I had to jerk around a set of pupae, rising like stalagmites. We'd only made a few of the gunpowder babies, but I'd made them for this part of the stretch. I had no idea if this would work, but I figured it couldn't hurt.

Donut released the gunpowder and shrapnel-filled bomb. "The shredders." For these, we used a long length of wick. *I* had to light wicks using a lighter, but thanks to Donut's quadruped status, the system allowed her to light them the same way she lit torches, with a mental click. She launched the massive shrapnel grenade. The long wick trailed sparks, like the tail of a rat. The baby crashed into one of the pupa mounds and fell on its side. A moment later, it blew, ripping the pupa to shreds.

I hazarded a glance over my shoulder, just long enough to see several human-sized, hornet-like creatures vomit out of the sacs. The uncooked monsters hit the ground and started convulsing.

I was hoping if I injured the chrysalis sacs, the monsters would come out, and the elemental would waste a valuable second or two ripping them to shreds.

We filled the last stretch of hallway with moonshine and fire. The elemental seemed to be moving more cautiously, but it continued to follow. Ahead, the stairwell materialized.

A warning appeared, blinking ominously just below the handlebars.

Goblin Copper Chopper – Boiler Breach Imminent.

"*Goddamnit*," I growled. I'd pushed it too hard. We had 15 seconds. I tried to remember which of the valves to turn to release the pressure. I couldn't.

"Fuck it," I said, increasing the speed.

"I thought we were going to the other safe room!" Donut cried. "We're not going down the stairs, are we?"

We entered the large, round room. The stairwell loomed before us, a hole in the ground with a bright light shining directly up into the air. All around us, pupae pulsed, most of them ringing the walls. There were dozens of them now. All had timers over their heads, some of them only at a few hours.

The actual stairs faced the wrong direction, but that was okay. There was no railing or barrier. This was nothing but a hole in the ground, as wide as one of the tunnels, just like it had been on the surface.

"Oil slick! Then jump," I cried.

"Jump? Are you crazy!"

"Goddamnit, Donut. Do it!"

She pulled the red lever, and the bottom of the second chamber fell away. Champagne-colored oil sprayed onto the floor.

"Jump," I cried. Donut and I both leaped from the fast-moving vehicle. It continued its forward trajectory, spilling oil onto the rocky ground, plummeting into the deep stairway hole. The chopper disappeared from view. It crunched, followed by a relatively small explosion. Black smoke billowed into the air.

"What did you do that for?" Donut yelled as we both scrambled to our feet.

"Get your *Puddle Jumper* spell ready," I said. I pointed behind us, at the far end of the distant hallway, the opposite direction we'd come. Mordecai's guild room was just around the corner from there. "Send us there. Cast it when I tell you."

"Okay," she said, her voice filled with uncertainty. "Don't forget, it's ten seconds!"

The elemental had, indeed, stopped to eviscerate the hornet creatures in the hall, giving me just enough time to think about how much of a crazy asshole I was. *The stairs are right there. We can just go down and be safe. If this doesn't work, you are dead*.

I stood right at the edge of the hole.

"Cast now!" I cried.

Why not, I thought, and I pulled one of the oh shit babies from my inventory and gently placed it down on the ground in front of us. It sat there like a giant skateboard. Two boom jars, gunpowder, and a ring of dynamite.

Nine seconds.

"It's coming!" Donut screamed, her voice more terrified than I ever heard. She leaped to my shoulder.

Eight seconds.

In front of us, the rage elemental emerged from the billowing smoke of the hall. It was a beast from hell, huge. Terrifying. A length of chain was still attached to its back leg. To my surprise, the monster's health was in the red. Barely in the red, but it had been more hurt than I expected. It saw us, and it paused.

Five seconds.

It bellowed, long and hard.

I looked up, for the first time, and I realized the ceiling of this chamber, like the borough boss room on the floor above, was very, very high. If it cast *Reverse Gravity* now…

Three seconds.

It charged.

Two seconds.

"Stay with me," I said.

It passed the threshold of the room, and the moment its six legs hit the floor, it started to slide on the oil slick. It barely seemed to notice. It roared as it rocketed toward us, forward fingers ready to slash. I remembered what it did to Yolanda, unraveling her.

We disappeared, reappearing about 500 feet away, down the hall. A horrific, indignant shriek filled the dungeon, followed by the distinctive whoosh of a big-ass explosion. I hit the ground and covered Donut, but it was okay. The bomb was deep in the hole when it went off, and we were far away.

A moment passed. I watched the minimap, looking for signs that the monster had survived.

The dot was gone. Absolute silence followed. My stomach heaved, an aftereffect of the sudden teleportation.

Relief washed over me. I sat down right there on the floor. My heart, which had been oddly calm throughout, was now a jackhammer. My arms felt numb, tingling with the overdose of adrenaline. My entire body trembled.

A moment later, Donut cried in outrage. "We didn't get any experience! Carl, you broke the game!"

"We didn't get any experience because we're not the ones who killed it."

"What?" Donut said. "I don't understand."

I remembered what Rory, the goblin shamanka had told us. It'd only been a few days ago, but it felt like a lifetime. *If we climb down the stairs, we die. You get halfway down, and your body just dissolves. I've seen it myself*.

Mordecai had said something similar once, too. Mobs who dared to attempt to descend didn't teleport away. They died. We'd tricked the monster into the hole. Once it was in there, the dungeon followed its own rules, and it dissolved the elemental.

Unfortunately, the system didn't look too kindly on what we'd done. We hadn't been awarded experience for the kill. I'd received a couple achievements, but not many.

But that was okay. We were still alive. I took in the mass of red grub dots and Xs littering the map. I felt as if I'd been awake for two days straight. I groaned, pulling myself to my feet. We still had a lot of work to do.

Carl: Brandon. Get your people to the stairs. Do it now. The way is safe, but it won't be for long.

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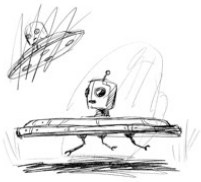

Time to Level Collapse: 4 Days, 6 hours

Views: 1.4 Trillion
Followers: 352.2 Billion
Favorites: 21.4 Billion

I still had plenty of moonshine left, and Donut and I spent the hour torching all the pupae in the large room. I looked up at the map. There was no way we could get to them all. We were going to have to hightail it out of here.

With the unfortunate destruction of the chopper, our travel options were now limited. I had enough crap in my massive inventory to probably build another one, but I didn't know what I was doing with the boiler part of the mechanism. Hopefully we could find another set of goblins to help us. Or better yet, find something more reliable.

About forty minutes after we killed the elemental, the tattered remains of Meadow Lark entered the chamber. Brandon, Chris, and Imani had built a second, less elegant transportation system. There were 36 residents left, and they were piled into three separate

shopping-cart-like contraptions, built with chopper wheels and hunks of wood. Chris and Imani pushed the two larger "people buckets" as Brandon called them. This time, both of them strained with the effort. Brandon, whose strength was nowhere near the other's, also awkwardly pushed a group of six people into the room.

"We didn't need your directions," Brandon said. "There's a long trail of scorched hallway that leads directly to this hole." He paused. "There are a lot of those chrysalis things out there. You sure you don't just want to come with us?"

"I'm sure," I said. I looked into the smoking hole. "Do me a favor, though, and pick up anything you find down there. There probably isn't much left."

He nodded. I reached out to shake his hand, and he pulled me into a hug. "You two take care of yourselves, okay?"

I grinned. "You do the same."

I said my goodbyes to Chris and Imani. I found Donut on the lap of Mrs. McGibbons, purring away.

"Barry?" she asked as I walked up. "Barry, where are we?"

"We're in the dungeon, Mrs. McGibbons. It's me, Carl. You're going down to the next floor."

She looked at me, her eyes registering confusion. Once again, I felt a wave of doubt wash over me. Was this the right thing? What else could we do?

"The dungeon?" she asked. "Like a sex thing?"

"I don't know if I'm ever going to see you again," I said, kneeling down. She sat in the people bucket, looking about, eyes wide. "I wanted to say goodbye."

She reached up and touched my cheek. At that moment, she looked every day of her 99 years. Her hands were worryingly cold. "We should have had children, Barry. I wish I hadn't talked you into working so hard."

I grasped her hand. "It's okay. It's going to be okay." I remembered my mom saying the same thing to me the day she had left. It had been a lie then, and it was a lie now.

"I think I've had too much to drink," she said. "Or I'm having another one of those acid flashbacks. This cat keeps talking to me."

I smiled. “Goodbye, Mrs. McGibbons.”

Imani was the last to go down the ramp. It’d gone quickly. She waved, unsmiling at us. I waved back, and we turned away.

“Do you think we’ll ever see them again?” Donut asked.

“I don’t know,” I said.

We angled toward the quadrant with the kobolds, killing all the grubs and burning all the pupae we passed. Earlier, I had noted a safe room deep in the kobold quadrant, along the back side of the area. We would grind our way toward it and try to get a nap before we had to do this next interview.

Hopefully the hornet monsters, when they hatched, would remain in their area.

Kobold Rider – Level 5

Here’s an interesting fact. The DNA of a kobold and the DNA of a chihuahua are almost identical. That should tell you almost everything you need to know about these yappy little assholes.

Small, angry, think they are bigger than they really are, there is nothing more terrifying than a pack of these little bastards charging at you across the battlefield, at least in their own minds. But don’t underestimate them, either. They are fearless, they are intelligent, and they bite first, ask questions later.

Their mounts, the Danger Dingoes, should probably worry you.

The last time I’d played *Dungeons and Dragons* had been aboard the USCGC *Stratton.* I remembered kobolds as little, lizard-like monsters. In the game I’d played, the dungeon master had them as minions of a small dragon. Here, they were different. They, indeed,

looked like goddamned armored chihuahuas. They were about the same size as the barking little dogs, but they stood upright and wore chainmail armor that seemed to be made out of beer can tabs. Each wore tiny metal caps with a spike on them.

Most of them were armed with long, angry-looking spears with feathers hanging off the end. They wielded them like lances.

"Dogs riding dogs," Donut spat as the pair of Danger-Dingo-riding kobolds charged at us. "I've had nightmares like this." She hissed and fired a pair of magic missiles, hitting the mounts. The level-five dingoes stumbled, rolling forward. I formed a fist as the two kobold riders went flying. The first one crunched onto the ground, breaking his neck. The second bounced up, yapping, teeth frothing. It charged at me. I punched it, and it splattered against the wall. The things were more solid than they looked.

I fell back as one of the dingoes lunged at me. This one had a **Septic** debuff blinking over its head. This monster's snarl and bark was deeper, more terrifying than that of its rider. Their white face paint made them appear even more frightening. Donut leaped onto the back of the dingo, ripping with her rear claws as she hopped high into the air and fired a third magic missile at the still-recovering second mount, killing it. The dingo on top of me shuddered, then fell over, dead. Stinking blood and gore washed over me as I pushed it off.

Donut landed deftly next to me and started licking her paw.

"That was pretty slick," I said, brushing myself off. My entire front was soaked in gore. "You're getting a lot better at that."

"I think I have a bonus to damage against canine creatures," she said. "That reminds me, I saw something weird earlier, and I forgot to tell you about it. It was a new tab that said 'Racial benefits,' but it was only there for a second. It blinked and disappeared."

"That *is* weird," I said. Instinctively, I pulled up my own menu, and I didn't have anything like that.

The safe room was just around the corner. After we obliterated the kobold and dingo corpses, we headed toward it. This was another one of the non-manned rooms. The room appeared to have once been some sort of industrial kitchen, but with all the appliances

removed except a large, walk-in freezer that still was in working order. We inspected the giant refrigerator, but it was empty.

A stainless steel counter stood underneath the set of screens, and on the counter was a plain, metallic toaster, surrounded by a pile of crumbs. It didn't seem to be plugged into anything, but I couldn't lift it up, either. Up on the screen it read, **Free Mana Toast! One per Crawler!**

I pressed down the little handle, and a moment later it popped up. A burned triangle of toast jumped out, landing on the counter. I picked it up and smelled it. I examined its properties.

Mana Toast.

This is toast.

It refills your mana. That's it. Nothing more. Fuck you.

"Well, that was unnecessary," I muttered. I gave my piece to Donut, who tucked them both away into her inventory.

The room also contained a drinking fountain, a couple chairs and cots, and a set of bathrooms. As had become our custom, we checked both of the bathrooms out. They were empty, but someone had clearly been here before us. The toilet paper had all been taken, and the shampoo dispenser in the woman's shower had been emptied. The floor was wet, like someone had recently taken a shower.

Mukta (Admin): Crawlers Carl and Princess Donut. You are to be transported to your interview in ten minutes. Prepare yourselves.

Mukta?

Donut: WHO ARE YOU? WHERE IS ZEV?

Mukta (Admin): Your Outreach Associate has been put in a time out. She will return to you tomorrow. I am her substitute until then.

I glanced up at the clock. We had eight hours until the next episode. That wasn't right.

Carl: We weren't supposed to go for another couple hours.

Mukta (Admin): Administrator Zev had you scheduled on a program called *Dungeon Crawl Tactics*. I have overridden

her decision and picked a better program for you. This one is paying a higher fee. Do not worry, it is similar to the other one. It is still round-table style. Close enough at least. They still offer gifts to the participants.

Carl: We were promised the right to refuse interviews. I don't want to go on this one.

Mukta (Admin): You seem to be under the impression that you have a say in this, crawler.

Donut: WHAT DID ZEV DO? WHY IS SHE IN A TIME OUT?

The message clicked away, and the chat disappeared from our log. There was no way to respond or initiate a new message.

"Carl, I'm not ready!" A brush appeared in front of her. "Brush me, quick!"

The front of my jacket was still covered in dingo gore. I moved to the bathroom to clean myself off the best I could. "I'll get to you in a minute."

"I don't like this," I said a few minutes later as I brushed a knot out of Donut's fur. This was my first time doing this since we'd come to the dungeon. I had a quick memory, of Bea teaching me how to properly brush the cat. The first time I'd ever done it, Donut had yowled and tried to disembowel me. Bea and I had fallen over ourselves laughing at the indignant look on the cat's face. It had taken months before she'd sit still and let me do it.

We only had a couple minutes, and I spent it looking at the handful of achievements I'd received from our rage elemental gambit. Donut actually had several more than I did, all of them bomb-themed ones I'd already received. She didn't waste time opening the associated boxes just yet, instead opting to use her precious few minutes cleaning herself.

Most of my own bomb-themed skills moved up to level nine. I now had a handful of mechanic and construction-themed skills as well. I received two achievements of note:

New achievement! Grease Monkey!

Don’t get ahead of yourself, Dale. You built and deployed a wheeled device. When the primitive humans in Mesopotamia made the first wheel, they probably thought they were hot shit, too. It still took them another 5,000 years after that to invent the toilet.

***Reward*: You’ve received a Silver Mechanic’s Box!**

New achievement! You call that a trap?

A mob has been injured because of something you purposely left lying around the dungeon. From scattered Legos to spiked pits to buckets of flesh-devouring Skinner Ants to dimensional rifts that instantly boil all the blood in one’s body, the art of trapmaking has a celebrated and storied history in the annals of *Dungeon Crawler World*.

So if you’re going to do it, you better do it right. Whatever it was that gave you this achievement, it was probably something stupid. This will help you make the next trap more… exciting.

Remember: If you don’t make it titillating, we will.

***Reward*: You’ve received a Gold Sapper’s Box!**

I was a bit confused about what, specifically, gave me the trap achievement. I knew Donut had received this one, too. I guessed it was from either dropping the chain or the oil slick. Probably not the bombs, which were placed in another category.

The mechanic’s box gave me a tool called a Gorgon Marital Aid. It was shaped like a spatula. “What the hell is this?” I muttered, pulling up its properties.

Gorgon Marital Aid

A favorite amongst intergalactic porn stars, this is a hardening and de-hardening tool. May only be used at a workbench. Assists in fusing joints or creating varying

degrees of plasticity in otherwise rigid materials without affecting material strength.

That seemed like a pretty useful tool. I put it in my inventory next to my goo-inator 3000.

The sapper's box contained two items. A Sapper's table that practically knocked me over when it appeared. It was a table just like my engineering and alchemy table. The description noted that explosive items or traps created at the table didn't lose stability or couldn't be prematurely set off.

The second item in the box was a trap-building item. There were ten of them, and each one was nothing more than a tiny black box the size of a dime with a long length of wire attached.

Proximity Trigger

Trigger Warning! Traumatizing content! Using a Sapper's Table, the highly-valuable Proximity Trigger may be attached to any non-static trap. Allows for the establishment of activation conditions, including countdowns, mob-type triggers, etc.

Sure enough, the moment I put the item in my inventory, it placed itself near the top of the list in terms of value, right behind that ridiculous Fireball or Custard lottery ticket. And I now had ten of them.

After all of that, my level was still stuck at 11. It was near the edge of 12, but it had barely budged since the fight with Krakaren. The plan was, for now, to kill off the kobolds and then move out of the area. I was hoping to be at least level 13 by the time we hit the stairs.

Mukta (Admin): Transferring now.

Before I even had the chance to finish my thought, we disappeared and reappeared.

Donut, who had been sitting on a chair, reappeared two feet in the air. She yowled in surprise and fell. Her metallic crupper clinked onto the boat's deck. The ground roiled. As always, my HUD snapped off.

We were on another boat, one much smaller than the last one. There were no windows and no doors. There were no features at all

other than a pair of chairs that sat cramped together at one end of the room. The place was about the size of a large walk-in closet. I could reach up and touch the ceiling, which seemed to be made of plastic. The room smelled of salt water and was about twenty degrees cooler than the dungeon.

A floating frisbee thing descended from the low ceiling. The jet-black, metallic disk hummed. A single blue light flashed on the edge. It spoke in a soothing female, robotic voice.

"My name is Mexx-55. You are in a rental trailer owned and operated by Senegal Production Systems, Unlimited. This trailer is used by multiple tunnel productions related to the crawl. For this session, use of these facilities has been leased by the program *Death Watch Extreme Dungeon Mayhem*. Sit in the provided chairs and keep your limbs to your side while the table generates. The holo will commence in 60 seconds."

"No green room?" Donut said, looking around, outraged. "No snacks?"

"Please sit down," Mexx-55 repeated.

"What's the host's name?" Donut asked.

"The Maestro," Mexx-55 said. Her previously-emotionless voice hinted an air of distaste.

"*Death Watch Extreme Dungeon Mayhem*?" I muttered, moving to the chair. The moment we sat, Donut's seat raised up. A table formed out of the wall, grinding in place in front of us. It was only about two feet wide. "That's the stupidest name I've ever heard."

"Yeah, wait until you see the show," Mexx-55 said before rising up into the ceiling.

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"I'm going to vomit," Donut said as the floor heaved. "I'm going to puke on television, Carl."

"You'll get used to it," I said. "I think when the holo starts, it stabilizes. Just breathe."

"I don't like puking. I don't want to puke!"

I laughed. "Really? I seem to recall you had a thing for vomiting on my pillow."

"That was different. I did that on purpose."

"I knew it! I fucking knew it."

Donut made a gagging noise. "The last place didn't bounce around this much."

"The seas were calmer, and it was a bigger boat," I said. "Breathe."

The dark, heaving room flickered, and the lights turned on, revealing an audience. They had no reaction to our sudden appearance, and I suspected we weren't yet visible to them. The sensation of movement was suddenly much more muted. It was still there, but the holo had some sort of compensation effect.

I looked about the suddenly-bigger room. A table floated before us, much larger than the actual table in the trailer. This table curved, shaped like a smile. We sat in the second and third seat. To our left was a larger, more ornate chair. It was made of a dark wood with what appeared to be red velvet cushions. The arm rests were made

of pig skulls. Four more plain, empty chairs appeared to our right, curving along the table.

I looked over my shoulder, and the backdrop was an elephant-like monster with three spike-covered trunks. The animation swung its head back and forth in a loop with the word "Extreme" exploding over and over in the midst of the image.

The crowd suddenly started screaming and cheering. I snapped my attention forward, but I couldn't see what they were hollering at. Their attention was to my left. I realized the show had started, and the host had appeared, but for whatever reason, we couldn't see him or her yet. This was a different setup to Odette's show. I suspected we'd just magically appear when it was our turn.

This went on for several minutes. The crowd started chanting something. It took me a moment to understand what they were saying. "Die, die, die," they seemed to be repeating. They were watching a video, I realized, their attention focused on the main screen, which for me, still showed the elephant graphic. They burst into screams of pleasure as whatever it was they were watching, died. "Glurp, glurp!" they screamed. "Glurp, glurp!"

I spent a few moments examining the crowd, who continued to laugh and cheer. The audience's makeup was fairly similar to Odette's crowd, with a glaring difference that made my stomach sink.

"Oh fuck," I grumbled when I finally saw it.

I focused on a group of humans sitting in the second row, hooting and screaming and laughing boisterously. There was a cruel air to their laughter. It was almost a tangible thing, like a black, malevolent cloud that embraced the presence of the entire audience. I was reminded of that day when my dad and his friends broke my slingshot. They'd been firing rocks at squirrels, laughing in a similar way.

These humans in the second row were all male, and they were all about twelve or thirteen years old. It seemed the entire audience consisted of young, pre-and early teen males. One of them was wearing a red shirt that said "GLURP!" on it.

"Glurp, glurp!" the audience yelled. "Glurp, glurp!"

"Donut," I said, talking quickly. "This crowd is going to be a lot different than the last one. They're all kids. I don't think they're the happy, cartoon-watching kind, either."

"Carl, we've gone over this," Donut said. "You sit there and look angry, and I do the talking. Remember?"

To our left, the host suddenly appeared. There was no warning. He showed up in mid-sentence. A floating note appeared in front of me. **ON AIR SOON. BE READY.**

"… know you little cunts are gonna love today's surprise panelists! Your Maestro had to bang some slimy mudskipper tail to pull this one off. But nothing is too good for Maestro's piglets! Suck it! Suck it good, piglets!"

"Glurp, glurp!" the audience screamed. "Glurp, glurp!"

The host—the Maestro—was an orc. A huge, muscular orc.

He looked a lot like a tuskling, but it was clear this was a different type of the same species. The tusklings were dwarf versions of these guys. Tuskling skin was bright pink, pig-like. The Maestro's flesh was darker, covered in black, bristly hair. He reminded me of a wild boar. His left tusk was completely gold. He stood about six and a half feet tall, built like a tank. A line of earrings circled his left ear. He wore a hot pink, silken shirt, buttoned halfway up, revealing a hairy, well-muscled chest covered in gold chains. I couldn't tell for certain, but I had the distinct impression he was only in his early twenties.

I hated him instantly.

To my right now sat two humans, two men about my age. Both of them were Asian. Their ragged, bewildered look pegged them as fellow crawlers. One of them noticed us and pointed, talking quickly to his companion. I couldn't hear what they were saying, but it seemed like they recognized us. I waved, and they waved back, both of them bowing rapidly.

They turned and also waved at the empty chairs to their right. There was someone there, but we couldn't see who it was.

"So we have six guests today. Two stupid, lame guests. Two VIP surprise guests, and then two more surprise guests for our VIPs. Our VIPs today are so hot, we are—for the very first time—coming to

you live! That is how hard I am working for you. We'll start with the lame guests. Watch this shit, piglets."

A screen appeared in front of us. It showed a party of four crawlers running from a group of ten troglodyte bashers. The lizard monsters were armed with spiked clubs. The crawler group consisted of the two guys sitting next to us, a woman, and a third male. Only the male who wasn't here appeared to be armed. He held a long, odd sword with teeth on it like a saw. None of them wore any sort of armor. They turned the corner and stopped dead.

I felt sick to my stomach, seeing what they faced. Just around the bend was a familiar sight. Five grub pupae sat, blocking their retreat. The middle sac was in the midst of ripping open. A massive hornet burst forth and buzzed into the air. The only resemblance it bore to the brindle grub was the top half of its bug face. The monster consisted of a huge, hornet-like body with a pair of arms with grasping, clawed fingers. It looked at the four crawlers and spat. A glob of white goo shot out and hit the male with the sword. It splattered directly on the man's face. He screamed, falling to the ground, dropping the sword. The glob was like acid. It sizzled and crackled. His pain-filled screeches continued as the troglodytes stopped at the corner, boxing them all in. The other pupae started to pulsate and tear as four more hornets appeared. The woman reached down to pick up the sword. The world on the screen froze.

At first I thought they'd simply paused the scene, but then the two men disappeared. When they vanished, there was a puff of air, and the sword blew a foot away, clattering loudly. Everything else, including the mobs remained frozen.

The crowd burst into a mix of applause and jeers. The two men next us were now visible to the audience.

"You know what time it is, piglets?" the Maestro shouted.

"Death watch! Death watch!" the crowd screamed.

"Okay, so we got two crawlers here. Their full names are quite the snout full, and does it really matter?" Laughter followed. "The fellow with the acne scars is Li Jun and the bald fucker we'll just call Zhang. Say hello, meat."

It took the two men a moment to realize the Maestro was talking to them.

"Hello," Li Jun said. "I don't understand what is happening."

"Okay, so let me catch you up since you're too stupid to figure it out. You're on Death Watch, a segment of my show. That means we just plucked you away from certain death. You're welcome. Before, your plight was hopeless. Now you have a chance to survive. But we'll get to that in a second."

The Maestro waved up at the screen. "You all have been hit with a *Time Freeze* spell, and it will run out just as this episode ends. We have a little game we'd like you to play, to give you the opportunity to live past the next few seconds. Yeah?"

"Okay," Li Jun said, exchanging a look with his companion. "What do we need to do?"

"Death watch! Death watch!" the crowd chanted.

"We're going to show you a series of scenes, and you have to guess if the crawler survives or not. But before we begin, I want to know a little about you guys." The Maestro waved his hand, the stats of the two men appeared floating over both them. Both were level seven. They each had a single bronze star over their heads. Both had a strength of eight, meaning they'd received some sort of enhancement. Also of note was Zhang's constitution, which was at 15, making it one point higher than my own.

"Li Jun," the Maestro said. "Did you know your three companions before the game started?"

The poor man seemed terrified and bewildered. "Yes. Yes, sir. We all work together in a warehouse. All except my sister, Li Na."

"So that doll up on the screen there, the one reaching for the sword. She's your sister?"

"Yes, sir."

The orc nodded thoughtfully. "Would you do anything to save her?"

"Death watch! Death watch!" the crowd screamed.

"What do you mean?" the man asked.

The Maestro ignored him. He turned to Zhang. "And you, Zhang. What do you think about Li Na?"

"What do I think about her? She's my best friend's sister. She's like my own sister."

"And what about your fourth companion? The guy who just got his face spooged on by that Brindled Vespa? He's your friend too?"

"Yes," Zhang said after a moment. The bald man's eyes were fixed on the frozen scene. "He's our manager."

"The big boss man, huh?" the Maestro said. "So, if you were forced to choose between saving him and saving Li Na, you'd pick the girl, right?"

Zhang just looked at the orc, refusing to answer.

"That's okay buddy, you might not have to choose. We're going to play a game. This is how it works. We're going to show you four scenes, and we want you to guess if the crawler is going to live or die through the encounter. If you guess correctly, you will receive a teleport point. When we're done, for every point you have, you can spend it to save yourselves or one of your companions. The recipient of each teleport point will be immediately transferred to the closest safe room. If you decide to throw a point at ol' spooge-face, he will be healed, so don't worry about that. Ready? Good, let's go."

The scene showed a woman running from a giant beaver thing holding a battle axe.

"Fuck this," I said, and I stood from my chair.

"Carl, where are you going?" Donut asked.

"Come on, Donut. This is beyond the pale. Fuck this guy." The table was blocking my exit. I climbed up on it, feeling forward for where the real table ended. I reached it, and hopped down, my legs piercing through the illusion.

A moment later the lights of the chamber snapped back on, and the holo dispersed. Mexx-55 emerged, floating down from her spot on the ceiling. But when she spoke, the voice was different. This was a gruff, male voice. Also an orc if I had to guess.

"Get back in your seat, Crawler," the voice said. "You're scheduled to be on screen after this segment. This show is being tunneled live. We do not have time for tantrums."

"Go fuck yourself," I said.

"Carl, you're going to get us in trouble," Donut said.

"You are ordered to sit," the voice said. "We have paid the appearance fee, and you will participate in the program. If you refuse, we are authorized to drop you into this ocean, drowning you both."

"Bullshit," I said. "You're not Borant, and you're not the Syndicate. There's no way they'd authorize that. We are not participating in this cruelty."

Nothing happened for several moments. Donut jumped up to my shoulder. "You're gonna get us in trouble," she said again, this time more quietly.

"Crawler Carl, this is Administrator Mukta," a new voice said. "You are required to take your seat, or there will be consequences."

"I'll go on as many shows as you want, but we're not doing this one," I said.

"Carl, we will discuss this when you are done. If you do not participate, we *will* accelerate you. There are plenty of other crawlers to show on our program. This is not a bluff."

Deep breath, I thought. *You will not break me. You will not fucking break me.*

"Can that other guy hear me right now?" I asked.

A pause. "No, he cannot," Mukta said.

"As long as I don't talk shit about you guys, will there be consequences for what I say? As long as I participate, I mean?"

Another pause, and this one was longer than before. "They have paid for your appearance. Nothing else."

"All right," I said, "Tell him we want on the show. Now. Before this Death Watch segment ends." Without waiting for an answer, I returned to my seat. The table once again pushed itself out, and the holo resumed.

"Carl, what are you doing?" Donut asked as she settled back in place.

"I'm the one who talks this time," I said.

The studio reformed. The crowd was screaming and laughing. On the screen, a dead man convulsed on the ground as a group of baby-faced winged fairies splashed about in his corpse like it was a kiddie pool.

"Sorry, it looks like you got that one wrong, too. You have two teleport points," the Maestro said. "I need a decision."

Neither of the men said anything.

The Maestro leaned forward in his ornate chair. He smiled wickedly. "I need a decision, or nobody gets saved."

"Then nobody gets saved," Li Jun said. He looked at Zhang. "We die together."

"Aw, isn't that fucking sweet?" the Maestro said. "Very well, if that's what you want. Piglets, should we give them what they want?"

"Death Watch! Death Watch!"

"No, wait," Zhang said. "Save Li Jun and Li Na."

"*No*," Li Jun said. He reached out and put his hand on his friend's shoulder. "We stand together."

A sour look passed across the Maestro's face. He said something, but it was muted. He paused, then nodded. A moment passed, and the cruel smile reappeared on his face.

"We're going to do something a little different, piglets. Our VIP guests have been watching backstage, and it seems like they have something to say."

The crowd screamed its approval.

ON AIR IN TEN SECONDS.

The Maestro was playing this off like this was his idea. "Okay, piglets, my next two guests do not need any introduction. The last you probably saw of these two, they were stuck in a room with a bunch of old fucks. Are they going to escape? Spoiler alert, they just got out. We were going to show what these crazy assholes did to get free, but since they want to suck on it so bad, we're going to bring them on early."

"Glurp, glurp! Glurp, glurp!"

YOU ARE NOW ON AIR.

The studio became brighter, and the crowd went berserk. Donut made a show of licking her paw, looking aloof.

"Crawler Carl and *Princess* Donut," the Maestro said. He drew out the word "Princess," and it dripped with sarcasm. "Piglets, you probably don't know this. These two just broke a record for the most-watched second floor battle in the history of *Dungeon Crawler*

World. If it were me, I would've killed every last one of those geriatric sandbags and reaped the experience, but you know how it is with humans." He looked down at Donut. "And cats, apparently. All that effort, and what did they get? No experience, no real loot." He shrugged. "But you can't argue with results. Carl and Donut, say hello to my piglets."

"We want in on the game," I said, not bothering to greet the crowd. "We want to play Death Watch, too."

The Maestro laughed, an uncertain timbre to it. "That's not how it works, Carl. I knew you were a crazy mother…"

"They have two points. Let's use them to transfer me and Donut to that spot." I looked at the crowd. "Wouldn't that be cool?"

The crowd roared. "Death watch! Death watch!"

It took a moment for the large orc to recover. "People talk about how stupid you are, Carl. But I never realized you were this stupid. If you're feeling suicidal, then…"

I leaned in, pointing my finger. "No, you listen to me, pork boy. If you're going to fuck with people like this, then at least make it fair. They played your game, and they won two points. You said they can use those two points to transfer people away. I don't see why it can't be used to transfer people in, either."

The crowd seemed to love this idea.

"It doesn't work that way," the Maestro repeated. "You're not part of the game. It's against the rules."

"Yeah, fuck the rules." I looked at the crowd. "I think we should tell the rules to suck it. What do you think?"

"Glurp, glurp! Glurp, glurp!"

The Maestro did *not* like his audience glurping for someone else. I recognized that look on his face, of fulminating, under-the-surface rage. I felt a deep satisfaction at that. I didn't know if this was a good idea or an incredibly dumb one, but I felt the urge to keep poking at him.

The truth was, I didn't really want to be transferred to this battle, likely halfway across the world. I felt for these guys, and I wanted to help them. But if helping Brandon and crew taught me anything, it was that I needed to balance it out. There was a difference between

giving aid and sacrificing yourself for people you didn't even know. Still, this felt like the right thing. I knew my argument was nonsensical. I also knew how this sort of crowd thought. This Maestro guy was the worst kind of a bully. A bully with an audience. I had to do something. For the moment I didn't have a plan other than pissing him off as much as I could.

I looked over at the two empty chairs to the right of Zhang and Li Jun. A thought struck me. What had he said? *Two more surprise guests for our VIPs.* So it was somebody we knew. I had a sudden, strong suspicion who it was. If I was right, then I knew I could push the Maestro even further. He had a plan. A cruel plan, and going down this path was doing nothing but detracting from the narrative he was attempting to build. That meant the more I pushed, the more it would piss him off, and the more desperate he'd get to get to steer the conversation back on track.

On television shows and in kids' books, they always repeated the "Bullies will back down when stood up to" mantra. That was utter horseshit. It always has been. That only worked when the one standing up to the bully was stronger than them. The Maestro and I were not on equal footing. But my short confrontation in the production trailer taught me something important. I didn't need to be stronger than him. Donut and I were something better. We were expensive.

I had a hunch that they'd spent a lot of money to get me and Donut on this show, maybe even overextended themselves. We were popular, and Donut had proven herself a reliable guest. The fact they were using a shitty rental trailer and didn't have their own suggested this production ran on the same sort of shoestring budget most YouTube shows had.

The Maestro, seething, said, "You dumb shit. These guys were dead! I saved them. I'm giving them a second chance. Maybe I *will* transfer you into that fight. How would you like that? And we'll transfer the other four out, so you have no backup at all. Your ridiculous luck wouldn't save you then. I don't think you've fought a Brindled Vespa yet. In a second, there'll be five of them in that hallway. You'll be utterly fucked."

I smiled. “You’re too much of a pussy to do it. I dare you.”

“Death watch! Death watch!”

The Maestro looked so angry I thought he might actually cry. I suspected—and hoped—he *couldn’t* do it. If I knew one thing about Borant, it was that they nickel and dimed everything. This Death Watch segment probably cost a lot of money, and that was with regular, low-view crawlers. There was no way they’d be able to send one of the game’s highest-value streams into danger like that.

When people became red-zone angry, they were, in general, unpredictable. That wasn’t true with bullies. I knew this from experience. It was the opposite with bullies. I knew exactly what was about to happen.

I turned to Li Jun and Zhang who sat next to me, mouths agape. I quickly whispered, “Grab your sister and the other guy and run toward the troglodytes and through them. Leave the sword. The lizards are really dumb and slow, and their attention is on the hornets. You’ll only have a few seconds.”

“But,” Li Jun said. “You wanted to trade places…”

The Maestro growled, “You don’t tell me what to do on my own show, meat.” He slammed down on a button on his table, and the two men to my right vanished.

The words “Death Watch Extreme!” appeared on the giant display. The two men appeared back in the scene in the hallway, caught between the hornets and the troglodytes. For a moment, everything remained frozen except the two men.

Zhang reacted first, shouting, “grab your sister!” as he reached down to pick up the fallen third man.

Just as he moved to pick him up, the scene unfroze. The sister stumbled as the sword she was grabbing for was suddenly several feet away. Li Jun grasped her wrist and pointed. “Run!” he cried. The three of them scrambled directly at the crowd of troglodytes, who stood like turkeys, watching the hornets.

The monsters—Brindled Vespas he’d called them—didn’t care who their victims were. Multiple globs of white spit shot out, splashing into the lizards, who in turn raised their clubs and charged at the bugs.

Both groups of monsters ignored the four humans, who managed to slip away and out into the hall. The scene ended with Zhang forcing a healing potion into the mouth of their companion before they slipped into a safe room. The video snapped off to a mix of jeers and scattered applause. The audience's reaction was subdued, as if they weren't sure how to respond.

I looked up at the Maestro, a huge smile on my face.

"Glurp on that, motherfucker," I said.

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"Uh, let's now watch how our two guests escaped that safe room," the Maestro said after the audience's laughter died down.

The stage went dark as the screen replayed our desperate escape from the rage elemental. It showed the scene from the point of view of the hallway, with the chopper bursting out of the room, screeching around the corner, Donut sitting high on the contraption. The audience roared their approval. Next to us, the Maestro screamed and ranted at some unseen producer. It was all muted. The large orc seemed to be out of breath and enraged.

"Carl, you scare me when you get that angry," Donut whispered.

I reached over and scratched her head. "I'm sorry," I said. "I'm not really as mad as I look. I'm just trying to make *him* angry."

"It worked. Now he hates us. I don't like people hating us. Our followers are going to go down."

I grunted. "Yeah, I don't think you need to worry about that. Look, Donut. The show isn't over yet. See those two chairs over there. I think it's…"

"Do you think it's Miss Beatrice?" Donut asked. "Maybe her and her boyfriend?" She gasped. "Or maybe it's Miss Beatrice and Ferdinand."

"No, Donut," I said. "It's not going to be Bea and whoever the hell…"

"Listen here, pukes," the Maestro said, interrupting. He smiled big, but his words held no mirth. He'd calmed himself, probably after

getting some advice from his producer. The audience continued to watch the recap of our escape, oohing and ahhing at the explosions. They couldn't hear this exchange. "This is my fucking show. You need to learn your place."

"You were never a crawler were you?" I asked.

He seemed genuinely offended by the question. He laughed with derision. "You savages are all the same. I come from a civilized system. My family has a long history with the dungeon. We were there when the Syndicate *created* the crawl. We are of gods and royalty." He indicated the tiara on Donut's head. "If you pukes make it to the 9th floor, you'll learn all about what my family can do."

I looked at Donut's small, jeweled tiara, trying to remember the exact description. I hadn't thought about it for several days. The tooltip system didn't work here, but I recalled part of it. It's what gave her ability to imbue the Septic debuff. Because she'd put it on, she'd become a royal member of "The Blood Sultanate." We could only get off the ninth floor if all other members of that family were killed, including the Sultan himself. I had no idea what any of that meant.

I remembered what Mordecai had said. *That… That will be a challenge. You can always leave the party. That crown is on her head, not yours*.

"Your family?" I asked. "Wait, are you guys part of the Blood Sultanate?"

He laughed again. "Do I look like a fucking Naga to you?" He sat straighter. "My family's Skull Clan has been victorious six times out of the last ten Faction Wars. Top three every time. The pitiful Blood Sultanate is almost always the first of the nine to get eliminated. You idiots have been dead since the moment she put on that crown."

I tried to ignore the pit of dread that had formed in my gut. "What about you? Are *you* going to be on the ninth floor?"

On the screen, Donut and I stood at the edge of the hole to the next floor down. The camera was positioned from the POV of the rage elemental. We looked tiny standing there, a trail of black smoke rising behind us. The entire crowd held its breath as the monstrosity charged.

"I will be there. I was of age last season, but the stupid Squim Conglomerate always plays Battle Royale, which doesn't have a Faction Wars or Celestial Ascendancy segment. But I will be there this year. I'm on my way to your stupid planet right now." He pounded his chest like he was a gorilla. "I will be War Leader Maestro of the Skull Clan."

I nodded. It always astounded me how easy it was to get assholes to talk, as long as they were talking about themselves. "So, if you're in the dungeon, what happens if you get hurt? Do you guys really die?"

He scoffed. "You think you could actually…"

The crowd went absolutely apeshit as the scene ended, and the lights snapped back on. Donut stood on her hindlegs and raised her two front paws in the air. "That's how it's done!" she yelled. "Next time, we'll kill that thing ourselves and send pictures to his mama! We'll tell her to… what was it, Carl?"

"Suck it," I said.

"Glurp, glurp! Glurp, glurp!" the audience cried.

The Maestro was back to his sneering, condescending self. His unseen producer was smart enough to explain that having a tantrum during a live program would make this spiral even further out of his control. I sighed. Whatever happened next, it wasn't going to be pleasant. Might as well get it over with.

The Maestro waved for the crowd to quiet down. They eventually did.

"So that's how you did it. You used the dungeon's rules to save yourselves."

I shrugged. "That thing was level 93. We weren't gonna kill it."

The Maestro grinned. "Nobody, not even me, can say you don't have the balls of a Taurin. But a lot of my piglets seem to think you have had it too easy. Some say you've been stumbling your way through the dungeon, only surviving because you're the AI's pet. That happens from time to time, that the dungeon turns a crawler into its bitch." He reached over and scratched at his hairy chest. His fingernails were disgusting.

He continued. “I have two surprise guests for our VIPs. You have any guesses who they might be, meat?”

I put my hand on Donut before she could say anything out loud. The last thing we needed right now was to give the Maestro ammunition to mock her.

“Can they see us now?” I asked, turning to look at the empty chairs.

“They’ve been watching this whole time,” the Maestro said. “And man, they do not like you.”

It didn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out who this was. Other than Brandon and crew, we’d only come across one other group of crawlers. I’d been thinking *maybe* it was Rory and Lorelai, the goblin shamankas. I didn’t know if bringing mobs out of the dungeon was a thing. But I remembered that Zhang and Li Jun had waved at them, and I doubted they’d have reacted like that toward a pair of scary-looking goblins.

“Hi, Frank Q. Hi, Maggie My,” I said. “I see you didn’t find the present I left for you. That’s too bad.”

The Maestro smiled huge and for a terrifying moment, I thought I had guessed incorrectly. *Could it possibly be Beatrice? No*, I decided*. No fucking way*.

“Watch this, piglets,” he said. “Let’s see if they’re right.”

The video started and I relaxed. It was a recap of Frank and Maggie’s journey so far. I watched as the two player killers stumbled into the dungeon. But, curiously, they had someone else with them. A teenaged girl. It showed them coming into a tutorial guild. We watched as their guide—one of those floating brain Mind Horrors—sat the three of them down and told them the only way to survive was to kill other crawlers. The guide had a deep, rumbly voice, unlike anything I’d heard before. It was terrifying. The teenager wept as the guide explained what had to be done. Maggie clutched onto the girl, hugging her tightly.

The scene switched to the girl on the ground, injured and crying. We hadn’t seen what had happened. It looked as if she’d maybe been hit with a glob of Bad Llama lava. Frank was also injured,

convulsing nearby as blood pooled around them. The woman, Maggie, sobbed as she went to her knees in front of the girl.

"Mom," the girl said. "It hurts."

"I know baby," Maggie said. She reached down, and to my utter astonishment, she wrapped her hands around the girl's throat. She choked her own daughter until she died. When it was done, Maggie leaned against the dungeon wall and wailed.

"What the hell?" I asked, astounded. I turned to the empty chairs. "You didn't have to do that. She wasn't dead. She would've recovered."

The recap continued. We were being shown these scenes out of order. This was now something from before the daughter's death. We watched Frank and Maggie and the daughter come across a much larger group. This group included Rebecca W and several other men. Frank and Maggie introduced themselves as a married couple, and the teenager was their daughter, Yvette. They waited until the others' backs were turned, and Frank and Maggie ambushed them. They pulled their guns and shot them all. Yvette cried for them to stop. Rebecca and another man fled, and Frank chased them. It showed the man running directly into some plant mob thing I'd never seen before, and of Frank finally tracking Rebecca down, cornering her in the quadrant with the scatterer bugs. The screen split, showing Yvette screaming while Maggie tried to calm her. One of the other men they'd shot wasn't dead. Maggie put a gun in Yvette's hand, told her to shoot the man, to get the experience. The girl refused.

As I expected, Frank's entire backstory was complete, made-up bullshit. I still didn't know if they were cops or not. I suspected they were. Either way, Rebecca W hadn't been some sort human trafficker. She'd been someone like me. Afraid, and at the end, alone. She'd been betrayed and hunted down by a fellow human. I thought of the woman's naked, stripped-bare body. I shook my head in disgust.

The two had received multiple loot boxes from being player killers, including a ring that gave Maggie an area-of-effect stealth

ability and a potion that imbued Frank with the ability to track down nearby crawlers.

I noted that Maggie's stealth ability worked like my *Protective Shell*. It cast in a static, semi-circle area. It didn't move with them. That was good to know.

I watched as they hunted several other crawlers, most of them people wandering about on their own. Most of them appeared to have been homeless, some elderly. All of them were afraid. All of them had been so happy to see someone else before they were murdered. Yvette was in some of these scenes. She wasn't in others. The girl never participated in the killings.

"The best part is coming up," the Maestro announced.

The video, finally, showed a much abridged version of Donut and me coming across Frank Q in the saferoom and of them attacking us, of them getting frozen. It showed me putting the dynamite in the rat corpse.

But then, I saw something unexpected. My heart sank the moment I realized what was happening.

"Mom?" Yvette asked, coming out of the bathroom. The girl stopped in horror upon seeing both of her parents frozen in the safe room.

Oh. Oh no, I thought. She'd been there. Yvette had been there the whole time. She'd been hiding with her mother under the stealth field.

I see you didn't find the present I left for you. Now I knew why the Maestro had smiled so big when I said that.

I held my breath as the two murderers and their daughter approached the rat corpse. Maggie yelled at Frank not to loot it. He did it anyway. If I remembered correctly, we'd left five items in its inventory: a hunk of rat steak, a skin, a lit smoke bomb, a lit stick of dynamite, and an unlit, unstable stick. Frank only pulled out one item. The lit dynamite stick. He dropped it in surprise, and all three turned to run. A moment passed, and the dynamite went off. Shrapnel blasted the three crawlers. Yvette went down, and so did Frank. A hunk of dislodged rock sheared the man's hand right off.

A llama hadn't given those horrible injuries to the teenaged girl.

I had.

The scene ended, the lights switched on, and Maggie and Frank emerged to our right.

Donut hissed. The crowd's response was mixed. Half cheers, half insults and screams, as if they weren't sure whose side they were supposed to be on. I spent the moment observing the two crawlers. Frank was missing his right hand. But that wasn't all that had changed about him. The man had a hollowed-out, 1,000-yard stare. He looked as if he'd aged ten years in just a few days. *Do I look like that*? His missing hand wasn't a rounded, healed stump like one would expect. It was a straight cut, like he was a mannequin whose hand had been removed.

The woman, Maggie, glared directly at me.

I returned her stare. "You didn't have to kill her," I said when the audience finally silenced. "Why did you do that? To get the experience? She would've healed. Your own daughter? Jesus fuck, lady."

"You don't know," she said to me, spitting the words. "You don't know anything. You didn't get the whole story."

"She wasn't dead yet," I repeated. "She would've healed."

"Fuck you," Maggie said. "You don't know what we've had to do to survive."

"Survive? Your daughter is dead. But it's okay, because you got credit for the kill. I'm sure she'd be so fucking proud," I said.

Maggie leaped from her chair, pulling a black dagger that glowed with a purple halo. She lunged at me.

I didn't flinch. Her jab passed harmlessly through my throat. The dagger dropped away as Maggie cried out in pain, clutching her hand. She'd likely just stabbed the invisible wall of their production trailer.

"Children, children," the Maestro said, plainly enjoying this. He was back on familiar ground. "Clearly you guys have a beef with one another."

Frank whispered something to Maggie, who returned to her chair. He tried to put an arm on her shoulder. She pushed him away.

"As far as I'm concerned, any business I've had with these two has already been transacted," I said. I turned toward Frank and met the man's eyes. The man had changed significantly since the last time we'd seen each other. He looked away and down. "I'm sorry about what happened to your kid. But fuck you. Fuck both of you. She deserved better. We all would've been stronger together. Your game guide is a piece of shit."

Maggie growled. "I am going to find you, and I am going to watch you die. You and the fucking cat."

"Oooooh," the crowd said, like we were on an episode of the goddamned *Jerry Springer Show*.

"Don't bring me into this," Donut said, raising a paw in defense. "I'm not the one who went all danger dingo on my own kid."

The crowd screamed with laughter. I had to hand it to her. Donut was oftentimes caught off guard, but she was highly adaptable. She knew how to read a crowd, that was for sure. But as much as I disliked these two assholes, they weren't the real enemy. We needed to end this. This bullshit didn't serve any of us.

I turned to the Maestro. "Congratulations. You've reunited us. We all know how she feels about the matter. I've said my piece. If that's all, we'll be going now."

"No, no, why so quick to leave?" For the next several minutes, the Maestro attempted to ask us leading questions. *So why did you kill your own daughter? Carl, how does it feel to know you're partially responsible for the death of another human?* Maggie said nothing but, "Fuck you." Frank hadn't said a word this whole time. Donut would only talk directly to the audience, and I just grunted responses.

It was obvious that the orc wasn't good at asking interview questions, especially with a group of hostile guests. The crowd grew restless.

Donut started making wisecracks. The Maestro tried to ask her something, and she just ignored him. She looked directly at the audience and said, "I once watched a cocker spaniel lick her own butthole for thirty minutes straight. That was more insightful than that question."

Eventually, the Maestro threw his large hands in the air and gave up. The orc had a panicked look to him. He knew this entire episode had been a dumpster fire from the start. But then the orc's eyes sparkled with one last glimmer of hope. I braced myself for whatever bullshit was coming.

"Well, I have parting gifts for each of the teams," he said. "Are you piglets excited to see what we got for the crawlers?"

The crowd responded half-heartedly. A few of the audience members had already flickered and disappeared from the stream, leaving empty spaces in the crowd.

"Hopefully it's a door so we can get back to the dungeon," Donut muttered. The audience laughed. But she wasn't fooling me. The cat was shaking with pleasure. Even now, Donut couldn't contain herself. That damn cat loved her presents.

"Let's give our VIPs their gift first, shall we?"

A box appeared in front of me. This was a literal cardboard box. I hesitantly reached forward, and it was really there.

"This is just a present for Carl. Sorry about that, Donut," the Maestro said. He leaned forward expectantly. I could feel Donut deflate next to me. I realized I'd been stroking her back without thinking about it. "Carl, I know this is something you want really bad. We paid a lot of money to make sure you have the very best."

I opened the box. *You asshole*. I had to laugh. It was a perfectly-chosen gift to troll me. I probably would've laughed even if we'd been on another show.

"Carl. You have boots now!" Donut said.

It was a brand-new pair of Bates zip-up tactical boots. They were identical to the service boots I wore on active duty. I picked one up. Sure enough, they were in my size.

"We even got you socks," the Maestro said. "They're in the box!"

"Thanks!" I said, pulling the box onto my lap. "These will be really comfortable when I'm in a safe room!" I put the lid back on. There was no way I was going to wear these things.

Now that my soles had fully acclimated, me wearing shoes would put me at a massive disadvantage. I had several buffs and skills that only worked if I was barefoot, and the orc knew it. The gift was just

him being a dick. He was expecting me to react, to rant and rave. He should've known by now that wasn't the sort of bait that would snag me. The audience barely reacted at all. They either didn't understand the intended troll or didn't care.

"I love them," I added. I tapped the top of the box, smiling. "I hope they weren't too expensive."

The Maestro took a deep breath and gave me his best *fuck you* glare. He turned to Frank and Maggie. "And now, you two. Frank has a skill called Find Crawler, which shows you any crawlers within five square kilometers." The Maestro waved his hand. "I don't think that is good enough." A potion appeared in front of them. Maggie snatched it up, looking at it. "That there is a Legendary Skill Potion, taken from my clan's own stock. Either of you drink that fucker down, and it will upgrade your Find Crawler skill to level 15." He turned to look at me, smiling again. "That means you can put in any crawler's name, and it'll tell you exactly where they are, no matter how far."

"Wait, can I drink this? Frank is the one with the skill," Maggie asked.

"Oh yeah," he said. "That'll take you all the way to the top level of 20 if you have the right class. But if you take it now, it'll take you up to 15 no problem."

I sighed. "So, are we done here?"

The Maestro seemed to be at a loss for words, pissed his gifts hadn't gone over well with the audience. "Uh, thanks to my piglets. You know the Maestro takes care of you fuckers. You know what to do!"

The audience lukewarmly glurp-glurped.

"Well, we probably won't be coming back on this show, pork boy," I said, standing up. Donut jumped to my shoulder and waved vigorously at the audience. "But I imagine we'll see each other again soon enough. I look forward to kicking your ass all over again on the ninth floor. That is, if you're not too much of a puss to face me."

Now that. That garnered a reaction from the crowd.

As the show ended, and the crowd cheered, finally happy to have something to holler about, I turned my attention to the two crawlers

sitting next to us. Frank continued to stare straight down, a shell of a man. Maggie clutched the skill potion to her chest, staring at me.

For the first time, the woman smiled.

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[44]

Time to Level Collapse: 3 Days, 14 hours

Views: 1.7 Trillion
Followers: 439.9 Billion
Favorites: 42.4 Billion

"I don't understand why she killed her daughter," Donut said after we returned to the safe room. She immediately started opening the loot boxes from the earlier battle. She received nothing new except two "Trap Modules" from her gold sapper's box. One was called a Spike Module and the other an Alarm Module. These were ready-to-go traps, no tinkering required. We could upgrade and reconfigure them, but it required the use of our sapper's table, which wouldn't happen until the fourth floor.

Despite Mukta's warning that we'd have a discussion after the show, there was no sign of the admin. The program ended, and we'd immediately transported back to the room. I still clutched the shoebox in my hands. I sighed and put it all in my inventory. I pulled out my pedicure kit and started to work on my feet as Donut continued to talk, rapid fire. She'd been like this after the last interview, too. She got some sort of adrenaline rush from being on

camera, even when the show was a disaster. “She had a pretty name. Yvette. I like that name. Did you see? She didn’t want to kill people. But then her mom killed her. It’s really sad. But I’m also kind of relieved, you know what I mean? Since her mom killed her, that means you didn’t kill her. It would’ve been an accident, but still.”

“Aren’t you tired?” I asked. I was exhausted. I rubbed the bottom of my foot with the little stone thing. I could just feel the AI watching me. The recap show would air in a few hours, and I wanted to get some sleep before that. Afterward, we needed to head out.

Donut plopped herself on my shoulder, settling in to sleep after I finished with my feet.

“He was kind of a jerk, huh? The orc guy, I mean. But do you remember what he said? We broke the record.”

“Yes, Donut,” I said. I closed my eyes.

“Carl?”

“What, Donut?” I said, trying not to let the exasperation sound in my voice.

“I heard what he said to you, about the ninth floor, I mean.”

“Don’t let that idiot bother you.”

“No, not the orc. I mean Mordecai. When he told you that you should leave me when we get to that floor. I heard him.”

“Let’s worry about getting to the third floor before we even think about something as far away as the ninth. We don’t even know what the hell that is all about.”

“Okay,” she said, her voice small. She finally settled next to me, and she was asleep before I was.

I slept through the first part of the recap episode. I awakened to find Donut sitting on the chair, her attention on the screen. She looked back at me. “They haven’t mentioned us yet. But they showed those guys from Africa, Le Mouvement. They found a city boss. It was a just a see-through blob the size of a house! It killed

all of them. There was one guy on the outside of where they were locked in, and now he's all alone. Everyone died except him. They showed him sitting on the ground just crying for like a minute straight. The blob looked like it was made of Jell-O. They couldn't figure out how to hurt it. I bet fire would've worked. They didn't have much room to run around, though. The boss room was a series of tubes, like a sewer system."

"Christ," I said, looking up at the screen. It now showed Lucia Mar smashing a Brindled Vespa into pieces with her mace. She had some sort of personal, magical shield I'd never noticed before. The hornet spat at her, and the white glob hit the shield, sizzling and floating in the air a good two inches from the side of her head.

"No wonder," I grumbled.

The last ten minutes of the show were dedicated to our escape. The recap was almost identical to the one they'd showed on the Maestro's show, but with added music and better production values. They showed close-up freeze frames of the MOAB and spinning, 3D renderings of the individual bombs.

It showed the rage elemental tumbling into the hole, and the oh shit baby exploding right next to it. We watched as the monster's health bar plummeted, almost hit zero, and then the monster dissolved.

Experience Denied. Slammed onto the screen.

"Hey, that wasn't fair," Donut cried. "We would've killed it if it hadn't dissolved!"

"Maybe," I said. I was suspicious about how easy it was to do damage to the elemental, considering its high level. Either my bombs were overpowered, or the monster was especially weak for its level.

I suspected there was something else we were missing. The monster probably split in two or blew up on death or something equally horrible. It was almost as if the game was daring us to summon another one and to try kill it fair and square this time. We'd probably rocket up a dozen levels if we managed it. I could already think of a dozen ways to summon one and have something waiting

for it, something that'd kill it for sure. Once you knew how the monster worked, it wasn't so difficult. It *had* to be a trap.

The show ended with Imani pausing at the scorched entrance to the third floor. She looked up into the air and raised a middle finger before going inside.

The show ended, and I suddenly felt very alone. The feeling came out of nowhere. I thought of that last member of Le Mouvement, of being locked outside the boss area, only to find everyone he knew was just gone. What a nightmare.

I looked up at the ticker. **990,303.**

We'd gone below one million, and I hadn't noticed. For every person that ticked away, I felt I was losing a part of myself, a part of my humanity. I thought of what Donut had said before we'd fallen asleep, and of the unspoken question she had asked and of the answer I hadn't given her.

The announcement came, and even though I knew it was coming, the sudden, booming voice surprised me.

Hello Crawlers,

Keep up the good work. Everything is running smoothly. Now that we've reached the halfway point of the level, game guides are now able to instruct you upon some of the intricacies regarding the third floor and how the race and class selection process works. Be sure to visit your game guide prior to descending in order to make the transition more smooth.

Effective immediately, any non-sapient mobs who happen upon a stairwell will not be disintegrated. Yes, we all just watched that rule get exploited on the recap episode. It was very clever and very exciting. But it's not going to happen again.

The System AI has determined the proliferation of the Brindled Vespas is too aggressive, and we have halved the number of these mobs currently in the dungeon. In addition, the damage from their spitting acid attack has been adjusted down. Slightly. Please note, new Brindle Grubs will continue to generate upon the creation of a corpse, but each

one now only has a 50% chance to proceed to the pupa stage.

That's it for now. Now go out there and kill, kill, kill!

The moment the announcement ended, a message popped up.

Admin Notice. A new tab is available in your interface.

I blinked. That was unexpected. I opened up my interface, and indeed, there was a new section. **ACCOUNTS**. I clicked on it.

There was only one item:

Creator's Fee. Carl's Jug O' Boom. Royalty: 1 Gold Coin per Kill. Current kills: 4.

There was a button. **Cash Out Now**. Below that was a very small line that I could barely read. There was no way to zoom in. I had to squint to read it.

Count updates once daily. Two gold coins plus 25% Deposit fee, rounded up, deducted upon cash out. Funds not deposited are subject to forfeiture upon death.

"Twenty-five percent!" I said. "Highway robbery." If I cashed out now, I'd only receive a single gold coin. If I'd had five coins, I'd still only receive one coin because they rounded the fee up.

"What?" Donut asked.

I waved my hand. "It's nothing. I'll explain later. Let's get going."

"Are we running? Is that what we're doing? Hiding from Frank Q and Maggie My?"

"No," I said. "That was my first instinct, but now that I've slept on it, I've changed my mind. That woman is hell-bent on hunting us down, and we're going to have to deal with it sooner rather than later. I don't know if they're coming now or not. I'd much rather be ready for her than have her sneak up behind us."

"But how can we do that? They can track us and go invisible, and we can't do either of those."

"Her invisibility is not nearly as powerful as I first thought. We'll need to take out the local neighborhood boss and get that map. It'll make our lives much easier…"

Warning: You may not wield your weapons while in the presence of Admins. Any attempted violence against an Admin will result in your immediate execution.

"Shit," I said, looking up at the ceiling. "Mukta is coming."

Pop! Water splashed over my feet, and a familiar, armored kua-tin appeared. My interface snapped off.

"Zev!" Donut cried. "Where were you! I was worried."

"Hello, Carl, hello, Princess Donut. I'm here for your show debriefing."

"Are you okay?" Donut asked.

"Yes, thank you," Zev said. "I was censured by the System AI. I was given a suspension because the system determined that I had cheated by warning you of the rage elemental before it appeared. My representative appealed the decision on my behalf, and upon further review, it was determined that you'd noticed the man urinating simultaneously with my exclamation, so the censure was removed from my record." She sighed, filling her mask with bubbles. "But even though my record is technically clean, it's not really. Once the AI notices you, it's difficult to get it to un-notice you, so I have to be extra careful from now on."

"Are we in trouble?" Donut asked. "That orc guy was really mean to Carl."

"No," Zev said. "It was improper for you to attempt to disengage from the interview, but the Borant corporation wishes to commend you for showing proper respect to the organization. They're actually quite pleased with you right now."

"Commend us?" I said. "Really?" *Proper respect*? The thought of giving respect to anything Borant did made me sick. Anyone who mistook fear for respect was a fool.

"The politics regarding all of this is too complicated to even begin to explain. However, that particular production, while technically private, is owned and operated by a prince of a faction that is allied with another faction that is at odds with the Borant system. All of it would make your head spin if I were to explain it to you."

"If you don't like those guys, then why did you let them interview us? That show is awful, Zev. It's…" *It's almost as cruel as the game itself*, I almost said. "It's abusive."

She nodded. "And I would like to apologize. Mukta should never have booked it. The show I had scheduled also caters to the

younger crowd, but it would be a discussion regarding specific tactics you use in the dungeon. They do it in a creative, silly way. But to answer your question, Borant is not allowed to discriminate against Syndicate-member production companies. Especially when said companies are tied to production sponsors. This is monitored very closely by the AI. Anything to do with money is watched carefully, especially this season."

"So that Maestro asshole is a prince?" I asked. "No wonder he's such a cheesedick. I didn't realize he was royalty. I assumed the show didn't have very much money."

"He *is* a prince," Zev said. "But that production is owned by his older brother, Crown Prince Stalwart. I think their father gives them a small stipend to make the show, probably to keep them busy."

I thought of that voice that had threatened us when we'd attempted to bail. If that was him, he seemed just as much of a douche as his younger brother. "Prince Stalwart? That name is almost as bad as 'the Maestro.'"

"They're orcs. Everything they do is mawkish."

I had no idea what the word "mawkish" meant, but I assumed it translated to "cheesy." "So these guys are different than the tusklings? I know they are obviously a different race, but I thought the tusklings were the rulers of all the orcs."

"The tusklings are the rulers of the Orcish Supremacy. Stalwart and the Maestro are princes of the Skull Empire. That's a whole different system. If the Orcish Supremacy is a child with a lemonade stand, the Skull Empire is the Wal-Mart corporation. It's one of the largest and oldest Syndicate governments."

"Yeah, he'd said something about creating the crawl." I glanced down at Donut. "He also talked a bit about the ninth floor. How he's going to be there."

"Sorry, I can't really discuss that yet. Mordecai is now authorized to tell you about the third floor, but that's it."

"Is there anything you can tell us?" I asked.

She looked pained. "What I can say is that every three floors are the same setting. Sort of. The third, sixth, ninth and so forth are all linked in a way that will later become clear."

I thought about what Mordecai had whispered to me earlier, that Borant was trying to end the game as soon as possible.

"What if all the crawlers die before the ninth floor even starts?"

"That probably isn't going to happen," she said. "It's starting to look like we'll get there much faster than usual, but we've never had a full player extinction before the ninth floor. It happens *on* the ninth floor a lot, but not before it. Again, I can't tell you much, but those floors … three, six, nine, twelve, fifteen, and eighteen, all come into existence at the same time. *You* can only visit them in context with the rest of the crawl, but that doesn't mean they're not being utilized. Whatever happens on the ninth and twelfth floors happens with or without the crawlers. It's a game within the game where you are not the main focus. At least not until you get there. Sorry, that's all I can say."

"Okay," I said. "I was just wondering. I'm not going to worry about it until we get there, I guess."

"That's the spirit! Now we need to talk about the next couple of days. I was just brainstorming with my team, and we agree that you two need to concentrate on building up your character. You're already in a good position, but a couple extra levels would really help you out. Now that the Meadow Lark storyline is completed, we can wait a day or two before really focusing on the next story arc."

"Story arc?" I said. "Really?"

"How is this thing with Maggie and Frank going over?" Donut asked.

Zev waved dismissively. "It has potential, but it's already tired. Those two have a good amount of followers, especially after last night, but not many people think they're going to survive long enough for that Maggie lady to make good on her threat. She's not very charismatic, and she's acting more and more irrationally. This gripe you have with Prince Maestro is getting much more attention, especially with that Pork Boy Snick that just showed up. Two hours old, and it's already trending all over the social media tunnels. But like we've already discussed, that whole story won't bear fruit until much later. We feel you can get away with coasting for a few days until you hit the next floor down, but once you do hit the over city,

you really need to focus on something compelling. Just train, and try not to be too boring. Maybe take out a boss or two. And don't pick anything weird during race selection."

"Back up," I said. "What the hell is a 'Pork Boy Snick?'"

She chuckled nervously. "Yeah, I need to tell you about this. So, you have… had… a similar phenomenon on earth. Are you familiar with the concept of fan fiction?"

"Wait, what's that?" Donut asked.

Zev whirled on Donut. "Oh my gods, Donut. You would love it. There was this whole website, and it was filled with stories about *Gossip Girl*. But it was written by people like you and me. Actual fans, not the writers. So the stories aren't real. Or canon, they called it. But some were great! I tried writing one once, but it didn't get many views."

"That sounds like the greatest thing in the world," Donut said. "You can make it so the show never ends! Wait. People are writing stories about *us*? Me and Carl?"

"Yeah, so a snick is kind of like a fan fiction, but it's a video. So it's like a fan fiction movie. You can experience the scene from any of the character's point of view, or you can just watch it. This particular video is short, and a little, what is the word? Um, explicit."

"What was in the video?" Donut asked. "What do you mean by explicit? Was I in it?"

"No," Zev said. "Just Carl. Carl and the Maestro. And let's just say Carl has the upper hand during the scene."

"Uh," I said. I tried to think of something to say, but I couldn't think of anything. "Who made it?"

"So, that's the interesting part. It's a bit of a mystery. It showed up just a few hours after your interview. Nobody knows where it came from. But it went very viral, very fast. The quality is flawless. In fact, it came out so fast, some people think it's real. It's not… Right?"

"Are you asking me if I fucked the orc?"

"Wait, it's a sex tape? With Carl and the Maestro?" Donut said. She practically fell off her chair, laughing. "And I thought it was going to be a bog witch that finally stole his heart."

"It *is* a little funny," Zev said. "But the Skull Empire probably isn't going to find it amusing. They haven't reacted yet, at least not officially. They're not known for their measured responses to insults."

"Is it an insult, though?" I asked. "I'm not gay, but does it matter? The tusklings seem to be very open with, you know, weird stuff. Do people really care?"

"It's not that," Zev said. "You're right, most wouldn't care. But this is a prince of the Skull Empire. And that video is both graphic and humiliating. You two… say things to each other."

"Can we watch it?" Donut asked. "I want to watch it!"

"That sort of thing has to happen all the time," I said. "That prince is such a cockwomble, I can't imagine the intergalactic internet isn't filled with stuff like that."

"Oh, it is. This is different. The quality is so good, and it is just everywhere right now. Everyone is calling the Prince 'Pork Boy' and, uh, 'Carl's Naughty Little Piggie.' You have to watch the video. Anyway, if the Skull Empire demands people stop calling him that, it's going to be just like the mudskipper thing all over again. In the past hour, your appearance fee has doubled. You're now equal with Lucia Mar. The fact this has happened at the expense of the Skull Empire has made the Party very happy with you."

"Oh shit," I said, any sense of amusement fleeing. "The last thing we need is some giant sponsor gunning for us. Any interview we do, they're just going to ask me about it, and I can tell you right now, there's nothing I'm willing to say to make those assholes hate me less."

"There's no such thing as bad publicity," Zev said. "Borant's official stance on this is that as long as you do not disparage the company, the party, or the Syndicate itself, any opinion you air about other governments will not be met with any sort of punitive action. Besides, there's not much the other governments can do to you. Not until the sixth floor. Or if they spring for a deity sponsorship this season. But anyway, don't worry about anything happening outside your floor. That's my job. Now I gotta get going. Your next scheduled appearance is on Odette's show. In the meantime, I'll be available on chat. Bye to both of you."

A moment later, she popped away, splashing water all over the floor.

"I'm glad she's okay," Donut said. "I feel bad we got her in trouble."

I barely heard her. I couldn't stop thinking about the video. This Skull Empire government had to know how much of an asshole that prince was. Plus they couldn't blame me for something I didn't make. Could they?

My HUD snapped back on. The first thing I noticed was that my followers had increased significantly in the past hour. With the combination of the recap episode and this stupid video, that feeling of loneliness I'd felt earlier was all but gone. I now felt like a bug under a microscope. I wondered how many people *really* thought that the snick was real. I always wondered that about conspiracy theorists. I always suspected most of them were just trolling. Surely the real number couldn't be very many.

"Carl, darling. I can't believe you hooked up with that guy," Donut said loudly. She pushed at the door, heading out of the room. "He sure squealed a lot, though." Her laughter trailed off into the hallway.

"Goddamnit, Donut," I said.

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FINDING THE BOSS CHAMBER OF THE KOBOLDS WAS EASY.

Heavy, thrumming metal music blasted through the halls. It was a cacophony of sound with growling, deep vocals and guitars that were almost seizure-like. I couldn't tell if the vocalist was singing in English, or if he was even human at all. The words sounded like deeply distorted barking. Considering the enemies of this quadrant, I wouldn't be surprised if the singer was a kobold or a dingo.

We followed the sound, which grew louder and louder until it was physically painful. Donut and I couldn't talk to one another, and we had to rely on the chat to communicate. We killed a half dozen kobolds and an equal number of dingoes along the way, plus a handful of the brindle grubs. Both of us hit level 12 by the time we approached the source.

Donut: THIS MUSIC IS MAKING MY HEAD HURT. WHY CAN'T THEY PLAY SOMETHING GOOD? LIKE OASIS.

Carl: Oasis? Where did you get that from? Even Bea didn't listen to Oasis.

Donut: NO MISS BEATRICE LIKES COUNTRY MUSIC. THAT'S JUST AS BAD AS THIS.

Carl: Yeah, that should've been my first warning.

Donut: THERE IS THE BOSS CHAMBER.

The outer kobold boss chamber was set up as a giant dog kennel. The text on the walls was in Portuguese, indicating the place

had been some sort of municipal dog pound. It was a group of three long hallways flanked by cages. There was a secondary, main chamber with a door at the end of the middle hallway, but we already knew from experience that whatever the boss was going to be, it would likely come out of that second room. That second door was huge, like the double doors of a barn. An ominous sign.

Most of the cages were empty, but not all of them. Each row had four or five locked pens with danger dingoes within. I didn't see any signs of the kobolds. A handful of cages also contained the Xs of dead monsters. Here, in this context, the large dingoes looked especially dog-like, and I suddenly felt an uneasy sympathy for them. The monsters didn't bark or attack the cages as we passed by them. They sat there, curled up, looking pitiful.

Their dots, however, remained red on the minimap.

Donut: SHOULD WE KILL THEM? WE SHOULD PROBABLY KILL THEM.

It would be easy, free experience. And I knew once that boss chamber opened, these doors would likely also open. But it felt wrong. I remembered Mordecai's advice regarding the boss rooms. *Look for the clues.*

Carl: Hang on. Not yet. Let's try to figure out what's going on here.

I stopped at one of the cages. The dingo was on its side, breathing heavily, its back turned.

"Hey buddy, you doing okay?" I said, yelling the words. I couldn't even hear my own voice.

The dingo looked up, turning its head toward me. He was missing an eye, a recent injury. His white face paint mixed red with blood. Then I noticed the injuries on his side, a mixture of old scars and new ones around his flank and along the side of his neck.

The song ended. A moment later, a new one started, just as loud and heavy. But in that brief moment of silence I heard something coming from the main boss chamber.

Cheering.

I knew, then, what this was.

Goddamnit, I thought. I hated this place. I hated it so damn much. I looked up at the boss room door.

I searched my inventory. I didn't have any Scrolls of *Heal Critter* left, but I did have a ton of pet biscuits. Donut still ate them despite being classified as a regular crawler. But unless we were locked in the dungeon for fifty years, we'd never run out of the food. I took a single biscuit from my inventory and tossed it into the cage.

Donut: CARL WHAT ARE YOU DOING. THAT IS MY FOOD.

Carl: I'm trying something. Let's see what happens.

Donut: THIS IS A BETRAYAL MOST FOUL.

Carl: You know the viewers can't see this chat. Don't be such a drama queen.

The dingo painfully pulled himself up, sniffed at the food, and he ate the tiny biscuit. He sat back down and turned his back.

The dot on the minimap blinked and turned white.

Yes.

We repeated the process for all the other dingoes in the cages. There was a total of fourteen of them. Most of them were in similar shape to the first one.

Three cages also contained dead danger dingoes. I debated whether or not to have Donut raise them from the dead prior to the battle, but there didn't seem to be a way to open the cages. Donut's ten-mana *Second Chance* spell was now level five. Instead of reanimating the corpses for five minutes, once she hit level five, they now remained animated for ten minutes, which was usually long enough to finish out a battle. She could now apparently resurrect monsters up to five levels higher than herself.

She currently had a pool of 28 mana points. She had two pieces of mana toast and a pile of mana restoration potions, though with her two-minute cooldown between potions, their use in battle became negligible. So we decided to wait and see what we faced first.

My plan wasn't too exciting, but it was safe. The door to the main chamber didn't seem to be opening, at least not yet, so we were going to use our tried-and-true method of firebomb and run.

But just as I pulled a boom jug out of my inventory, our luck ran out.

The music abruptly stopped. My ears rang, feeling heavy in my head. Within the chamber, the cheering ceased. The double barn doors started to open. Behind us, the door to the secondary chamber slammed shut. Above, new, more familiar music started to play.

Boss Battle!

That's right! You have discovered another lair of a Neighborhood Boss!

Put your game faces on ladies and gentlemen! *Aaaand* Here. We. Go!

"*Shit*," I said, scrambling toward the barn doors. As I ran, I had a brief moment to marvel at how much I'd changed in the past week. My original instinct would've been to hide. Instead, I ran toward the danger.

I lit the torch on the jug, and I tossed it directly at the still-opening doors. Just as the jug took flight, the doors flew all the way open, revealing a mass of about 40 kobolds emerging from the room, cheering and chanting. I did not see any boss at all.

The world froze with the jug in midair. It hung like a comet. The group of kobolds were just starting to look up at the object in the air, rocketing toward them, their eyes registering surprise.

My eyes focused on the kobold in the center of the congregation. He still appeared to be one of the level-five kobold riders, but he was much better dressed. He wore what appeared to be a fur coat made out of dingo fur and wore spiked boots, making him a head taller than the others. In his hands he held a small, metal-reinforced cage, about the size of a shoebox. His hands were frozen in the act of pulling open the enclosure, the little entrance pointed directly at us like a gun barrel.

Uh-oh, I thought.

Our mugshots splattered into view, and the **Versus** stamped onto the image.

Ralph

Frenzied Gerbil

Level 11 Neighborhood Boss!

Before we send you off to certain death, it's time for a short history lesson.

When the Black Death swept through 14th century Europe, killing upwards of 200 million people and forever altering the course of human history, one of the original culprits of the epidemic was said to be the black rat, carrying plague-infested fleas into population centers to wreak their destruction.

This is, in fact, not true. The true perpetrator was actually the Asian great gerbil, who took advantage of the warmer climate to travel the silk road and bring the disease into Europe.

This is only important to know because Ralph, champion pit fighter of the kobold training grounds, lives his life in a perpetual state of rage. Why? Because he feels that human death toll of 200 million is much too low, and he will do everything in his power to triple that number.

Starting with you.

The only survivor of a family of gerbils left to starve by a child who'd grown bored with the pets, Ralph had to commit unspeakable acts of cannibalism in order to endure.

Part earth rodent, part the embodiment of death, Frenzied Gerbils are regular mobs one might encounter on the fifth or seventh floors. But Ralph here is special. He has dedicated his existence to fighting and training in hopes that one day he might exact his revenge against the humans he so despises.

He is fast, he is angry, and by the time you're done reading this, he's already halfway to your jugular.

You might want to duck.

The moment the extra-long description ended, the world unfroze, and chaos erupted all around us.

I threw my body to the ground just as the furry, squealing rodent sailed over my head. He'd shot out of the carrier so fast I hadn't even seen him.

At the same moment, the boom jug exploded in the midst of the kobolds, evaporating most of them instantly, including Ralph's owner, the pimped-out kobold.

The fist-sized ball of fur screamed with rage as he landed harmlessly down the long hallway. Donut jumped to my shoulder and shot a magic missile at the tiny monster, and she scored a direct hit. It flew further back, sliding and tumbling. A health bar appeared, indicating she'd taken maybe 15% of its health away.

"Good shot," I cried.

The tiny boss looked mostly like a regular gerbil with the exception of its mouth, which defied logic and physics. Its ravening jaw appeared normal when closed, but when the tiny, absurdly cute creature screamed, its mouth opened huge, just as wide as the dingoes it fought in the arena. It squealed angrily now, and its mouth burst open, obscuring the small creature attached to it. This was a round, frothing set of gnashing teeth big enough for me to stick my entire head within.

"All righty then," I said, standing to my full height as the creature snarled at us and prepared to charge again.

"Carl, I can't help but think this boss has been placed here for a very specific purpose," Donut said. She shot it again with a magic missile, but this one missed. The gerbil squealed and jumped back.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

Most of the kobolds were dead, but a few at the edges of the blast had survived. One kobold, trailing blood, dragged itself to the wall and pressed a button recessed against the wall near the barn doors. A deep rumbling filled the chamber as the cages all started to open.

"Bad idea, buddy," I called to the kobold.

The dingoes emerged from their cages. Their dots on the minimap remained white. They slunk low, growling. Most of them were still injured, in obvious pain. But whatever spell had kept them under the control of their kobold slave masters had been broken by a simple act of kindness.

One of the dingoes—that first one we'd fed—leaped out and pounced right onto Ralph. It happened quick, lightning fast. The

one-eyed dingo swallowed the rodent whole in a swift, snapping gulp. Just like that, and the boss was gone.

Behind us, the remaining kobolds fell back as the other dingoes turned on their former masters, dropping upon them and ripping them apart savagely. The kobolds weren't armed, and there weren't many of them. The barking, snarling dingoes finished them off in seconds.

If we hadn't turned the dingoes on our side, this would've been a much more difficult battle. That had been the "trick" of this particular boss room. I silently thanked Mordecai for his advice. As unfair as this world was, it was still a game. There were puzzles and hidden paths to survival, and we needed to continue to keep our eyes open.

"Well, that was quite easy," Donut said. "And a little anticlimactic, if I must say so." She looked back at the first dingo, the one who'd eaten the boss. "I guess I was wrong."

I looked about the room. The kobolds were all dead. From the main boss chamber, the sound of multiple, unknown creatures started to howl and trill and yip. These weren't particularly loud or menacing sounds, and I could barely hear them over the background music. None of them sounded like dingoes. Now that the smoke was clearing, I could see within the boss chamber. Like I expected, it was a small fighting arena. More cages circled the distant walls. I couldn't see the contents from this distance, but it was a mix of red and white dots. I suspected if we hadn't killed the kobolds so quickly, one of them would've likely run back in and opened those cages as well.

The boss music still played, and the realization startled me. "This isn't over yet," I said. "We're missing something." I formed a fist, preparing for an attack. "And what did you mean? What were you wrong about?"

The other dingoes all slinked away. Some bared their teeth at us as they passed, but in a submissive gesture, not an angry one. This close, the massive, 200-pound dingoes were even more terrifying to behold. While they all wore the white face paint, none wore it exactly the same. They congregated at the end of the chamber by

the locked door. They scratched at the exit, like dogs wanting to go outside.

The one-eyed dingo who'd eaten Ralph continued to stand where he'd swallowed the miniature boss. He seemed frozen in place. The creature looked at us and started to whine.

Donut looked pointedly at my foot. "It's a small rodent. Your feet are all nice and shiny. As Miss Beatrice used to say, 'Time to pay the Daddy tax.'"

"Wait, what? Under what circumstances would she say that?"

At that moment, the dingo's head exploded.

The creature looked at us, cocked its head to the side, and then *boom*. Red and white gore splattered everywhere. The still-alive gerbil burst forth, flying directly at my throat. It was halfway across the room before the poor, headless dingo hit the ground. The tiny, furry rocket squealed.

I'd been ready. I Mike Tysoned it with all my strength. The gerbil bounced off the floor with a sickening *crunch*, sliding until it hit the edge of a cage. Its health was suddenly in the deep red.

It had **Stunned** over its head with a 15 second timer.

My gauntlet only had a two percent chance to inflict Stun on monsters. I'd never, not once, gotten the debuff to activate until now. With a baleful glance at the ceiling, I took two steps toward the tiny, unmoving form. For a moment, I contemplated just punching it to death.

Time to pay the Daddy tax.

"If it makes you feel better, she was talking about you. You're the daddy," Donut said, looking down at the almost-dead boss.

"No, Donut," I said. "That does not make me feel better. That's the opposite of making me feel better."

I placed my bare, right foot upon the small monster.

"Sorry, Ralph," I said.

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The dungeon groaned. It fucking groaned.

I sighed as I wiped my foot on the metal bar of the cage. The entire dungeon rumbled as if it was experiencing a small earthquake. My HUD flickered. I felt dirty and sick. I rubbed my foot over and over, but the blood wouldn't come off.

The boss fight officially ended, and the distant door opened. The thirteen danger dingoes fled into the hallway, scattering away to the wind.

I looted the neighborhood map. Dozens of red dots filled the hallways. These were newly-generated brindle grubs. I watched as the white dots of the dingoes continued to run toward the main artery hall, snatching up and killing the grubs they passed. The dingoes, as a pack, hit the main passage and their dots disappeared.

I wondered what would happen if they ran across another group of crawlers. Probably nothing good, at least not for the crawlers. Either way, they wouldn't bother us again.

"Let's see what's in this main room," I said.

We stepped over the slagged, still smoldering remains of the kobolds. Most of their bodies had been destroyed. I picked through what was left, looting a few spiked helmets and gold coins here and there. One had a scroll of *Heal Critter* and a handful of pet biscuits.

The small gerbil cage lay on the floor, undamaged by the fire. I tossed it into my inventory.

The kobold who'd pressed the button to open the cages also had a key. I examined its properties.

Master Pen Key

Opens the individual cages of both the fighters and the bait animals within the kobold fighting pits. This key is magically attuned to the kobold race. If you are not a kobold and attempt to use this key, it will only work once before breaking.

Choose wisely.

We stepped into the arena, and I was immediately assaulted by the stench of death. A small, round fighting arena stood empty. The dirt floor was stained red. Against the left wall stood a pile of bones as tall as the ceiling. Several dozen chairs made of hardened wood circled the arena. I picked them up and looted them all before approaching the line of cages against the back of the chamber.

The moment we approached the cages, each filled with a different type of monster, two achievements popped up.

New achievement! I'll take the ceramic dalmatian, Pat!

You have discovered a reward room! Scattered throughout the dungeon, reward rooms offer crawlers items generally not available within loot boxes. Most reward rooms only allow one choice. So, if you're in a party of multiple people, tell them I said *you* should get the prize, not them.

***Reward*: Don't be a greedy bitch. The goddamned room is the reward.**

New achievement! Menagerie!

You have discovered a pet reward room. From caterpillars who secrete vodka to basilisks who can turn mobs to stone, a good pet can make the difference between survival and the end of the road. Just remember what happened with Harambe. There ain't no zookeepers around

to shoot the monster's ass if you bite off more than you can chew.

***Reward*: You have a key. It opens only one cage. Figure it out, Einstein.**

"Well, shit," I said, looking over the choices. "I guess we're getting a pet."

"I get to pick," Donut said. "The thing said it was my prize."

"Yeah, Donut. It said the same thing to both of us. It's trying to get us to fight."

"Really? Well that was mean." She gasped as she noticed the very last cage. "Carl, Carl, give me the key!"

There was a line of ten cages. None of the creatures looked particularly impressive. But then again, that gerbil hadn't looked too impressive either. Still, I suspected since this was only the second floor and the first of these treasure rooms we'd come across, none of these guys were super rare or valuable.

I was hesitant about this. In most games I'd played, you could only have one pet at a time. Would that be the case here? If so, how hard was it to give up the pet? I had no idea.

The first animal was a parrot thing with a long beak, and it was easily the loudest thing here. Its dot was red. I examined it, but the system didn't give me any info other than its name. **Juvenile Riven Wing**.

The next was a green slime, then a rat, then a meatball with two legs and a mohawk called a **Tummy Acher**. Of the first four, only the slime and the rat had white dots. A row of equally-pitiful animals followed, looking up at us, including a white-tagged brindle grub. I thought of those massive, deadly Brindled Vespas and thought maybe that'd be a good choice.

But Donut only had eyes on that last cage.

It was a chicken dinosaur thing with pink, downy feathers. The monster cooed up at the cat, making a chirping noise.

The thing looked pitiful. I immediately saw why Donut liked it. It landed firmly in the it's-so-damn-ugly-it's-cute category. It was probably seven inches tall. It stood on two legs and cocked its head at me. The damn thing looked like a raw piece of chicken with a few,

random pink-hued feathers attached to it. It had two tiny forearms instead of wings, and a long, serpentine tail. It squawked, opening its beaked mouth, revealing a row of sharp, tiny teeth.

It was called a **Mongoliensis**. It was also red-tagged.

"Is it a boy or girl?" Donut asked. "How can I tell? If it's a boy I'm gonna call him Mongo." The chicken thing chirped at Donut. "If it's a girl I'm naming her Sissy."

"It looks like dinner," I said. "I think we should get the brindle grub."

"Give it a pet biscuit," Donut said. "See if its dot changes to white."

I sighed and pulled a pet biscuit out. I tried to toss it into the cage, but a blue forcefield appeared, blocking the treat. The chicken cried in outrage and slammed its head against the bars. All up and down the row, all the creatures started squealing and squawking.

If we were going to get a pet, I knew it would be for the best to let Donut have the creature. I didn't know for certain what attribute counted the most toward keeping it happy and not murdering us in our sleep, but I imagined charisma had a major role. And maybe strength. Donut outranked me in both. I weighed whether or not I should attempt to overrule her.

"If it's a girl, we can get her a little dress, and she can sit on my shoulder when we do interviews. Can't you just see it? I'll be like Paris Hilton with Tinkerbell."

"Donut," I said. "I really think.."

Warning: The cages will permanently close in thirty seconds. Translation: hurry the hell up.

"Carl, quick! Please, please, please! I'll never ask for anything ever again. I promise!"

I sighed. "It's going to attack us. I'll grab it, and you try feeding it."

I took the key, and I jammed it into the lock of the mongoliensis cage. I cracked the door, and the little bastard shot out. I grasped it in both hands. It started thrashing and attempting to bite me. The thing barely weighed anything at all.

I had to sit on the ground while Donut pulled a few pet biscuits from her inventory. They appeared on the ground in front of the thing. It continued to fight me, but it slowed down, eyeing the food. I eased my double-handed grip enough for it to peck at the food like a chicken. It took a few bites then squawked.

The dot remained red.

"Carl, it's a boy! It's okay, Mongo. I'm sorry I said I'd put you in a dress. We'll get you a nice little bow tie, would you like that?"

The creature snapped forward and bit Donut directly on the nose. She squealed in pain.

"Bad! Bad Mongo!"

The baby dinosaur, still in my grip, started screaming back at the cat while I tried to keep myself from falling over with laughter. Donut hissed and swatted it lightly on the head. The small monster squealed indignantly and snapped again at her face.

I examined the creature's properties.

Male Mongoliensis – Level 1

This is a pet-class mob.

This pet has not yet bonded with a crawler.

The stubborn and hot-headed Mongoliensis is not the type of pet to ever be "tamed." The best one can hope for is mutual respect. And even then they still might try to eat you if the fancy strikes them. While especially powerful, fast, and vicious when they are fully grown at level 15, getting them to level 15 is about as likely as a cheerleader from West Virginia reaching her 18th birthday as a virgin.

They will immediately attack any mobs they see. They will fight to the death.

Good luck.

"Goddamnit, Donut," I said. "I knew we should've gone with the grub."

"I'm not going to have a disgusting bug thing as a pet, Carl," Donut said. "You can't even put a bow tie on a grub." She reached forward and patted Mongo on the head. He snapped at her and attached himself to her arm. She yowled and shook her arm until he fell off.

"Well we better figure out how to get this thing to 'bond' with you before we go to Mordecai's room, or Mongo here is going to teleport away the second we walk in there."

"Don't worry, Carl. Mongo and I are practically best friends already. Aren't we, Mongo?"

Mongo shrieked at the cat.

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[47]

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The process of getting Mongo to bond with Donut took the rest of our time on the second floor. It also, for whatever reason, appeared to be endlessly amusing to the general public. The continuing fallout from the Maestro sex tape along with Donut getting her nose chomped over and over and over by her new "pet" seemed to be a winning combination, in terms of views, at least. Even though we faced no more bosses or major battles for the remainder of our time on this floor, we were far from idle. Zev was beside herself with our numbers, which apparently were exceptionally good for the second floor.

We received daily updates from the PR agent. The pet was playing well. Zev implored me to stop training with the slingshot. Nobody liked me using the "boring" slingshot, she claimed, not when I could toss a stick of dynamite instead. I ignored her advice and continued practicing with it. I managed to get the skill up to five. And while the tiny stones did very little damage, they had the ability to knock the brindled vespas out of the air. A single hit to one of the

hornet's wings caused it to crash to the ground and make it unable to spit its acid. A follow-up magic missile from Donut—whose skill in the spell had risen to eight—usually killed them off. We didn't need to wander far when we had an almost endless supply of the level-eight hornets to hunt.

The first thing we did after winning Mongo was go talk to Mordecai. The creature fit in the gerbil cage. Barely. It wasn't ideal, and it was cruel to keep him in there. But if I carried him in my hands, he spent every free moment trying to bite me. If we stuck him in the cage, it allowed us to take him into a safe room without having to worry about him teleporting away. That is, as long as we kept our fingers away from the bars.

"Don't ask me about that thing until you start the bonding process," Mordecai said. "The rules are a little weird about taming dungeon pets." In his cage, Mongo screamed and hissed at the guide. "Once you figure out how to remove his automatic hostility, which is the first step, come back, and I'll give you more info."

"Remove his hostility? Like how I did with the danger dingoes?" I asked.

"That's right. You can't bond with a creature when its aggro is activated. If you see that dot turn white, come back here, and I can help after that."

Donut and I opened up our loot boxes from the boss fight. Donut "coincidentally" received a spell book of *Heal Critter*. I received yet another Potion of *Determine Value* (which had come from a Looter Box, not a boss box last time) and 1,000 gold coins. I wondered about that. There seemed to be a reason why the system kept giving these things to me. I drank it down, and I had a few new sort options for my inventory, including a new history tab. I would explore all that later. It still didn't tell me the monetary value of my individual items.

I also received an achievement for feeding the danger dingoes.

New achievement! PETA Enthusiast!

You somehow managed to remove the hostility of an aggravated, non-sapient enemy. That enemy then fought

against other enemies to your benefit. The ghost of Steve Irwin smiles down upon you.

Reward: **I SAID THE GHOST OF STEVE IRWIN SMILES DOWN UPON YOU.**

"Okay," I said. "So, let's talk about the third floor."

"All right, here we go," Mordecai said. He rubbed his furry hands together. "Here's the deal."

He indicated a pair of chairs, asking us to sit. I sat down, placing Mongo's cage on the floor between me and Donut. The guide seemed oddly excited about this. I noticed for the first time that he'd cleaned up his chambers. His bed was made. The shelves with the picture of his brother and the urn with his mother had been straightened and dusted.

Once we were settled, he continued. "You're going to go down the stairs, and you will immediately find yourselves back in this room. You will first choose your race, then your class, and then you will distribute your stat points. From there, I will give you information on class guilds, if applicable. Not all classes have guilds."

"How many choices will there be for race?" I asked.

"A lot. It is unique every season, and the both of you will have a different pool of choices. The class choices will depend on your racial choice. You know how in every new Olympics they introduce a few new sports, usually ones associated with the host country? That's how it is with classes. The base classes will always be available. Fighter, mage, rogue, bard, cleric, etcetera. But there will also be additional, more specialized classes available, including new, earth-specific classes."

"What does that mean, though? Earth-specific classes?"

"I don't know yet. I won't see the list until you do. But you will have an incentive to pick one of these classes. They like it when crawlers pick the new classes because it's good for ratings. The system AI..." He paused, making sure I was paying attention. "Again, the system AI and *not* Borant will give you some recommendations based on your preexisting skills. These recommendations are generally good. However, these recommendations do *not* take into

account how these choices might affect your standing socially. Does that make sense?"

"Yes," I said. "The AI might say it'll be best to turn into a rock monster paladin, and I'd be a badass, but it might also tank my views."

"Exactly. I will also be allowed to offer limited advice. After class selection, your stat points will automatically distribute up to the race and class minimums, and you will be free to distribute the rest as you please. However, you, Donut, can't distribute stats because of your Enhanced Growth buff. You'll want to find something that comes with a boost to constitution if you can. Got it?"

"Got it," I said. Donut grunted assent.

"Wait a second," I said. "What was your class? I know you chose a changeling as your race, but what was your class?"

"I chose Arcanist, which allowed me to explore several different magic schools. Certain classes can further specialize when they hit the sixth floor. It was then that I chose the fire path. I was a Changeling Fire Mage Arcanist. It worked out well for me. I ended up a few levels behind people who went straight to fire magic, but I could still wield other magics without a big penalty."

"So you didn't pick one of the special classes for your planet?"

He frowned slightly. "I almost chose a skyfowl class, something called a Storm Commander. But Odette talked me out of it. My brother ended up picking it instead, on her recommendation."

I paused, my eyes immediately moving to the framed photo on the shelf. He'd mentioned his brother a few times, but I hadn't realized he'd been a crawler. I'd assumed he'd been lost during his planet's initial collapse.

"Finally, there's the matter of the third floor itself," Mordecai said, making it perfectly clear he had no desire to go down that conversational path. "I prefer to explain it when you get there because there's a lot to take in. It's not something you need to worry about just yet. Okay?"

"Sure," I said, standing. "Now…"

Thwum.

"Mongo!" Donut cried.

I'd stood too close to the cage, and the monster tried to bite me. He teleported away.

"Whoops," I said.

"Carl, you scared him!"

"I *scared* him?" I picked up the now-empty cage. "Well, that sucks. I guess it wasn't meant to…"

Donut bolted out the door, yelling, "Mongo! Mongo!"

"Goddamnit, Donut!" I cried, running after the cat. "Don't go out there alone!"

We eventually found the thing huddled in the main hall, crying like a baby, squawking at the top of his little chicken lungs.

"There you are! You're going to get lost! Don't wander like that!" Donut cried, out of breath.

The dinosaur looked up. The little shit looked like he'd been crying. His beady, reptilian eyes grew giant when he saw us. He ran right to Donut, little arms out, like a long-lost puppy reuniting with his owner.

"It's okay, I'm here. Mommy is here," Donut said.

He rushed up and chomped her directly on the nose.

The next day consisted of grinding, killing brindled vespas, and wrangling Mongo.

We quickly learned that only one thing stopped the thing from trying to murder me and Donut: seeing another mob.

If any sort of enemy came anywhere near us, the crazy chicken went absolutely apeshit. He screamed and snapped and tried to kill himself in an attempt to get to the creature. He was like a goddamned psychotic wolverine hopped up on bath salts.

Other than his ability to inflict punishing nose chomps, the dinosaur chicken remained mostly harmless. I was afraid to let him near any mobs, even simple brindle grubs in fear he'd get himself stomped.

But in the end, that's exactly what we needed to do. It was the recap episode that gave me the clue. We were only on the program for a few short moments, but I learned something important. The four-eyed, orange-hued host of the show mentioned that Mongo was a pack hunter. That gave me an idea. After the episode, we went out and found a lone brindle grub struggling its way down a hall.

"You need to show him how to kill it," I said. "I'm going to let him free, and you two kill it together."

"You mean I gotta use my claws?" Donut asked.

"Yep," I said.

She sighed. "All right. Who knew being a mother would be this difficult?"

I opened the cage, and Mongo shot out like a bullet toward the level-two brindle grub, who squeaked and tried to crawl away. The little dinosaur leaped in the air, slashing with his clawed feet and chomping down on the bug. The health bar on the grub appeared, but it barely went down.

"Look, these guys are juicy on the inside," Donut said, coming up behind the two combatants. "If you cut here, all the stuff falls out and they're dead." She rolled the grub over and cut with her claw along the bug's stomach, like she was unzipping it. The grub shuddered and died, spilling white goo everywhere. Mongo shrieked with joy and began to vigorously devour the remains, filling himself up so much his stomach bulged afterward. The little dinosaur puked on the floor and then ate that, too.

"Christ, that's disgusting," I said.

"Good boy. Good Mongo!" Donut cried.

Mongo stood on top of the grub's remains and peed. Luckily the ban only applied to humans otherwise we'd have summoned about 100 elementals that first day.

"Come on, let's keep killing," Donut said. The next hall down held three grubs. I followed at a distance while they rushed over and tried it again.

Mongo seemed to have been paying attention. He managed to kill the second grub by himself, slicing open its belly with the hooked

claw on his foot. He bounced up and down with excitement after he did it.

By the time he'd finished off all three grubs, Mongo's dot turned from red to white. He still wasn't "bonded" to Donut, but he no longer attacked us. Actually, that wasn't true. He still attacked, but not as much. We didn't need the cage anymore. He followed us on foot, sometimes running ahead, sometimes hopping sideways and lagging behind. If we approached an unknown mob, I had to stick him back in the cage, however. He did not like that one bit.

Despite killing a dozen grubs, he remained at level one. We decided it was time to go back to Mordecai.

"So, pets," Mordecai said after we returned to the guild. "I'm limited in what I can tell you at this point, but I can now reveal you're on the right track. Keep doing what you're doing. That's the good news. The bad news is you need to hurry. If he's not bonded by the time the floor collapses, you won't be able to bring him with you."

We had barely forty hours left.

"Oh no," Donut cried. "Carl, we need to get back out there!"

"Just a minute," I said. "I have a couple pet questions. Can we have more than one?"

"It depends," he said. "There are multiple types of pets. The quick answer is no, you generally can't have more than one. But there are lots of exceptions. Some classes and some races allow for crawlers to have multiple pets. Also, if you have an especially high charisma, like Donut, you can also have multiples of certain types of pets. Also, pets with crawler IDs don't count toward that number. So if Donut had still been classified as a pet, you'd have been able to bond with another. Crawler pets and dungeon familiars are actually a different sort of thing. That's why that Lucia Mar kid can have those two dogs without any issues. There's also this one lady who brought like 15 goats in with her. She's still alive, and so are the goats. It's bizarre. There's this one show that is obsessed with her."

"Why isn't he leveling up?" I asked. "It's like he's not getting any experience at all."

Mordecai nodded. “Pet-class mobs are a little different. You got him from a treasure room, but it’s the same as if you’d purchased him from a shop. Mobs that start out as a pet class will always be level one regardless of what they usually are when you find them in the dungeon. And they’ll stay level one until they’re bonded. Only then will they start to level. Once they do start gaining experience, though, they will grow rapidly. He’ll get physically more mature each level up.”

“The description says he’s fully grown at level 15. Is that as high as he can get?” I asked.

“Oh no,” Mordecai said. “Not even close. He just won’t get physically bigger after that.”

“How big will he get?” Donut asked, looking down at the chicken who was running in circles around Mordecai’s room, shrieking.

“I can’t tell you,” he said. “But that little cage you’ve been using isn’t going to work for much longer. You need to do more than just bond with him. You need to teach him restraint, or he *is* going to die, and he might just take you down with him if he aggravates the wrong mob. Any attempt at stealth is out the window until he learns to behave himself.” Mongo responded by running up to Mordecai and leap-attacking his leg.

It took us a good bit to find where he’d teleported to. He’d entered the hallway across from our current quadrant and was in the process of wrangling with one of those level-three cow-tailed brindle grubs. He didn’t quite yet have the chops to take one of those things out on his own, but the ferocious little dino was doing an admirable job of dodging the grub’s tail swipes.

We spent the next several hours trying to train him with dog commands. “Attack” and “come” and even “lie down” worked really well. “Stay,” was another story.

Donut was surprisingly patient during this time. It turned out Mongo was very food motivated, and he loved pet biscuits, which made him easier to train. After a full day, we managed to keep him from just outright charging every time he saw something. He’d snarl and squawk and hop up and down, but he wouldn’t plunge headfirst

into battle until Donut said the command, which had somehow evolved from "attack" to "sic 'em."

When the timer was down to ten hours, we had to start carving our way toward the stairwell. We didn't have a choice. Mongo still hadn't officially bonded with Donut, and I was getting pretty worried it wasn't going to happen.

We were now exclusively fighting the brindled vespas. Despite the dungeon halving the number of hornets in the dungeon, they were still everywhere. The mobs gave a decent amount of experience, and we both hit level 13.

Out of desperation, we finally allowed Mongo to participate in the fights.

If there were more than a couple hornets in a hallway, we didn't fuck around. I tossed in an explosive. But if there was only one or two, I grounded them with my slingshot, and Donut hit them with magic missiles. Sometimes a single missile wasn't enough to kill them. That's when we'd send Mongo in to enthusiastically finish them off. The little beast was getting good at using his claw to rip open the thorax of the downed bugs.

In the hallway just outside the stair chamber, the same hallway we'd run through a few days earlier during our fight with the rage elemental, Mongo rushed in to finish off a hornet monster. The vespa grabbed at Mongo with his human-like hand, capturing the small creature. The mob had been mostly dead, but apparently not dead enough. It lifted the screaming and struggling chicken into the air and moved to toss him into its enormous, toothed mouth.

"Put Mongo down!" Donut screamed, flying across the hallway and slashing at the bug. I'd never seen her move that fast. She decapitated the monster with a quick slash, and all three of them fell into a heap on the ground.

"Carl, Carl, something happened," Donut said a minute later.

"I see that," I said, walking up. I felt an odd combination of relief and dread. "It finally worked. Congratulations."

On the minimap, Mongo's dot had turned from white to orange.

"Wait, I can officially name him now," she said. "I have a new menu and everything!"

Mongo the Mongoliensis Level One (Pet of Grand Champion Best in Dungeon Princess Donut) has joined the party.

Mongo's title has been changed to Royal Steed.

"We did it," Donut cried, hopping up and down. "We tamed Mongo!"

Mongo also jumped up and down next to the cat. He squawked with delight, waving his little arms.

And then he bit Donut right on the nose.

So, with seven hours left—one before the recommended time to descend—we camped out in the room with the stairs.

I sat on the ground playing with my menus while Donut and Mongo ran in circles around the large chamber, playing energetically. Donut was instructing Mongo on the art of pouncing. I watched, smiling. My heart felt heavy as I watched them. What would the next floor hold? How much longer could we survive?

I thought of Mordecai and his brother, of that time we'd caught Mordecai unaware. He'd been drunk, holding onto that framed picture. This game, this terrible, cruel game left scars that spanned centuries. I thought of the cheering crowds, watching this all from the safety of their homes.

You will not break me. Fuck you all. You will not break me.

As we waited for the timer to hit six hours, I thought back to that odd boss prize I received after killing the gerbil. I would've thought that defeating the boss in such a manner would've garnered me a better prize. The dungeon AI wasn't my friend. It wasn't on my side. I knew that. But surely I should've gained *something* good.

I pulled up my inventory menu. I now had a new tab labeled **History**. I clicked on it, and it was filled with pretty much the same junk I had now, but with the chopper and a few extra potions and scrolls and bits of things I'd used to build other items. Curious, I clicked to sort it by value.

I practically choked. Listed at the very top of my menu were three items I'd never seen before. I clicked over to make sure I didn't have them now. I didn't.

What the actual hell?

I looked about, afraid to say anything out loud. Was this some sort of bug? I went back to the menu and examined the three items. The tooltips didn't go into the same detail they would if I still had the items on me, though I could see their names and what category my inventory had placed them in.

Trans Tunnel 7C Orator Relay by Valtay Corp. – Inter-Tunnel Communications Device.

Valtay Perso-Shield Platinum Edition. – Tech-based Personal Shield.

Mag 3040 Valtay Corp Pulse Pistol. – Tech-based Weapon.

The first item had a red exclamation point next to it. I hovered over the red mark, and a warning popped up.

Warning: The System AI governing this program has deemed all non-sanctioned and monitored communication devices illegal, and they will not work within the dungeon. You may own and sell illegal devices, but any attempt to use or circumvent dungeon rules will result in immediate disqualification.

I was completely at a loss.

"Somebody's coming," Donut said. "There's a blue dot moving toward us."

My first thought was Frank and Maggie. I jumped to my feet and pulled up the map. It wasn't them. The moment I saw who it was, though, I realized I knew exactly where those items in my inventory had come from. The realization hit me like a brick. *Well, that's a weird coincidence*.

"Agatha," I said. "Holy shit, she's still alive."

I had taken her entire shopping cart into my inventory during that boss battle with the Ball of Swine. So much had happened so quickly during that battle, I'd never actually examined the individual items of her cart. I'd never even thought to do it. I looked now, and

sure enough all of it was there. The shopping cart. An inordinate amount of IKEA bags and cans of spray paint. Blankets. Clothes. And a goddamned "Pulse pistol." All three of the items appeared to be manufactured by the same company. The Valtay Corporation.

My mind raced. I thought of what Brandon had said. Agatha had been the one to set their old folk's home on fire, bringing everyone outside. The act had, temporarily, saved the lives of hundreds of people. But did she work for Borant? Had someone just given her that stuff, and she didn't know what it was? And why the hell hadn't she shown up on the recap episode? Should I say something?

"You ain't dead," Agatha said a few minutes later as she wheeled the squeaking shopping cart into the room. The woman was still level four, the same she'd been since the boss battle with the tusklings.

"Where have you been?" I asked, moving toward her.

"Don't touch me!" she cried, shuffling faster toward the stairs. "You're a cart thief. I don't trust cart thieves."

"Hey, I gave it back," I said.

She didn't answer. She just pushed her cart toward the stairs.

I was tempted to grab her cart again, but only for a second. Whatever this was, it was something well beyond my current ability to understand or process. And getting involved with it probably wasn't good for my health, especially when I didn't know what the hell was going on. *Never trust someone if their motivations aren't clear.* Odette had said that to me. Still, I was overwhelmed with curiosity.

I thought of that saying. *Curiosity killed the cat*.

Mongo screamed at Agatha, but Donut whispered a quiet command and the little monster held back. Agatha gave the dinosaur no heed. The stairs had already turned into a ramp thanks to the earlier descent by Brandon and crew.

"I see the others made it down," Agatha muttered as she pushed the cart forward.

"You should wait ten minutes," I called. "If you go down now, you'll lose six hours. Plus I need to talk to you… About your

shopping cart." I added that last part without thinking, and I immediately regretted it. *Don't get involved, you idiot!*

Agatha paused. She gave me a sharp look. Through her rheumy eyes, I saw a warning there. *No*, those eyes said, *stop now*.

"I can fix the wheel," I quickly added. "It's squeaking. They can hear you coming."

She blinked, and the look went away so quickly I wondered if I had imagined it.

"No need to fix m'squeak, boy. Them critters already know I'm here. They just don't know what to do about it. You worry about you, and I worry about me."

She continued down the stairs, quickly disappearing from view.

Zev: Are you guys okay?

DONUT: WE ARE FINE ARE YOU OKAY?

Zev: Okay, false alarm. I see you now. There was a brief outage there in the feed. It happens sometimes. Odette says she's ready whenever you are, so feel free to go down starting in seven minutes. I won't be able to talk to you until after you're done with the race and class selection. I guess I'll see you guys on the other side. Good luck.

Carl: How long was the feed out?

Zev: Just a couple minutes. It's been acting funky all day. Don't worry, it's nothing unusual. People are always complaining about it. I'm on planet, and I still have feed issues.

Them critters already know I'm here. They just don't know what to do about it.

Christ, I thought. What sort of bullshit was this? I thought back to the inventory potion. The moment I'd discovered the items, Agatha had appeared. Was that a coincidence? Was she working with the system AI? I shook my head.

A week and a half ago, I'd been planning on kidnapping a prize-winning cat and then selling everything I owned in order to bribe my ex-girlfriend to keep her from suing me. And even that was more drama than I'd ever wanted to deal with. All of this… with the Skull Empire and everything else, it was just too much, too fast. How

could we focus on surviving when we had all this other stuff to deal with?

I sighed. I watched the timer finally run down to six hours.

"Come on, Donut," I said. "Let's see what this third floor is all about."

"Do you think it'll be as exciting as the second floor?" she asked.

"God, I hope not," I said.

Mongo screeched.

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EPILOGUE

"You do realize that thing is going to get you killed, right?" Odette asked after the conclusion of her show. Donut was currently chasing Mongo around the studio. The little dinosaur kept running head-first into the invisible wall and screaming. Lexis, Odette's production assistant, had given the small monster a bow tie to wear on the show, and he'd practically bitten off her finger. The tie had lasted about three seconds before he'd ripped it off.

The taping had gone well. We'd started off by discussing the whole thing with the rage elemental. Then we talked about Mongo. Donut had trained him to perch quietly on her back, clinging onto her fur. He'd behaved himself. Mostly. Odette had mentioned something about a magical pet carrier, which apparently was the dungeon's equivalent of a pokeball. They were supposedly expensive, but it would allow us to put bonded pets into inventory without harming them. I didn't care how much they cost. If we could afford it, it was going to be one of our first purchases. No more shoving Mongo into the gerbil cage and then sticking him in the bathroom so we couldn't hear his shrieks while we slept.

I'd known what was coming next.

After the segment on Mongo, I'd finally gotten to see a shortened version of the infamous Pork Boy Snick. Donut had found it hilarious. The mysterious creator of the video had been very… generous… with my proportions. I'd been half-expecting the video to feature my feet prominently. I didn't dare say it out loud, but I had this strange

notion that the system AI might've had something to do with the video. But if it did, the video showed nothing to indicate it. In fact, it had clearly been produced by someone more interested in the Maestro than me, as he was the obvious subject of the video.

"So," Odette had said after we watched the scene and the audience's uproarious laughter eased. "You are likely unaware of this, but *Death Watch Extreme Dungeon Mayhem* announced earlier that it was going into hiatus while the show restructured."

"I'm shocked," Donut said. "Quite shocked."

The audience laughed.

"King Rust of the Skull Empire, who recently arrived in earth orbit, has been oddly quiet about the controversy. A spokesperson for the royal family has requested people stop referring to the prince as 'Carl's Naughty Little Piggie,'" The audience roared, "But so far, nobody seems to be complying." Odette turned to her audience. With her bug helmet, her face was expressionless, but I could hear the grin in her voice. "I would personally like to assure King Rust that I would never call Prince Maestro 'Carl's Naughty Little Piggie' or 'Pork Boy.' And I would like to encourage my audience to never sink to that level. Again, it's 'Prince Maestro' and not," she held her hands out.

"Carl's Naughty Little Piggie!" the audience shouted, followed by peals of laughter.

"Anyway," Odette said. "What do you think about this, Carl?"

"Look," I said. "I don't know anything about the Skull Clan or Empire or whatever, or this king guy. I'm sure he has a perfectly nice family and kingdom." The audience laughed. "I don't want any trouble with him and his people. But his son is a dick, and I called him out on it. Nothing more, and nothing less. I didn't mean to cause an intergalactic incident. I know nothing about the video."

"So, to be clear, it is a snick," Odette asked. "A lot of people seem to believe it's real."

"If I was going to turn gay, it wouldn't be with that guy."

The audience screamed. Odette nodded. "But you did challenge him to single combat."

"Yes, I did. And that offer still stands," I said. "I still don't know how any of this stuff works because you guys won't tell me anything." More laughter. "But I hope for the chance to face him one on one."

"We do too, don't we?" Odette said.

The audience cheered. Someone shouted, "Glurp, glurp!" A minute later the whole audience was glurping.

Odette shook her head in mock disgust.

The show soon ended after that. Like last time, Odette ushered Lexis out of the room so we could talk for a few minutes.

"Is it worth it," I asked, indicating the pet. "If he lives, I mean."

"You should've picked the Tummy Acher," Odette said. "The little round guy with the mohawk. They're very friendly and easy to work with. Plus they're rare, and people love them. Once they're full grown, they are one of the best melee tanks in the game. But your Mongo is a solid choice. If you can keep him alive, he will be a vicious fighter."

"So," I said. "I gave your message to Mordecai. He wasn't too pleased with the idea of working for you."

She nodded sadly. "I saw. I watched you tell him. He had a few additional choice words for me after you left. He'll come around. Tell him I understand his feelings on the matter, and I would love for the opportunity to explain myself."

"What happened between you two?" I asked.

"We don't have time to go into it," Odette said. "But the short answer is I pushed him too hard, and he paid dearly for it. Anyway, you're about to hit the all-important third floor." She'd asked me on air if I knew what I was going to do, and I'd answered truthfully. I had no idea what was going to happen. Donut had lied and said she had it all planned out. "Do you really not know what you're going to do?"

"I don't even know what my choices are going to be," I said. "How can I decide?"

She nodded. "When I decided to stay human, it lost me several viewers, but not too many. You're in a tough position. Whatever you choose, make sure it has either a pathfinder skill or some sort of

advanced mapping ability. Finding stairwells as quickly as possible will be crucial on further floors. It's not going to be a problem on this third floor. Also," she added. "Make sure Donut goes first. That way you can tailor your class selection on hers. I would ignore the AI's advice for your race, but I'd take a careful look at whatever it suggests for your class."

"Hey," I said. "Do you know anything about the Valtay Corporation?"

She paused, cocking her head to the side. "Where did you hear about them?"

I shrugged. "Just curious. I heard it somewhere."

She smiled, but without humor. "Be careful. If they are somehow contacting you or trying to get to you, be very cautious. They're a corporate system government, and they're the ones who currently have an entire fleet parked outside of the Borant system, ready to collect on the debt. They were hours away from initiating a full-scale collection action when the kua-tin stopped them in their tracks by starting the season early. They're one of the most powerful entities in the universe. The next season is going to be run by them."

"Are they human?" I asked. I thought of Agatha. Was she one of these aliens? The idea seemed absurd.

"No," she said. "Not usually. They're a parasitic lifeform. They do utilize human bodies, but their home world is aquatic, and they much prefer water-based hosts, such as the kua-tin or the gleeners. They're known for their technological advancements. Their version of *Dungeon Crawler World* is less goblins and trolls and more android death machines and pulse rifles.

I contemplated telling her about Agatha, but I decided against it. I decided it would be best to just stay away from the woman the best I could.

Mongo pounced and chomped directly onto Donut's tail. She howled and started running in circles with Mongo still attached.

Odette shook her head. "You're gonna want to level that thing up as soon as you can. But make sure Donut has proper control over him first. Those little nibbles and nose chomps are cute now. They won't be so adorable when he's full-grown."

"Do you know how big he gets?"

"You honestly don't know what he is?" Odette asked. "He's a pretty common creature across the universe. They always seed the human worlds with those guys and the others before the humans develop. Most human kids love these things."

"He's a dinosaur of some sort. I know that much."

"He's a dinosaur all right. Mongoliensis." Her eyes flashed, in a similar way that Mordecai's did when he was searching through his menus. "Ahh, I see," she said after a moment. "The issue is the translation. 'Mongoliensis' is based off the scientific name. Your language had a more common name for those things."

The little chicken jumped up on Donut's back and squawked.

"You called them velociraptors."

I returned my gaze to the little monster. I'd been thrown off by the pink feathers and the beak. But now that she said it, I could see the monstrosity Mongo would soon become.

"I mean, it's obvious, isn't it?"

"Oh hell," I finally said.

She laughed.

Donut came up to us, breathless. "Carl, is it time to go yet?"

"There's one last piece of advice I'd like to give," Odette said, looking at the both of us. She paused, as if uncertain about what she was about to say. She'd changed on a dime, suddenly looking different, almost sad. "It's just a suggestion. I don't know if, morally, this is a good idea or not, but this will greatly increase your chances of survival. It's something to look for during class selection. It's generally only offered to crawlers with a high charisma, so if it's available, it'll be hidden somewhere amongst Donut's choices. The problem is, if you pick it, it's going to make someone very angry."

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IT'S OVER, YO

New Achievement! You read a book!

You managed to make it all the way through the first *Dungeon Crawler Carl* book without throwing it against the wall!

***Reward*: You get to wait until January of 2021 before you can read the next one.**

The good news is the next book has clowns and dead hookers in it.

Carl's Doomsday Scenario will be available in January of 2021. Don't worry. It's already written and ready to go. Cheryl is editing it right now. Thank you for reading. Seriously. Please, please leave a review. We live and die by our reviews, and it's super important. So if you read this and enjoyed it, please review it. It's against Amazon's rules to offer a prize to those who review books, but I will risk Amazon's wrath and offer my services to be the father of your babies if you post a review. See you in '21.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

(This is where we switch to third person and pretend like Matt isn't writing this himself.)

Matt Dinniman is a writer and artist from Gig Harbor, WA. When he isn't attending cat shows, wrangling dogs, feeding turtles, playing bass in a punk/metal band, or writing books that make guys named Kyle threaten to kill his family because he called a goblin an incel, he designs cat-themed greeting cards and decorations. If you've ever walked into a Target or an IKEA or a Home Goods, looked at the weird wall art they have for sale there, and thought to yourself, *who buys this crap?* The answer is, "Not nearly as many people as Matt would like." So please buy all his books. (Or his art!)



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THE PAGE WHERE WE TOUT FACEBOOK GROUPS SO THEY LET US SPAM THEM ABOUT THIS BOOK

Over on Facebook, if you want to talk about Gamelit. I mean if you really want to talk about Gamelit, check out the Gamelit Society!

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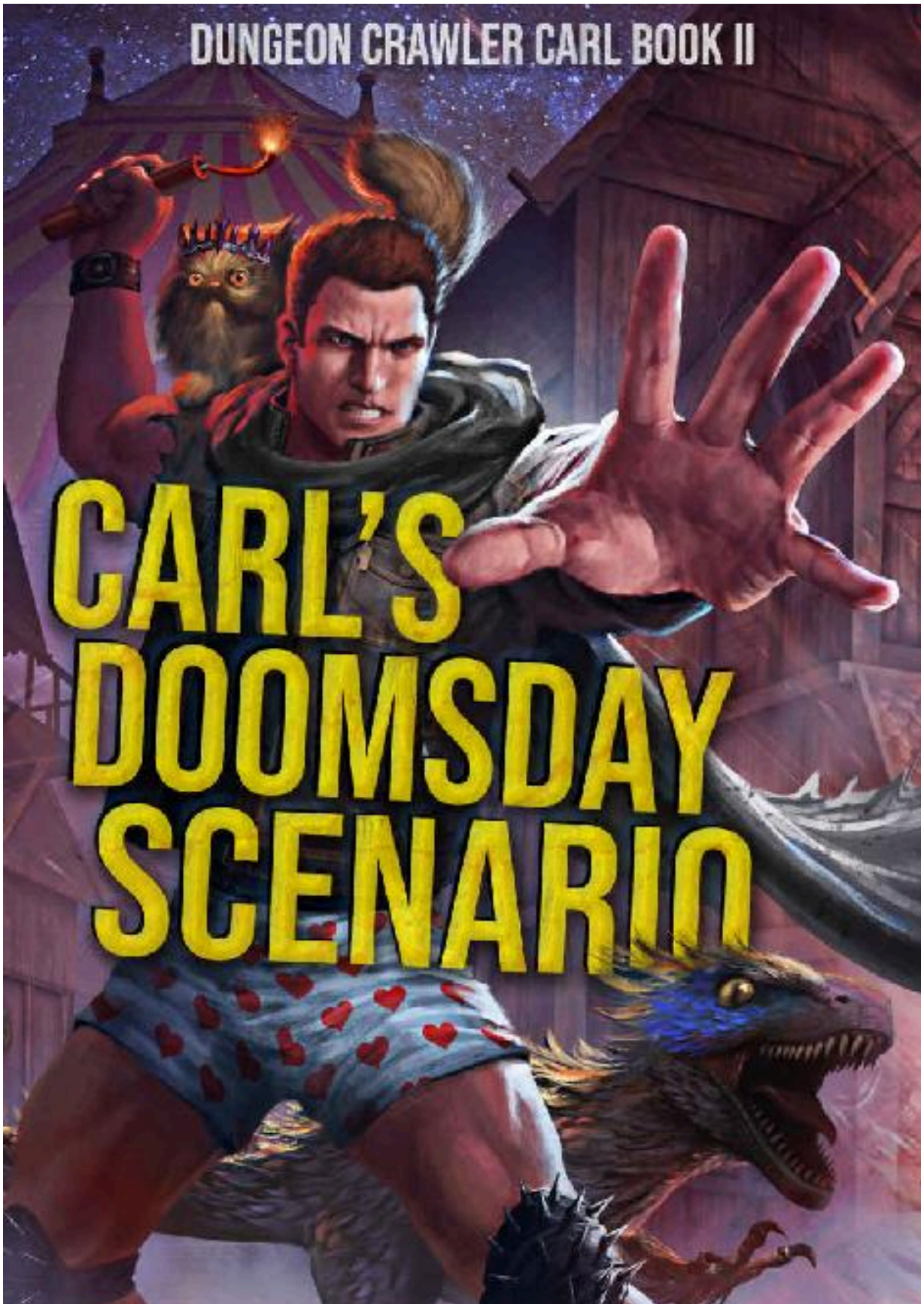
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If you hold a cat by the tail you learn things you cannot learn any other way.

- MARK TWAIN

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It's that time again.
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[1]

Welcome, Crawler to the third floor.

The previous level will collapse in 3 hours and 35 minutes.

We teleported straight from the green room to a long, golden hallway reminiscent of the first hallway we entered.

"Carl, look! We're outside!" Donut said, looking up into the air.

Sure enough, a dark sky rose above us, dotted with stars. A colorful nebula, reminiscent of the background image on Odette's stage, covered the sky.

The air still felt stale. I pulled my slingshot, aimed it at the stars, and I fired.

Plink. Sure enough, the rock bounced off the ceiling, about 25 feet up.

"It's an illusion," I said. "It's like that mall in Las Vegas. They make it look like you're outside, but you're really not."

"Well, that's disappointing," Donut said.

The walls and the ground were made of golden-colored bricks. A plush, red carpet led to a familiar door at the end of the hallway. As we approached, the door opened on its own. A tall figure stepped out, and all three of us stopped.

A well-built, young and disgustingly handsome man wearing a tuxedo waited for us. His skin was a dusky gray, and he had a short

pair of devil horns jutting from his forehead. The man stood about my height, and he had long gray and black hair that was held back in a ponytail. A barbed tail poked from the rear of his tuxedo. A pair of black, bat-like wings sat folded tightly against his back.

"Hello, Mordecai," I said, examining his new form. "Jesus, dude. Looking good."

"Wow," Donut said, looking him up and down. "I wouldn't kick you out of bed for eating crackers."

Even Mongo's customary screech sounded as if he was in awe.

Mordecai – Incubus. Level 50.

Guildmaster of this guildhall.

This is a Non-Combatant NPC.

Also known as the Gigachad of the Over City, Incubi are the male counterparts of the infamous Succubus. The smooth, seductive, and ultimately deadly Incubus can be identified by his stunning good looks, exquisite charm, and sensuous feet. They can only be found on the urban levels of the dungeon. They give new meaning to the phrase, "hit it and quit it."

"Princess Donut, Carl, little Mongo, welcome to the third floor. The training levels have concluded. Now the games may truly begin," Mordecai said, bowing slightly. Even his voice had gotten deeper. He indicated for us to enter.

We walked inside, and the door closed behind us.

"Training levels?" I said. "For fuck's sake. You call those training levels?"

"Oh, thank goodness," Mordecai said once the door closed. He ripped the jacket off and pulled off the tie, unbuttoning the top three buttons. The jacket was odd, with a pair of long slits along the back to accommodate his wings. "I thought you two were never going to show up. I've been in this thing for three hours waiting for you. I hate formal wear."

"The interview ran long," I said. "I take it the general public can't watch this part?"

"Nope," he said. "They'll watch you go in, and they'll watch you come out, but they don't get to see what's going on inside. It's like a

jury room."

His room was exactly the same as it had always been, but he'd cleaned up even further. A pair of beds had magically appeared since the last time we'd been in here.

"Those are for the transformation, if required," he said. "Remember what happened with Donut when she took that enhanced pet biscuit?"

I swallowed, remembering the weird, gooey blob thing she'd transformed into before.

"So," Mordecai said, "have you decided who wants to go first? I suggest Princess…"

"Me," Donut said, jumping up on one of the beds. "Let's get this rolling."

"Okay, Carl, take a seat," Mordecai said. I sat in one of the chairs. Mongo jumped into my lap and squeaked, sounding concerned.

"Mommy will be okay," Donut said. "You hang out with Uncle Carl for a few minutes while I get some work done. Behave yourself."

The baby velociraptor settled into my lap. I suddenly felt uncomfortable having that many teeth so close to my crotch. If he bit me now, I didn't know what would happen. I suspected he wouldn't teleport away. Instead, he'd get frozen like Frank and Maggie had that one time. Hopefully, I wouldn't find out.

"Okay," Mordecai said. He waved his hand and a screen appeared floating in the air, like we were on Odette's show. "Your current race is 'cat.' This is a list of all the available races you may choose. It looks like you've been given 320 different choices. It is in alphabetical order, and you may click on any of them to drill down to a very specific set of details. Also, the system AI has narrowed it down to a set of three recommendations. We will spend the next hour or so going over these choices, and then I will…"

"I choose cat. Next."

Mordecai took a deep breath. "Donut, there are a few choices on here where you'll actually look mostly…"

"Cat. Final answer. Let's move on."

Mordecai looked at me. I shrugged. She'd made it clear from the start that she wasn't going to change. I was just happy she'd

dropped the idea of me turning into a cat also.

"Okay, then," he said. "A message will pop up, and you have to confirm your choice by clicking on it."

"Wait," I said, a horrific thought coming to me. "It's not going to, you know, change her back to the way she was before is it?"

"Too late," Donut said. She glowed for a moment. "I clicked it." She looked at her paw. "I feel the same."

"No," Mordecai said. He looked pointedly at Donut. "But it is important to ask questions like that. I made it so she actually chose to not make a choice. Nothing will change, but she will now have access to a few racial benefits she didn't have before."

"Benefits? What are they?" Donut asked.

"I don't know, Princess Donut," Mordecai said, sounding exasperated. "We never got to examine the cat choice in the menu. You'll be able to see when we're done. And you wouldn't have changed yet anyway. The change doesn't happen until the end of the process."

"Okay, Donut," I said. "We need to think carefully about this next choice. Let's see what the AI suggests. Okay?"

"Let's do this," she said. "Show me anything with the word princess or queen in the title."

"Okay, moving on," Mordecai said. A list of items appeared on the screen, though the list appeared to be much shorter than the last one.

Mordecai paused, his eyes flashing as he quickly looked over the selections. "Okay, Princess Donut. It looks as if you've been given 34 class choices. That's a pretty short list. In fact, it's the shortest I've ever seen, but I think that's a combination of your racial choice and a result of your stats. Your base constitution is still two," He paused. "No, actually it's four now thanks to your racial choice of cat." He again searched through his unseen menus. "Oh, I see now. It's actually a combination of four things. You both also have that Desperado pass, which precludes several of the classes right off the bat. And Donut has that tiara on her head, which narrows it even further. But that's all right, there are still a few great choices on there."

"So what's good?" Donut asked, looking at the list. "Ohh, that one sounds cool. It sounds menacing yet mysterious and fun. I pick that one."

"Wait," I said, jumping to my feet. I caught the now-asleep Mongo in the crook of my arm and rushed to the screen. "Do *not* pick anything yet until we've looked it over carefully."

Donut pointed at something entitled **NecroBard**.

Mordecai grunted. "That's actually not a bad choice. It's one of the three recommendations.

I looked over the list. The only base classes available to her were **Bard, Magic User**, and **Barbarian**. Each of the base classes had a few additional items under them, including **Necromancer**, **Wind Mage**, and **Warlock**. The NecroBard subclass was listed under both Bard and Necromancer. There was also an **Earth Class** heading, and the majority of the available items were listed under there. Included on that list were several interesting items, including **Feral Cat Berserker**, **Animal Test Subject**, and **Roller Derby Jammer**.

I looked at the list of the three AI-picked recommendations. They were:

Artist Alley Mogul

NecroBard

And

Former Child Actor

I said a silent thank you to the game gods that they hadn't named the roller derby one "Derby Queen." She probably would've insisted upon picking it without reading anything. We'd discussed this, and we had a loose plan based on Odette's advice. But Donut was also prone to go off the rails from time to time.

"Donut," I said. "Click on each of the three recommendations so we can see the information."

"I'm telling you right now I am absolutely not choosing this one," Donut said as she clicked on the first choice.

Artist Alley Mogul

This Charisma and Intelligence-based class is the modern-day merchant. Using your superior artistic talent to

entertain and entice fellow nerds, the Artist Alley Mogul travels the world to sell her copyright-infringing wares. While not particularly menacing physically, this plucky merchant is extremely difficult to hurt. Members of this class receive the following benefits:

+5 Dexterity

Instant access to the level-5 *Shield* spell.

A 25% discount at all stores plus a 15% bonus to money earned from sales.

10% Interest earned on all coins upon descent to the next level.

Level-5 Pathfinder skill

Access to Enhanced Dodge, which allows the Dodge skill to train to level 20.

Level-5 Dodge skill. (Already obtained)

Additional subclasses become available on the sixth floor.

This is an Earth Class. As an incentive to choose an Earth Class, you will receive a Silver Earth Box upon choosing this class.

Mordecai grunted. "That incentive is a little weak compared to what they usually do. It's usually a gold box and a couple stat points."

"I'm not surprised," I muttered. My eyes immediately focused on that Pathfinder skill. Odette had said I needed to find something with that skill. But we were looking for something else, too.

"Still," Mordecai said. "This is a very good choice for her. If she can get Dodge over level 15, she will be almost impossible to hit. And a 25% discount at stores is great, too. That'll be on top of the bonus she already gets from her charisma. Stuff will be half-price for her, and that's a huge deal. But most importantly, you'd have access to the Pathfinder skill. It'll make finding stairwells, shops, and guilds much easier."

"Yeah, no," Donut said. "Artist Alley? Really? Aren't those the nerds that like *Star Wars* and draw pictures of cats dressed like the guys from *A-Team* and stuff?" She shuddered.

"It's a good choice," I said. "Let's look at the other two."

NecroBard

This unusual class combines one of the most-loved occupations with one of the most reviled. Necromancers specialize in magic related to raising the dead. Bards must choose an entertainment-based skill. Depending on this choice, whether it be singing, the kazoo, or storytelling, the resulting crawler will use this skill to either entertain, protect, or glamour both the living and the dead.

The NecroBard receives the following benefits:

Instant access to a level-5 entertainment-based skill of their choice.

Access to all membership-based clubs, regardless of current memberships.

Free rooms at all saferooms.

A 10% mana cost penalty on all non-Necromancer or Bard spells.

Instant access to the Level-3 *Turn Undead* Spell.

Instant access to the Level-3 *Panty Dropper* Spell.

+5 to Constitution, Charisma, and Intelligence.

-2 Strength

Additional benefits depending on entertainment-based skill choice.

"So help me god," I said. "I will abandon you right here and right now if you choose to take up the kazoo."

"I could play an instrument," Donut said, voice full of wonder. "I could be a singer!"

"We want to keep viewers, remember?" I said.

"What this description doesn't say is that a lot of the necromancer spells will be cast with her instrument," Mordecai said. "And that means she won't have to use spell points to cast them. That's pretty huge. Plus each instrument has a long list of additional benefits. This is a solid choice if you end up picking a DPS class. Something that does a lot of damage. She'll have a wide range of both protection and other support skills."

"Carl, look! I could get a harmonica!" Donut said. She'd pulled up the submenu of entertainment skills. She gasped. "Bongos. They

have bongos, Carl."

"Harmonica? How would that even work?" I said. "You don't have thumbs."

"You don't need thumbs for the harmonica, Carl. Not if I get one of those neck thingies."

I had a quick vision of tiny Zev attempting to strangle me after I allowed Donut to take up a ridiculous instrument. "Please, let's just look at that third choice."

Former Child Actor

This rare subclass is an offshoot of the Character Actor class. It can only be obtained by Crawlers who have both received the "Cut!" achievement and have obtained at least one trillion views.

Once a spoiled brat superstar, then addicted to drugs, you have crawled back from the brink stronger than ever. You are ready for your comeback. This Charisma and Chance-based class could go either way. You'll either rise to the top, or you'll be dead in a ditch in a week.

This unique Earth class is based on the Bard/Rogue Jack-Of-All-Trades subclass, but with a few distinctive differences.

In addition to the following benefits, the most distinct aspect of this multi-faceted class is the Level-3 Character Actor skill. This skill increases in level only upon descent to the next floor.

Additional benefits:

Immunity to all poisons and diseases.

Level-5 Cockroach skill.

+10 to Charisma.

+15% faster growth in all Charisma-based skills.

The Manager Benefit.

This is an Earth Class. As an incentive to choose an Earth Class, you will receive a Silver Earth Box upon choosing this class.

I watched Donut's eyes get huge upon reading this one.

"What the hell is the Character Actor skill? Or the Cockroach skill?" I asked. "And what was the 'Cut!' achievement? I don't remember that one."

"I got it for being a good actress," Donut said. "When we tricked the goblin shamankas."

"Okay, but it doesn't explain what the character actor part means. Mordecai?"

Mordecai didn't say anything for several moments. His lip was curled in displeasure. On that incubus face of his, it looked downright menacing.

"What?" he said. "Oh, so Character Actor. It's a bit complicated. Basically every floor, Donut has to pick a specialty."

"Specialty?" I asked.

"She can basically pick a new class each floor. Each floor from now on will have a theme. So it would be somewhat useful. If it's a floor filled with ice monsters, she can pick a fire class, and so forth. But it's also a chance-based skill. So if she chooses it, and then she chooses a fire mage, the system AI basically rolls the dice and decides how many fire mage spells and skills to give to her. And as soon as she's done with the floor, she loses the skills and starts over. Each higher level of the Character Actor skill, however, gives better skills. It makes it so she is pretty weak for the early levels, but once you get higher, it can be quite powerful depending on her class choices."

"I don't think I like that," I said. "It leaves too much to chance. What about her existing skills, like *Magic Missile* and the like?"

"Those are untouched. But if she chooses a class that has a penalty for those skills or spells, they will apply. For example, if she chooses a Necromancer specialty, that *Magic Missile* spell will cost 10% more to cast, but just for the length of that floor. Or if she chooses Warlock, her constitution will go down one point for the length of that floor."

I liked that she would be immune to poison and diseases. "What's the cockroach skill?"

"Basically, it gives a chance to survive a fatal attack. At level five she's guaranteed one free lethal hit a fight, though she'd be near

death afterward. At level ten, your health doesn't go down at all after the first fatal strike. The problem is, the only way to train that skill is by using it. Or with potions, or a training guild if you can find one, but that can get expensive."

"I like it," Donut said. "If I pick it, then I can just choose NecroBard as my specialty every floor, but pick a different instrument every time. Wouldn't that be neat? It's the best of both worlds!"

"Not necessarily, Donut," I said. "If you get a bad roll from the AI, you might get stuck with underpowered skills and spells until the next floor."

"Exactly," Mordecai said.

"Let's spend some time looking at the other choices," I said. "But of the three, I think I like the Artist Alley one the best."

"I agree," Mordecai said. "I think the NecroBard *might* be better. But you're right, Carl. It's a… dangerous choice for your social numbers."

We spent some time going over the other choices, carefully looking at all the abilities. The Feral Cat Berserker was basically a barbarian that'd end up getting her killed immediately thanks to her low health, and the Animal Test Subject was a mage that specialized in using poison. It also caused the crawler to glow green. Warlock was a solid choice in terms of skills, but it caused her to lose one point of Constitution, which would make her just too fragile. The others used mostly melee-based attacks and weren't really suitable.

I took a deep breath. "Donut, I know you're not excited about it. But I really think you should go with the Artist Alley Mogul class. It's not perfect, but it's the most well-rounded."

"Okay," she said.

I exchanged a look with Mordecai to see if he was buying it. He appeared skeptical. "Really?" I said.

She approximated a shrug. "We gotta do what's best for the team, right? You want me to be a nerd, I'll be a nerd."

Donut: CARL ARE YOU SURE ABOUT THIS? HE IS GOING TO BE REALLY MAD.

Carl: Do it.

"Okay, then," Mordecai said. "The menu is going to pop up now, and you have to scroll down and choose it."

Donut glowed for a moment. A moment later, she glowed again. "Done. I am now a stupid Artist Alley Mogul."

"Goddamnit, Donut!" Mordecai cried. "God fucking damnit!"

"And scene," Donut said, waving her paw.

"Whoa," I said. Mongo stirred in my arms. "What's happening?"

"Mordecai dear, that's Carl's line. You should pick something else. Carl, he's upset because I chose the Former Child Actor class. I was acting! Isn't it great?"

"That not acting," I said. "It's called lying."

"It wasn't a lie. Not technically. I picked the Artist Alley Mogul as my third-floor specialty. It's basically the same thing anyway, so I don't see why he's so upset. It said I received all the benefits except the 25% discount. Or the *Shield* spell. Or that Pathfinder skill."

"That's like all of the usable benefits, Donut." I sighed. "At least your Charisma is now higher. And you have that Cockroach skill."

"And I'm immune to poison and disease!"

"Yeah," Mordecai said drily. "And you've received the Manager benefit."

"Oh yeah," I said. "What *is* that?"

I already knew exactly what the manager benefit was. Odette had explained it in detail.

"That's me," Mordecai said. "*I'm* the manager. From now on, for the remainder of your time in this godsforsaken place, I will instantly teleport to any saferoom you are in."

"Yay!" Donut cried.

"No, not yay," Mordecai said. "I was supposed to transfer to a magic guild after this floor. I *like* running the magic guild. My room gets bigger, and I have access to my potions and more spells. Now every time you sleep or eat or stop to brush your teeth, I'll be forced to spend my time with you. Away from my room and my clothes and food. Oh gods, and I've lost my tunnel access. No more television. No more access to the information codex. And since I can no longer watch you stumbling around the dungeon, I will have no warning for

when I’m to be teleported away. And if you buy a personal space…” He started grumbling under his breath.

“That wasn’t cool, Donut,” I said.

Donut: I TOLD YOU HE’D BE MAD. I DON’T LIKE PEOPLE MAD AT ME, CARL.

Carl: Yeah, he’s pissed. Sorry about that.

“If you do pick the Manager benefit, and it's not attached to an obvious choice, you’ll want to make it look like a mistake,” Odette had said. “Don't ask him about it, because once he tells you what it is, it'll be too late. He won't be allowed to tell you unless you ask. Make it look like it was all Donut’s idea, and you didn’t have anything to do with it. Mordecai can hold a grudge, but he still sees Donut as a child. He’ll forgive her. If he ever found out you did this on purpose, he would never forgive you.”

“What if that manager benefit is attached to a class that isn’t as good?” I said. “I like having him around, but it doesn’t seem like that great of a trade-off if it hobbles Donut.”

“There’s a lot he can’t tell you or help you with as a game guide. As a manager, that’s all out the window. He’ll lose access to the codex, and everything he tells you will have to be from his own memory. But Mordecai has been in the dungeon for a very long time, and that brain of his is the single greatest resource any crawler can have. As long as he *wants* to help you, it’ll be the next best thing to having him in the party. He’ll be able to use the chat feature. He is an alchemical master. Get him in front of an Alchemist’s table, and he’ll be able to make you potions. Surely you can see the benefit in that.”

I did, indeed, see the benefit in it. So we’d decided to take Odette’s advice. I didn’t like lying or tricking Mordecai. He was as close to a friend as I could get to an alien, and I knew this could irreparably harm that trust and friendship if he ever found out. Furthermore, I didn’t trust Odette. We now owed her, and she potentially held something over us. But I did trust that she wanted us to survive for as long as possible.

After quickly discussing it with Donut, we’d decided the risk was worth it. We would pick that benefit if it was available.

Mordecai's well-chiseled face groused. His smoldering eyes focused on Donut. "Well, congratulations, crawler. You are now Princess Donut the Level 13 Former Child Actor Cat. Welcome to the third fucking floor."

Mordecai glared at me.

"Your turn," he said.

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Mordecai took a deep breath, and I watched him calm himself.

"Okay," he said. "Let's take a look at your race selections, Carl."

I sat on the bed. I'd transferred the still-sleeping Mongo to the seat. Donut sat next to the baby velociraptor and rested a paw on his tiny head.

Lines and lines populated the screen.

"It looks as if you have 398 choices. That's a good amount," the incubus said.

I focused on the line of the three AI-recommended choices and laughed.

Hobgoblin

Human

And

Sasquatch

"Huh, that's odd," Mordecai said. "I've never seen the system recommend the existing race before."

"The AI loves Carl's tootsies," Donut said.

Mordecai made a face. He opened his mouth as if to say something, then closed it.

I clicked on the first one, the Hobgoblin

A spinning, 3D model of a large creature appeared in the air. They were basically large, more muscular goblins, but with festering sores on their faces. My stomach lurched at the sight of the monster, and for the first time what was happening here really hit me.

I can say the word, and I will turn into that thing. Forever. Holy shit.

"Ew," Donut said. "Carl, you are not picking that. If you're going to change, you should pick what he chose." She waved at Mordecai. "An Incubus. Or a Changeling. Yes, a Changeling! You can alter yourself to fit my current class. Carl, wouldn't that be great?"

"Neither of those are on the list," I said. I didn't like the idea of the Changeling anyway. Mordecai had said—like Donut's Character Actor skill—the facsimile wasn't always as good as the original. Extreme versatility came with a price.

Hobgoblin

This limited race is only available to Crawlers who have obtained a level five Explosives Handling skill by the time race selection becomes available.

A Hobgoblin is what happens when a lady troll manages to get a goblin drunk enough to talk herself into his pants. Large, muscular, and smart, Hobgoblins excel at trapmaking, explosives management, and all-out mayhem. Unfortunately, these guys are so ugly even Gorgons lose their lunch looking upon them. This race is best suited for rogue and fighter-based classes.

Automatic +3 to all trap-based and explosive-based skills.

+5% Faster skill progression in all trap-based and explosive-based skills.

Unlocks higher-tier explosives and trap-making abilities, allowing one to raise these skills to 20.

Free access to all Hobgoblin Sapper Workshops.

-5 to Charisma. Charisma is capped at 10.

+1 to Dexterity.

+2 to Intelligence.

Adds the Regeneration skill (already obtained via Trollskin Shirt).

This was a good race. In fact, it was almost perfect for the build I had in my mind. But there was no way I was going to turn myself into that thing. Absolutely not. The bonuses were great, but I would

lose all of our viewers. They really were ugly. And not cute ugly like Mongo. These guys were genuinely unsettling to look at.

I was curious what the system had to say about humans.

Human

You're already a human. I'm going to go out on a limb here and guess you don't need a description. If you choose this, nothing will change. Except for these racial benefits:

+2 to all base stats.

Adaptability. +2% faster skill progression.

Choosing this race unlocks multiple exclusive, earth-based classes.

I cringed a little as I clicked on my last choice.

A large, hairy humanoid with massive feet started spinning. It looked almost identical to the creature in those beef jerky commercials. It was a stereotypical, hair-covered bigfoot creature with fangs and a giant forehead.

Sasquatch.

This limited race is only available to Crawlers who have obtained a level five Smush skill by the time race selection becomes available.

Bigfoot. Yeti (if you choose an ice-based class). Skunk Ape. The list of nicknames for these things is almost endless, but in the end, the result is the same. First you take a human, you cross it with a gorilla, you make them a foot and a half taller, cover them with hair, and then give them size 24 feet. The resulting behemoth is a monstrous melee fighter and tank.

+ 3 to Bash Skill

+ 3 to Smush Skill

-3 to Intelligence

-1 to Charisma

+6 to Strength

+6 to Constitution

+2 to Dexterity

Unlocks higher tier Smush skill.

I eyed the spinning, 3D bigfoot creature with distaste. I focused on the creature's massive, sparkling feet. That was not going to happen. I didn't want to become a joke or a fucking parody of an earth creature. I thought of what that orc had said, that I was the AI's pet. No. No way.

"Advice?" I asked Mordecai.

"Keep looking," he said. "There are a few additional races available that still give you access to the exclusive earth-based classes. Based on Donut's offerings, it appears the earth classes are going to be the best ones this year."

For the next two hours, I read through every available race. There was a wide variety of choices, from short, squat, purple-skinned little people called Night Dwarves to tall, thin gazelle-like fighters called Lyrx Elves to monstrous rock creatures with molten centers called Coal Engines. There was even a finger-sized parasitic worm creature called an Intellect Hunter. I wondered if they were the same creatures who ran the Valtay Corporation, but I was afraid to ask. They could take over the bodies of any creature they killed, though the bodies would immediately start to rot. Mordecai said that was actually a solid choice, but I couldn't imagine losing myself to that form.

Most of the creatures were fairly balanced with one another. Generally the stats adjusted for a net gain of about 10 stat points, and if they didn't, it came with a skill bonus or a few random abilities, like night vision, the ability to fly short distances, or inherent, racial spells. The exclusive races, like Hobgoblin and Sasquatch, usually added an extra bonus or two making them slightly better.

I found one odd choice hidden amongst the others. A Primal. I clicked on it, and the 3D image was empty.

Primal.

For the first several seasons of *Dungeon Crawler World*, all contestants started off as Primals. Primals are blank slates. You will look the same as before. You will obtain all skills associated with your current race, with the following exceptions:

-1 to all base stats

All higher-tier skills are unlocked and are able to train to 20.

Choosing this race unlocks multiple exclusive, earth-based classes.

I thought about this for several moments, trying to decide if this was better or worse than a straight human.

"How hard is it to train a skill above 15?" I asked Mordecai.

"Getting skills up to ten or eleven is relatively easy as long as you use them regularly. Look at Donut's *Magic Missile* skill. It's only the third floor, and it's already at level nine. But each level after that is a slog unless you really dedicate yourself to training. There are multiple ways to train skills up. There are guilds, equipment boosts, expensive potions, and unreliable spells. If you get a particularly generous sponsor, they might grant you something that'll also raise a skill. But it can be done with dedication and a lot of strategic planning. Every season, a few crawlers choose this race. It usually doesn't pay off. Only a rare few crawlers manage to train one or two skills above 15."

"Is it worth it, to get a skill above 15?"

"Absolutely," he said. "A level 15 *Fireball* is a powerful spell that can ruin the day of most mobs. A level 16 *Fireball* is literally four times as potent. A level 20 can turn a mountain into an active volcano. If you manage to train one of your punching skills above 15, you will be unstoppable. But you'd have to get there first. If you choose this instead of human, you'll miss out on the extra 10 stat points you obtain, and you'll lose five additional points. It's like starting five levels behind. That's a big deal. But it's not insurmountable. It's well worth it if you plan your build carefully and dedicate yourself to a few core skills."

"Let me ask you something else," I said. "The Maestro guy gifted something called a Legendary Skill potion to Maggie during his show. Are those things common?"

"I can't…" he paused, looking at Donut. His expression soured, as if he just remembered everything had changed thanks to that Manager skill. "They're not common at all, and if you can find one

for sale somewhere, it would cost many million gold. If that Maggie crawler has half a brain, she'll sell it. But during the faction wars segment on the ninth floor, each clan can bring a war chest of supplies. That's a specific unit of measurement based on volume. Each clan will usually fill these chests with such potions and magical rings and other small but powerful items. I'll have to explain how that works later."

"So, they'll have a bunch of these potions?"

"The ninth floor is going to open up in about a half hour. And about fifteen minutes after that, most of those potions will have already been used up. But not all of them. Again, it's a lot to explain."

"What's your take?" I asked. "Human or Primal?"

"You *should* pick Hobgoblin or Coal Engine, but both will probably lose you viewers. People hate hobgoblins. Interviewers don't like them on their shows."

I looked over at Donut, who had fallen asleep. She'd curled up with Mongo.

"What is a Primal anyway?" I asked. "It doesn't say. Is it just something made up for the dungeon?"

"Yes and no," Mordecai said. "The Primals are the progenitors, the first known species to conquer the universe. They are the boogiemen of the cosmos. Nobody knows what they looked like or anything about them other than that they spread across the galaxy, and then one day, they just vanished. There was a great war that spanned all corners of the galaxies. We can see the remnants of the battles. If they were fighting a species other than themselves, we don't know who they were. When someone comes across an abandoned remnant of their civilization, the resident AI, if it is still sane, usually takes the form of the race of the species who discovered it. That is why they look like whomever chooses them. It is said one day they will return. Mothers call upon Primals to instill fear into their young ones. Some systems worship them as gods."

I opened up the menu, scrolled all the way to the bottom, and I picked **Primal** as my race.

My list of available classes consisted of over 650 choices.

"You'd have even more if you didn't have that tattoo on your neck," Mordecai said.

"Why? And what sort of classes are excluded?"

"The Desperado club doesn't allow, what is the word? Goody-two-shoes? It doesn't allow those sorts. So no Cleric classes and Paladin classes," Mordecai said. "Along with a few monk classes, which is unfortunate as they would've been worth a look. But I think all three of your suggested choices are good ones."

I looked over the AI's recommend choices. All three were from the pool of earth-based classes.

Bomb Squad Tech

Prize Fighter

And

Compensated Anarchist

"Hmm," I said. I pulled up each one in turn.

Bomb Squad Tech

This exclusive class is only available to crawlers who have obtained the Boom! Achievement.

People who actually choose to work with explosives are the craziest bastards around. You excel at making things blow up. And while you're good at keeping the bombs from going off in your own hands, Bomb Squad Techs still tend to lose both friends and limbs at alarming rates. Luckily this class comes with a benefit that can fix 50% of that problem.

All explosive-based traps will mark themselves as you approach.

All armor is 10% more effective.

The handling of explosives no longer degrades them.

Automatic +2 to all explosive-based skills.

+5 Bomb Surgeon skill

+2 to Dexterity.

+2 to Constitution.

-2 to Intelligence (After all, only dumbasses would choose to do this for a living.)

Plus the Limb Regeneration Benefit.

This is an Earth Class. As an incentive to choose an Earth Class, you will receive a Silver Earth Box upon choosing this class.

This was good, very good in fact, but it was missing some of the key benefits I was looking for. The next class had the same issues.

Prizefighter

This exclusive class is only available to crawlers who have obtained a Level five in the Pugilism skill.

This is a Monk subclass.

Sweaty, half-naked men circling each other in a ring, turning their faces into raw pulp as the crowd roars. The people in this audience don't care who is fighting who, as long as one of them ends up a crumpled, bloody heap on the mat before the night is done. Prizefighters don't do it for the glory, or for honor. They do it to put food on the table. It's nothing personal.

Prizefighters receive the following benefits:

+5 to Constitution

+2 to Strength.

-2 to Intelligence

-2 to Charisma

+3 to the Pugilism Skill

+1 to the Unarmed Combat Skill

+1 to the Iron Punch Skill

+5 to the Knockout Skill

+(1 x Floor Number) gold for every mob killed with a punch.

Unlocks higher-tier Pugilism Skill benefit (Benefit already received)

This is an Earth Class. As an incentive to choose an Earth Class, you will receive a Silver Earth Box upon choosing this class.

That +3 in Pugilism was a huge bonus considering I'd already managed to get it to 10 thanks to that Cheat Code potion. I'd pick this class in a second if I thought I could just punch my way through the dungeon. I knew already that wasn't going to happen. I needed something that was more versatile.

I sighed and pulled up the description on the third suggested class.

Compensated Anarchist

This rare and exclusive class is only available to crawlers who have obtained Level five in the Explosives Handling skill and have received at least 500 Billion views by the time they've reached the third floor.

When the oligarchs want to manufacture a social movement, or better yet, stop one in its tracks, they must first bring in the big guns. The paid protestors. The Agent Provocateur. This Monk/Rogue hybrid class is a trapmaking, bomb-making, social-media dynamo. The Compensated Anarchist will happily throw a Molotov through a window one moment and step in front of a camera to plead for the violence to stop the next. Experts in hand-to-hand and dirty tactics, the Compensated Anarchist only suffers when it comes to more traditional fighting techniques.

+1 to the Bomb Surgeon Skill

+1 to the Trap Engineer Skill

+1 to Unarmed Combat Skill

-25% Damage when using bladed weapons

+25% Mana cost for damage-dealing spells

+5% skill progression speed in all trap-making and bomb-making skills.

+ 2 Hide in Shadows Skill

+ *Fear* spell

+ 1 Intelligence

+ 5 Charisma

+5 to the Find Trap Skill
+5 to the Backfire Skill
+5 to the Escape Plan Skill
Access to the Desperado Club (already obtained)
Access to the Naughty Boys Employment Agency
This is an Earth Class. As an incentive to choose an Earth Class, you will receive a Silver Earth Box upon choosing this class.
Compensated Anarchists must choose a subclass upon descent to the sixth floor.

"Holy shit. That seems like a winner," I said. "This one has a ton of stuff attached to it. Though 'Compensated Anarchist' is kind of an oxymoron. I guess that's the point."

"Yeah, all those classes with view-count minimums are usually really good. They do it on purpose to give the more popular players a boost. This one definitely seems tailored for you. Let me look deeper into it while you peruse some of the others. There's probably a few issues hidden under the hood."

I started sorting through the mass of other classes. I could hide all the ones that didn't have any special requirements, as they generally weren't nearly as good.

I didn't get very far before the world rumbled. I glanced up, surprised. The second floor had collapsed.

The new countdown appeared. We only had eight days to complete this next level.

Welcome Crawlers to the third floor! We have just over 700,000 crawlers remaining. You will have eight full days to complete this floor. We will have a longer announcement later, but we know most of you are currently dealing with your game guides. We are looking forward to seeing what races and classes everyone picks. We have some new, exciting classes available this season! Good luck to everyone!

"Eight days," Mordecai said, looking up at the ceiling. He shook his head. "If they keep this up, the sixth floor is only going to be

open 11 or 12 days. The factions are going to be pissed. It's usually open for 30."

I went back to work. There were multiple classes that seemed really good on the surface. Many were similar to the Bomb Squad one, like **Riot Forces Support** and **Trebuchet Commander**. And a few of the non-earth ones were interesting as well, including the **Rogue Trapmaster** and **Trickster** class.

Donut and Mongo snored loudly in unison as Mordecai and I discussed the ins and outs of each class.

"Just a warning," Mordecai said. "Donut didn't have to worry about this, but some of these classes have strict stat minimums. The charisma minimum for the Compensated Anarchist is 25. You'll have 36 points to distribute, but you'll be forced to spend 17 of them on your charisma right away, even with that plus five. And then another six to get your base Dexterity up to 10, though I'd recommend that anyway."

"Yikes," I said. "That kind of sucks."

"But several of the skills that it comes with are pretty rare. The Backfire skill, for example," Mordecai said. "It allows you to pick up a trap and deconstruct it. You'll be able to use the materials for your own purpose. The triggering mechanisms alone are quite valuable. You could make a living just by farming traps."

We went over a few of the other skills. Bomb Surgeon, which came with a few of my choices allowed me to basically take a stick of dynamite and cut it into pieces, making smaller, less potent bombs. Or I could deconstruct smoke bombs and utilize the individual parts for traps. Hide in Shadows was self-explanatory, though with Donut and Mongo in tow, I imagined it wouldn't be too useful.

Multiple classes had a pathfinder skill, including the Trickster class. But I soon learned the Compensated Anarchist had the next best thing.

"What's this Escape Plan skill?"

Mordecai nodded, looking it over. "Odd. It looks like it's an old skill, but I've never come across it before. You learn something new every day. It shows hidden doors more readily, but more importantly,

there's a secret benefit." Mordecai grunted. "You can thank your cat for this one. It says it offers access to the Dungeon Locator, but it doesn't say what that is or how to access it. Luckily for you, I do know how to find and read it. Before, I wouldn't have been able to tell you."

"What is it?"

"At every major intersection of the dungeon is a concealed map legend that intelligent and wandering mobs can utilize. It gives a very general overview of what's in every direction. You know how at the zoo there's arrows that say, 'Monkeys this way, lions that way?' It's the same concept. It'll point you toward exits and city bosses and so forth. It's not quite as good as the pathfinder skill, which basically opens up the map in a very wide area, but this might be even more useful in some ways."

"Okay, what about this Naughty Boys Employment Agency?"

He shrugged. "I have no idea what that is. It sounds like a quest-giving guild."

"And the subclasses? It says I have to pick one on the sixth floor."

"We can't see what they are yet. It's pretty rare that you're required to choose one, but I've seen it a few times. You'll likely have to specialize further in one of the three skills. Bombs, traps, or hand-to-hand."

"Okay, then," I said after a moment. "So what do you think?"

"If you were in a more well-rounded party, I'd tell you to go with the Prizefighter class," Mordecai said. "If you were in an even larger group, I'd suggest the Bomb Squad. All three of those are good. The Compensated Anarchist is potentially the best, but like with your race, it requires a lot of work. You're going to need to grind and grind and focus on gaining as much experience as possible. With these shortened timers, it's going to be a lot harder."

I grinned. "I guess it's a good thing we now have a group member who knows what he's doing."

Mordecai narrowed his eyes at me as I scrolled down and picked **Compensated Anarchist** as my class.

I next had to figure out my stats. Donut ended up with the following:

Strength: 20

Intelligence: 23 + 5 (Tiara) +1 (Charm) = 29

Constitution: 4 + 2 (Brush) = 6

Dexterity: 12 + 2 (Crupper) +2 (Bracelet) +5 (temp. floor bonus) = 21

Charisma: 70

Her strength had taken a minus three hit, but her dexterity had risen by four, her constitution by two, and her charisma by another single point thanks to her cat racial choice. Her constitution was still worryingly low. Finding items to get that up would be one of our first priorities.

She'd only gained a net of four stat points by choosing the cat race, but she had received a ton of new skills. **Night Vision, Slash Attack, Cat-like Reflexes**, and a benefit called **9 Lives**.

The 9 Lives benefit was similar to her Cockroach skill, but it wasn't as good. It halved the damage received for the first nine physical attacks she received per day. That was helpful, especially considering her low Constitution. But if we were going to be facing super powerful monsters, a half attack would still likely cut her in half.

She eventually awakened. "What'd I miss? Did you grow elf ears?" She looked me up and down. "You're still human. That's boring."

"I'm not human. I'm a Primal."

"Is that like a caveman?" She made a show of sniffing me. "You smell the same."

"If you had remained awake, you would have learned what all this meant."

She shrugged and stretched. Mongo yawned loudly, also stretching. He made a purring noise that sounded suspiciously cat-like.

I was going to have to continue to be the party's tank. I received three stat points on level-up, and I had a pool of 36 points, though more than half of them were chosen for me thanks to the class's minimums. After everything settled, I ended up with the following:

Strength: 10 + 3 (toe ring) = 13 +3 (When Gauntlet Formed)

Intelligence: 5

Constitution: 10 + 4 (shirt) +1 (ring) +2 (ring) +2 (boxers) = 19

Dexterity: 10 + 1 (Gauntlet) = 11

Charisma: 25

I'd given myself enough Intelligence to read that *Wisp Armor* spellbook, but I didn't do it quite yet. I was still on the fence about using it for myself, giving it to Donut, or selling it. I wanted to see what its actual monetary value was first. The *Fear* spell I now had cost three points to cast.

I wasn't too happy yet with this build. Donut was still way more powerful than me. For the hundredth time in as many seconds, I wondered if I was an idiot for choosing this path. I'd been forced to spend a ton on Charisma. The stat was mostly useless, especially since Donut was already deity-like with hers. I was going to have to level as quickly as possible. In my head, I originally was hoping for much more Strength and Constitution. From now on, all my points were going to go into those two until their base was at least 20.

Donut had ended up with a skillset that allowed her to pretty much make it up as she went along. My chosen path required very deliberate planning and rigorous training. But if I managed to excel —and survive—I could mold myself into something very powerful. *Was* I an idiot? I knew some people would definitely think so.

"Only one thing is going to make this work," Mordecai said. It seemed as if he'd been reading my mind.

"Training?" I asked.

"No," he said. "Money. And lots of it. Come on. Let's go outside." He started buttoning his tuxedo shirt back up. "Where did I put that tie? Oh, there it is."

"Wait, you can leave your room?"

"Of course I can leave my room. I'm your manager now. Plus I have to present you two. It's part of the whole deal." He straightened his bow tie and rubbed the front of his jacket.

"Technically you're *my* manager," Donut grumbled. Mongo screeched.

That was actually a good point, but neither Mordecai nor I wanted to broach that subject just yet. He ignored it for now. "I'm not allowed to directly fight with you, but I can still occasionally step outside. Especially on the urban levels. Let's go. I'm going to present you, and then I need to show you something. Carl first, then Donut and Mongo."

All of us stood and lined up at the door. He opened it with a flourish.

When we'd entered the room, we'd been in a long, golden hallway with tall walls. But now, spread before us was a bustling village with dozens of creatures of all types walking about. The stench of sulfur and smoke filled the polluted air. Dozens of medieval-style shops filled the area. The ground appeared to be made of wooden slats with wide spaces in some areas. Smoke drifted lazily from the holes. Above, on the fake ceiling, a blazing red sun rose, filling the area with a crimson-hued light.

Mordecai looked out at the village. None of the denizens gave him any heed. He waved for me to step outside, and I did. My feet echoed on the slats. The temperature out here was much higher than the previous level.

"I'd like to present Dungeon Crawler Carl, the Level 13 Compensated Anarchist Primal. Welcome, Carl, to the third floor."

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[3]

"This is called the Over City," Mordecai said as we walked along the wooden street. My minimap was awash in the white dots of NPCs. Mordecai's dot had turned to a yellow star. A few blue dots of other crawlers were scattered about, but not many. "Where you exited the second floor has no bearing on where you enter this floor. It is completely random, so you will now be mixed in with crawlers from around the world."

"So Brandon and crew could be anywhere?" I asked. "How big is this place?"

Donut sat on my shoulder and Mongo stood on her back, like we were a goddamned vaudeville act. With my increased strength, I barely felt their presence. Many of the NPCs stopped and gawked at us as we passed. Most of the NPCs in this area were humanoid dwarves, but a mix of regular humans and orcs and elf-like creatures also walked about. All wore medieval-style clothing. Larger, armored guards with obscured faces also strolled about.

"Yes, they could be anywhere," Mordecai said. "Their location is based on the location of their game guide. You can talk to them directly, but they probably don't know where they are in relation to you. They had someone called Mistress Tiatha as their guide. I don't know her that well, but I can try to figure out where she is if you'd like."

"Is this one giant city?"

He nodded. “The Over City levels are a tradition in *Dungeon Crawler World*. There are hundreds of small, scattered villages surrounded by wide swaths of abandoned city. It’s all connected. As far as you’re concerned, these urban areas appear every three levels.” He stomped his foot on the rickety ground. “Most of this is just window dressing. You’re still below the surface of your planet. That isn’t really the sky of some distant world. There isn’t really a massive volcano under our feet.”

“Volcano?” I asked, looking down.

“We’ll get to that. Think of this as a stage set for the benefit of the viewers. This and all the following floors will be significantly smaller than the first two, with the exception of the ninth floor. This one is probably about the size of the state of Arizona. About 300,000 square kilometers. Most of that is the ruins.”

“What about these NPCs?” I asked.

A pair of dwarven girls, no older than teenagers, were practically swooning at the sight of Mordecai. They said something, trying to get his attention. He growled at them, and they scattered, giggling.

“Oh, they’re very real. They are living, biological creatures similar to some of the mobs. Most have been engineered by the Borant Corporation, and therefore are owned by the Borant Corporation. This is the only world they know and have ever known.”

“That’s really fucked up. Do they know what they are?”

“Their minds are altered every time they are regenerated. The next time this floor is formed on some distant planet, these NPCs will wake up like it is just another day. But they will have also been changed, planted with false memories. Inconvenient memories—like some crawler sitting them down and explaining to them that they’re props on an intergalactic television series—will be erased. Take those goblins you told me about, for instance. They were addicted to meth. They were fighting the llamas over it. That storyline didn’t exist in the previous season. That was added for this world and this world only. Next time they’ll be addicted to solar berry extract or something like that. Or they’ll be fanatics of some god. Or something else.”

"What the hell?" I asked. That was just as bad, and in some ways worse, than what they were doing to me and my fellow humans. "But these are still living creatures? How is that legal?"

"Borant created them, so they own them. One can't alter the memories of naturals. People who were born in a natural biological process. Not unless they sign away their rights."

"And people are okay with this?"

"Most are. The galaxy, as a whole, has plenty of other things to worry about. The rules regarding this stuff are pretty strict, almost as strict as those regarding AIs. These biologically printed mobs and NPCs are not allowed to exist outside of a Syndicate-monitored production. Using them for any purpose other than sanctioned entertainment is highly illegal. It's basically considered a war crime."

"So, there are no intergalactic brothels filled with genetically-engineered women?"

Mordecai grimaced. "Not legal ones. But there is one place where such things do exist legally." He pointed down.

"But you said…" The realization struck me. "Oh, so the deeper floors?"

"That's right," Mordecai said. "This third floor won't have any tourists on it. Most of them are on the 18th floor. It's like a billionaire's luxury retreat. The galaxy's rich and elite congregate on the 18th floor to party and gamble and satiate their most base desires."

"I don't understand," I said. "I assumed the 18th floor would be hell on earth filled with dragons and lightning giants and shit. What would happen if a crawler managed to get there?"

"Nobody ever has," Mordecai said. "So, I don't know. The same with the 15th floor. Borant and the system AI are required to have a plan in place, but nobody has ever gotten that deep, so nobody knows. That sort of thing is way above my pay grade."

As we walked, we passed multiple shops and guildhalls and inns. The inns were listed as Saferooms on my minimap.

Mordecai spent some time explaining class and skill guildhalls. Donut and I both could train at Rogue guildhalls. Donut also had access to Bard halls, and I would have access to Fighter halls.

Sometimes there would be special halls for certain races, too. He said he'd never seen a Primal hall, but it was possible it existed. Quadrupeds generally didn't have halls.

We reached the end of the street where a small fence had been erected. A pair of the well-armored guards stood by a small gate about as high as my waist. The two guards were decked head-to-toe in plate mail, and I couldn't tell what sort of creatures they were, only that they were bulky and tall. Each was armed with a long, steel blade. I examined one.

Village Guard Swordsman – Level 75

Everyone likes the strong, silent type. In order to find out what's underneath that helmet, you'll have to first kill the guard. Go ahead and give it a try. I double dog dare you.

Village Guards are tasked with protecting the population centers of the third floor from the creatures who roam the Over City Ruins. They are only on duty when the sun is up, so don't go whining to them for help when it's dark.

The guard was unmoving. He stood there like a statue.

"He's kind of scary," Donut said as we paused at the gate.

"Don't mess with the guards," Mordecai said. "Don't attack the NPCs. Don't try to rob the stores. Don't get drunk and pass out in the streets. There is no jail here. Only the death penalty. If you run afoul of the guards, don't try to fight them. They are slow, but there are a lot of them. Run from them and into the ruins. They won't follow you there. You will never be able to return to that particular village."

Beyond the gate were more buildings, but they were decrepit and abandoned, made of crumbling, moss-covered bricks slumping in on themselves. A rolling fog obscured the distance, but even in the shadows of the fog I could see faint buildings of all shapes and sizes.

"Okay," Mordecai said, indicating the area beyond the gate. "The ruins. It's the same as the dungeon, but it's all old, rotting buildings, abandoned and overgrown parks and so forth. There's this whole storyline about the existence of the city. It's all based on a children's story that never made it into your earth's culture. Basically, there's

this massive, dormant volcano, and a magical world existed solely inside of the volcano. That world consisted of six layers. The very top layer is where we are now, the Over City. It is where most of the people lived. A great monster lived at the bottom of the volcano and breathed out poison gas one day and killed or transformed 90% of the volcano world. The descendants of the survivors live in these villages. The resulting monsters live in the ruins."

"That's quite morbid," Donut said.

"So, we're on top of a volcano right now? In the game's story, I mean?" I asked.

"Yes. This floor is supposed to span the length of the volcano's crater."

"What's the next level down?" I asked.

"For you, the fourth level is just a random dungeon level. Same with the fifth. But the sixth floor is also part of this volcano city storyline. For the NPCs here, it is the next level down. It is called the Hunting Grounds. It's another urban level with similar villages, though the villages are much bigger, and the original residents were much wealthier. The ruins are jungle-like and filled with vines. And it's the first level where brave and insane tourists can go to hunt crawlers. Not too many do it because it's both expensive and dangerous. There are no protections for the hunters. They're in real danger from both the mobs and the crawlers, and every season a handful of rich dumbasses get themselves killed."

"What about gods?"

"That's a whole different thing, and those don't appear until the fourth floor. I'll explain that later. For now, you need to get to work."

"Okay," I said, turning back to the village. "There are shops here. Should we go shopping now? And should we open our boxes now?"

"Yes, shopping," Donut said. "Definitely shopping."

"Not here," Mordecai said. "This is a small village. These shops are overpriced and will gouge you and won't buy any of your items. You need to get yourself to a larger settlement, and there's very little time." He pointed east. "See that wider road there? Follow it for about a half day, and you'll come across a bigger village. It will have better, richer shops."

"How do you know?" I asked.

Mordecai pointed at a discolored rock on the ground just outside the gate. "Focus on that, and select the tooltip that pops up."

I did as he asked. "Holy shit," I said a minute later.

A holographic sign popped up, growing out of the ground like a tree. It showed arrows with signs and distances in kilometers. Pointing north along the main road it read, "Medium Sized Skyfowl Settlement. 34 Kilometers." There were other signs, too, pointing to saferooms, restrooms, and most importantly, stairs. The closest set of stairs was six kilometers away.

"There are saferooms in the ruins? We don't have to rely on the villages? And do the villages have names?"

"Yes. The saferooms and restrooms will be scattered the same as before. There will *not* be tutorial guilds in the ruins. Only in the villages. Not that it matters as I'll teleport to the saferooms anyway. Also, the villages don't have names. The system designates them as tiny, small, medium, large, and extra-large. Not very exciting. This one is small. You can actually name them yourself if you manage to kill the mayor. Don't bother, at least on this floor. You'll likely end up dead, and it doesn't come with any real benefits when the timer is only eight days."

"Okay," I said. "So, I guess we'll grind our way to that other village."

He nodded. "Make sure you check out the signs every once in a while to make sure you're still on the correct track. All medium villages on this floor will have a tutorial guild. Meet me there. When you get there, we'll hit some shops together."

"Will the monsters be a lot harder on this floor?"

"Oh yeah," Mordecai said, grinning sheepishly. "I should probably tell you this part. It's hard to remember without my checklist. There is night and there is day on this floor. There will always be monsters in the ruins. They are more dangerous at night. The daytime ones should be cake for you two, but you might want to keep Mongo back at first. Don't go out at night until I say you're ready. The villages will always be safe during the day. At night, only the village main roads are safe. Usually. The alleys will be very dangerous. In some

cases, more dangerous than the ruins." He flapped his incubus wings a few times and looked directly at me. "Stay away from girls with horns on their heads. Your charisma is a lot higher than it was before, and they are attracted to that. They will be coming out of the woodwork at you. Work on your punching skills, and use that new *Fear* spell every single fight. Remember to stop at a saferoom to open your boxes and so Donut can get her next spellbook from the book of the floor club."

"I forgot about that!" Donut said.

Mordecai turned and started walking back into the village. He was making a beeline straight for a pub. He called over his shoulder, "Don't stop at the first saferoom you find, though. Give it at least two hours. Maybe four. And Donut, keep working on that *Magic Missile* spell. You're almost at skill level 10. I'll be on chat if you need me."

"If I had known he was going to be so bossy, I wouldn't have picked that Manager benefit," Donut muttered.

"Shut up, Donut," I said under my breath as I lifted the latch to the small gate that led out into the ruins. It opened with a noisy screech. The two guards didn't move a muscle. We wandered out into the streets, leaving the safety of the village behind.

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[4]

Views: 371.5 Trillion
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Donut worked on Mongo's training while we walked along the road. I pulled a stick from my inventory and tossed it. She was working on getting him to stay put until she told him to go fetch it. He was about 80% of the way there already. The problem was when he got too excited, he absolutely refused to listen to orders.

Donut stopped at the first restroom we found. She went inside, and the little dinosaur went berserk at the door, attacking and scratching at it and screaming at the top of his lungs until Donut came out.

"You need to learn patience, Mongo!" Donut said. "Follow mommy's example."

"Yeah, because you're known for your patience," I said.

I marveled at the ceiling as we walked. It was much, much higher here than it'd been in the hallway. Some of these buildings were four stories tall. In the smoky distance, some were even taller than that. But I could still tell the sky was but an illusion. Lights reflected off it oddly, revealing the facade.

Zev: Hello, hello.

Donut: HI ZEV!

Zev: Hi Donut! Good news, you two. Odette's show was another hit. But more importantly, the majority of viewers are giving thumbs up to your choices for class and race. A few people have expressed confusion as to why Donut chose Artist Alley as this floor's selection, but generally people like the idea of the Former Child Actor class. A couple people are grumbling that it doesn't allow for growth, but most seem to believe it's offset by Carl picking something that requires such rigorous training. Also, so far both of you have picked unique classes. Nobody else out there has chosen them. That's always a plus. There are a few other Primals out there, but not many. No straight cats, though someone chose a were-cat race. And there are a few cat girls walking around. It's still early. A lot of crawlers haven't picked yet.

Donut looked absolutely scandalized. I laughed.

Carl: Good to know, Zev. Question. Can people see Mordecai now?

Zev: No, not generally. They know you have a manager, and they got to see him when he introduced you into the world. But from now on, it's how it was before. By the way, I checked, and no VIP crawlers are nearby as far as I can tell. I'd avoid adding any of the close-by locals to your party. They're all too boring.

Donut: WHAT IS THE NEXT SHOW WE ARE GOING ON?

Zev: So, this floor is eight days. I'm still in negotiations with a few programs. It'll likely be during the fourth night, but I haven't locked in an interview yet. I've had to take in a few extra people just to field all the interview requests.

Carl: Okay, thank you Zev.

Zev: Ta-ta for now.

Donut: BYE ZEV!

"What is a cat girl?" Donut asked. "I don't like that. And a were-cat? Whoever that is needs to just learn to commit."

"Watch out," I cried, jumping back. The knife bounced off my chest, clattering harmlessly to the ground. I looked up at the creature who'd thrown the blade, a monkey wearing a painted human skull as a mask.

Former Circus Lemur – Level 8

Grimaldi's Traveling Circus was one of the Over City's favorite attractions before that fateful day so long ago. Hundreds of years later, the feral and transformed descendants of that circus still stalk the ruins, seeking out adults and children alike to dazzle and entertain.

And by dazzle and entertain, we mean devour the flesh from their bones and use their remains as armor.

Grimaldi's Amazing Juggling Lemurs were one of the circus's key attractions. Children from all over the realm would laugh and clap as they watched these funny little creatures juggle all manner of items, from balls to pins to knives.

You can probably guess where this is going.

The red-furred monkey thing—apparently a lemur—was wearing a black and red-painted human skull as a mask. It'd appeared in the second-floor window of a dilapidated building. It was just sitting on the window ledge, little legs dangling off. He hadn't appeared as a dot on my minimap until after he'd thrown the knife, which he'd tossed directly at my head. Luckily the knife flew low and hit me in the chest, bouncing off my jacket thanks to my cloak's anti-piercing benefit.

"Oh fuck," I cried as four more lemurs appeared in the window. Donut and I jumped into an alley as more knives sliced through the air. Two of them embedded in the wooden floorboards.

Mongo screeched in rage, and Donut yelled for the dinosaur not to rush out into the street.

I prepared a smoke bomb as I examined the map, figuring out the best way to get to them. There were no windows facing the alley, but they'd figure out where we were in a minute. An unsettling, throaty roar filled the streets, followed by an answering

call from several blocks down. There was a lot more than just five of them. I put the smoke bomb away and pulled one of my boom jugs.

Admin Notice. A new tab is available in your interface. Quests.

"The hell?" I said.

A musical chime, like trumpets blaring, filled the air. It only lasted a second. Sparkles and illusionary streamers danced at the edges of my vision.

New Quest. The Show Must Go On.

The words appeared spinning in the air, slamming into place in front of me, like the title of an old-school television special. Sparkles cascaded off the word "Quest."

You've discovered the remnants of an ancient circus. Hundreds of years after the toxic cloud that devastated the Over City, this traveling circus endures. But instead of joy and laughter and cotton candy, it now delivers devastation and pain. Their cotton candy is probably really gross by now, too. Find out why this circus still exists and put an end to its reign of terror.

***Reward*: You will receive a Gold Quest Box.**

"What the fuck is this?" I said. "A quest?" Mordecai had mentioned quests once or twice, but we'd never talked about them.

Carl: Mordecai. We just walked into a quest. Should we stay here and try to figure it out?

Mordecai: You should try to figure out your face.

Carl: What?

Mordecai: Mom loved him more. Well, who's the dead one now? I'm glad that cat used her ashes as a bathroom.

"What's wrong with Mordecai?" Donut asked.

Carl: Are you drunk? It's been like 15 minutes!

Mordecai: Did you know incubi have a very low tolerance for…

Carl: Mordecai?

He didn't answer.

"Shit. It looks like we're doing this on our own," I said. We couldn't stay here. I pointed across the street to the next alley

down. There was a safe room about three blocks over. "Get ready to run."

I jumped from around the corner. My plan was to try to toss it through the window, but I now saw multiple lemurs on the building's roof. I added a bit of extra *oompf* to the toss, arcing it high. I pulled myself back into the alley and crouched low as more knives slammed into the ground. The jug detonated, and the building against my back shuddered. High-pitched, frenzied screams rose, and I could feel the heat from the building.

A flaming lemur leaped from above and landed in the alley. I punted it, and it flew across the street, flying way further than I expected. It cracked into the stone wall of a building. Behind us, more flaming lemurs started to fall from the roof.

"Run," I cried.

We rushed from the alley, crossing the street. Multiple red dots appeared behind us. The entire top of the now-engulfed building was filled with the X's of dead lemurs.

"Goddamnit, Mongo," I cried at the little dinosaur as he broke away and headed right for the now-dead lemur I'd punted. He screeched, jumping through the air, legs first and executed a perfect pounce onto the corpse. The dinosaur growled with glee as scorched lemur fur went flying. I altered course to grab him.

The dino chicken howled in rage as I scooped him up. A knife bounced off the bricks, inches from my head. I hazarded a look over my shoulder, and I stopped dead at the sight.

A giraffe. A goddamned giraffe ran down the street at us.

The giant animal was covered in lemurs who clung onto its neck like it was a tree trunk. The giraffe was about a block away. It bent, then flipped, its neck, flinging a dozen of the lemurs into the air in our direction. One of the little monkey things was flung too high, and he bounced off the rocky ceiling with a crunch. He plummeted to the ground, smashing into the wooden street.

The remaining lemurs screamed as they flew, brandishing shining knives as more knives flew at us from the windows of the now-burning building. I ducked, but most of the blades clattered onto the street, flung from too far away. The giraffe-riding lemurs landed and

pulled more knives from bandoliers draped across their shoulders. They bounded sideways toward us, howling in a deep, guttural screech.

"Control your damn chicken!" I cried, dropping Mongo to the ground as I pulled a smoke bomb. I lit it and dropped it as we turned down the alley and fled. We rushed to the next street over and crossed, then entered another alleyway, this one much tighter than the last.

"Mongo, follow!" Donut cried as she leaped to my shoulder. She landed backward and fired a pair of magic missiles. Mongo screeched and flapped his little arms, but he kept up with us, running along my left side.

This next street, the last one before the saferoom, held a single red dot in the center. I pulled another smoke bomb and tossed it ahead of me.

"Hit it with a missile as we cross!"

Smoke filled the street ahead of us, but it caught on a breeze, blowing in the wrong direction. *Shit. These things suck*. At the last moment, I remembered Mordecai's advice that I use my *Fear* spell as much as possible.

We rushed into the street, and I cast *Fear* just as Donut shot a full-powered magic missile. My breath caught in my throat at the sight of the creature.

Warning: scary-ass mobs are immune to *Fear* effects.

My first impression was *Slender Man*. Slender Man dressed as a clown. Holy shit.

Donut's missile flew low, but I realized that was on purpose. She hit it in the leg, and it toppled over. As the clown creature fell, its description popped up.

Terror the Clown – Level 10

It's okay if you just pissed yourself. You wouldn't be the first.

Standing just over 11 feet tall, the clown-on-stilts was always a favorite amongst the snot-nosed kiddos visiting Grimaldi's three-ring circus. Now, ravaged by time and the curse of the Over City, the once-affable stilt-clowns have

been transformed into tall, blood-thirsty monstrosities who want nothing more than to make balloon animals out of your intestines.

The monster was humanoid, but with splotchy, bone-white white skin, no eyes or nose, and a red, tooth-filled mouth that was much too large. It wore tattered and bloody clown clothes over its emaciated frame. Its extra-long arms hung almost to the ground. It held a giant butcher knife in each hand. It wore a red, curly-haired wig and a little hat with a flower.

Donut had shot it directly below the knee. It flew onto its back, throwing a massive red shoe into the air. Blood gushed from the wound. The place she'd hit should have been a stilt, but it appeared the monster's legs actually were that long.

A health bar appeared, but the magic missile had only taken about 20% of its health.

After a quick glance of the minimap—the lemurs were still a block away—I sprinted toward the monster as Donut pumped it with two more missiles.

"Watch its arms!" I cried as I formed a fist. Donut leaped from my shoulder.

"Sic 'em!" she yelled as she skidded to the ground.

Mongo and I both leaped into the air. I landed on the clown's chest as Mongo screamed and started tearing at the prone clown's ankle just above the shoe.

The clown's chest caved in with a *crack* as I landed. It felt as if I'd just crunched into a wooden pallet that had splintered under my weight. I fell to a knee and pulled my hand back to punch.

Another missile crashed into the clown's raising arm as I punched it in the face as hard as I could. Its neck snapped back. A long, forked tongue lolled out. The little hat went flying, and the red wig fell off. I pounded again and again until its head caved in.

A mass of red dots was getting closer, and they'd be here in fifteen seconds. I pulled up the clown's inventory:

Clown Meat
Big Top Ticket
35 Gold.

I looted it all, plus both of the oversized butcher knives, the red wig, and the little hat. Mongo remained at the clown's ankle, tearing at the skin and growling like a dog with a bone. I bent to pick him up, and I realized he'd gotten noticeably larger. I picked him up anyway, and he squealed in rage. I put him back down a foot away.

"Tell him to follow us," I said as I turned toward the next alley. "Hurry."

"Mongo, come!" Donut cried.

This alley curved into a small labyrinth, dotted with doors and stone walls. The saferoom appeared to be a tavern about fifty meters down a dead-end alley. A sign hung in front of the tavern, naming it "The Belly-Rubbed Pug." A pug in a top hat and a suit appeared on the sign. I worriedly watched the wave of red dots swarm into the main street as I pushed open the door and ran inside.

Unlike the saferooms from the previous two floors, this appeared to actually be some sort of renaissance fair-style pub. The three television screens remained, and the general layout was similar to the manned saferooms. A Bopca protector stood behind the counter, looking at us with curiosity as we entered.

The first thing I noticed was that the sleeping rooms—there were only five available—now cost money to rent. Ten gold a night, which was nothing. Between Donut and I, we now had almost ten grand in gold. The food cost money as well, but it appeared to be equally inexpensive.

I kept my eye on the red dots to see if they would follow us into the alley. If they knew we were in here, we'd have a problem. They didn't appear to have seen where we'd gone.

I moved to the counter to order a drink. I needed one bad.

Thwum.

Mordecai teleported into the room, standing just to the side of the main bar. He stood with his pants down to his knees, eyes

closed. “Now ladies,” he said, his voice slurring heavily. “One at a time. Grannie first. There’s plenty of Mordecai to…” He trailed off. He opened an eye, looking upon us.

“My good sir, I must ask you sheath your sword immediately!” the Bopca cried. “This is a family establishment!”

I glanced over at the gnome. His name was Gordo.

Mordecai quickly pulled up his pants. He was still in his tuxedo, but the tie and jacket were gone. His barbed tail got caught on the edge of his belt, and he couldn’t pull them up all the way. He awkwardly fed the tail through the pants and fastened himself. He stood there, swaying. I could smell the alcohol wafting off of him.

It’d been twenty minutes since we left him. Twenty minutes.

“You weren’t supposed to go to a saferoom for a couple more hours,” Mordecai said. He wagged his finger. “If this is going to work, you need to listen to your manager.”

Mordecai stumbled and held out his hands, balancing like he was standing on a surfboard. “Where did those two girls and their grandma go?”

Then he vomited on the floor, sat in it, and passed out.

Gordo leaned over the counter and made a face. “This is your manager?”

“Yep,” I said.

He shook his head sadly. “You two are so dead.”

“Yep,” I said.

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Mongo had risen to level three and almost doubled in size. He was going to be a very bright and colorful monster when he was done growing. His pink-hued feathers grew longer and thicker along his little arms, mixing in with a line of deep-red feathers. His tail also grew longer, making him appear more dinosaur-like and less like poultry. The skin around his eyes took in a bluish tone. His beak had widened and grown larger, too. A nose chomp from him now could do serious damage.

"They grow up so fast," Donut said sadly. "He's too big to sit on my back now."

"Pretty soon you're going to be able to sit on *his* back," I said. I knew the real version of these things on earth weren't as big as they were in the movies, but I could tell already that the game was growing Mongo toward a more cinematic, crowd-pleasing size.

While Mordecai snored loudly in a pile of his own vomit, Donut and I opened our boxes. We each had a Silver Earth box. We also both received a couple random achievements. I had no additional loot boxes, but Donut had a gold pet box she hadn't yet opened. The most notable new achievement was for stumbling upon our first quest.

New achievement! It's Elementary, My Dear Crawler!

And you thought all you had to do was bonk monsters on the head.

You've received a quest! Puzzles and intrigue and mysteries, oh my! If you want to survive in this world, you're going to need to be more than just a pretty, sword-swinging barbarian. Some quests require brute strength, yes, but sometimes you also gotta use your noggin.

***Reward*: We don't want you getting bored. That's your prize.**

That was interesting. If there was some sort of mystery involved, I wondered if it required us actually talking to people. If that was the case, Donut's astronomical Charisma was going to be valuable.

Donut opened up her earth box and gasped.

She'd received three items. Two were unopened boxes that appeared to be from Amazon.com: a scented candle and a large-sized cat tree with multiple scratching posts and platforms and a round cat hammock. It was larger and fancier than the one she'd had in our apartment. I would have to put it together myself. The candle was labeled "Sea Breeze" but smelled nothing like the sea.

The third item was a potion. An **Earth Hobby Potion**. I read the description.

Earth Hobby Potion.

Per subsection 1256-C of the Indigenous Species Protection Act, this particular reward is required by the Syndicate Government to be awarded to all Crawlers who have chosen a domestic class.

Taking this potion is optional, however it may not be sold or transferred to other Crawlers or entities.

Upon drinking this, you will immediately obtain a Level Three skill ability in a unique, Earth-based hobby. The benefit is chosen at random, however you will not receive a skill that you currently have.

Gods, I hate it when the lawyers make me put their crap into the descriptions. Don't you? Anyway, this could be something useful like Parkour or Jui-jitsu, or you could get fucked and receive some useless crap like Stamp Collecting or Kombucha Brewing. Don't get your hopes up. The fact your planet was filled with so many boring assholes with

inane, ridiculous hobbies tips the scales way out of your favor.

I laughed. Why would something like this be required? What would be the purpose? Was it some bureaucratic attempt at preserving Earth culture? It didn't make sense, yet at the same time it reminded me of some bullshit the military would enact.

In the gold pet box, Donut received a black, magical collar for Mongo that placed his orange dot on the map wherever he was. He screamed and tried to rip it off, but after a few admonishments from Donut, he relented and stopped scratching at it.

In a dark corner of the saferoom stood a mailbox, and Donut went to retrieve her spellbook. She pulled it out. "This sounds positively delicious," she said. She glowed as she applied the book to herself.

"I swear to god, Donut," I said. "You better have read the description first."

"Oh, relax, Carl. Watch." She waved her paw, and Mongo, who was currently running in circles around the prone form of Mordecai, suddenly split into three. Now there were three of them running in circles. One of the forms squeaked in concern, jumped up on the counter and started growling at the other two forms. A moment later, the other two also jumped on the table. The first one cried out in fear and ran, running to hide behind Donut. The other two looked at one another then jumped down and resumed circling Mordecai like a pair of sharks.

"Please tell me that's an illusion," I said. The two new Mongos were physically mirror images, but they weren't moving like exact duplicates. Each one seemed to have a mind of its own.

"They're real!" Donut said, "Isn't it great? They only last for a minute! It's an expensive spell, too. It costs 26 points."

Sure enough, the two little dinosaurs stopped running after a moment. They looked at each other, and then they fell apart, revealing little gears and servos and electric parts. The clockwork pieces disappeared in a puff of smoke a moment later.

"It's called *Clockwork Triplicate*. Isn't it great? I can only cast it on pets and minions, though. So no clockwork Carl."

The real Mongo squeaked with concern at the two little black piles of ash on the floor.

"That is a good spell. You'll want to practice with that one. You've grown a decent catalog," I said, looking over her spell list.

Donut's spells currently were

***Heal* – Level 1 (Max)**
***Torch* – Level 10**
***Magic Missile* – Level 9**
***Puddle Jumper* – Level 3**
***Second Chance* – Level 5**
***Heal Critter* – Level 1**
***Clockwork Triplicate* – Level 1**

I hadn't realized her Torch spell had risen to level 10. She usually turned it on as soon as we left a saferoom, and it followed just above us for most of the day. She'd been adjusting the brightness on the fly when we were attempting to be stealthy, but I hadn't thought about it. Most of the halls on the second floor had come with ambient lighting anyway.

"Will you put my tree together?" Donut asked. "And maybe light my candle? Miss Beatrice used to light candles."

"Just a minute," I said. I had a quick memory of Donut walking too close to a line of candles, and of Bea flipping out. She was always paranoid about the cat catching on fire, yet she had a million candles all over the apartment.

I still had my own Earth box to open, which I did now. Like Donut's, mine contained two random items and a Hobby potion.

The first item was a small cactus plant in a clay pot. The short, squat cactus was only about three inches tall and was covered in yellow spikes. The pot still had a price tag on it. $3.99. It'd come from a Home Depot.

The second item was a shrink-wrapped set of small paperback books.

"Oh wow," I said, turning the pack over in my hands. It was a collection of Louis L'Amour books. Westerns. My dad had an entire shelf of them. As a kid, I'd sneak one here and there and read the entire book in one night, hiding under the covers with a flashlight.

This was a pack of 18 books, all from the same series. The Sackett Family Saga. I hadn't read any of these. I put the books into my inventory. My hands were shaking, I realized, and I wasn't sure why.

I examined the cactus, wondering what to do with it, and why they'd chosen this to give to me. Both of Donut's gifts had been deliberate. A candle to remind her of home and a cat tree for comfort.

I sighed, putting the plant into my inventory.

"So, you want to get a new hobby?" I asked. I didn't have high hopes it would be anything good.

"Okay," Donut said. Her entire body glowed for a moment. She made a face.

"Scutelliphily," she said a moment later, pronouncing it slowly. "I don't… I don't even know what that means. I'm a scutelliphile. That sounds obscene. How can I have a skill in something and not know what it is? This makes no sense. What a waste."

I chuckled. "I don't know what to tell you, Donut. It warned us the skill would be something stupid."

I put the potion in my hotlist and clicked it. A warmth spread through me.

You have gained a skill!

You are now Level 3 in the Cesta Punta skill.

That was it. There was no other explanation.

"Cesta Punta?" I said. Was that a martial art? I looked at my hands. I didn't feel any different.

"Was your potion worthless, too?" Donut asked.

"I don't know," I said. "Maybe." Donut was right. It was stupid and pointless if we didn't know what it was.

"It's likely the art of cracking nuts with your toes," Donut said. She turned to the bopca. "Gordo, darling. Get me some walnuts. We need to experiment." She laughed.

"Of course. Right away, your majesty," he said. He scurried into the back kitchen.

This guy was even more subservient than they usually were. Her Charisma had rocketed up to 70. Mordecai had said while that number seemed crazy high, on the lower floors we were going to

see and need much higher numbers than that just to keep our heads above water. With only three points per level, we needed to fight for potions and items and bonuses and everything we could to make those stats soar.

Since it was one of the few spells that worked inside of a saferoom, I made Donut cast her new *Clockwork Triplicate* spell over and over. It currently took Donut about 20 seconds to regenerate a single mana point. Mongo quickly got used to having two clockwork friends suddenly emerging out of nowhere. He now squeaked with joy when they appeared, and he ran up to them. The other two also jumped up and down with excitement, and the three would tussle, rolling over each other, knocking over chairs and pouncing and jumping on tables. The tooltips over their heads didn't indicate which one was the real deal. I'd quickly lose track of the real Mongo until the two eventually fell apart. Mongo would peep sadly when this happened and would run up to Donut and start screaming, hopping up and down demanding that she bring them back.

"I don't think I'm gaining experience in the spell," Donut eventually said. "It should've gone up to level two by now."

"Hmm. Maybe it doesn't count in saferooms." I looked over at the snoring form of Mordecai. "It'd be nice if we had someone to ask," I said loudly. I'd tried to wake him earlier, but he was out cold.

"Should we move him so he's not in a pile of his own vomit?" Donut asked.

"Probably," I said. "But I don't want to touch him again." When I tried waking him the first time, his tail had risen ominously, like a cobra. "The last thing we need is some weird incubus spell activating and your manager getting put in a time out. Besides, something tells me this isn't his first rodeo."

I really didn't feel like putting together Donut's cat tree just yet, and I told her I would do it later tonight. So instead, while Donut played with Mongo and his clones, I spent some time fiddling with explosives.

I needed to be doing this at a Sapper's table, which would stop the dynamite from degrading and would supposedly offer more ways to work with the stuff. I had an idea, but I quickly gave up on it for

now. I had that new Bomb Surgeon skill, and even though it was only level one, I could sense how useful it would be. I could feel the depth of the blasting cap in my dynamite sticks. I could feel how close a piece of dynamite was to prematurely going off without having to consult the description.

Instead of dynamite, I moved my examination to my stash of goblin smoke bombs. The apple-sized bombs were just a bit too big for my slingshot, and their design didn't really allow me to break them down. I wondered if I should switch to a sling. Frustrated, I put it all away.

I had a lot of random chemicals and a load of black powder, but with my limited knowledge in chemistry, I didn't have the correct combination of items to make what was in my head. I needed to seek out a store that sold explosive supplies, or better yet, find a village of hobgoblins and raid their stash. It seemed they had higher quality stuff than the goblins.

We were supposed to make our way to that larger settlement before it got dark, but I made the executive decision to stay in the area and explore. I wasn't certain when night would descend, but we still had several hours before the next recap episode.

The plan was to go out there and sneak around the edges of this supposed circus. We would try not to poke too hard. Not until we knew exactly what we were dealing with.

"Come on Donut," I said. "Let's go clown hunting."

The first thing we noticed when we edged our way outside was the group of three X's on the map. These were crawlers, and they'd fallen not too far from where we encountered the lemurs.

"Ah, damnit," I said. I remembered what Zev had said about not joining up with any of the other crawlers in the area, and I suddenly felt guilty for not going to seek them out. I'd been so overwhelmed with all the newness of this floor, I hadn't really thought about it. I regretted that now.

We carefully approached the area, walking through the thin alley. Mongo stopped and sniffed the air. He let out a low growl.

"Stop," I whispered. I searched the minimap, but I didn't see any mobs.

Mongo was looking straight up. I followed the path of his gaze, and I finally saw it. A skull-headed lemur lounged on the edge of the roof. It hadn't noticed us yet.

The moment I saw him, his dot appeared on my map. These things had some sort of stealth ability. He was overlooking the street with the dead crawlers, his back to us. A trap. I could only see one lemur, but I had no doubt there were more.

"Back," I said. "Let's go in this building and sneak up on him."

These buildings were nothing but the bare shells of old houses. None had doors or windows, just the holes where they used to be. We backtracked and peered inside.

We crouched by the entrance. Mongo was being good and remained silent. The second floor and the roof both were made of nothing but beams of rotting wood, all surrounded by the stone bricks of the house. We could see the lemur from here, sitting idly on the edge of the roof. There were no stairs or easy way for me to get up there.

"Want me to take him out?" Donut asked.

"We need to do it silently," I said. My slingshot would only piss it off. Donut's magic missile could be a little loud.

"Be quiet, Mongo, and watch how Mommy does this."

"Wait. Goddamnit, Donut," I hissed.

But before I could protest further, Donut leaped into the air and landed on a second-floor beam. She crossed the roof, walking low. *Huh*, I thought. She'd managed to be a lot quieter than I thought she could be considering her…

She jumped to the center ceiling beam, landing right behind the lemur.

Even from here I could hear the little charm on her collar jingle as she landed on the roof. In this silence, it was as loud as a damn church bell. Her backside armor also clinked loudly onto the beam.

Mongo, deciding he wanted in on the fun, screeched loudly.

The lemur turned, looking over his shoulder just as Donut pounced.

She somehow managed not to fall off the edge and into the street below. She slashed savagely at the creature, and he crumpled over, falling into the building, bouncing off one of the second-floor beams and cracking into the ground. Mongo rushed forward and pounced, landing hard on the not-yet-dead lemur. He ripped savagely at the furry monster's stomach, unzipping him like he'd been trained. Mongo squeaked and shoved his head into the lemur's now-open belly.

Holy shit, I thought, rushing forward.

Donut jumped down and sat next to her kill, looking triumphant.

"We're gonna need to do something about that bell of yours if you want to be stealthy," I said. "You're too fragile to do stuff like that without planning it out."

"I need to make a good example for my child, Carl."

"He's not your child, Donut. He's a pet. We don't put our lives in danger for our pets."

I regretted it the moment the words came out of my mouth. Donut looked as if I'd slapped her. I suddenly felt like an enormous asshole.

Mongo ripped off the painted skull, revealing the dead lemur's own skull.

"Ew," Donut said, looking horrified. The look of hurt had disappeared just as quickly as it had come. "Carl, do you see that? It's disgusting!"

"Yeah, that's really gross," I said, happy for the quick change of subject.

The human skull hat covered a secondary skull with a pair of bulbous, bloodshot eyes. The thing had no fur or skin on its head at all. It looked even more scary without the skull hat than it did with it.

The lemur held a poor lemur skin and a small bandolier containing six throwing knives. Donut took all of them. The knives were each about the size of my hand with little black handles.

"Donut, you should go back up there," I said. "Slowly and quietly, and look over the street. See if you can spy any more lemurs on the roofs. Also see if you can tell where the main part of the circus is."

"No need," Donut said. "I already looked. There's one more lemur across the street, but he's asleep. I can probably take him out with a missile and nobody will notice. And a few streets over, you can see the large circus tents. There's a park, I think. It's the same direction from where the giraffe came. I could see at least three of the giraffes walking around over there. I didn't see any of the scary clowns though. Also, if you're really quiet, you can hear the music from the circus."

I just looked at Donut. She really was growing, getting more efficient. Again, I felt bad for the pet comment. But at the same time, it was true, wasn't it? Donut was different. She was more than a pet.

Donut gazed down lovingly at Mongo, who'd eaten his fill.

"You did good," she said. "You're almost at level four already!"

The little dinosaur hopped up and down, waving his bloody arms and splattering gore everywhere.

"Okay," I said. "Let's kill the guy across the street, examine the bodies of those crawlers out there, and then check out the circus. Sound like a plan, partner?"

Donut paused and then nodded slowly. "Okay," she said. "Partner."

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Donut took out the sleeping lemur with a magic missile. We waited five minutes to see if anything would react, but only silence followed. In those moments as we waited, I could hear it, the distant whisper of a calliope, playing slow and haunting circus music. Once I was relatively certain the watchers were gone, we approached the three dead crawlers.

As we came closer, it was apparent there was enough blood and guts to comprise five or six crawlers. Like with the brindle grubs, the X's disappeared if the bodies were significantly destroyed. It seemed there'd been a large-scale battle here, and I suspected they'd taken out several of the lemurs, too, but their bodies had already been removed. As I suspected, the three crawlers had been left as a trap.

Of the three I could easily examine, two were human and one was a large, tree-like creature. I'd had that on my list, but I couldn't remember the name. When I examined the corpse, it didn't tell us their new races. All three were women.

Corpse of Crawler Grace Bautista 3. Level 8. Killed by Former Circus Lemur.

All of them appeared Asian, maybe Filipino. All had the same last name. All were level 8. All killed by lemurs. Grace, Nica, and Lea. None of them had any inventory, meaning some of their group were probably still alive.

"That one, the tree lady is wearing an anklet," Donut said. "And this one has two rings."

Sure enough, as I examined the corpses more closely, I could tell they'd been looted hastily. Their inventory was gone, and their weapons and armor appeared to have been removed, leaving them in regular street clothes—all except the tree woman, who was naked save for the anklet. Whatever had transpired here had happened quickly. These three were sisters or close family members, and all three had died at the same time. I shook my head. Fuck this game.

The tree creature was humanoid but with a badly misshapen body. She was closer to an Ent from *Lord of the Rings* than Groot from *Guardians of the Galaxy*. But even that comparison wasn't correct. Her facial features remained human, but she'd been bent over and hunchbacked with an extra set of limbs erupting from her back.

It took a few minutes to pry the anklet from her ankle, which is likely why they'd abandoned it. I also pulled the two rings off the fingers of the second one, the human named Nica.

Both of the rings were +2 to strength. Since Donut couldn't wear them, I rubbed the blood off and put them on myself, giving me a total of four rings. And just like that, my strength was back to an acceptable level. I didn't take any joy from looting the corpses of fellow crawlers, but I now realized how much of an advantage it was to be in an area where other crawlers existed. I could see the allure of being a player killer. This game gave a lot of loot.

I examined the simple anklet. It appeared to be made of wood. It had three little beads attached to it that clicked when I shook it, like seed pods. It wasn't nearly as loud as Donut's charm, but anything that made noise was a distraction.

Enchanted Anklet of the Fallen Oak.

Imbues wearer with +1 Dexterity, +1 Constitution, and gives +3 to the skill Double Tap. It's also an anklet. One would think anklets enhance the beauty of feet like toe rings do, but they are excessive, jangly distractions that make you look too garish.

"Let's see if it'll let you wear this," I said. I suspected it would. She already had one bracelet wrapped around her forward leg. I could barely see it through all the fur.

Donut looked at the anklet with distaste. “Wood?” she said. “What is this, the 70s? Anklets are for the foot model, not me.”

The AI clearly didn’t want me wearing this thing, but I wasn’t going to say that out loud. “It has a constitution buff. You need it.”

She sighed and pulled it into her inventory. “I’ll put it on my back leg so nobody will see it.”

It appeared in a blink, forming around her rear left ankle. It was a fourth the size as it was before, and it remained hidden in the tufts of fur. She shook her leg a few times with distaste. Thankfully the little beads barely made any noise. If we kept her hairbrush buff active, her Constitution was now seven. It was still much too low for my tastes.

“Read the description of that Double Tap skill and tell me what it does” I said.

She shrugged. “It says if I hit the monster twice in a row with the same attack there’s a chance the second hit does critical damage.”

“Okay, good,” I said. “Now let’s get out of the street.”

The closer we came to the edge of the circus, the louder the calliope music. The music didn’t change. It was a slow, haunting oom-pah-pah, oom-pah-pah of a polka played at half speed. I looked worriedly at the sun, which edged close to the distant rooftops. I hadn’t seen any saferooms since the last one.

We hid inside of a building that overlooked the massive circus tents. We’d killed five sentinel lemurs on our way here. While the lazy lemurs were hard to spot, they also seemed easy to sneak up on as long as we moved slowly. Donut had killed most of them, usually allowing Mongo to finish them off. The little dinosaur hit level four, and now he was about the same size as the cat. The dinosaur quivered with anger and potential energy every time we approached a lemur, and sometimes the excitement was too much for him. He’d let out a quick screech and then clamp his beak shut, as if he knew he’d messed up.

We came across a sleeping lemur sprawled out on the floor of one building, and it was just too much temptation for Mongo. The dinosaur squealed and pounced, landing onto the stomach of the

lemur, who awakened and managed to croak before I could also jump and smash his skull with my foot. A lemur-laden giraffe walked down the street soon thereafter while we hid against the inside wall of the building. But it passed by, not pausing.

Through the hole of a missing window, we now observed the circus. It consisted of three massive tents, multiple wagons, several cages filled with shadowy forms we couldn't see, and at least a dozen other smaller tents. In addition to the lemurs, giraffes, and stilt clowns, we saw a few other types of mobs, including a group of short, fat clowns and a large, ogre-like creature wearing a leopard-skin leotard. The ogre had a tentacle sprouting from the side of his neck.

One of the tents was flanked by a massive, faded sign that read "Grimaldi's World O' Freaks, Admission One Gold Coin. No children or those with weak constitutions allowed." A line of illustrated, ten-foot-tall images stood on either side of the sign, showing the freaks and other attractions within the tent. One of them was the ogre creature with "The Over City's Strongest Citizen." written over it.

The other illustrations were a faded mix of sideshow characters and attractions like "The Over City's Fattest Woman" and "Garth, The Two-Headed Troglodyte" and "Tiny, The Amazing, Fire-Breathing Gnoll."

There was one peculiarity amongst the signs. The last of the tall illustrations held an image of a horned, elf-like woman covered head to toe in tattoos. The sign read "Tsarina Signet and Her Amazing Battle Squad." But someone had painted a large circle around the poster, crossing out the image. "Wanted. Traitor," was written above the sign. As we watched, one of the round clowns walked by, pushing a wheelbarrow that appeared to be filled with animal skins. He paused at the sign, zipped down his pants, and urinated on the poster.

"My word, they don't seem to like that lady," Donut said.

"No. No, they don't," I said.

We watched for a few more minutes. The clowns and lemurs appeared to be hard at work, but what were they doing? The entire circus was surrounded by a well-worn, five-foot-high battlement

made of rocks, wood, and bones. The clowns started draping animal skins over the barriers. A pair of stilt clowns pulled a wagon out into the street and started erecting what looked like trench warfare defenses. They dumped jack-like wooden structures connected to one another by circling, barbed lengths of wire.

"They're getting ready for a battle," I said.

Mordecai: It's getting late. Are you guys close to the other town yet?

Carl: Hello, Mordecai. How's your head?

Mordecai: I've had no… Wait, what do you mean?

Carl: Where are you?

Mordecai: I'm in my room. Are you two near the town or not?

Huh. He must've teleported back to his base the moment we left the saferoom.

Carl: Do you remember anything from today?

Donut: YOU WERE DRUNK AND YOU MOLESTED SOMEONE'S GRANDMA.

Mordecai didn't answer for several moments.

Mordecai: Where are you right now?

I went on to explain everything that had happened. He didn't ask any questions and waited for me to finish. It didn't take long to explain.

Mordecai: Okay. Back the hell out of there and get your butts to that safe room. You are in way over your head. Do it now. It will be dark soon. I will explain just how stupid you two are once you get there.

Carl: Maybe we wouldn't have been stupid if you hadn't been passed out in a pile of your own vomit. We were just about to head back. See you there.

Mordecai: Night comes on quickly. You'll want to hurry.

Mongo growled.

"Down," I hissed.

Outside, dozens of the lemurs and stilt clowns appeared. They came from all directions, heading back toward the circus. These

were the sentries, I realized. They were headed back to home base before it got dark.

We had to remain low and press ourselves against the interior wall of the decrepit building, or we'd be seen by the passing mobs. We huddled as the *clomp, clomp, clomp* of a giraffe walked by on the wooden slats. Donut jumped to my shoulders and peered over the windowsill while Mongo crawled into my lap. I found myself making "shhh," noises while I rubbed the rough, half-feathered back of the little dinosaur's head.

"They just keep coming and coming," Donut said. "We shouldn't have come here, Carl. It's getting darker, too."

"Okay," I said. "If they're retreating back to their base, they probably won't follow us. Let's give it a minute and run."

Donut nodded.

We waited until the steady progression of lemurs and clowns started to abate. There had to be a thousand of them. The sun still hadn't fully sunk below the artificial horizon. Outside, the stilt clowns had finished erecting the barbed wire defenses and were now starting to line up behind the wall. Another group of monsters I hadn't yet seen circled around a group of cauldrons, like witches stirring a magical soup. These monsters were tall and thin with emaciated arms and fabric robes and masks that hung in tatters, like undead executioners. Except the fabric was bright purple and yellow. On this side of the park there were four cauldrons set up, and each cauldron had four of the brightly-colored robed figures surrounding the bubbling and hissing pot.

A group of the round clowns pushed the large, red and yellow-painted animal cages to the edges of the walls, the doors facing outward. Roars and trills shook the massive pens. Whatever was in there, I guessed they would unleash the monsters on the attackers. I caught glimpse of tentacles and claws reaching outward from one of the cages. I was reminded of the Krakaren boss we'd fought earlier, though these tentacles seemed less octopus-like and more, I don't know, worm-like. I felt a visceral revulsion at the sight.

"Yeah, fuck this. We're out of here," I said. "Let's go."

A pair of lemurs and a clown remained on the street as we emerged. Donut hit them with three quick magic missiles as I rushed up at them. I punted the first lemur directly at the clown, who'd fallen backward. The squealing, on-fire lemur ricocheted off the struggling clown's head, who stumbled again, hitting the ground. While Donut and Mongo quickly dispatched the third lemur, I leaped up on the clown like I'd done before, crushing in his chest and pummeling him in his face, smashing it in. I could feel the extra strength I'd gained from the rings with each punch.

More strength. I needed more strength, and I could kill these things with a single hit.

I looted a second big top ticket and hunk of clown meat.

I eyed a group of ten lemurs one street over. They howled and pointed at us, but they didn't move to pursue.

"Run," I said. We turned and bolted down the street, not bothering with the alleys. The saferoom was only four blocks over.

"Did you see!" Donut shouted as we ran. A whistling noise filled the air as she breathlessly talked. "My magic missile can set things on fire now! My spell hit level…"

Wham! Half the street where we'd just been standing exploded, sending us both flying forward. I hit the ground and rolled, coming to a stop. My ears throbbed. Rocks and debris showered over us. Mongo squealed in pain. He glowed a moment later as Donut cast *Heal Critter*. She rushed to the small, blood-splattered dinosaur, clucking over him worriedly.

"What the hell was that?" I yelled, pulling myself to my feet. "Come on!"

A purple and yellow comet rose into the air from the direction of the circus. It whistled as it bounced off the ceiling and hurled at us. The brightly-colored projectile was a mortar round, I realized in that fraction of a moment. It'd been fired from the cauldrons. They were firing goddamned magical mortars at us.

"Shit," I cried. "There!" I pointed at a nearby entranceway, and all three of us dove inside. I covered Donut and Mongo as another, louder detonation echoed. My health plummeted as darkness descended.

Rocks bounced off me as the building collapsed around us. I slammed a healing potion as my health continued its downward arc. The ground cracked, and we fell again. *Shit*. *The ground is made of wood*, I thought. *We're falling through*. We crashed to another stop, rock and wood falling around us, tumbling and rolling. I couldn't hear anything for several moments. Underneath me, Donut and Mongo squirmed to get out.

I rolled over, freeing them. Debris and dust cascaded, and I couldn't stop coughing. My health remained about halfway full, and I cast *Heal* to bring it all the way back up. We were in murky darkness. Mongo let out a cry of fear.

Light filled the room as Donut cast *Torch*.

We waited for another mortar round to drop, but it never came. They'd probably assumed they'd gotten us. After the rocks finally settled, I could still hear the distant, haunting calliope music.

"That was most unpleasant," Donut said. She started rubbing dust off Mongo's feathers.

We'd fallen into what appeared to be a basement of some sort. I looked about. Above, a dim light shone through where we'd fallen, about twelve feet up. I looked uneasily at the ground, but I couldn't see it. It was nothing but rubble and wood. This room had been built below the main level of the Over City. I didn't know that was a thing. Smoke rose lazily through a gap in the wreckage.

The room wasn't large. It appeared to be about twice the size of Mordecai's base with walls made of rough stone. There'd once been a staircase leading up, but it had collapsed in on itself. Rotted remnants of barrels lined one wall. The only way out was through the hole we'd fallen in.

"Can you use your *Puddle Jumper* spell to get us out?" I asked. I could also build a ladder, but it'd take a few minutes. We were almost out of time.

"I don't know," she said. She backed up, peering up at the ceiling. "The hole is too small. I need line of sight, and all I can see is the sky. If I make the hole bigger, it should work. One moment."

She leaped up through the hole. Mongo cried out. He started furiously leaping in the air, trying to jump as high as Donut. "She'll

be right back," I said. "Calm down little dude."

Mongo screeched in rage and jumped again, leaping astonishingly high. He'd jumped almost ten feet in the air, just shy of the hole.

"Wow, that was great," I said.

He squeaked sadly, looking at the hole.

A moment later, a larger chunk of floor fell in, and Donut jumped down. Her hair was all poofed out. Mongo started squeaking and bouncing around her like she'd been gone for hours.

Donut ignored her pet. "She's out there, right on the street," she said breathlessly. "She's just standing there like she's waiting for us. There's only one way out of the building, and she's right there. I think she knows we're here!"

"Who?" I said.

"The elf lady from the poster. Tsarina Signet!"

"Oh shit. Did she see you just now? Was her dot on the minimap red? What level is she?" I didn't see anything on my map.

Donut paused. "She looked right at me, but she didn't move! The dot is white! But she is really scary looking. I didn't have time to examine her properties. I got too scared! She's glowing. She's completely naked except for this quite lovely thong that Miss Beatrice would just adore. But this lady is swirling with tattoos that are moving and swimming about like a fishbowl. I don't like tattoos, Carl."

I sighed, looking up at the hole, calming slightly. If her dot was white, then we weren't in immediate danger. "You have a tattoo," I said absently. "Remember? And I have two now. And you know Bea had a tattoo, too. That awful tramp stamp."

"Miss Beatrice's tattoo is a masterpiece and an exception to the rule," Donut said. "And *our* tattoos were placed upon us against our wills."

Bea's tattoo was a faded, Persian cat on her lower back surrounded by weird, uneven wisps. The cat it was based on was Princess Chonkalot, Donut's long-dead grandmother and Bea's childhood cat. The awful tattoo looked like a stoned Ewok. I never understood why she'd gotten a tattoo in a place where the only ones

who'd see it were people smashing her from behind. I'd made the error of jokingly mentioning that once. And the Ewok part. Yeah, that'd been a mistake.

"Her dot is white, which means we can talk to her," I said. "Let's ask her what the hell is going on then get to the saferoom. Can you teleport us up there?"

"Okay," Donut said, sounding uneasy.

I scooped up Mongo. The last thing we needed was the little monster attacking her. "Beam us up, Donut."

Ten seconds later, and we crouched at the crumbled-in entranceway to the now-destroyed building. Darkness had fully descended on the area. My heart thrashed as I remembered Mordecai's warning.

Light glowed from the street, and I squeezed through the rubble of the collapsed doorway to go outside. In the distance, about a block and a half down, the circus was lit like a holiday display. The three big top tents glowed, and multiple fires surrounded the encampment. Spotlights shot into the air, waving about.

A line of clowns and lemurs and giraffes stood nearby. They could clearly see us here. Why weren't they firing their mortars?

I examined the almost-naked elf creature who stood quietly by herself in the now-darkened streets. She stood about five and a half feet tall, and she reminded me of Lexis, Odette's production assistant. She was an extra-thin, humanoid creature with long, pointed elf ears, short horns jutting from her forehead, and sharpened fangs. She had a malevolent, horrifying look about her.

Her skin gave off a mild luminescence, and in this glow, I could see the tattoos. From her toes to her face, she was covered in thick-lined, old-school tattoos of monsters. Most of the creatures were Asian-themed or nautical-themed, like Japanese Oni and small, Chinese dragons and dozens of other monstrosities like sharks and octopuses. Like Donut said, these tattoos were alive. They moved about her body, twirling around each other, rippling her skin.

Tsarina Signet - Half Naiad, Half High-Elf Summoner. Level 60

This is an Elite.

The High-Elf King Finian, leader of the Liana Sector of the Hunting Grounds, was such a horny bastard, it was said he'd bedded women from over 5,000 different races during his rule. Most scholars agree this has to be an exaggeration considering King Finian's harelip and obsession with knitting, but nonetheless, at least one of these trysts did take place, resulting in the unique combination of half Naiad, half High Elf. Considering the Naiad Confederacy's tendency to drown outsiders and the High Elves' inclination to hunt down and murder any mongrel child of the late king, Signet here has probably had a tough life. Maybe that's why she ran away and joined the circus.

WARNING: This is a fairy-class NPC. Creatures of this class inflict 20% more damage against you due to your goblin pass.

The moment the description ended, a new notification popped up.

New Achievement! Meet an Elite.

Sometimes they're NPCs, sometimes they're mobs, but usually they're just assholes. Elites are powerful, one-of-a-kind entities. These are the non-boss, non-divine hero class of Dungeon Crawler World. If you come across one of these egomaniacs, they will either want to fuck you or kill you. Either way, they will *always* want to use you. They tend to think this whole production is all about them. Be careful. Where there's one elite, there's usually more.

***Reward*: Elites will now show on your map as white or red dots with a black cross.**

I swallowed. The woman was decidedly terrifying to look upon, yet I found myself attracted to her. The effect was sudden and almost overwhelming. With horror, I felt myself getting physically excited. I pictured myself pulling the woman into my arms, kissing her on the mouth. I took a step toward her. *It's a spell*, I realized. What had Mordecai said? *Stay away from girls with horns on their heads.*

Carl: I think I'm being charmed by an NPC with horns. What do I do?

Mordecai: It's not a real Charm spell because if it was, you wouldn't be asking me about it. Is it happening to Donut, too?

Donut: HE HAS AN ERECTION, MORDECAI. IT'S VERY INAPPROPRIATE. MONGO IS APPALLED.

Mordecai: Okay, Carl. She likely has a 100 plus Charisma, which gives some inherent buffs. One of those is something called Puppy Dog, which can make men mad with desire. It's a weak effect at first, but the longer you're in her presence, the worse it'll get. There's only one surefire way to break it. You need to fracture your own finger. Do it fast. It will negate the effect. Uh, make sure you don't rip your finger off.

Shit. I still clutched onto Mongo. I reached over, grasped my left pinky, and I bent it back so it snapped loudly. Pain exploded. I cried out. *Holy crap. That just happened*. I looked stupidly at my bent-back finger.

It worked. I felt the spell rush away. The effect was similar to having a bucket of cold water dumped on my head. I just sat there and breathed heavily.

The woman looked down with amusement at my finger.

"My, my," she said. "It's been a while since I've seen that trick in action."

She had a seductive voice. It did not match her face. I drank a health potion.

Donut: IT WORKED. YOU ARE A GENIUS MORDECAI.

Mordecai: Gods, Donut. Do you have to type in all caps? That trick works for most charm-based spells. But you have to do it to yourself. The problem is that by the time you're truly charmed, you don't know you're charmed. This is a succubus. Get away from her and get back to the base.

Donut: SHE IS NOT A SUCCUBUS. IT SAYS SHE'S A HALF NAIAD AND ELF. IT ALSO SAYS SHE'S AN ELITE.

<u>Mordecai</u>: Holy fuck. Get the hell out of there. Do not get involved in whatever she's trying to rope you into.

"We're sorry to have bothered you," I said while Donut and Mordecai talked in the chat. "We need to head back now."

Signet took a tentative, almost shy step toward me. In my menu, I prepared to click *Protective Shell* if I had to. It wouldn't have an effect on her if her dot remained white, so if I needed it, I had to time it properly. "I came here to see if you were okay. I watched you get attacked by my former family. They can be quite… unwelcoming… to strangers these days."

I watched a sea dragon pulse across her small breasts. The black tattoo paused to look at me and silently hiss before wrapping itself around her back. On Signet's arms, the monsters danced about one another. I caught glimpse of a giant, three-headed ogre who held a curved sword, which he sharpened on a wheel.

I realized Mongo had gone slack in my arm. I looked down, and the little dinosaur was staring at the woman, little eyes wide. She reached out and patted him on the head. He made a happy little squeak. This is what happened with the goblins and the laminak fairies, I realized. Only this time we were the ones getting seduced by the ultra-high charm.

"We're okay," I said as Donut leaped up on my shoulder. "Thank you for your concern. We really need to get going."

The woman reached forward to pet Donut, but the cat pulled back and let out a growl. Mongo looked between Donut and Signet, confused. I felt the small dinosaur tense, the spell broken. He also let out a little growl. *Good boy*, I thought.

"We're not getting involved with this weird little quarrel, sweetheart," said Donut. "Carl and I want nothing to do with you and your circus freak friends. We will be leaving now," Donut said.

"I'm afraid it's too late for that," Signet said as she took a step back and spread out her arms. The tattoos on her body began to swirl, moving faster and faster until they blurred. She nodded toward the circus, and I reluctantly turned my head.

At this distance, I could barely see what she was indicating. A cheer rose from the line of clowns and circus animals. A moment

passed, and I realized, with dread, that I *could* see what had changed.

The cages of the beasts were all open. I glanced at my minimap, and the red dots appeared, one-by-one. In front of us, behind us, and to our sides.

We were surrounded, and they were moving in fast.

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[7]

"What was your name again?" Signet asked me. She didn't move from her arms-out Jesus pose.

"Uh, Carl," I said as I frantically searched the map for the best way to flee. We had nowhere to go. I regretted making Donut use her *Puddle Jumper* spell already. The spell had a five-hour countdown, and we really could've used it about now.

"Carl. What a strong name. Be a dear, Sir Carl. You seem like a strapping lad," Signet said. "Please keep those Mold Lions off of me while I organize my battle squad. I usually have this part done before I have to face them. Your presence distracted me, so it's only fair. Besides, if you run, they will take you down."

"Carl, I don't like this," Donut whispered as I put Mongo down. "I think we're in real trouble."

"Get ready," I said. I formed a fist and faced the closest red dot. It was right there, fifty feet away, across the street and down the alley from the house with the basement. But I couldn't see it. I watched the dot move toward us. The mob moved *through* the building.

No, not through the building. *Over* the building. It was on the roof. I looked up and tried not to gasp.

Mold Lion – Level 15

Mean, green, and it gonna eat yo spleen!

Madam Kiki's Dancing Lions were an integral part of Grimaldi's Traveling Circus. Crowds would roar in approval

as the diminutive lion trainer stood in the middle of the ring, cracked her whip, and the dozen male lions took to their hindlegs and twirled like ballerinas. What a sight it was!

On the day of the great cataclysm, the gentle and tame lions were some of the first to transform. The spores of Scolopendra took quick root within the lions, turning them into the fiends you see today. Further transformations occurred as a result of the vine.

As with all early victims of the cataclysm, these creatures are filled with rage. They will stop at nothing until your innards wet the floorboards of the Over City.

"That was needlessly gruesome," Donut muttered as I gawked up at the lion.

The monster was a regular-sized, male lion with a mane. Half of his body was covered with a green, lumpy, glowing fungus that pulsated like he was being eaten. The green mold covered his legs and chest, and splattered tendrils of the stuff covered the lion's face, like a pair of hands caressing it from behind. The lion's right eye glowed like an emerald. Erupting from his mane were tentacles. Dozens of long, pink and green, finger-like worms waved in the air, making the creature appear to be some sort of fucked-up cat medusa.

The monster roared. Behind me, an answering roar followed. Then a third. The lions appeared all around us, all of them on the roofs of the buildings. They were going to pounce at any moment.

"Holy shit, lady, how long is this going to take?" I called to Signet. We now had six lions circling us.

The half-naiad's eyes glowed. The tattoos swirled faster and faster along her skin. She did not answer.

For the past day, I'd been trying to organize scenarios such as this in my mind. We needed to come up with contingencies, ways to respond to certain threats. If Donut and I trained, we could call out the play and each of us would know how to respond. I had one such contingency already worked out in my head, something for this exact scenario—surrounded by powerful monsters. The problem was, I hadn't explained this yet to Donut.

I looked about for the strongest-looking wall. *There.* Just on the other side of Signet.

"Okay, Donut," I said as I slowly circled behind the half-naiad. I had to mentally gauge the distance. "Save your magic until I tell you. Can you take another potion yet?"

"*Yes*," she said, voice full of fear. Mongo stayed under my feet. "What're we doing?"

"Got a plan. When I say, cast that last scroll of *Confusing Fog*. Okay? Get it re… Oh shit, now, now!"

All six lions pounced at once, and their terrifying roar filled the dark street.

I slammed down on *Protective Shell*.

Earlier, I'd tossed a goblin smoke bomb, and it'd caught in the wind, resulting in the bomb being rendered ineffective. The Confusing Fog didn't have that problem. The lions bounced off the shell like fireflies off a bug zapper. Each of the six lions ricocheted in a different direction, all of them howling in outrage as the billowing eddies of fog spread out around us.

Signet, as I'd hoped, was not affected by my shield. She remained within the spell's area of effect. The magical shell would only last twenty seconds. The translucent-only-to-the-good-guys fog, however, would stick around for a good two and a half minutes thanks to Donut's high intelligence.

One of the lions bounced off the shell and flew into the sturdy wall of the building. I'd judged the distance correctly, and the lion was momentarily caught between the wall and the dome shape of the spell. The spell pushed the lion against the wall as it blindly scrambled for purchase with its claws, but it had nowhere to go, and it hung just a couple feet off the ground, wedged in good. The lion was on its side, back against the wall and belly facing us, angled downward. Blind and confused, it howled and scrambled, unable to push off the shell. In a second it'd figure out that rotating would save it. I had to act fast.

Its body sparked where it came into contact with the shield. A damage bar appeared and slowly started to descend. Behind me, another lion roared in pain as one of his friends instinctively slashed

at him. I bolted forward, pulled my fist back and punched the trapped lion in the mold-covered chest just as he started to rotate.

He howled in pain and tried to slash at me but couldn't angle his claws—which were inches from my face—past the invisible shell. I punched again and again. I felt something give. My next punch went deeper than I expected.

Mongo screamed and flew through the air, attaching himself to the lion's unprotected belly, ripping at it as I pulled my dripping gauntlet and punched again. My hand entered the chest cavity, and I opened my fist, grasped and pulled.

I fell back onto my ass as the entire lion plummeted to the ground and rolled toward me. Surely it hadn't been twenty seconds yet? The green mold turned black before my eyes, and the worm tentacles all dropped, mixing in with the matted and dirty hair of the mold lion.

It was dead.

Mongo shrieked with glee. The dinosaur grew before my eyes. I wasted a precious second staring stupidly at the mold-covered lion heart in my hand. *Holy shit. I pulled his fucking heart out. I pulled out the heart of a fucking lion.*

"*Second Chance*!" I cried, scrambling to my feet as I put the heart into my inventory.

Donut's spell only cost ten of her 29 magic points.

The protective shell fizzled out just as the reanimated lion rose to its feet. It stood, both eyes dead, guts trailing from where Mongo had eviscerated it. Signet still hadn't moved or changed.

Undead Minion of Crawler Princess Donut – Mold Lion – Level 5

The zombies were a third as powerful as their former selves, but they weren't blind.

"Kill!" Donut yelled, pointing at the closest lion. The zombie growled and pounced, landing on the back of a lion whose health was already cut in half. It was over in a second, the zombie having ripped open the throat of his confused friend.

I shouted instructions at Donut as I formed a fist. At any moment the four remaining lions would realize we were unprotected.

Donut rose the second lion from the dead and downed a mana potion. She then spent 26 points to cast *Clockwork Triplicate* on the new zombie with the ripped-out throat.

"Kill the others!" Donut cried. Two of the lions jumped forward to attack. A moment later, the other two followed, wading into the fray. The two automatons fell into pieces before the final lion was dead. The two zombies also fell to the last lion, whose health was down to nothing. It growled, looking about just as the fog started to clear.

Mongo squealed and charged.

Donut hit the lion with a magic missile just as it swiped at the dinosaur. It dropped dead. Mongo, oblivious that Donut had just saved the idiot's life, pounced, landing on the lion's back, and started ripping. He'd gone up to level six. He was now a hand taller than Donut, about the size of an actual turkey. His tail was longer, too. A set of long feathers sprouted from the back of the tail.

Donut and I were both now level 14. A notification popped up telling me I couldn't assign my points until I reached a saferoom.

"Well, that was unexpected," Signet said.

I turned to look at the woman. Nothing had happened. Her tattoos stopped swirling around her body, though they continued to move as they had before. Her eyes no longer glowed. I'd been expecting her tattoos to turn into the monsters. Her description had stated she was a summoner, and she'd said she was summoning her "battle squad."

"What's going on?" I said. "Did your spell not work?"

"No, it didn't," she said. She had a sour look on her face. "My spells are Blood Magic. They require a proper sacrifice to work. I choose the sacrifice and cast the spell, and my lovelies take the blood and form."

I indicated the six dead lions. "You have blood right here." Down the street, the group of circus creatures cried in outrage once they realized the lions were all dead. We needed to get out of here. The mortars were going to start firing again at any moment.

"I can't use them," she said. As I watched, one of the lions twitched. I jumped back and formed a fist. Donut screeched and

leaped onto my shoulder. A green line of mold oozed off the lion and hit the ground. It started creeping back toward the circus.

Donut fired a magic missile at the ground. The mold shriveled and died.

"Don't bother," Signet said. "The mold isn't dangerous. Not directly, and you won't get it all no matter how hard you try. Believe me. You can incinerate the bodies, and you'll still miss some. All it takes is a single, microscopic spore to get back to the vine, and tomorrow this lion will be regrown and ready to attack again." She sighed. "Let's back up a block before those acrobats start shooting at us. This night's attack is canceled. What a disappointment. My boys were really looking forward to it."

We walked away from the circus to the jeers of the clowns. A few mortars did fire, though we were clearly out of range.

"You can only cast that summoning once a night?" I asked.

Signet gave me a half smile. Her ghoulish face looked downright sinister. "That is correct, Carl."

Donut: CARL I DO NOT LIKE THIS LADY EVEN IF HER DOT IS WHITE. WE NEED TO DITCH HER.

Carl: We will. She's even crazier than you think. Let me do the talking. Get ready to run just in case, but I don't think we'll have to. I want to get some info from her first. I don't think she's dangerous, not anymore, not as long as we don't provoke her.

"So," I said, trying to sound casual. "Which one of us was supposed to be the sacrifice? Me or the cat?"

"You, of course," Signet said, seeming not a bit surprised I'd figured it out. "The moment one of those lions cut you open, all of your blood would've flown into me and animated my squad. We've never used primal blood before, but I can sense how powerful it is. But you received nary a scratch."

"Wait," I said. "All my blood would've flowed out of me even if I'd just received a single cut?"

I'd already deduced the real reason why her spell hadn't worked. She didn't really want us to protect her. She'd wanted to charm me and then have me die while defending her. She hadn't been casting

her spell while all those tattoos were swirling about. She'd already cast it, and they were just waiting for my blood. This NPC was crazy and dangerous, but she was also clearly part of the quest, and I intended on getting the full story.

"Just a single cut wouldn't do it. It has to be a life-ending cut. I must say, it can be a hassle."

"What sort of creature do you usually use?" I asked.

She shrugged. "I usually catch something, the bigger the better. I'm not allowed to bleed the sacrifice myself. Otherwise I would've just killed you. I have to capture something and then capture a second, different something, put them together so they fight, guess which one is going to lose, and then cast my spell on the loser before they receive their first injury. The moment they're dead, my battle squad arises. How powerful they are depends wholly on the quality of the blood."

Donut: SHE IS GOING TO TRY TO CAPTURE US, CARL. WE NEED TO GET OUT OF HERE.

Donut was right. It was stupid to keep following her. I paused in the street. We were only two blocks over now from the saferoom. But before we left, I had to ask one last question. The all-important question.

"Why are you attacking them?" I asked.

She indicated a tall, white building. "My home is over there. I moved in because it is close to the vine, and the circus can no longer move from their spot. I have refreshments. If you'd like to join me for an evening drink, I will regale you with the sad tale of Signet the Bastard and Grimaldi, the man she loved."

"Bastards can be girls?" Donut asked, speaking for the first time.

"Yes," Signet said. "I learned quite early the term does not discriminate between male or female."

"We have to get going," I said. "But I would love to talk more about this with you later. But only if you promise not to try to sacrifice us."

She smiled. "After seeing how well you two fight, you needn't worry about that. If you promise to help me with my assault, I will tell you the full story."

"We will come back tomorrow night," I said. "But if you don't mind, we'll meet up after you've already summoned your squad."

She smiled at that. She tapped the ground with her foot. "I'll meet you right here an hour after sundown tomorrow night."

"What's the point of having me as a manager if you two suicidal idiots don't listen to my advice?" Mordecai raged after we arrived back at the Belly-Rubbed Pug saferoom.

We'd had to dodge a single mob on our way to the inn. It was a spider thing, but its body was an eyeball the size of a beach ball. It'd woven a web across the street, and we'd had to take the long way to the room.

The recap episode was about to air when we arrived. We approached the room, and I sent a quick message to Mordecai that we were going in as a courtesy. If I'd known he was going to be such an ass, I wouldn't have warned him.

"Within minutes of us going out there, we got that quest," I said. "I asked you if it was important or if we should ignore it. Well guess what? You didn't answer because you were shitfaced."

Mordecai took a deep breath. "I apologize. I have not had the pleasure of drinking in an Over City pub in a very long time, and I took advantage of the opportunity. I did not take into account the Incubus's weakness, which is alcohol. But if I had been of sound mind, I would have told you that quests are great for experience and loot, but only if you are comfortably ahead of the difficulty curve for the level. Since we only have eight days, and you are currently playing catch-up, I would've said to skip it and *do what I originally told you to do*."

"And we probably would've taken that advice had you actually given it," I said.

"Furthermore," Mordecai continued. "After I was cogent of my surroundings, I told you to stay away from the goddamned elite, but did you listen? No. You made a date with her for tomorrow night. A

date, should you decide to attend, that will surely result in all of the blood seeping from your veins and into her minions."

"I don't like that lady," Donut said as she munched a freshly-prepared tuna steak. Mongo devoured a plate of something that looked like raw hamburger meat on the floor next to her. He looked up and squeaked agreement.

"She's an elite," Mordecai said. "Never trust an elite."

"So what, exactly, are elites? How are they different than other NPCs? Is it just because they're more powerful?"

Mordecai sighed. "Okay, so elites. There are thousands of them spread throughout the urban levels of the dungeon. Unlike most mobs and dungeon NPCs, they can—and do—freely travel between the urban floors. In addition to the crawl, there is also a more scripted aspect to the dungeon. Think of it as a soap opera or a serial. All of these stories activated with the opening of the third floor. Every season they have multiple storylines pop up at once, like in September when all the new shows come out on television. There are also a few running stories that have been spanning multiple seasons, but that's all on the ninth floor. That's too complicated to explain right now."

"Wait," I said. "So, they're like actors?"

He shook his head. "Do you remember what we discussed earlier about how Borant owns and alters the minds of some mobs and NPCs? Elites are never naturals. They are designed, printed, and then imprinted with the memories needed for them to act out their drama. As far as they're concerned, this is their real world."

"But that's how it is with most of the other mobs," I said.

Mordecai shook his head again, this time more adamantly. "No. Regular mobs are autonomous. Once they're set loose in the dungeon, what they do is up to chance. Here is the thing with elites, and this is extremely important, so pay careful attention. Your quest with this circus and this Signet woman is a storyline, a drama created for the viewers by a team of writers. It will play itself out whether or not you get involved. It will have its own show and team of people working on that show who have been working on it for a very long time and who will be very protective of it. Some of these

dramas and storylines become quite popular in their own right. While elites aren't directly controlled by the AI and the writers, they are constantly being nudged and manipulated. If the writers don't like where a storyline is going, they will hot patch new instructions right into the elite's minds. There are AI-controlled rules to keep the dungeon 'fair' for the crawlers, but those rules are much looser when it comes to elites. If it comes down to saving the life of a single crawler or blowing an entire drama that's been building for weeks, what do you think is going to happen? I've seen it a dozen times. A hot shit crawler comes across an elite, and instead of trying to solve the quest, he decides to go all murder hobo and kill the NPC. Something always happens. Something bad. Most of these elites have very thick plot armor, and in those stories, *you're* the extra. The red shirt. The guest star. Not every quest will involve elites, but if it does, then I will always suggest that you stay the hell away. Especially when that storyline just launched, because there's a whole team of writers and producers out there who don't want their precious little series to get canceled after the first day. And if they can write in the death of a popular crawler, all the better. It will guarantee their show gets more viewers."

"So when we talk to that Signet woman, we're on another show?" Donut asked.

Mordecai just looked at the cat. "Out of all of what I just said, that's what you take away?"

"Wait," I said. A notion came at me. Something Signet had said. "But if this level is only eight days, what happens when the floor collapses?"

"The important elites will go down to the sixth floor, and the story will continue. While you crawlers are dicking around on the fourth and fifth floors, these dramas will continue to play out. That is until you guys get there to mess it all up. That's part of the fun for the viewers, seeing how crawlers crap all over the producer's hard work. It's like taking Jason from a *Friday the Thirteenth* movie and tossing him into a late-season episode of *Jane the Virgin* just to see what happens. But, like I said, the producers and writers aren't

going to allow you to just come and do it this early. They will fight back."

"But only if we're going against their planned storyline," I said. "If we're aiding the narrative, they might actually do the opposite. They might help us."

Mordecai scoffed. "You can also just sit here in this pub and play with yourselves for the next seven days. It might be fun, but it's also a one-way ticket to getting left behind. Forget this quest and go to the city."

The center television screen snapped on, and the opening music for the recap episode played.

"Special Edition! See what your favorite crawlers chose as their race!" the announcer cried.

I sat back and thought about everything that had happened today while we watched a shortened version of the bloody first part of the show. Some large group of crawlers fought against a demon-like city boss with crab pincers. The boss ripped through them in seconds, killing about forty crawlers with horrifying alacrity. The demon cackled with glee as it killed them all.

The first crawler they showed getting her upgrade was Hekla of Brynhild's Daughters, the woman from Iceland who'd gathered a large group of female crawlers around her. It showed her entering the saferoom alone.

"Where's the rest of her group?" I asked.

"They didn't get together until later," Mordecai said, "So they had different game guides. They'll come out scattered to the wind."

"Yikes," I said. "That sucks." I patted Donut on the head. I was about to say something about how it would suck if Donut and I got separated, but I thought better of saying that out loud.

Hekla emerged from the guild, and the program showed a spinning, 3D version of her new character. Her new race was Amazonian. She looked mostly the same, but she was a good foot taller than before and much wider. The pretty, blonde woman had been in good shape before. Now she looked like a professional bodybuilder. It didn't show her stats, but I could tell it was clearly a strength build with a good amount of dexterity, too.

A scrolling paragraph of text appeared, much too fast for me to read that explained her new class. She'd been allowed to pick an earth class, and she went with the obvious choice. Shieldmaiden.

"I couldn't read what it said," I groused.

"You're being forced to watch on a flat display," Mordecai said. "If you were using a standard view screen, you'd be able to grab that paragraph and pull it up. You'll be able to buy such a display for your private base later, but they're likely prohibitively expensive."

The next few groups were crawlers I didn't recognize, but who had picked odd races or classes, including a man who turned himself in a massive slug and a woman who turned herself into a four-armed, blue-skinned replica of the Hindu goddess Kali. The same woman picked an odd class called Kabaddi Raider.

"A few groups aren't done with their selection," the announcer said. "But it appears just about 80% of the crawlers have opted to remain human."

"That's way more than I thought it would be," I said. "I'm surprised."

"Not me," Donut said. "You humans were always a cocky bunch."

"You didn't change, either," I said.

"Of course not, Carl. Why would I stop being a cat?"

"It's usually around that percentage," Mordecai said. "Sometimes higher."

"Really?" I asked.

He nodded. "Whenever there's a poll of Syndicate citizens, the vast majority of them always say they'd change into something else if they were put in that situation. But the truth is, when people are *really* given the opportunity to be something else, and that change is real and permanent, most opt to stay the same. They get scared. Even if there's an obviously better choice, it's terrifying to take that leap. And if that something else is a *major* change, there's always a learning curve. Sometimes it's better to stay in familiar skin. Believe me, it can be a real mind bender to suddenly find yourself two feet taller or shorter. Or if you lose limbs, or worse, gain them."

"We're on!" Donut cried as we appeared on the screen. I was shown first. "Look, Mongo. Uncle Carl is on television." She pointed

up at the screen. Mongo looked and started bouncing up and down, waving his arms.

They played a brief history of the Primal race. They showed another human from many seasons ago who'd chosen the same race. They showed him flying through the air with white, wispy angel wings, wielding a massive sword made of lightning as he charged at a humanoid demon the size of a goddamned football stadium, standing knee-deep in a lake of fire.

"What the hell is that?" I said, watching the brief scene unfold. It faded away before the actual battle could start. The paragraph that explained what a Compensated Anarchist was appeared and disappeared.

"That, my boy, is a Divine Guardian, one of the behemoths of the 12th floor. A Country Boss. He is guarding a fire gate, an entrance to the 13th floor."

"Holy fuck," I said.

"Yeah," Mordecai said.

"Is that the guy who made it to the thirteenth floor?"

"No," Mordecai said. "But he was a famous crawler. He's from before my time. He died a minute later. The next time you're with your friend Odette, you should ask her about him."

"Shush," Donut said. "Talk after they show me!"

As they revealed Donut's selection process, I couldn't get the image of that Godzilla-sized monster out of my head. It was a literal kaiju. Sure, it was a country boss, second only to a level boss, but it was still only the 12th level. That was the floor Donut and I needed to get to if we wanted any sort of freedom. There were six levels after that. What sort of bosses would be down there? I thought of the rage elemental. They were regular mobs from the 13th floor. The thought of scaling up our power to that level in such a short amount of time seemed impossible.

The show ended with Lucia Mar's transformation. Her two rottweilers, as non-sapient pets, did not get the opportunity to change, so they remained dogs.

Lucia had chosen one of the oddest, most fucked-up races I'd seen so far.

"What the hell, kid," I said, watching the show, completely aghast at her choice. "Why?"

A Lajabless, it was called.

She'd grown from her young, street-kid appearance to a full-grown adult woman. As the 3D image spun, her face altered, from that of a great beauty to a skull-faced monstrosity. The announcer explained that she would spend half the day as a beautiful woman and the other half as lady Skeletor. While she was in her woman form, her magic ability was doubled. Spells cost half as much, but her strength was cut in half. While she was sporting her dia-de-holy-shit face, it was the opposite. Spells cost more, but she was twice as strong.

She also now walked with a limp. No more running on walls for her. Her right leg, and just her right leg, had transformed from a human limb to that of a hairy goat, complete with a cloven hoof.

As she emerged from the guildhall, clomping on her new leg, even her two dogs looked freaked out by the transformation.

"She looks like she smells really bad," Donut said.

"That race seems like a terrible idea," I said.

"Maybe," said Mordecai. "But she's likely the most powerful crawler in this game. There's probably a slew of hidden benefits in that racial choice that makes it worth it."

And then was her class choice. Again, I couldn't see what the details were. Just the name.

It was a triple class. A cleric, magic-user, warrior combo called a Black Inquisitor General.

"Wow," I said. "And I thought that kid was a scary mo-fo before."

The show ended, and a moment later the announcement came.

Welcome, again, Crawlers to the third floor!

There are still a few stragglers working on their class and race choices, and that's okay. The vast majority of you are out and about and just starting to learn about the wonders of the Over City. We welcome you to a Dungeon Crawler World tradition.

You all have made some wondrous and unique choices. Of the just under 700,000 crawlers who've made a decision,

we have seen almost 40,000 different class choices. Can you believe that? That is a record, and we are very proud to see such diversity.

A couple announcements regarding this third floor. While the bathroom penalties have been removed, we want to remind the crawlers that restrooms still populate this floor. In the villages you may find restrooms in any pub and in some shops. In the ruins, the toilets are just as prevalent as they were on the higher floors. Please do not force us to backtrack.

We are already seeing much interest in the sponsorship program. And while the program doesn't officially get underway until the fourth floor, potential sponsors now have the ability to put in early bids. Therefore, remember to be as entertaining as possible!

Finally, many of you are discovering new abilities and spells and wish to try them out. We urge you to do so. But this is just a general warning that any attempts of violence against non-combatant NPCs should be avoided. While this practice is technically not against the rules, the Borant corporation wishes to keep the citizenry as safe as possible. As a result, we have adjusted the experience counter for citizens down to zero. In addition, city guards have been given a slight boost in stats.

That's all for now. Get out there and kill, kill, kill!

"What's with the warning about the NPCs?" I asked.

"Who knows?" Mordecai said.

We spent some time talking about the day and some of the things Signet had said. She'd mentioned that Grimaldi had turned into something called a "Vinev," which led to a long, yawn-inducing conversation about plants and parasites and mind control. Mordecai counted on his fingers, giving me and Donut a long list of ways to deal with each kind of plant-based monster. This, apparently, was a subject of great interest to Mordecai.

"Now go rent a room and get some sleep," he eventually said as he handed back the pile of potions. He'd been showing us how to

combine certain potions to make them more potent and work more quickly. “I want you two up early. Tomorrow is going to be a big day.”

“What’re we doing?” Donut asked.

“Oh, it’s going to be amazing,” Mordecai said. “It’s going to be a day for the history books. It’ll be the first time you two do exactly what I tell you to do.”

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[8]

Time to level Collapse: 6 days, 23 hours.

Views: 998.3 Trillion
Followers: 16.5 Trillion
Favorites: 3 Trillion

I awakened to find a long message from Brandon just hovering in my field of vision. I put it aside for the moment while I let myself wake up. As usual, Donut had insisted we share a room. But instead of sleeping on my neck, she'd slept upon her newly-erected cat tree, which barely fit in the room. It'd taken me the better part of an hour to put it together using the paper instructions and provided Allen wrench. It seemed so surreal, so ridiculous to be completing such a mundane task in the middle of all this. But the tree was light, and we'd be able to store it and bring it out each night. While Donut slept on the top platform, Mongo curled up at the bottom. I also lit the cheap candle for her. It filled the small, rented room with the scent of home.

I watched Donut for a bit, and I could tell what she was doing. She wasn't really asleep. She was just closing her eyes and pretending that she was back home in her favorite spot. After some

time, I blew out the candle and went to sleep myself. When I woke up, Donut was back in her usual place on my neck, and Mongo had jumped onto my legs, sinking the whole bed in.

We'd also purchased a room for Mordecai, though when I wandered out to get breakfast, he was passed out at a round table with a still-full glass of something that smelled like mead. Gordo the Bopca was also passed out at the table, snoring so loud, it sounded like a chainsaw.

"Gordo, wake up! Wake up immediately!" Donut cried as we entered the main room. "I need my breakfast, and you need to brush me!"

"Hold yer horses, ye blowhard," Gordo said, sitting up. He wiped the drool off his face. He shook his head and mumbled something under his breath. "I need to freshen up a bit, and I'll get you fed, don't you worry. And you can brush yourself, princess."

"Well, I never," Donut said, looking appalled. She looked up at me expectantly. "Carl, do something."

"Mordecai teach you the finger-breaking trick?" I asked, sliding into a chair next to the still-asleep incubus.

"Finger breaking? No. He made me a potion," Gordo said. The short gnome stood and wiped himself off. "I told him I didn't quite feel myself since you two arrived, and he offered to mix me a draft using a few things behind my bar. Something that'll allow me to regain my dignity." He glared at Donut. "It's not right, taking advantage of me kind nature like that."

"This is an outrage!" Donut said as Gordo disappeared into the back. "Mordecai, I wish to speak with you. Wake up!"

"Where am I?" Mordecai said, sitting up. He looked about wildly. He settled when his eyes met mine. "Oh," he said. The incubus smelled like the floor of a biker bar. I got up to change seats, but Mordecai grabbed my arm, preventing me from moving.

"Do you always drink this much?" I said. "Why is it we're just seeing this now?"

"You're *my* manager, Mordecai," Donut said. "Why are you turning the help against me? Now who's going to brush my hair?"

Mordecai: Listen up both of you. Don't say anything out loud. I had to make him a potion that would knock him out so I could go into his kitchens and find the newsletter.

Carl: Newsletter?

Mordecai: Yes. Bopcas and shopkeepers don't have access to the feed, so they get a physical newsletter delivered after each recap episode. Once he passed out, I went into the back so I could read the brief. I also stole a few items for potions. I don't have an inventory like you do, so take this.

He pulled several items from his pockets and handed them to me under the table. I pulled them into my inventory without looking. Almost all of them were loose herbs.

Carl: Holy shit, Mordecai. Is that cheating?

Mordecai: Managers only have one rule. We can't engage in direct battle with mobs. Everything else is fair game.

Donut: YOU ARE LIKE A SPY. I KNEW YOU WOULDN'T BETRAY ME.

Carl: So, did you learn anything?

Mordecai: Yes. The brief is regional, and it warned of a potential major battle event happening in this area today or tonight. If they're taking the time to warn the Bopcas about it, then it's a big deal. It's likely related to your elite friend. So you two need to eat your breakfast and hightail it to that town, and never come back this way. No dawdling.

Carl: Okay.

"Don't forget to assign your stat points," Mordecai said as Gordo returned with what looked like a bowl of lumpy oatmeal. He plopped two bowls on the table.

"I did last night," I said. "I put all three points into strength."

Donut's magical brush appeared on the table in front of me. "You're going to have to do it," she said. I sighed and picked it up. I still needed to do my foot routine. While I brushed her, I pulled up the note from Brandon.

Brandon: Carl. You there, buddy? We were really happy to see you two on the recap tonight. I wanted to let you

know we're still dealing with selection. It's slow going. None of the residents can choose human, lest they remain in their current condition, and there is a lot of pushback. The ones with cognitive issues have to pick some really weird races in order to remain viable. I'll tell you all about it later. I stayed human. Chris and Imani did not. Most of the residents are still level one, but you would not believe the loot boxes they got for hitting the third floor without killing anything or dealing any damage. They all are getting Legendary Pacifist Boxes along with a ton of other ones. It's ridiculous how much magical gear we now have. Some of these bastards are going to be more powerful than Imani pretty soon. Anyway, Mistress Tiatha says we're likely pretty far from you now. I wanted to thank you again for your help. I hope we see each other again.

I sent him back a quick reply, asking him to stay safe. I contemplated telling him about Agatha, but I decided against it. I didn't want anything to do with that, and I feared putting it in writing would be a mistake. I also asked if he knew what Donut's new talent, Scutelliphily, was. Or if he knew what Cesta Punta was.

I also gave him a piece of advice, the same advice Odette had given us. If they weren't done yet, and somebody had that manager ability, he needed to talk them into choosing it. Despite Mordecai's raging alcoholism, I could already tell that benefit was the best chance we had at survival.

A half-hour later, Donut, Mongo, and I headed back out into the Over City ruins. The artificial sun had just risen, leaving long shadows throughout the wooden streets. Lazy wisps of smoke rose from random places throughout the city. The world smelled of sulfur and something else, something acrid, like an outboard motor that was burning too much oil. The air was cooler in the morning, though still warmer than the previous level. I took a deep breath of the smokey air. Mongo squeaked a few times, and Donut leaped to my shoulder.

I pulled up the first dungeon locator we came across to make sure I hadn't gotten myself turned around, and we turned toward

the skyfowl settlement. We had a good 30 kilometers to go.

"Look, the blood is all gone," Donut said as we passed a place where we'd killed a lemur the day before. Mongo had made a real mess of the body, splattering blood everywhere.

"Remember what Mordecai said? Every floor has a janitor mob. The rats, then the brindle grubs. We haven't seen the ones for this floor yet. They might only come out at night."

"Are we really going to do everything Mordecai says?" Donut said.

"Today we are," I said. "He may have some issues, but he knows what he's doing. He was right, and I was wrong yesterday. We should never have kicked up that hornet's nest. Especially now that we know how those elites work. We need to stay as far away from those assholes as…"

You have been stunned!
You have been paralyzed!
You have been rendered unconscious!
Why do you got to get killed? You ain't so little as mice.
I didn't bounce you hard.

My head felt as if a pickup truck had rolled over it. I groaned. Multiple, increasingly-frantic messages from Mordecai appeared in my vision. I mentally waved them away. I sat up, looking around frantically. I was in a darkened room. I'd been placed on a ratty, old couch that stank of mildew. I still had all of my equipment. My health was full.

Donut? Where's Donut?

My chest pulled with fear. *No, I don't want to be alone*.

"Donut?" I called. "Where are you?"

No answer.

Carl: Donut? Fuck, please answer me.

There was no answer. I pulled up my minimap, but I didn't see her at all. I couldn't see anything. But she was still there in the party

menu, which meant she was alive. Only slightly relieved, I called for her again, this time louder.

I heard something. A screech. It was distant, but it came from another room. The moment I heard it, an orange dot appeared on my map. Mongo. Mongo was still alive.

Calm down. Take a deep breath. Think about this for a moment.

What had happened? I tried to remember. We'd been walking and talking. We'd barely just hit the main road. I hadn't seen anything. Mongo hadn't warned us of the attack. I'd been stunned, then paralyzed, then knocked out.

The AI seemed to think I was about to die. It'd read a quote from *Of Mice and Men*. As a kid, I'd had to read that damn book three times in school, as a result of constantly moving around. Later, as an adult, I'd kept a copy with me in my bunk. I'd read it over and over. It was one of my favorite books, not because I liked the story but because it felt so familiar to me, like comfort food. It was kind of a fucked-up scene for the AI to quote, but it almost felt like it was supposed to be soothing.

Carl: Mordecai, I just woke up. I don't know what happened. I don't know where Donut is. I don't know where I am.

Mordecai: Oh thank the gods. Are you tied up? In a cage? In a web?

Carl: I'm on a couch. I'm not tied up, and I still have all my stuff. It's dark in here, though. I can't see anything.

Mordecai: Okay. I can see Donut is alive. I can't see where she is. If you just awakened now, she'll probably wake soon. You'll see her on your map when she does as long as she's not too far. Spend a few minutes looking around, gather all the info you can, and tell me what you see.

The level countdown had gone down significantly. I calculated in my head. I'd been unconscious for fifteen hours. Holy shit. It was a kick in the teeth. Even if I somehow got out of this, whatever the hell this was, I'd lost fifteen fucking hours. When every second counted, that was a serious setback.

I checked my notifications to see if there were any clues. I'd received three achievements. One for getting stunned, a second for getting paralyzed, and a third:

New achievement! Lazarus!

You have been hit with—and survived—an offensive spell that was higher than level 15. The fact you are not a quivering stain of meat on the dungeon floor right now is testament to your sheer luck. It's either that or you're banging the producer.

***Reward*: You've received a Platinum Lucky Bastard Box!**

It didn't tell me what the spell was, but the moment I read it, I was certain I knew who had cast it.

"Signet," I said. "Are you here?"

"You hurt my feelings," she said, whispering in my ear. I felt a warm hand on my upper leg, between my boxers and kneepads.

"Fuck," I said, practically jumping out of my skin. Her firm, strong hand held me in place. Had she been next to me the whole time? Goosebumps crawled across my skin.

"You called me an asshole," she continued. She practically bit at my ear. Her breath was hot on my neck. I tried not to shiver. She was level 60. If she wanted me dead, there would be nothing I could do about it. "You were leaving. You had promised me you would come back."

"Where is Donut?" I said.

"She is safe. Don't you worry. I even saved that little dinosaur of hers. Your friend is still asleep and will remain asleep."

"I want to see her," I said.

"Of course, of course," Signet said. "We shall see her on the way out."

"I'm not going anywhere without Donut," I said.

"You will do exactly as I say," Signet said. "I followed you and your pet this morning. I wanted to see if you would abide by your promise. You lied to me, Carl. I was tempted to just melt the both of you right then. But I can be forgiving. I have a forgiving nature. My mother was a naiad, and she taught me that grace should always be observed, even in the face of betrayal."

"Your mother sounds very smart," I said. "But I will be grabbing my cat, and we will be leaving now."

Her hand remained on my knee in the dark room. I felt her palm rustle unnaturally as something moved by just under her skin. "Like I said, your cat is asleep. My mother taught me more than just grace. She taught me magic. Heirloom magic, which is the strongest. The spell is called *Water Lily*. Isn't it a beautiful name? She was a princess, once. My mother, I mean. Before the confederacy usurped the crown. I would be tsarina were I full-blooded. I told this to Grimaldi, once. He changed my name to Tsarina Signet after that."

Holy shit, this bitch was crazy. "What does the *Water Lily* spell do?"

"It puts you to sleep, of course," she said. "And you don't wake up until I cancel the spell. If I die, she dies, too."

A new wave of fear swept over me. "What do you want me to do?"

She smiled. "Just fulfill your promise. That is all."

"I promised you we would help you assault the circus. I can't do that without Donut."

"You're going to have to try. This is my deal. My grace. This is how you win back your life."

Shit.

The bottom floor of Signet's building was an empty shell with broken walls on three of the four sides. Outside, the sun had made a full journey across the sky. It sank now behind the distant buildings. Donut lay asleep in the middle of the room, placed upon a rotting, cushioned chair. It was the only thing in the room other than a large cage containing Mongo, who hopped up and down and screeched at my approach.

"Donut!" I cried, rushing up to the cat. I went to a knee and stroked her soft fur. I remembered brushing it earlier. It was hard to

look at her like this. *She's so small, so vulnerable*. She had **Unconscious** hovering over her body.

I reached over and opened up Mongo's cage. The dinosaur jumped onto the chair and pushed his head questioningly against the cat, who did not wake up. He let out a worried screech.

Signet stood nearby, her hands clasped in front of her. Her small, bare breasts would've been a distraction at any other time, even with her ghastly face. Her tattoos seemed to congregate on her body, facing whatever direction I was in, all of them staring at me intently.

"We can't leave Donut here," I said, looking about the room. We were practically outside. Any wandering mob would find her. I worried about the janitor mob, whatever it might be.

"She will remain," Signet said.

"No. Fuck you," I said. I reached to pick her up. A health bar appeared the moment I lifted her. It started quickly falling.

"Carl. I would return her immediately to her place. A water lily must not be removed, lest it die."

I quickly put her limp body back in the chair. The bar stopped moving down. A moment later, and it began to ease its way up.

"Come, Carl. It is almost time for me to cast my summoning. We have much to prepare before the assault."

"Just a minute," I said. "Watch out, Mongo." I started pulling the last of the redoubt pieces from my inventory. I had multiple pieces of wood and metal in my pack. I erected an ugly, quick and dirty shelter around the cat, like a pyramid. I worked as quickly as I could.

"Carl," Signet said. "Now."

"Jesus, you're worse than Bea," I said as I put the last piece in place. The obstacle wouldn't protect Donut from a determined mob, but this was better than nothing. Mongo jumped to the top of the neck-high, haphazard pyramid. He looked down through the jagged hole in the top and then back at me.

I put my hand against the side of the dinosaur's head. He was still small, but at level six, he was now bigger than Donut. "I don't know if you understand me, but you have to stay here, and you

have to protect her. It's the most important thing you've ever had to do. I gotta go now, but I will be back. Do you understand?"

Mongo screeched, looked down at Donut through the hole in the top of the pile of crap and screeched again.

I turned and followed Signet out the door. I was giving Mordecai a running commentary of everything that was happening. I had a plan. A loose plan I'd formulated on the fly. But I couldn't do it on my own. I asked him what he thought, and he told me I was batshit crazy. I took that as a good sign.

Carl: Zev, are you there?

Zev: Hi, Carl. I'm watching. The whole universe is watching. We're all rooting for you.

Carl: That's what I'm hoping for. I need your help.

Zev: You know I can't interfere.

Carl: No, not like that.

I explained what I wanted her to do. She told me it was impossible. I told her to try anyway.

"I'm sorry it came to this, Carl," Signet was saying as we walked. "You surprised me yesterday when you survived. I won't make that mistake today."

"Why are we doing this, Signet? Why do you attack the circus every day?"

"Of the entire crew, I was the only one who made it through the attack without being altered by the poisonous cloud. And the one who got the worst of it was Grimaldi."

"Grimaldi? So the guy who owns the circus? Last night you said you loved him."

"I do love him. He is the love of my life. He saved me when I was a child. He took me in when nobody else would. He protected me from the high elves, took me from the Hunting Grounds, gave me a life. But most importantly, he gave me a family. As I became an adult, I grew to love him as more than just a father. We were going to share our lives together."

"So, what happened?"

"You have to understand how horrible it was, the cataclysm. Scolopendra's poison cloud was a Nine Tier attack. It attacked you in

nine different ways. The lucky ones simply died. The others were transformed, all in different ways."

This was the second time I'd heard that name, Scolopendra. It sounded like this was the monster at the bottom of the volcano. I filed that information away.

She continued. "Grimaldi was more than just the owner. He was also the circus's ringleader. We were nearing the end of a show when the cataclysm came. He stood in the middle of the center ring. The others were all out there, taking their bow." Signet took a deep breath. "He transformed into the vine. All the others in the tent, no matter how they transformed, were soon infected with the mold-covered parasites. This put them under Grimaldi's control. The lemurs, the clowns, almost everyone. They do as he says. And if they die, the spores return to the vine, and they are reborn the next day."

"And that's why you attack the circus every day? Why did you survive and the others did not?"

She didn't answer my question. "Last night I cast my spell, expecting you to perish. Tonight, I am putting my faith in you. You will have to be the one to defeat the sacrifice. I have captured Heather multiple times, but always for the purpose of killing the sacrifice. I have yet to use her blood to summon my team. I am trusting you tonight to kill Heather. While her blood won't be as powerful as yours, it'll be some of the most potent blood I've used."

We rounded a corner and stopped. Lying asleep in the middle of the road was an unconscious… *something*. She was under the same *Water Lily* spell as Donut.

"That's Heather?" I asked, feeling sick.

"Yes."

"And you want me to kill her so you can take her blood and summon your people?"

"Yes, again."

I stepped forward. "Okay. Cast your spell before she wakes up. I'll kill her now."

"It doesn't work that way, Carl. I can't influence the battle, or the spell doesn't work."

"That's the stupidest shit I've ever heard."

"If it wasn't like that, I would've just killed you last night."

I swallowed. I examined "Heather."

It—she—appeared to have once been a black bear. She wore a tattered, pink clown hat and a pleated, clown ruff around her neck, both of which appeared to be physically attached to her body. Like the lemurs, she had no skin on her face. Above her neck was nothing but exposed skull and a pair of round, red eyes.

The horrors didn't stop there. Her two front paws had been transformed to white worms, like her claws had been replaced with mops. These were different than the worms that made up the lions' mane. Even in sleep, they moved and undulated. I felt my gorge rise at the sight.

But most absurd of all was the bear's two back legs, which had a pair of roller skates attached to them. She also wore a pink tutu.

Signet took a step back. "Okay, Carl. She's going to wake up, and I will cast my summoning spell. Then you go kill her."

Admin Note: Boss Battles that arise concurrently with secondary productions or as parts of a Quest may present themselves differently. You will still receive awards commensurate with the boss's proper rank. If you survive, of course.

"Oh fuck," I said.

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[9]

THE USUAL MUSIC AND BOMBASTIC, OVER-THE-LOUDSPEAKER ANNOUNCEMENT never came. The system was treating this just like a regular mob. But this clearly wasn't just any old monster.

Heather the Bear!

Level 19 Neighborhood Boss!

Performing since she was a cub, Heather the Roller-Skating Bear was one of the longest-running attractions at Grimaldi's Traveling Circus. Her retirement had been only weeks away when the cataclysm hit. Now the tired, old bear has been transformed into a monstrosity, barely recognizable from her former self. She lives out her days as a hunter for the circus, seeking out juicy mobs and unsuspecting crawlers. She finds and incapacitates her prey using her overwhelming speed and strength. Then she drags her quarry back to the circus so the clowns may feed.

Somewhere in there, deep, deep down, there is a spark of the old Heather. The beloved bear has moments of lucidity as she runs down her terrified prey. In those brief moments, she thinks: *Good. I've always hated all you assholes, anyway*.

Unlike most boss battles, it didn't appear that I was locked into the area. But I couldn't run, could I? I looked wildly about. Behind me was a large intersection. A two-story building sat at each corner. It was already too dark for me to see inside.

Carl: Mordecai. Boss battle. Level 19 black bear with worms for claws and roller skates for feet. Tips?

Mordecai: Roller skates? Like those little shoes with wheels on them? Are you serious?

Carl: Yes, I'm fucking serious!

Mordecai: Male or female?

Carl: Female.

Mordecai: Shit. Okay. What about your *Protective Shell*? Has that reset yet?

Carl: Yes. It did about 15 minutes ago.

Mordecai: Black bears are the smallest of the bears, but they are faster and stronger than they look. Female bears are much smarter than the male ones. I don't know what the worm claws mean. Don't let her hug you. Use your shell.

Heather roared and stood to her full height, balancing on her two legs as she spread her two upper arms out.

"Fuck me," I said, scrambling back. I'd seen plenty of black bears in my life, and they usually weren't that big, most no larger than big dogs. Heather was an exception. She was *huge*. On her roller skates, she stood about eight feet tall. The pink clown hat sat cockeyed on her skull head. I could see where the cone of the hat was fused directly to the bone, like she was some sort of fucked-up bearicorn.

The worm claws came to life, dozens of little appendages wriggling and undulating.

…And growing longer and longer. The bone-white worms appeared to glow in the fading light as they spread to the ground, like pasta being made directly from the bear's hands. As the swirling worms fell, I caught glints of actual bear claws at the ends of the paws.

Holy shit, I thought. *That's really fucking gross*.

Where the hell was Signet? I looked about for the elite. My eyes caught movement, and I spied her through a hole in a building across the intersection. She was on the second floor, and her arms were raised like they'd been yesterday. Her strange tattoos twirled about her body the same as before.

I sensed the movement before I saw it. I'd only looked over my shoulder for a second, but the bear had halved the distance between us. She sailed across the wooden slats on her roller skates, gliding at me. The well-oiled skates made a *whisk, whisk, whisk* noise across the ground. She whipped her arm back as I twisted, pulling a pair of smoke bombs from my inventory and tossing them at my feet. I pulled two more as I started to run. I'd learned my lesson the other day not to use just one of these things.

Too slow. Heather swiped from fifteen feet away. The worms swept at me like a whip before I'd even realized what the hell was happening. Dozens of worms rushed at me, slapping into me, and wrapping around me three quick times like a damn tetherball. The wet, cold ends of the worms hit the exposed skin of my upper legs, and I felt them start to burrow into my body. *I need pants. I really fucking need pants*. It felt like knives going into my skin.

Yes, yes, this is new flesh. Primal flesh. Delicious flesh.

Strong he is. Do we taste this? He will feed our clowns well.

The clowns hunger, Primal. They are ravenous. And now they know of your flavor.

I smashed down on *Protective Shell* as the smoke started to billow from the smoke bombs. The worms severed off the bear, cutting them in half and killing them. The ends half-burrowed into my skin dropped away. The bear, which had been almost on top of me, rocketed back, hitting the ground and rolling away. I'd blown it a good fifty feet back.

What the hell was that?

The worm things had entered my skin and immediately started talking in my mind. The words had come all at once, piling on top of one another. I couldn't tell if it was one voice or a thousand voices. Male or female. It'd felt as if someone had taken their dirty fingers, sunk them directly into the meat of my brain, and dragged.

Fuck no. Fuck that. I would die before I let that happen again. I jumped into action.

I rushed at the fallen bear, leaving the protection of the shield behind. I pulled nuts and bolts and barbells from my inventory as I ran, scattering them on the ground.

I was too close for a boom jar or a stick of dynamite. Instead, I pulled a regular jug of moonshine and tossed it at the bear as hard as I could. The jug shattered against the bear's head. I'd thrown it significantly harder than I'd expected or anticipated. *Wow*. Even with my enhanced strength, I hadn't been expecting the sheer violence of the toss. I skidded to a stop.

A health bar finally appeared as Heather screamed in rage. Moonshine splashed over the bear, who remained on her back, struggling. The pungent stench filled the intersection. The puddle highlighted itself in my vision, and the word **Flammable Liquid** appeared floating over it. *That's new*, I thought as I pulled a torch, lit it, and tossed it at the bear.

I didn't wait to see what happened next. I turned and ran toward the still-billowing smoke plume. Like last time, it was an irritatingly-narrow cone of smoke despite the multiple bombs. It'd caught in the wind, swelling away from the bear. But the smoke cone was just wide enough to hide within.

Whoosh.

I felt the heat of the moonshine igniting. I ran into the smoke and turned in time to see the bear pulling herself to her feet, her entire body aflame. The red and blue flames rose into the night air. The billowing fire partially obscured Heather's health bar. It moved down, but at a crawl. It wasn't even in the red yet.

The on-fire bear shrieked and started roller skating at me. *Whisk, whisk, whisk*.

Now, if you've never had a flaming, skull-faced bear on roller skates barreling at you full speed, you don't know what you're missing.

She stumbled and fell, tripping over a dumbbell. When she rose again, half of her skin and fur remained on the ground, revealing an exposed ribcage, filled completely with worms, like a knot of ramen noodles. The worms burst forth from the flames, reaching every which way.

For fuck's sake.

I'd been saving it for a dire situation, and I pulled it out now. The scratcher lottery ticket I'd received from that Lucky Bastard box.

Fireball or Custard. I had a fifty/fifty chance. It would either fire a level-15 fireball, which would probably kill it immediately. Or it would splatter the thing with strawberry custard, which would heal it.

I awkwardly held the paper ticket in my left hand as I scratched off one of the five spots, revealing a little spinning circle. The tiny icon flashed back and forth from a red fireball to a pink glob. The skating boss was nothing but a skeleton now. Only the hat and the roller skates remained on fire. Even the round, bulbous eyes were gone. A mass of worms covered the skeleton, as if it was wrapped in yarn.

The health bar was only half gone.

Hiding in the smoke seemed to do nothing. The arm whipped back once again.

The spinning icon on the ticket stopped.

Custard. Yummy!

The voice said it out loud, deep and bass heavy, like it was the announcer dude from that goddamned *Candy Crush* game. I had a sudden, inexplicable memory of Bea playing that game on her phone with the volume turned all the way up while I was trying to watch TV.

"Mother fuck!" I cried, jumping back as the beachball-sized custard ball burst forth and splattered against the bear, who staggered and—once again—fell on its back.

The skeletal bear roared in pain as custard boiled against her skin. Her skin and fur reformed over her body, spreading across her frame in odd, jerky clumps, like a stop-motion film. The bear struggled upward again. The damn thing was like the Terminator. Her health bar started to ease back up.

But something had changed. The roller skates fell off the bear's feet as she struggled. So did the hat. Both dissipated into dust. The skin on the bear's face formed. She did not stand as she had before, but remained on all fours like a normal bear. Her tattered, black fur held a silver sheen, especially evident around her muzzle.

By healing it, I'd killed the worms. The bear let out a howl, mournful and afraid. She sat down and lowered herself painfully to the ground. The last of the boiling custard sizzled away. The bear

looked at me, all of the fight out of her. This was Heather, the real Heather, free of the parasites that'd been controlling her. She looked at me with her newly-formed eyes.

End it, those bitter eyes said. *I should never have lived this long*. She made a quick, pained whimper, and her eyes closed.

I approached the bear. I kept a wary eye on her claws, looking for any sign of a trick. The bear sighed heavily as I approached. Her health bar, which had moved to the top was now falling again on its own. Without the worms and mold or whatever the hell magic was keeping this thing alive, her body was breaking down fast. This elderly bear, Heather, was not who I'd just fought. Not really. She was just the shell.

I was tempted to just let her die on her own. But only for a moment. I formed a fist, and I smashed her head in with two quick punches. Then I stood, and I finished her off by pressing my foot against her skull and crushing. Her skull caved in easily.

Winner! Appeared in my interface. That was the only indication I'd just finished a boss battle. A few achievements came and went into the folder. I'd gone up to level 15. I was pushing 16 already. Donut was going to be pissed.

The bear's body shuddered. A line of red rose from the corpse, even through the flames. The blood flew through the air, angling upward toward Signet's now-glowing body.

Mordecai: Congrats. You just won your first solo boss battle.

A black, crackling shell of smoke surrounded the building where Signet cast her spell. Mordecai said he knew exactly what spell this was, and it'd likely take a good ten minutes for it to finish. In the meantime, I figured I'd better stay the hell away and just let it happen.

Carl: Not gonna lie. I'm surprised. I thought for sure she wanted me to die and that she'd cast that sacrifice spell on me again.

Mordecai: She probably did. Like I said, the system lets them fudge with reality when you're dealing with elites. Which is why we stay away from them. Have you heard back from Zev yet?

Carl: No. Donut is still okay?

Mordecai: Yes. I get a warning when her health is down to 20 percent, but that's all I have. Her status hasn't changed.

Carl: Did you learn anything for me?

Mordecai: I visited my old friend Eklund. He's the only game guide in this town I know. He's too smart for his own good, unfortunately. I couldn't get him to look up the cure for the Water Lily curse, but I am headed to the town alchemist now to see if he has a clue. Eklund did, however, tell me the name of the program.

Carl: And?

Mordecai: I think your hunch is correct. It's called *Vengeance of the Daughter*.

Carl: Oh, thank god. Okay. Thanks, Mordecai. Keep looking.

I looted the remains of the dead, bloodless bear. Like with any other neighborhood boss, I received a map upgrade. I grabbed it, and the neighborhood came alive with dots. At this distance, I couldn't see Mongo and Donut, but I could see the entirety of the circus a few streets over. Hundreds of red dots surrounded the edges of the circus like before, waiting. In addition, dozens of other red dots spread around the map, some of them moving, some sitting still. These were the night denizens of the ruins, and I needed to stay away from them all.

A group of white dots centered around Signet. As I watched, another appeared. Then another.

I felt a stab of concern. While it was a lot—there had to be at least thirty of them—it wasn't nearly enough to take on the sheer numbers of that circus.

The smoke cleared, and just as it faded, Signet appeared, followed by her summoned minions.

"Wow," I said, taking in the sight. I took a step back, almost tripping over the splattered remains of the dead bear. I didn't know whether to be in awe, to laugh, or to cry. *I am so fucked.*

The smallest of the monsters, a floating head thing, was about ten feet tall. The largest, a twisting, undulating sea serpent, was as tall as a three-story building. The three-headed ogre was the second largest of the motley collection, wielding an enormous saber. He stood behind Signet as she approached me. The ogre crossed his arms, and his saber caught the wind, flapping.

The others crowded into the intersection and flowed into the streets around us. A hammerhead shark floated in the air above me.

"Can these things actually fight?" I asked as Signet came to stand before me.

The tattoos were all gone from her skin. Her white flesh glowed, her nakedness starker now that her only adornment was the thong. I detected a very slight blue shimmer to her skin, almost as if she was covered with very fine scales, too small to see with the naked eye. Her face, without the constant, swirling lines, was easier to discern. While still strange-looking, Signet wasn't nearly as repugnant as usual. Now I could see the half sea creature that she was. But I only had a moment to ruminate over her appearance. My attention was focused on the "army" that towered behind her.

While all the tattoo monsters were huge and fearsome, they were not what I expected. Not at all. They were still… tattoos. Drawings. While absolutely huge, the monsters were barely three dimensional. Reverse Shrinky Dinks. Each one was like a paper cutout of a monster, blown up to massive proportions and then cut out with scissors and left to flap in the wind.

Every one of them was a deep red outline, with a white, translucent substance between the lines, like wax paper or maybe onion skin. The backside of the paper monsters was blank. I had the sense I could easily punch through each one. If I looked upon them at any direction other than straight on, I could see them for what they were. A paper army. The monsters moved and blinked and roared, but all of it was confined to the plane on which they had been drawn.

I examined the three-headed ogre:

Blood and Ink Elemental – Summoned Minion of Tsarina Signet – Level 50

Created by a combination of sacrificial blood magic and an artist's imagination, these short-lived elementals vary wildly in their strength and abilities. Their potential relies heavily on too many factors to list here. Kind of like humans. If you have to guess, odds are good the one you're looking at right now is probably hot garbage.

"Of course, they can fight," Signet said. "Do you think Grimaldi would prepare such a defense each night for something other than a real threat? Now we must hurry. Heather's blood was powerful indeed. I have summoned my entire retinue, but I decreased their longevity in exchange for more strength. We have but a short amount of time."

How can paper fight? I wanted to demand, but Signet strode forward before I could ask. As she walked away, I caught sight of one last tattoo on her shoulder blade. It was of a tiny figure, too small for me to see clearly. It was a fish of some kind. The tattoo faded away, like a sea creature diving under the waves.

The monsters rustled past me, marching and floating toward the circus. The long, sea-serpent monsters floated sideways, so they always faced the circus. I remained, gawking up at the menagerie. The three-headed ogre turned, his entire body folding over as he glared down at me. "Follow or you get the smash," the middle head said in a deep, rumbly voice.

"You can talk!" I exclaimed.

"I can smash, too," he said.

I followed. I ran to catch up to Signet, who strolled toward the circus as if she didn't have a care in the world.

"I honestly don't know what the hell you want me to do here," I said. "I've never participated in anything like this. I have shitty armor and all I do is punch stuff."

"You are more than that. I believe you actually freed Heather tonight. For two centuries, she's been caught in that loop, and you freed her. She was a grumpy old bear, and I told Grimaldi more than

once that she was going to snap and try to eat a spectator if we didn't retire her soon. But she was family, and you freed her. Thank you."

"Yeah, thanks for the warning, by the way," I said. "That was a one-on-one fight. I won't be able to pull any fancy tricks in a giant battle."

"Just don't die," she said. "We usually push through the defenders, and this is the strongest we've been in a while. It's the final defense I need help with."

"There's like a thousand of them!" I said.

I pinged Mordecai, and told him everything. I told him I didn't think these elemental things were a real threat.

Mordecai: Don't worry about that. If they're as big and as numerous as you describe, it means her skill in that spell is likely over 15. They can fight. They're gonna put on a hell of a show.

Carl: What is that spell anyway?

Mordecai: *Ink Marauder*. You draw something on paper, cast the blood sacrifice, and it animates the drawings. Certain classes can tattoo the monsters upon themselves. By doing it that way, her own blood powers the minions, keeping them alive on her flesh. They can leave her body when she casts the sacrifice spell. They take on a 2D appearance, but it's been long rumored that certain sacrifices can lead to the minions being complete, fully-realized renditions of the monsters they depict. Assuming that is her most powerful spell, I don't see the producers allowing her to blow that wad this early in the story.

A distant cry filled the night, followed by the *thwump* of a magical mortar. The projectile sailed into the night sky, bouncing off the ceiling into a neighborhood one street over. More mortars started raining down. I tried to stick as close to Miss Plot Armor as possible.

The floating head and several dragons circled around us, moving ahead. One of the elementals—an octopus—caught a mortar round directly in the chest and burst into flames. If Signet was controlling these things, she wasn't doing it out loud. Dark shadows filled the

air. Lemurs, I realized, seeing the dots on the minimap. They were being flung by the artillery giraffes. I could hear the distinctive roar of mold lions, as well. They moved fast, streaking down one street over as paper monsters moved to intercept.

We were only one block from the circus now. The haunting calliope music rose into the night, mixing in with the roar of the lemurs and clowns. More lemurs burst into the air, this time aimed directly at us.

The ogre leaped forward, sailing over the top of me and Signet, and landing on the ground. All I could now see was the back of the flat elemental. He swung his paper saber in the air at the line of lemurs.

Dozens of the skull-headed monsters screamed as they were flung away, but a moment later, I heard the *thwap, thwap thwap* of knives embedding themselves into the giant ogre. Despite the paper appearance, the knives slammed into the elemental like he was made of plywood. He took no heed of the damage. He swung again. And by swung, I mean his paper arm folded over on its own and kind of waved at the mobs.

There was something I was missing about the ogre's attacks. He'd swing, clearly miss, and yet dozens of lemurs would fly away. He had some sort of area attack I couldn't see from behind.

I did, however, see the eel's lightning attack. A pair of long moray eel-like creatures swept down and shot lighting from their mouths, turning the red dots of mold lions into X's.

Next to me, Signet fired a yellow bolt into the air from the palm of her hand. It arced over the shoulder of the ogre and hit something distant. Dozens of voices cried out in pain. Behind me, an entire building exploded as the mortar fire resumed.

"Jesus Christ, lady," I said, ducking. "You do this shit every night?"

She fired two more of the arcing, yellow bolts. "This is what you do for family," she said.

Mordecai: I know the recipe now. It's just Satch Toad extract mixed with a standard healing potion. I should have known. Negates all naiad sleep effects and curses. Simple.

Carl: Do you have any of that stuff?

Mordecai: Not in this town. But it's common enough. I can buy it at the alchemical market in a medium or large town.

Fuck. That wasn't going to help us now.

Carl: Okay. Plan B it is.

I dove to the ground as another building exploded. We were only fifty meters from the picket, and the clowns were starting to throw rocks at us. The largest of the serpents swept down and exhaled a stream of water, blasting hundreds of clowns and lemurs in all directions. I dove behind a low wall as more mortar fire sailed overhead. A shark twisted through the air above me, howling as it burned.

Carl: Zev. You talked to them yet?

Zev: I messaged the producer, but he didn't want to speak with me. He's waiting to see how this plays out, I think. My boss made me run your request by the Syndicate AI referee, and it said they'll only allow this under very strict circumstances. I can't, and they can't, give you any help whatsoever. Believe it or not, though, this isn't the first time this sort of thing has happened. In fact…

Carl: Later, Zev. Stay tuned. I'll need you in a bit.

Despite my earlier reservations, the clowns and circus creatures were no match for the tattoo monsters. The defenders soon fled, falling back to the massive, triple tent. The ogre elemental swiped his saber and the defensive wall shattered. Hundreds of lemurs and clowns and the thin mortar acrobats lay dead. It'd happened so fast. My entire map was awash in X's.

There were still hundreds of the monsters left, but they were all now inside the main tent. The paper army flapped their way onto the circus ground, pushing through the barbed wire fortifications like they were nothing, surrounding the massive pavilions. All of the secondary tents, including the freak show tent, soon fell. I noted the elementals were simply pushing the small tents over, as if they were being careful not to tear the fabric. All that remained was the big top. Only a few of the elementals had been destroyed. An octopus

tattoo had returned to Signet's skin, along with a few of the sharks. They swished about angrily.

The music was coming from a large, coach-sized contraption sitting just outside the big top. Steam rose from the humming, spitting instrument. The long, brass tubes hissed out the slow-motion music. The ogre moved to smash the machine, but Signet raised her hand.

"This music hurts my heads," the knife-riddled monster groused.

"I know," Signet said, "we go over this every time." She stepped forward and turned a dial on the machine. It wheezed once and the music stopped, plunging the night into silence. She lovingly stroked the fire-scorched wood.

Signet then pointed up at the giant sea serpent, which floated in the sky above the brightly-lit tent. The circus's spotlights remained lit, and they arced back and forth, adding to the surreal vision. The behemoth was almost as large as the center big top. The tattoo monster folded back on itself and then fired a blue waterspout. I cringed in anticipation, but the water dissipated before it could touch the colorful top. The world around me filled with a fine mist, and I suddenly found myself soaked.

Signet hung her head low. "Damn," she said. "Damn, damn, damn. I'd hoped, with the power of Heather's blood that we could overcome the protection this time."

"Why didn't that work?" I asked. In the distance, something howled in the night.

"This is where our fight usually ends," Signet said, indicating the tent. "There is magic here, protecting the exterior. Ancient magic. I have been banished, so I can't go inside. My minions can't go inside. The outside is impenetrable, but not the interior. If we break down the tents, the spell will disperse, and we can finish this." She pointed at the piles of dead bodies. "Some of these clowns will carry big top tickets. Find one and brandish it. It will allow you to go inside. The tickets are magical. They will promise you safe passage within the tent as long as you don't enter one of the three rings. You need to go in there and collapse the tent. There are three poles. You must break each one in turn."

I looked at the tent dubiously. "I take it these three poles are in the middle of the rings?"

"That's right," she said.

"What about the vine thing?" I asked.

"Also in the ring. The center ring."

This setup was designed to be completed by a group of at least three crawlers, not a solo player. There was no feasible way I could do this. Not with a straight-up fight.

I pulled one of the tickets I already had from my inventory. I'd already examined it, but I looked at it again.

Big Top Ticket.

Lucky you! This ticket admits one adult into the Grimaldi's Traveling Circus Big Top Show.

The holder of this ticket is guaranteed Safe Passage through the public areas only. *Grimaldi reserves the right to rescind this safe passage guarantee to drunks and purveyors of violence.*

Guaranteed good time or your money back!

Something told me I wasn't going to be having a good time.

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[10]

I HELD THE CIRCUS TICKET TIGHTLY IN MY HAND AS I APPROACHED THE MAIN entrance. This close to the big top tent, I could see the effects of time on the fabric and the rest of the circus. The red carpet below my feet was threadbare and stained with blood. The tent sidewalls were also stained and filled with tiny holes. Another few years, and Signet wouldn't need a magical army to knock this place down.

"You must hurry," Signet said. "We only have thirty minutes before the battle squad fades."

"If I die, you need to promise to let Donut free," I said.

"It will be done," she said.

The entranceway was shaped like a giant clown face, and I had to walk straight into the clown's mouth. Time had faded the clown's pupils, making the eyes completely white. *I hate clowns*, I thought. I *really hate clowns*. *Whoever invented these things needs to be punched in the face.*

I had to proceed through a short, curving tunnel. Music once again rose, coming from deep within the tent. This song was faster and happier, more in the style of traditional circus music. My minimap was a sea of red dots, including one right around the corner. *Oh fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck*, I kept thinking as I inched my way forward. I held the ticket out in front of me.

I turned the corner, and I stood face-to-face with one of the round clowns. The thing was shorter than me, but almost three times as wide. He wore a brightly colored, but filthy pink and blue

gown with a dirty white ruffle around his neck. The gown cascaded over his lumpy, misshapen body. Unlike the stilt clowns, which only had shark-like mouths, this thing had a much more human face, but with pointed teeth. The white, red, and blue grease paint seemed overly thick, like the frosting on a cake. The clown's stomach made a rumbling noise, and his entire belly shifted, like his flesh was alive.

The stilt clowns were armed with butcher knives. These guys just had long, yellowed fingernails, like the claws of a badger.

Clammy the Clown – Level 9

With a face not even a mother could love, the circus was the perfect escape for the young, portly boy who would grow to become Clammy the Clown. An expert at tumbling and with a solid work ethic, Clammy was a perfect addition to Grimaldi's family.

Kids always love the fat clowns. They're jolly. They're happy. They make you laugh. The resurrected Clammy clones still exhibit all of these qualities. Except, perhaps, the making you laugh part. They sure are happy and jolly when they're eating you, though.

The clown hissed at me, but I held up the ticket, brandishing it like a shield. The enormously fat clown leaned in and sniffed the ticket, like I was holding a treat up to a dog. He hissed again, blasting me with the stench of raw meat. But he stepped aside and allowed me to pass.

And thus I entered the main arena of Grimaldi's big top.

As a kid, one of my earliest memories was going to the circus with my mom on my fourth birthday. She'd temporarily left my dad and run away to her parent's' house all the way down in the middle-of-nowhere southern Texas, dragging me along.

It was during that time she'd taken me to the circus. It hadn't been one of the major traveling circuses, like Ringling Brothers, but a small, ghetto one. Anyone who has ever lived in the American southwest knows exactly what I'm talking about. Even little kid me had registered that this was a low-rent version of the real deal.

They'd had clowns and acrobats, plus a bunch of other weird attractions, like guys on motorcycles riding around the inside of a sphere and women juggling chainsaws. They'd also had animals. I remembered camels and dancing poodles, and a clown who walked around with a small monkey on his shoulder. They hadn't elephants or giraffes, but the main attraction had been a crusty old tiger who'd sat in the middle of the ring while a woman in a leotard twirled fire sticks around it.

Most of these memories came back to me, years later, from photos. I'd found the shoebox with those pictures more than a decade later, hidden under my parents' bed. This was after another birthday of mine, the one when I was left alone in the world. The box had been my mother's. Her secret, filled to the brim with photographs and ticket stubs and a deflated balloon. The items were only of that time, the few weeks of our lives when she'd run away.

But of all my patchy, incomplete recollections of the circus, there was one characteristic of that day I will never forget.

The smell.

It was unlike anything I'd ever experienced. It was the scent of peanuts and cotton candy and roasting corn and hay and animal musk and cheap, plastic toys all rolled into one. But it was more than that. My four-year-old mind couldn't possibly register it at the time, but it was the scent of happiness, of joy, of being a kid, of not being afraid. Over the years I'd catch similar scents in places such as the county fair, or carnivals, or whenever I visited a place with livestock. But this was a different, oddly specific aroma that had been indelibly imprinted on me as a four-year-old, a scent I'd sometimes remember as the path I could've taken, the world I could've lived had my dad not found us and taken us back. It was a scent I'd been chasing all of my adult life.

It's funny how that happens sometimes. We associate smells with memories, and when that memory is triggered, we are momentarily pulled away, no matter the current circumstances. That's exactly what happened here, as I stepped into the most fucked-up circus in the history of the universe. I was surrounded by bedlam, by unorganized chaos and clutter, by one what-the-fuck after another,

and that smell just came out of nowhere, smacking me like a goddamned baseball bat, and making me think of my fourth birthday party, when I'd been with my mom and visited the circus, and I'd laughed and clapped and dropped my hotdog onto the dirty bleacher before picking it up and eating it even though it tasted like dirt. My mom had cried, had been crying, and up until that very moment when the smell hit me for the second time in my life, I'd always thought she'd been crying about the damn hotdog.

And it made me mad, so fucking mad. I had so little of my mom, so little memory I could call my own. It was one of the few things this fucking place couldn't possibly take from me, yet that was exactly what had just happened, and it was so unexpected, so violent, so final that I no longer cared about the stupid plan, or of trying to save my life.

I just wanted to tear it all down.

But you don't want to hear about any of this shit, do you? It's not important. Not when we were weeks past the earth's expiration date. Not when I was standing there like an idiot as I watched a unicycling, woman clown roll past me while greedily devouring what looked like a goblin leg. The colorful yet demonic acrobats who, moments before, had been firing magical mortars at monsters the size of buildings, were now sailing back and forth above me. The lemurs juggled. The clowns sang.

I thought of Donut, passed out and exposed, only protected by Mongo. I took a deep breath and tried to calm myself. *You will not break me. You will not break me.*

It was as if the battle outside hadn't occurred. These were still the fucked-up, transformed versions of the circus workers, but each and every one of them was feverishly performing a parody of their original acts, all of them shoved tight against one another. As I watched, two of the acrobats collided in mid-air and fell, crunching to the ground. Nobody took any heed.

A weathered, wooden sign stood in my path: a cutout of a figure with a speech bubble. It was of a dwarf wearing the red and black coattails and top hat of a ringmaster. On the wooden sign it read, "I am Ringmaster Grimaldi! Welcome to my Circus! Within this tent, all

your worries and fears are left behind. All we ask is for you to sit down, relax, and enjoy. Let us take those burdens from you, even if for just a short amount of time."

I returned my gaze to the performers. What the hell was going on? Did they forget? Was there a spell? Did they just assume they were safe? Furthermore, none of them—despite having red dots on the map—were even glancing at me. It was as if I were invisible.

I shook my head. This fucking game. I still clutched onto my ticket, and I didn't dare let it go. They were leaving me alone now, but I feared if I dropped this thing, I'd be toast.

And then I saw it. The vine. The thing was so huge, my mind hadn't properly registered its presence. I'd thought it was part of the tent or the show, a stage prop. Even after my extensive conversation with Mordecai regarding this thing, I'd been expecting, well, a vine. Like a dude with a bunch of brambles coming out of himself, reaching every which way and that, maybe curling up the center pole.

This was more of a giant-ass bush or shrub than a vine. It took the entirety of the center ring, and it reached the ceiling of the tent, swallowing the pole. It was a pale green color, less haphazard looking than I'd expected. Along the ground, multiple, python-like roots spread. Unable to find purchase in the floor of the Over City, the roots spread above ground, reaching all corners of the tent.

As I gawked, a new achievement popped up, one of the special ones I couldn't minimize. The moment I read it, I felt all of the blood rush out of my face.

New Achievement! You Can't Fight City Hall!

But you can sure die trying.

You have discovered a city boss!

That's right. Let me say that again for the assholes in the back!

A.

CITY.

FUCKING.

BOSS.

Welp. If you gonna go, you might as well do it with style.

Just an FYI. As of this moment in the current season of *Dungeon Crawler World*, not a single Crawler has faced a city boss and survived. And for good reason. Only a complete moron would voluntarily put themselves in a situation where they had to fight one of the most powerful monsters on the level.

***Reward*: A lot of people are probably going to watch you die. That's a better prize than most of us get.**

A few additional achievements appeared, but I waved them away. A city boss. Holy fuck. Like with the bear, I didn't appear to be locked into the tent. I took a step back and looked over my shoulder. The Clammy Clown remained at his post, arms crossed, blocking my exit. But I could get out. I could easily get out right now.

No. You can do this. You have a plan. I swallowed and examined the massive plant thing in the center of the arena.

Ringmaster Grimaldi – Pestiferous Vine

This is an Elite.

Level 85 City Boss!

Before the cataclysm, if you asked any child of the sprawling Over City what their favorite activity was, a good number of them would happily tell you of the great and wonderful Grimaldi's Traveling Circus. Children dreamed of walking outside and seeing the long line of circus carts rumbling through the streets, of the tents being erected in their local park. Circus night was a holiday. A time of joy.

To Redstone Grimaldi, nothing was more important than his family. He loved each and every one of them. When the cataclysm came, and the poison cloud swept over the circus, he was center stage. He remains there to this day.

Transformed from a simple dwarf to a hulking Pestiferous Vine, Grimaldi uses his special powers to keep his family safe and alive. No matter how many times they die, no matter how many crawlers the clowns devour, he brings them back, memories intact. Well, mostly intact. Somewhere in there Grimaldi may be aware that this may

not be the most moral of choices. But that's what we do when it comes to family. We protect them at all costs.

And besides, you know what they say.

The show must go on.

After the description ended, nothing changed. Nobody moved to attack. The vine didn't move at all. My eyes caught the largest of the roots. It snaked up into the empty bleachers. I walked toward it, slipping past clowns and lemurs and other oddities. I passed the strongman ogre with the appendage coming out of his neck. I realized with a start that the single-headed ogre's countenance bore a striking resemblance to the center head of the three-headed ogre tattoo monster. He held the same jagged scar across the side of his head.

This creature was also an elite. His name was Apollon the Mighty. He stood behind a small stand with a faded sign that read, "Iced Cream. A frozen treat from another world! No chewing necessary! Glides right in like a winter dream!"

"Cone?" the ogre asked as I approached. He held up what appeared to be a petrified ice cream cone. He dipped it into a bucket attached to the stand, and when he pulled it up, the cone was filled with writhing, bone-white worms, similar to the ones who'd infested Heather the Bear.

"No, thank you," I said, swallowing hard so I wouldn't be sick.

The creature watched me pass, a strange look of confusion on his face. His dot was red with a cross on my map. The strange appendage, a thick vine branch I now realized, twitched oddly. I kept moving, clomping onto the bleachers.

Carl: It's an elite and a city boss. You didn't tell me they could be both! Holy shit. A city boss. Is this still going to work?

Mordecai: Uh. I was right, though, correct? It's a Pestiferous Vine?

Carl: Yes. It's fucking huge, though. It's as tall as the tent!

Mordecai: It should still work. The core will be the same size. I think.

<u>Carl</u>: You *think*? Holy shit, Mordecai!

"There are a few different kinds of collective mind-control vine monsters, but the combination of spores and parasitic worms means it's likely something called a Pestiferous Vine," Mordecai had said last night. This was after the recap show, but before we'd gone to sleep. Signet had mentioned "the vine" a few times, and I'd asked Mordecai if he knew what that was. "It's a sign of lazy writing, if you ask me," he'd said. "It's like on earth television shows. Every time there's a cop show, the cop's marriage always sucks. There's always a storyline with a serial killer. There's always that asshole lieutenant. These vine things on the third floor, they're… what is the word? A trope. That's it. Pestiferous vines are a trope for these shows. It's because of the volcano story. The girl finds her grandma had turned into one of those things."

At this point, we'd already agreed that Donut and I would be idiots to have anything to do with the circus quest. But Mordecai had insisted on turning the subject into a lecture regarding collective mind plant monsters, which were common in the dungeon, as they were common in the universe.

"Every season," he'd said, "crawlers fall by the hundreds to these things, especially on the sixth floor. But plants are always easy to kill. *Very* easy to kill, as long as you know the trick. The problem is the trick is different for each one. Take that Pestiferous Vine, for example. It's a plant that infects other mobs. It's called a vine and it looks like a plant, all right, but it's really a hybrid fungus combined with a type of plant you don't have on earth. Don't get me started. Anyway, it excretes these mold spores that infect parasitic worms, who in turn infect other mobs. What happens next depends on a variety of factors, depending on the mob and the type of worms. It's fascinating stuff because there are literally billions of combinations. And these vines are real, too. This isn't made-up for the dungeon. Anyway, once the worms infect the mobs, this tri-symbiont, well, maybe tri-parasitic depending on how you want to look at it, relationship forms."

"So how do you kill one?" I asked. My head started to hurt from the conversation. Donut had lost interest and was running around

with Mongo in the restaurant.

"For the Pestiferous Vine, it's kind of a good news, bad news thing. The good news is they're one of the easiest ones to kill. The bad news is it's not instantaneous. The vine loves moisture, and it loves blood. You drip a few drops of blood directly onto one of the vines, and it'll slurp it right up. But," Mordecai said, leaning in closely. His eyes sparkled as if this was the most interesting subject in the world, "if that blood is from something that had been poisoned, it breaks the link with all of its symbionts. It takes about fifteen to twenty minutes to work, unfortunately. But one moment the vine is alive and well, the next, it's mulch. It doesn't feel it. It doesn't know it's been poisoned. But it's still dead."

"Does it kill all the other mobs?"

"Depends. Some immediately go insane. Some drop dead. Some don't realize anything has changed."

"So, you poison yourself, dribble some blood on it, and it's dead?"

"That's right. It won't know, but if it suspects, you need to be careful or it can save itself."

"How? Is there a cure?"

"Yes. If you've given yourself an antidote, and you give the plant an equal amount of the same blood, it will cure it. You can't just pour an antidote potion on there. It has to be the same blood. So be careful. If it knows you poisoned it, it'll try to get its monsters to bleed you."

Assuming Mordecai's information was correct and still valid, then I could kill Grimaldi right now from my spot in the bleachers. Still, I was nervous. Mordecai had warned me multiple times that when it came to elites, the rules didn't mean shit.

I sat down on the cold bleacher next to the vine. I tried to act casual, but I knew I had to be fast. If these producer guys had been watching my feed last night, it was possible they had already deduced what I was about to do. Everyone in the arena continued to ignore my presence. I took a deep breath. *Okay. Here we go*. I pulled my nightgaunt cloak off and put it over my legs, like anyone settling in would do. My constitution lowered by four points when I removed the cloak, but it also removed my poison resistance.

Poisoning myself was easy. I had a ton of potions. I pulled a health potion and held it in my hand. I drank one by clicking it in my hotlist, and then I quickly drank the one in my hand before the potion cooldown. I'd done this once before when Donut had been injured during the fight with the Juicer.

You have been poisoned!

"*Oof*". It felt as if I'd been kicked in the stomach by a damn horse. It took everything I had not to double over and cry out. Before, I hadn't felt this part. My health started to plummet. I kept one of the lemurs' juggling knives in my belt, and I pulled the palm of my hand across it, cutting deep enough to create a long gash. I squeezed my hand together as blood rained down on the vine.

I cast *Heal* on myself, which didn't stop the poisoning. I waited the next few seconds before my potions opened back up, and I took one of my few poison antidote potions. I'd received those way back in the very beginning, from a silver adventurer's box.

I gave myself a second to just breathe. I pulled the cloak back over my shoulder and looked about to see if anything had changed. Nothing. I hazarded a look down, and the blood was almost all gone. All that remained was a few drops that'd landed on either side of the thick root.

I had no idea if it worked or not.

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[11]

I WAITED A FEW MOMENTS TO SEE IF THERE WAS ANY SORT OF SIGN THAT THE city boss was sick. There was nothing. It was time for the next part of the plan.

Carl: Zev. I did it. But the plan has changed. I want you to message them right now and tell them exactly what I say.

Zev: Oh my gods, Carl. The net is going *crazy*. Only a few people understand what you just did. But word is getting out. Your numbers are just going up and up. It's amazing. Both of these dramas playing out at the same time.

Carl: Zev. Are you listening? This is important.

Zev: Yes, yes. I'm sorry. Go ahead.

Carl: To the producers of the program *Vengeance of the Daughter*. I just poisoned Grimaldi. Even though he's an elite, I suspect you're going to let him die. I know this is all part of your plan. This is Signet's story, not his. The title of the program says it all. This is just the first act, the origin story. This is really about her getting down to the Hunting Grounds and fucking up those High Elves and maybe the Naiads, too.

I also suspect that as soon as Mr. Grimaldi here dies, all hell is going to break loose. And when that happens, I will probably die. That's also part of your plan, isn't it? I'm looking at the three poles right now, and I can see how

you've set this shit up. That center pole isn't going anywhere. But that third pole looks like it's made out of popsicle sticks. Just a little push, and it's timbeeerrr. Hell, that thing will probably break on its own when Grimaldi dies.

You don't really need all three poles broken, do you? One will be enough for whatever plan you and your writers have. I'm spitballing here, but maybe a rip in the tent that'll allow Signet access? Of course, this would be after I'm dead. That's all you're expecting out of me, isn't it? You're serving your viewers something amazing either way. If I do it, awesome. If I fail, tragic. And no matter what, your program is drowning in viewers.

I have an offer for you. If you want these ratings to continue, I suggest you listen carefully.

This is what I'm proposing. I know you can't help me in any way. That's against the rules, and the last thing we want is to draw the ire of the system AI. But I want to be on your show. As a regular. If Donut and I both happen to survive past tonight, and I make it to the sixth floor, I will sign an exclusive agreement to only complete elite-themed quests on the sixth floor that are directly associated with *Vengeance of the Daughter*.

Look at the ratings you're experiencing right now. I am told that new programs such as yours rarely receive anything like this. Most fail right out the gate. You probably went out of your way to place this circus near me and Donut in the hopes we'd stumble upon it. Now imagine the ratings if we continue to participate in this storyline.

You have thirty seconds after the end of this message to agree. If you *do not* agree, I am going to cut my hand again, and I am going to give Grimaldi here some of my healthy blood. And you know what that means. And after I've un-poisoned the vine, I am going to sit here for the rest of the night and enjoy the show. Nothing will happen, though I might spout some of these theories out loud. Signet won't

get inside. Your special guest star's appearance will be a dud. After all this buildup, people will be *pissed*. It'll be Geraldo and Al Capone's vault all over again. You probably don't know what that means. Translation. Nobody will watch this shitty-ass show ever again.

But if you agree, I have a plan. A good fucking plan that people won't stop talking about. But I'm not going to attempt it without a deal.

Zev: This is not what we discussed.

Carl: Send it now. Quick before he dies.

Zev: They already heard it. My boss patched them in. We're waiting for their response now.

Out on the arena, nothing changed. Down at the bottom of the bleachers, Apollon the ice cream-selling strongman looked up at me, and we met eyes.

Zev: Okay, they're no longer listening. It's a deal. They say, and I quote, "Let's see what you got for us, Crawler. If your stupid ass can get out of this, we look forward to working with you in the future."

Carl: You're our agent, Zev. I want this to be official. On paper. Or whatever you guys do.

Zev: Don't worry about that. It's official. I have the power to sign on your behalf.

Carl: That's terrifying, Zev. Okay, they're about to be pissed off. If they ask, tell them I know what I'm doing.

Zev: Do you?

Carl: Fuck no. I'm making this shit up as I go along.

With that, I once again cut open my hand, and I dripped the blood on the root, healing the boss monster. Again, nothing changed. I had no idea if it would've worked or not, but at least for now, I wasn't going to find out. I stood and walked down the bleachers, approaching the strongman.

As I walked down the stairs, I pulled up my inventory and found the *Wisp Armor* spellbook. I'd been holding onto it because it appeared to be super valuable, and I wanted to sell it. Donut asked me about once a day if she could have it, and I'd almost relented a

few times. It was a magic protection spell, and it would be useful to her. But at the same time, *I* was supposed to be our party's tank. I needed protection, too. I wanted to wait until I saw what sort of spells were available at the magic shop first before I decided what to do.

But I no longer had the luxury of waiting. I read the book's description again.

Wisp Armor

Cost: 5 Mana

Target: Self Only

Duration: 5 minutes + 1 minute per level of spell. Requires 5 minute cooldown.

Surrounds your body with tendrils of light. While ineffective against physical attacks, this spell negates 75% of incoming damage from magic-based attacks. Provides temporary immunity to mind-control effects. Higher skill levels increase both effectiveness and duration. It also makes you look all wispy and ethereal and druid-like. A great spell to have if you're a club kid or trying to bang a vegan.

I activated the book and added the spell to my hotlist. Because of that *Heal* spell I'd cast earlier, I had to take a mana regen potion to bring my available magic points back up to five. My mana regenerated faster than it had before, but it was still maddeningly slow.

I approached Apollon.

"Hey there, buddy," I said. "You got any of them there ice cream cones left?"

"Yes," Apollon said. The large, muscular ogre moved slowly but with deliberate ease. I wondered how strong he really was. I hoped I wouldn't have to find out. He pulled out the mass of worms on a rotten cone, and he handed it to me. "Compliments of Grimaldi," he said.

I looked at the wriggling mass of worms on the rock-hard cone. I cast *Wisp Armor* on myself. A six-minute timer appeared as sparkling

lights started to twirl around me like a swarm of comets. I opened my mouth.

Like the sign said, no chewing was necessary. The worms glided right in, entering my mouth and sliding down my throat.

I met eyes with the ogre, who just looked at me. Even he seemed shocked I'd just done that.

You have been infested with a parasite!

"Delicious," I squeaked as I tried not to vomit.

Do not worry. You are one of us now.

Yes, love. We will not feed you to the clowns. We don't feed family to the clowns.

One of us, Carl. One of us. Gooble Gobble, Gooble Gobble.

We see your memories.

We are you. You are us.

The words spoke in my mind as I stumbled toward the exit. I felt them in my gut, writhing, expanding, growing. The Clammy Clown moved aside as I pushed through the exit.

No, Carl. We have use of you, and it is not safe for you out there. Papa Grimaldi cannot regenerate you like the others. She will kill us. She will kill you. You are special. No. Why do you not stop?

Something shifted in my gut. The worms stiffened, grew more rigid.

Carl.

This was a new voice. It wasn't the all-voices-at-once of the parasites. This was Grimaldi.

Carl. No.

"Can you hear me?" I gasped. When I spoke, I felt the still-growing infestation enter my throat, like I'd swallowed a string that wouldn't go away. I gagged. I felt the ends of the worms growing up into my mouth.

Carl, I can hear you. Our minds are one. I know what you are doing. Come back. Please, come back.

I felt the mental tug that attempted to get me to stop, but thanks to my *Wisp Armor*'s ability to negate mind-control effects, I still had autonomy over myself, but only for the next five minutes.

Despite the protection of the spell, my brain felt odd, disconnected from the rest of my body, like I was in a room with a constantly-dimming light.

This is what it's like to go crazy, I thought. *To lose control.*

No, Grimaldi answered. *No, son*. *This is nothing like that.*

I ran back out into the night. Signet stood right there at the exit. She was polishing a spot on the massive calliope. The tattoos had all returned to her flesh. Had I really been in there that long?

"Carl!" she said, surprised. "I thought…" She examined me, her eyes narrowing. The flashing lights continued to swirl about me. She raised her hands, and they started to glow yellow.

"Wait," I said.

"This is who you send, Redstone?" Signet called, raising her voice. She spoke with an odd mix of anger. "He's not even in the family."

"Wait," I said again. "I'm not Grimaldi, but he can hear you. I've been infected, but this spell is keeping them from taking full control."

Signet lowered her hands. "You didn't knock the poles down," she finally said.

"No," I said. "It wasn't going to work."

"I'm going to have to kill you, Carl. You won't be able to keep the infestation at bay for much longer."

"Listen. We only have a few minutes. When was the last time you two talked? It's clear you love this goddamned circus. That's why you attack it every night. You're trying to free them from this. And you, Grimaldi. I know your brain is a jumble. If it's anything like mine is right now, I can only imagine what you were going through when this thing happened. But somehow, of all of your family, the only one who escaped was Signet. You did that, didn't you? You protected her somehow. Because you love her. And now, hundreds of years later, you two assholes are trying to murder each other even though you want the same thing. You want to protect your family."

The worms in my throat surged into my mouth. The sensation was like I was suddenly vomiting. "She hurts the family. She has turned her back," I croaked.

Fucking hell. They'd physically forced me to say it. I felt blood start to drool down the side of my mouth. My throat felt as if I'd swallowed razors.

"Don't do that," I gasped. "Holy shit. Just think it, and I'll say it out loud."

"My brothers and sisters are suffering," Signet said. "The clowns have been transformed into these things. They kill those who they used to entertain. And you facilitate it, Redstone. You have a kind heart. You're protecting them because they're family. But they wouldn't want this. They would want it to end, and you know it."

"Please," I said. "Please, Grimaldi. Listen to her. Look, if you truly know my memories, then you know why I'm here. I went into that fucked up circus tent because I was trying to protect *my* family. When I killed that bear and freed her from this, I saw it in her eyes. She was *grateful*. And you know it. Every time those clowns eat someone, their soul is dying just a little bit more. This entire world is nothing but death and hopelessness, and I am starting to lose it, man. Signet says you used to be kind. I need, we all need, some of that kindness right now. I get the sense this Over City was a pretty bleak place even before the cataclysm. You were the joy that the people needed. But now you're killing them. And worst of all, you are killing the one you tried to protect the most. Signet shouldn't be here in this place. She has business down below in the Hunting Grounds, and you are keeping her from it. You are her family, and she will not leave until this is done. You can change that."

A moment passed. My timer was at less than a minute. I prepared the double healing potion, the one Mordecai had mixed last night. He insisted it would cure me of a parasitic infestation.

Come on, you assholes, I thought. Surely the producers of this ridiculous drama could see the bone I just threw them. Hopefully they had enough control of Grimaldi to take the bait.

No, no, no, I thought as I felt the worms surge back into my mouth.

"I have un-banished you, my love," I growled.

I slammed the potion, and then I fell to my knees and started vomiting a never-ending stream of dead and dying worms onto the ground.

Signet started to walk toward the entrance.

"Wait," I called, still coughing. "Wait. You need to free Donut."

"Your friend will awaken when the sun rises. Do not worry." She paused. "Thank you, Carl. I do not know if we will cross paths again" She turned and entered the tent.

As the flap opened, and she stepped into the mouth of the giant clown, I smelled it one last time. The scent of the big top. It was but a fleeting hint of that scent, and the moment it was gone I knew I would never smell it again. I'd lost something today, but if this story with the circus had a relatively happy ending, I knew I'd gained something as well.

I suddenly remembered something else about that day at the circus with my mom. One of the items we'd taken home from the show had been a pair of little sapling trees with the roots wrapped in nets. That was something this circus always did. They gave little trees to all the kids. My mom and I had planted those trees in my grandparent's backyard. Years later, long after my grandparents had died, I'd looked up that house on the internet, and I found the satellite images of the backyard. The trees were still there. They'd grown huge.

All it takes is a little seed, my mom had said that day as we planted the trees. *Just little seeds here and there, and soon enough you have a forest*.

While Signet's story was only just beginning, I knew my part in this particular chapter of *Vengeance of the Daughter* was now done. Whatever was about to go down in there, it no longer concerned me.

I felt a slight pang that'd I'd missed out on my chance to solo-kill a city boss, but I was also certain I wouldn't have survived the experience. Besides, I'd done something much more productive.

The seeds were planted. The roots were already beginning to dig.

You will not break me. Fuck you all.

Quest Completed. The Show Must Go On.

A half dozen achievements passed by, landing into my inbox. I'd jumped from level 15 to 18. Another wave of nausea swept over me, and I resumed heaving piles of dead worms onto the ground.

Something Zev had said had been bothering me for several minutes, and now that my mind was finally starting to clear, it made me jump to my feet.

It's amazing. Both of these dramas playing out at the same time.

Both of these dramas? What was the second one?

Mordecai: Carl. Donut's health just dropped below 20%. Go. Go now.

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[12]

I HURTLED THROUGH THE ABANDONED CITY.

I started about a mile and a half away from the old building where Signet lived. The neighborhood map's view of the local mobs ended just one street before. I avoided the scattered monsters. There weren't many in this area, but a few of them appeared to be large and fast.

Mordecai: Donut's Cockroach skill just activated. She went down to zero, but it kept her alive. She's now at five percent.

I rushed into the street, turning and running straight for the building's entrance. Several dots populated the map. In her unconscious state, I couldn't see Donut's dot, but I was relieved to see the orange dot of Mongo in the center of the room. He was surrounded by about 10 red dots and a metric shitload of Xs.

As I approached, two more monsters appeared, coming from around a far corner as they rolled toward the open building. They were squat and black and covered in spikes, each about as tall as my knee. They moved like tumbleweeds. A mighty roar emanated from the building, deep and loud. A moment later, two of the round monsters flew out the door and bounced off the street. I formed a fist and pushed into the darkened chaos. I couldn't see shit. I pulled a torch into my left hand, lit it, and tossed it into the room.

"Mongo, I'm here!"

It took my brain several moments to register the scene before me.

Mongo had once again doubled in size. That roar had come from him. But more importantly, his health was deep in the red. He stood on the ground before the pile of garbage I'd erected around Donut, screeching in fury. Half of the defense was gone, scattered about the room, exposing the chair and Donut to the room full of monsters. Mongo stood defiantly in front of the hole, like a hockey goalie protecting the net.

Both Donut and Mongo had been transformed into pin cushions. Each of them were riddled with long, black spikes. As I watched in horror, one of the rolling black mobs threw itself at Mongo, who leaped painfully into the air and slashed at the creature with his feet. The monster spun away, trailing gore. Mongo hit the ground, but stumbled and fell onto his side, crying. Several new spikes erupted from the dinosaur's feet. The sleek, black spikes were about 15 inches long, and some of them had completely pierced the bottom of the pet's foot and spewed from the top.

I examined the properties of the mobs as I rushed toward Donut.

Street Urchin – Level 8

These pokey little puppies only come out at night. Long, long ago, some of the richest citizens of the Over City kept these things as pets. Their name—Street Urchin—was a source of great amusement of the privileged. They would often joke about keeping a street urchin chained up in their homes, only letting the nocturnal creatures out to feed. The small, mindless creatures could clean an entire living space in a matter of minutes. When the cataclysm came, the Street Urchins were transformed into what you see today. Larger, deadlier, and a lot spikier. And after they cleaned the corpses of their former owners, they moved into the ruins and resumed their duties as the janitor mobs of the Over City.

The ruin's version of a Roomba, these things only have one purpose: to remove dead bodies and any other refuse

left behind by inconsiderate crawlers. They won't bother you if you don't bother them. But you best not get in their way.

They can be very tenacious when it comes to taking out the trash.

Holy shit. These little assholes were here because of me. They were attacking Mongo and Donut not because they were aggressive mobs, but because of the defenses I'd erected around the cat. They were trying to get to the wood and metal hunks I'd stacked. And because Mongo was putting up such a ferocious fight, they were attacking back. And Donut was getting skewered in the process.

I read the *Heal* scroll, one of the ones I'd gotten from the Survivor's Box, focusing on Donut. She glowed. The spikes squeezed out of her body and scattered onto the floor like pine needles. Then I tried a second *Heal* scroll on Mongo, but it didn't work. *Damnit*. I couldn't use a potion on the pet, either.

"Hang in there, buddy," I said. I started throwing the hunks of wood and metal into my inventory. And when one of the street urchins approached, I'd throw a piece of metal at it. It'd make a chittering noise but stop approaching us. Instead, it'd roll over the refuse and start to devour it. As I worked, more and more of the mobs appeared, cleaning up the bodies of their fellows.

After I pulled the last of my makeshift defense into my inventory, I cleaned up the needles at my feet by picking them up and tossing them into my inventory. After that, the small, round monsters lost interest and wandered back into the street.

Donut remained asleep on the chair, but her health had been restored. Mongo lay on the ground, whimpering. His heath was deep in the red. Dozens of the black needles jutted from his body in various places. I didn't dare pull any out.

Carl: Quick. How can I heal Mongo? The scroll and the potion didn't work.

Mordecai: Take out a heal potion. You should have a cinnamon stick in your inventory. I also gave you a couple branches of thistle rot. Put the entire cinnamon stick in the potion. Wait five seconds and add the thistle rot. Put the

cork back on and shake it. Then pour it down Mongo's throat and try not to get your hand bitten off.

I did exactly as he instructed. Both the cinnamon and the thistle thing had come from the stuff Mordecai had stolen from the Belly Rubbed Pug's kitchens.

A new recipe has been added to your crafting menu.

A pair of achievements appeared. Then another as I forced open the sharp mouth of the dinosaur and poured the now-brown potion into the pet's mouth. The needles dropped to the ground. Mongo groaned and shook his head. He sat up, nudged Donut with his head, and then he shrieked, loud enough that my ears hurt. Then he started bouncing up and down, waving his arms and circling around me, hitting me with his head in joy, as if he'd just realized I'd returned.

"You did it, Mongo," I said, petting the dinosaur, who made a purring noise when I patted him. "You saved Donut."

Mongo had risen from level six to ten. Before, he'd been about the size of a turkey. Now he was almost as tall as my waist. Colorful feathers covered the creature. Donut could probably ride on the back of him now.

We still couldn't move Donut from her spot, so I sat down and leaned against the chair, settling in. We still had several hours of night left. Signet had said Donut would awaken in the morning. I hoped she'd told the truth. Mongo, despite being much too large for this, curled himself onto my lap, hanging over both sides.

I found myself thinking about my mother, my father, and of Bea. Of my few friends from before, like Billy Maloney and Sam. Of my coworkers at the boatyard. They were all gone. All I had left in this world was right here.

Mongo soon started to snore. I could feel Donut's warmth against the back of my neck. She breathed softly, oblivious of all that had occurred tonight.

This, I thought, *this is my family*.

Just before dawn, a brilliant light shone into the air from the direction of the circus. The world rumbled. The map was too far off my screen for me to see what had changed.

Signet never returned, but she was true to her word, and Donut awakened with dawn.

"Where are we?" Donut asked, stretching and looking around. Her eyes flashed, which meant she was looking through her menus. "What did you do to Mongo! How did you finish the circus…"?

Mongo bowled her over, squeaking with absolute delight, bouncing around.

Donut, despite having done nothing, had risen to level 15. The system had leeched enough of my experience from the evening into her. I suspected most of it came from completing the quest since she'd participated in quite a bit of the early part. She'd also received a loot box for it.

"Come on," I said. "We're getting out of here."

"I am so confused," Donut said, stepping onto the floor. "Did I do something? I don't remember anything. But I had the oddest dream. Ferdinand came and visited me, and I ran to him, but he turned into a porcupine, and I kept getting his quills in me. It was quite unpleasant."

I laughed and laughed.

I told Donut the story of the previous evening as we quickly, but cautiously, set out for the skyfowl settlement. She was oddly quiet about the whole thing. She still seemed out of sorts.

As we passed the circus, I wasn't surprised to see that the tents were gone. The X's of all the corpses were gone, too, unfortunately. I kicked myself for not looting the coins from all the dead. Even though I hadn't killed the city boss, I'd hoped to return and loot whatever city bosses dropped, but there was nothing. I wondered if that meant he wasn't dead.

Something new did emerge from the wreckage. A staircase to the fourth floor, right in the middle of the park. It'd been hidden before. Usually these things appeared on my map, even if we couldn't get to them, like the one guarded by the Ball of Swine. This one had not been there before. I asked Mordecai about it, and he said many of the stairwells from now on would only become visible to us after we completed quests. This one had probably been there the whole time, right underneath Grimaldi.

I wondered if Signet had gone down the stairs. For her, she'd move directly to the sixth floor. Whatever story she had going on now would continue, undisturbed by us crawlers until we made it down there. *If* we made it down there.

"Why didn't you just kill that boss?" Donut asked. "You still would've won the quest, and think of all the experience we would've gotten!"

"It was a trap. If I'd killed it, we'd both be dead right now."

"Well, if I had been there, we would've done things differently."

Carl: Also, I don't want to add this part out loud. This is a good thing. We now have yet another group looking out for us. It's in that production studio's best interest to keep us alive. I doubt they can help us much, but the more advocates we have, the better.

Donut: Until we get to the sixth floor and they have written out some story designed to get us killed. Or worse, they realize more people are talking about you than they are about Signet, and they try to get us killed before we even get that deep. We are guest stars, Carl. It's too dangerous for a show to have guest stars that are more interesting than the main character. That's why they killed Barb on *Stranger Things*.

Carl: That… That does make sense. Except the Barb part. You're better with this television stuff than I am. When we get there, we'll need to think of every possible scenario.

Donut: GUESSING THE PLOTLINES OF TELEVISION SHOWS IS MY SUPER POWER.

The second she said that, I realized she hadn't posted the earlier, longer chat message in all caps. I decided not to say anything about it. It gave the impression Donut was maturing. Slowly. Very slowly.

But there was more to it, something that had been bothering me for a while now. Donut made a lot of seemingly-rash decisions and comments, yet they were almost always *good* decisions, even though they oftentimes didn't look like it at the time. And while I knew her intelligence being higher than mine didn't really mean she was smarter than me, I'd been suspecting for a while now that so much of her camera-facing self was an act, designed to hide her true cunning nature from the world. The problem was now we were *always* camera-facing.

As outgoing, as brash as she was, she was still new to this world, new to having real, sapient thoughts. She was still coming into her own. The adult she would become was in there somewhere, just starting to emerge, but Odette was right about her. She was still a child, and she held many child-like attitudes and beliefs. It'd be a long time before she fully matured. But it was clear if she did manage to grow up, she'd develop into a fiercely intelligent person.

At the same time, she seemed to hold the belief that outward cleverness and quiet efficiency was something she needed to hide, or worse, suppress. Part of it was the nature of the beast. After all, we needed to be popular to survive, but I was starting to really worry about her development, and I had no idea how to talk to her about it without sounding like an ass.

I had a quick memory of Bea's mom. It was just this past Thanksgiving, and we'd driven over to spend the weekend at her parent's house. I'd been asleep on the couch, but I awakened to hear Bea and her mom whispering as they drank their vodka, the ice cubes clinking in the glasses. We'd brought Donut, and she'd been asleep on my neck on the couch. They had like ten other Persians around the house, and Donut was always freaked out by the other cats, so she always stuck by me or Bea when we visited. I'd woken up, and I had to pee, but Donut snored, and I hadn't wanted to wake her. So I remained glued to the couch, eavesdropping on Bea and her mom.

Bea's mom had said, "You have to make them think you're dumber than you are. That's the only way to catch a good man. You can't control the ones who are smarter than you. And you don't want the dumb ones to know they're the dumb ones. Once a man realizes he's stupider than his mate, he gets mean. You're lucky to have found Carl. I just wish he was a doctor or a lawyer."

That Bea's mom thought I was a dumbass was nothing new, so this didn't surprise me. I didn't particularly care what she thought about me.

Bea had sighed. "Yeah," she said. "He's not complicated, that's for sure. It doesn't take much to make him happy. He says what he means. He won't fight me, even if I try to fight. He's not a doctor, but he makes good money, and he doesn't spend it on anything. Plus I love him, mom. I know I screw it up a lot. But I do love him. I really do."

That attitude, that we had to wear a mask, even toward our family, it was one I could never understand. A lot of people, men and women, thought like that, and I didn't get it. And now I was afraid Donut had inherited that same attitude directly from Bea and her mom.

A few minutes later, Bea and her mom had a different conversation, one about Donut. It was something I was glad now that the cat hadn't overheard.

I was reminded of something else I wanted to talk about. I sent a message to Zev asking if she was available to talk.

Zev: Hello you two. You sure know how to make a splash. I just heard back, and we have you both booked for a new show the day after tomorrow. It's called *Danger Zone with Ripper Wonton*. It's a round table. A real round table. There will be other Crawlers there and a few other intergalactic celebrities, maybe a politician. The show covers a few different hot topics of the day.

Donut: OHH, THAT SOUNDS DELICIOUS.

Zev: It has an audience participation segment, too. People will call in and ask questions. This is uncensored, so be ready for anything.

Carl: I can't wait. Hey Zev. I have a question. The real reason I messaged is I was wondering if you could tell me who the production company behind *Vengeance of the Daughter* is? Is it a Kua-Tin company?

Zev: No. Nobody in our system is allowed to run serials while we run the game. These are done by private groups, just like with the talk shows. We're not well known for our dramas, anyway. I'm afraid the nuances of compelling scripted drama are lost on the average Kua-Tin.

Carl: Okay, so who runs the one we just contracted with?

Zev: It's an entity called Sensation Entertainment, Incorporated. They're from one of the center systems, which tend to be more integrated. The gentleman I was dealing with was a Sac.

Carl: What the hell is a Sac?

Zev: It's a race of people. They're pretty common. Since you don't know, I can't tell you, I'm afraid. It's not that important. Good luck today. I'll keep in touch and will let you know when it's time to go to your interview.

Donut: BYE ZEV!

We fought several, random mobs as we trekked. Most of them averaged around levels 9-11. Each of us practiced with our spells, casting over and over, trying to get them to level up. Mordecai explained that spells did eventually level-up when you just randomly cast them, but the system was smart enough to distinguish between practicing and actual, combat usage.

Donut managed to level her *Clockwork Triplicate* spell up to level 3, much to Mongo's delight.

I practiced my *Fear* spell on every mob we saw. All of the circus creatures had been immune to it, but the other Over City mobs were not. The problem was the spell tended to make them run away, and if we didn't kill them, we didn't get any experience.

To solve the issue, Donut and I came up with the first move of what I would call our "playbook." I gave a name to each play, and as soon as it was called, we'd follow a set of predetermined reactions. While it was good to be adaptive and fluid, the fight with the mold

lions taught me that having a set of canned reactions to certain situations could be beneficial. Either of us were allowed to call plays, and once someone did, we needed to follow the play without question. That way we'd work together and know what each other were doing. This first one I called "Panic." I'd cast *Fear*, and Donut would hit it with a missile. Simple. It wasn't complicated, and it was pretty much what would naturally happen anyway. But I figured it would be a good start. As time went on, we'd have more and more complicated sets of reactions, including ones that integrated Mongo.

We practiced the Panic play, and I managed to raise my *Fear* spell up to level three. The spell was simple. If I successfully cast it, the mob either ran away, or it stood its ground, but its dexterity was lowered by an increasing amount each level. At level five, it would work on groups of mobs, so I needed to work on it as much as possible.

And speaking of Mongo… that little dude wasn't so little anymore. Now that he was level 10, he was starting to look scary as fuck. I was glad he was on our team, and I was extra glad Donut had spent so much effort on training him to follow orders. He still had a tendency to scream at the sight of monsters, but he was much, much better at not turning into a death chicken berserker until we unleashed him. His experience with protecting Donut had bonded the two even further.

He had a jump attack that was just amazing. He could now leap twenty feet from a complete standstill. He'd fly through the air, feet first, and his claws could disembowel an enemy before it even realized what was happening. I knew these things were pack hunters. The idea of facing a group of fully-grown Mongos was goddamned terrifying. I didn't know what floor these things normally lived on, but I hoped we'd never have to face them.

We still had plenty of light left by the time we reached the medium-sized settlement.

From a distance, the town looked similar to the last one. But the closer we came, I saw a few distinct differences. The town was easily four times the size. And the buildings were much bigger.

And then there were the NPCs. A little more than half of them were skyfowl. Eagle-headed humanoids who could fly. This is the same type of creature Mordecai was before he'd turned into a shapeshifter. I'd seen the photograph of his brother in his apartment, and there were a few of them in Odette's audience. But this was the first time I'd really gotten the chance to look at them.

They were smaller than I'd expected. The average male was about five and a half feet tall, so just below the average human in height. But, more oddly, they didn't have separate arms. They had large wings with little finger bones protruding from the center joint. It appeared they mostly used their large talons as hands. The eagles swooped about, flying just under the ceiling, circling around, going about their day, and doing whatever medieval-style eagle people did.

Other NPCs, including humans and orcs, also wandered through the town. The town guards were the same walking suits of armor. I pulled up the map, found the closest tutorial guild, and we headed straight for it.

As we walked, I caught sight of multiple crawlers. Most of them saw us and froze. A few waved and called out. Donut preened at the attention. I was currently level 18 and Donut was 15. Most of these guys hovered around levels 10 to 12, and most didn't have any stars by their names. I wondered how the hell they were still alive. Donut wanted to stop and talk to them. I did, too, but we had so much to do.

"Look, look!" Donut said just before we entered the tutorial guild. Mordecai's door was attached to a small, non-descript building a street over from a bustling market. A few players were coming and going out of the room, though I knew when they entered, they were transported to a different instance of the guild.

I followed Donut's pointing paw. She indicated a tower rising into the air from a street we hadn't yet ventured. At the tip of the tower was a familiar, rotating symbol of a knife. The large, art deco-style sign was out of place in the primitive fashion of this town. Under the

knife in tall, thin letters, the spinning sign read "The Desperado Club." And under that, in smaller letters it read "So fun it hurts." And then "Members only section + public pub."

"I've always wanted to go clubbing," Donut said. She looked at Mongo. "Do you want to go dancing with mommy?"

The not-so-little dinosaur squealed.

"Something tells me they won't let Mongo in there," I said as I pushed at the door to the tutorial guild.

I paused before going in. I spent the moment looking out at the world, marveling at the sights and sounds of this large town. Everything was happening so fast. I had a sudden, inexplicable feeling of longing wash over me. I wished this was all over. *It doesn't take much to make him happy*, Bea had said to her mom. It was true. I wondered what level we had to get to before they'd allow us to settle in a town like this.

"What kind of nightclub doesn't let your children in?" Donut grumbled, oblivious to my sudden reverie. "We'll just see about that."

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[13]

Time to level Collapse: 5 days, 10 hours.

Views: 1.4 Quadrillion
Followers: 30 Trillion
Favorites: 6.2 Trillion

THE FIRST THING I DID AS I SETTLED INTO MORDECAI'S CHAMBER WAS collapse into one of the classroom chairs. I'd been awake all night, and I really needed to get some sleep. The weight of the past 24 hours suddenly crashed down on me. I watched Mongo, equally exhausted, walk straight to the fireplace and sit in front of it. I could tell he wasn't yet used to his larger size, and it took him several moments to get comfortable. He eventually settled on his side, like a dog.

Mordecai transferred back to his own room a minute after we arrived. He arrived with a loud *pop*, and the drink in his hand sloshed onto the floor. The incubus cursed loudly at the sudden, unexpected teleportation. I'd forgotten to warn him. Whoops. Even though he was drinking, I could tell he wasn't nearly as trashed as last time.

"Oh thank the gods," Mordecai said, putting down the drink. "You're at the medium settlement? I was getting sick of that small town. They only had three bars, and I'd been kicked out of two."

"So, when you go out there without us, it's going to be that skyfowl town now?" I asked.

"That's right," Mordecai said. "Since I'm now a manager, for me, it'll match up with the last place Donut entered. If I was still a standard guide, I'd be able to dial it wherever I wanted." He sighed wistfully. "There's a guide-only town you buggers can't get to. I was really looking forward to it. Don't forget, I've been on this planet for decades. During the preparation stage, we can't mingle so much. So it's only when a dungeon is active do I get to see some of my friends."

I felt a short wave of guilt for making Donut pick the manager benefit. But then I remembered we'd probably be dead already if we hadn't picked it.

"Why aren't you puking drunk?" Donut asked. She jumped up on Mordecai's shelf and sniffed the drink. The flagon had "The Boll Weevil and the Chowder Pub" written on it. She crinkled her nose. "I thought your kind can't drink."

Mordecai shrugged. "I had to make a potion that negates the effects of alcohol on demon spawn. It's simple stuff. Then I dilute it at 43%, and it makes it so the alcohol works as intended. Almost." He frowned. "I think I need to add a bit more dilution next time."

"You're really into potions, aren't you?" I asked.

"Yes. While I focused on fire magic, I also spent a lot of time working on my alchemy. I was a mycologist on my world. I studied fungus. It was something that held great interest for me, and the two go hand-in-hand. The sixth floor, even though it's considered an urban level, is very thick with vegetation. Odette made me spend a lot of time learning about that stuff when we made it to that floor."

"Huh," I said. Donut looked at me sharply the moment he said that. She'd understood the significance of that last sentence the same moment I did. Neither of us said anything.

"I have a shitload of achievements and boxes to open," I said. "I also have 12 stat points to assign."

"Do the stat points last," Mordecai said. "See what sort of gear you've gotten. It's getting too late to hit the stores today, but we'll do that in the morning."

"The first thing I'm going to do tomorrow is buy pants," I said. "I may not be able to wear shoes, but if we're eventually going to go to a jungle level, I'm gonna want my legs covered."

"Also, we want to go to the club," Donut said. "Is it only open at night?"

"The Desperado Club will always be open," Mordecai said. "It won't be too hopping on this floor. On the sixth and ninth floors is where it gets really interesting. I'll tell you guys about it tomorrow. Don't go tonight. Carl needs rest. For now, open your boxes, and then you need to find a pub with open rooms. You can't sleep here. You'll want to watch the recap episode. You missed the one last night."

"Were we on it?" Donut asked.

"You were, and I reckon you'll be on it again tonight after what you two just pulled."

"Was there an announcement?" I asked. "I don't remember hearing it."

Mordecai nodded. "It happened while you were still conked out in that elite's lair. You didn't miss much. There were a lot of patch notes, but I don't think you have to worry about any of them. There's a *Golem* spell that's not working properly, so if you come across it, don't use it. Oh, and they introduced something called collective bidding for sponsorships, but she didn't explain it very well."

Mordecai had said the number of achievements we'd receive would start to wane when we got to this floor, but I had over 20 of them, the most I'd ever received at one time. Many of them were related to fighting the boss while solo and completing the quest. A few of the achievements of note were:

New Achievement! One Quadrillion!

You are one of the first ten crawlers to have achieved one quadrillion views! That means one of two things. You're

either one of the best crawlers in the game, or you're such a hot mess people can't wait to see you fail.

***Reward*: You have received a Gold Fan Box!**

Admin Note: You have received your first Fan Box. Fan boxes contain items that are voted for by those who follow your progress. Once a box is received, you may not open it for thirty hours while the fans vote for the contents.

Donut also received the same achievement. She was literally hopping up and down with excitement over it. Mordecai was telling her not to get her hopes up while I moved onto my next achievements:

New Achievement! Yellow-Bellied Chickenshit!

You initiated a boss battle, and it somehow ended with neither of you dead. What a disappointment you are. What a goddamned smear.

***Reward*: Pussies don't get prizes.**

New Achievement! Johnny Quest!

Not only have you been given a quest, but you actually completed it without dying. We like it when you do what you're told. It means you're a good dungeon citizen and not a traitor to your people at all.

***Reward*: In addition to the Gold Quest Box you've received for completing the quest, new quest locations will *sometimes* appear on your map. Notice how I italicized "sometimes"?**

The next one was even more interesting.

New achievement! Hadji!

You have completed a quest, but you completed it in a way unusual enough to trigger the Hadji Achievement! And

like the oft exploited street children of Kolkata, where there's one, there's usually more. This is one of the rare achievements that can be rewarded more than once.

***Reward*: Your Gold Quest box has been upgraded to a Platinum Quest Box!**

"There's another level past that, too," Mordecai said after I described the Hadji achievement. "I don't know what they call it this season, but it'll double upgrade your prize."

Donut also received the Hadji upgrade. I watched as she opened her boxes. She'd received a bunch of the usual items from the lower-tier boxes along with a few random objects like colorful bows and collar charms not as good as her butterfly charm. The system said she could only have one. The hair bows also couldn't be worn unless she took off her crown, which we couldn't allow her to do.

She opened the Platinum Quest Box, and it held 5,000 gold along with two items. A skill potion and a pair of "Fang Caps."

"Both are great items," Mordecai said, nodding. "Those teeth caps don't go well with Donut's fighting style, however. You should either sell them, or you might want to consider giving them to Mongo. Most gear can't be swapped with your pets, but some items can. This is one of them. Also, teeth caps come in pairs, and your dinosaur can wear up to six pairs of these things. It's something unique to his type."

While Mongo's face was mostly the beak of an overgrown chicken, when he opened the beak, a row of sharp, ripping teeth circled the interior.

The skill potion gave her level three in something called Acute Ears, which didn't just improve her hearing, it vastly increased the information that appeared on her minimap regarding not-yet-identified mobs. Basically, if she saw a red dot on her map, it now told her how large the mob was, and if it was a type of mob we'd already run across, it would tell us with "somewhat-reliable" accuracy.

Donut immediately drank it down. She pulled the twin, metallic metal caps from her inventory and allowed me to inspect them. They looked like a pair of loose vampire teeth.

Enchanted Fang Caps of the Expectorating Tizheruk

This is a Fleeting item!

Fun fact. There is not a single dentist from your world left in the dungeon. A few made it to the first floor, but every single one of those fuckers is now tits up. There're a few hygienists left, but I wouldn't want to rely on those chuckleheads. What I'm getting at is that you need to install these yourself. Make sure they're facing the right direction. You can always take them off, but this is a fleeting item. That means they disappear once they're off. So don't fuck it up.

Turns two of your incisors into ripping, tearing, deadly chompers that would impress even the most self-hating goth.

Increases melee bite damage by 50%

Each bite attack has a 25% chance to inflict a level-five Poisoned status.

Each bite attack has a 10% chance to inflict a level-five Paralyzed status.

"I'm totally giving this to Mongo when he wakes up. Carl, you'll have to put them on him."

"Are we sure that's a good idea?" I said. I eyed the still-sleeping Mongo uneasily. He hadn't chomped down on Donut or me in a couple days, but he snapped at the both of us. A lot. Both Donut and I were immune to poison, but not paralysis, as we'd both learned the hard way when Signet had captured us before.

Mongo chomped at the air in his sleep. It sounded like an axe splitting wood.

I sighed and moved to my boxes. I had several more than Donut did. She harrumphed at that. I could tell she was pissed that I was now three levels above her, but she hadn't actually said anything out loud. In fact, I had received a Lucky Bastard box for surviving Signet's initial attack on us, but Donut hadn't. She received the same Lazarus achievement, but instead of the box, her reward status said, "You're lucky to be alive. That's your reward." None of us were sure why. Mordecai suspected it was because Donut's health had zeroed

out while Mongo was defending her, and she'd been saved by her Cockroach skill. But that didn't make sense to me.

"It's just one of those things," Mordecai said. "Get used to it."

I started sifting through my rewards. I received multiple sticks of goblin dynamite and smoke bombs. I also received a whole box of hobgoblin dynamite along with three globs of Hobgoblin Pus—the remote-controlled explosive detonators—in the bronze boss box from my fight with Heather. I'd never seen hobgoblin dynamite before. The sticks were white instead of red. They had a larger yield and were much more stable.

I'd also been receiving a lot of random odds and ends lately that were simply labeled "Trap Supplies." They all went into my inventory. Mordecai warned me not to mess with that stuff until I had my sapper's table set up. "I don't know too much about trapmaking, but I do know it's just as dangerous as handling explosives," he said.

I'd been expecting another lottery ticket in my Lucky Bastard box, but instead I received a single casino chip.

"Holy cow," Mordecai said, snatching it up before it could get sucked into my inventory. He held it up to the light. "I've never even seen one of these before." He continued gawking at it as my Platinum Quest Box opened up.

In addition to 5,000 gold coins, I received a single scroll. A scroll of Upgrade. I immediately read the description. A 20 minute timer appeared over the scroll the moment I picked it up.

Scroll of Upgrade!

Warning: This item has a short shelf life.

Maybe it's not as good as getting something new, but sometimes it's better to just take something you're already comfortable with and improve upon it. Kind of like buying your girl new tits.

Once you read this scroll, one random, currently-equipped item will receive an upgrade. That upgrade could be small. It could be huge. But since this item has a short shelf life, you gotta do it now or forever hold your peace.

"I hate these short shelf life items," I said.

Mordecai was still peering at the casino chip. "They do that because if they didn't, you could hold onto it and save it for a really deep level, making it more valuable than they intended."

"Can I just take everything off except one item?" I asked. "If I wanted them to upgrade my ring, can I remove everything but that?"

"Yes, but I wouldn't," Mordecai said. "I've seen people try that several times, and the upgrade is never very good when they do that."

"Okay, I'm just going to do it now then," I said. I pulled the scroll into my hotlist and activated it.

My Enchanted BigBoi Boxers glowed. I read the description. And then I read the description of the new benefit I'd just received.

I looked up at the ceiling. "You motherfucker," I said. "Well played, asshole."

Mordecai barked with laughter. "Those things are probably now your most valuable item."

The upgrade was actually pretty awesome. But it came with a terrible catch.

Enchanted BigBoi Boxers.

This item has been Upgraded once.

All right, you already know the description of this item. Something something Incredible Hulk, blah, blah, blah. Now you want to know how this item has been upgraded. Right? So here are the original benefits of these naughty little undies:

+ 2 to Constitution

Wearer may cast a level 15 *Protective Shell* once every 30 hours.

That's some good shit right there. But we can do better than that. Here's a few additional benefits.

+ 5 to Dexterity

+ 5 to Intelligence

+ 3 more (for a total of + 5) to Constitution

+ The Freeballing Benefit

The benefit's description was:

Freeballing

And I'm freeeeee! Freeee Ballling!

Usually reserved for monk classes and those too soused to reliably dress themselves, recipients of this benefit receive an additional 100% damage bonus to all attacks that originate below the waist. In addition, all skills that originate from below the waist train 20% faster. But as the name implies, this benefit allows only a single layer of armor or clothing to cover your crotch area. And since you're already wearing these, it looks like you won't be getting trousers anytime soon.

Mordecai was still laughing. "You shouldn't have said you really wanted those pants."

"What? What?" Donut asked. Mordecai explained it to her, and she, too, started laughing. They both laughed so hard Mongo woke up and started bouncing around the room excitedly.

"Oh this is delicious. Positively delicious!" Donut said. "Don't worry, Carl. Maybe the next box will contain leather chaps. You can still wear those. Those would really frame out your feet." She looked up at the ceiling. "Can you imagine how sexy Carl would be in chaps?"

"Goddamnit, Donut," I said.

I took a deep breath and waited for both of them to stop howling. For the first time in days I really craved a cigarette. I tried changing the subject. "These benefits are way better than the ones we received on the previous level."

"Yeah," Mordecai said, finally calming down. He handed me back the casino chip. "You're eventually going to start seeing items that increase your stats not by numbers, but by percentages. That's why it's crucial to build your stats now. And you'll see weapon damage modifiers that are a lot higher, too. It gets a little crazy on the lower floors."

<u>Mordecai</u>: Also, I don't want to risk saying this out loud, but as you've just seen, once your brand gets established, they start to shift the type of gear you get. They like it when you get new equipment and, believe me, you'll be getting all

sorts of new stuff, but they don't want you completely changing your look overnight. Usually you don't start seeing these scrolls until deeper, but you two already have a name for yourselves. You'll be receiving a lot more of these Upgrade scrolls. That was a really good one. Most won't be that potent.

"So, what is this thing?" I asked, examining the poker chip. It was black with pink, then purple, then pink splotches staggered along the edges. A familiar dagger logo adorned the center. The chip felt as if it weighed 15 pounds.

"Oh yeah," Mordecai said. "So, you're rich. Maybe."

100,000 Gold Coin Casino Chip.

This is a comp chip, and it may not be sold or transferred. You may not redeem this chip directly for gold. This chip must be played at the High Roller's Roulette Table or the Wheel of Fortune game at the Desperado Club Casino.

Good luck.

"Roulette?" Bea always loved roulette. I would sometimes play blackjack, but I was one of those guys who got pissed off after I lost just a few bucks, and if I won, I would quit immediately. I wasn't much of a gambler.

"It's not roulette like you know it. Go get some sleep. Tomorrow night I'll take you both to the club and show you how that place works."

"Can you get in?" Donut asked.

"Don't you worry about that," Mordecai said, grinning. "They know me there."

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[14]

The moment we stepped outside of Mordecai's guild room, I pulled up the town's map. I looked for the smallest pub I could find. I found one a few blocks away that didn't appear to be along any main roads, so we headed toward it. I had been so desperate to find other people when we first arrived into the dungeon, but for now I just wanted to sleep. The way the other crawlers pointed and gasped when they saw us, it wasn't something I could deal with. Not tonight.

Mongo kept biting at the air. Getting the two chompers on him had been easier than I had expected. The way the system had described it, I thought it would be a difficult procedure, but both of the golden fangs had resized themselves and snapped easily into his mouth, clicking into place like they were Legos. He'd patiently allowed me to do it, whimpering like a dog getting his nails clipped. It'd only taken about five seconds. Now when he snapped his teeth, little tendrils of electricity exploded from his mouth. It'd scared him so much at first he'd actually peed himself, which had caused Mordecai to devolve into a torrent of arm-waving shouts and swears. But once Mongo realized the electric bites didn't hurt him, he spent every moment afterward chomping the air and grunting with excitement at the little sparks.

It wasn't quite dark yet, but we stuck to the center of the street. Skyfowl continued to sweep through the air above us. Most of the buildings in town were at least two levels, and many featured large,

open windows so the fliers could come and go as they pleased. In fact, some buildings appeared to be completely empty on the first floor while businesses and restaurants filled the higher levels, all catering to the eagle folk.

Most of the shops were now closed, curtains tight, so we couldn't even window shop. Before we left, Mordecai reiterated his warning to stay out of the alleys when it was dark. The guards remained on patrol, but I knew they would soon disappear. The city became a free-for-all at night. I wanted to be settled well before then. I could only handle so much drama and violence per day.

The pub was called The One-Eyed Narwhal, but the logo was of a fat, bald human unzipping his pants, grinning lewdly.

"Carl, this place looks disgusting," said Donut. Most of the buildings on this street were in various stages of disrepair. I didn't see any eagles here, either. It was mostly orcs, ogres, and humans. "There was a place back there called the Hot Schnitzel. It looked much more inviting. It had flowers out front."

"This place will be fine," I said as I opened the door, looking about. The pub was almost empty. A single orc NPC sat in one corner, drinking. The place was set up similarly to the last pub. There was a bar and the three televisions. It smelled of beer and grease. My eyes caught the player countdown and I sighed.

649,433.

That was tens of thousands of people dead since the last I'd looked, but at the same time, that number had slowed profoundly. *The people who've made it this far mostly know what they're doing now*.

The pub only had four rooms available, and they cost 20 gold each, much more expensive than the last place. But we had plenty to spare, and I still had no idea whether or not we were being ripped off. To my surprise, the proprietor wasn't a Bopca, but a human. He was a large, bald, level-30 man named "Fitz." He was the person depicted on the exterior sign, though the real-life version was twice as fat.

"Your majesty," Fitz said as we approached the counter. "What a pleasure. What an absolute pleasure. I've never had royalty in the

Narwhal. Not once. Are you just dining tonight, or will you require a room as well?"

"Why, hello, Fitz," Donut said, jumping on the counter. She rubbed her paw along the wood and then looked at it, a sour expression on her face. "We require two rooms. One for Carl and myself, and one for…" Mordecai popped into the room, right on cue. The incubus said nothing and immediately moved to the bar. He leaned over to gaze at the line of bottles. "And one for this gentleman. What are your fish selections this evening?"

As Donut and the human discussed our dinner, I sat down at a table. I watched Mordecai as he waited to order his drink. We couldn't get away from him, and he couldn't get away from us. I hadn't really thought too much on the implications of the manager benefit from that angle. That was going to get really old really fast.

I'd thrown ten of my stat points into strength and two into constitution. My strength without the gauntlet was now 30. I was literally as strong as six regular humans, and that had a way of messing with your mind. I grasped the edge of the thick, wooden table. It felt solid, like any normal hunk of aged wood. I squeezed, and I felt the possibility there. I could rip a hunk of wood off the edge if I wanted. I felt the potential of my power. The whole thing was just so surreal.

"Now don't be giving this guy any of your potions," Donut said as they sat at the table. Mongo ran across the room and started sniffing at the orc in the corner, but the large creature—a woman orc, actually—ignored the dinosaur. He grunted indignantly and returned to us.

The recap show came on just as our food was delivered. Donut received some sort of halibut thing, Mordecai a bowl of soup, Mongo a plate filled with raw meat, and I got a hamburger that tasted suspiciously like it came from Burger King.

The recap didn't show anything too interesting, though they were now focusing on a few crawlers I hadn't before seen. One was a guy with an alligator head and what looked like a Mossberg mag-fed shotgun. He never seemed to run out of shells, and I wondered what the story was there.

"I'm more concerned with how he gets that T-shirt on and off with such a giant head," Donut said.

They also showed the goat lady that Mordecai had told us about a while back. She'd entered the dungeon with 15 goats and managed to keep them all alive for a while. Now it appeared she only had five left. She remained human, and she'd clearly chosen some sort of mage class. Three of the burly brown and white goats remained unchanged. In my late teens, before I'd joined the military, the home had made us all get jobs, and I'd spent the summer working on a small farm that had multiple types of goats, including these guys. Boer goats. They were bred for meat, not dairy, I remembered. The bucks were heavy fuckers, heavier than they looked. It had taken three of us to lift one of them.

The other two remaining goats had changed.

"It looks like she got two of those enhanced pet biscuits," I said. I remembered the description had said that eating the biscuit could have varied results.

"Three, actually," Mordecai said. "They showed what happened last night. The third biscuit didn't go so well for her. Or several of her goats."

One of the goats was decked out in armor and walked on two legs alongside her. It appeared the goat had undergone a similar transformation as Donut, though I wasn't sure if it talked or not. It wielded a double-headed axe and occasionally screamed for no reason.

The last goat had transformed into a satanic monstrosity straight from the depths of a nightmare.

"My word," Donut said. "I could've turned into one of those?"

Mordecai grunted. "That's a hellspawn familiar. Carl probably would've been better off if you had."

I laughed and Donut made an indignant cat sound.

The thing was a horse-sized, multi-breasted, pitch black goat monster that looked like it belonged on the cover of one of those 1980s heavy metal album covers, one where if you played it backward, the words would tell you to murder your grandma. The face still had the distinctive shape and horns of a male boer goat. It

continued to walk on all four legs, but the thing was huge, and a group of six human-like breasts grew down the front of the creature. The entire thing had turned black, except the eyes, which glowed red. A constant wave of steam rose from it.

We watched as the hellspawn charged at a group of hyena-faced creatures and trampled them to death.

"Hellspawn are some of the best, most powerful pets in the game," Mordecai said. He looked down at Mongo. "No offense. But if she can keep that thing alive, she's gotten it early enough that it'll level pretty high. It'll eventually grow wings and will be the size of a damn dragon."

"Holy shit," I said. "Is it too late to get another one of those biscuits and give it to Donut?"

Mordecai laughed.

I watched in awe as the show aired a quick, fifteen-second montage of Mongo defending Donut. The dinosaur had killed dozens of the street urchin things.

"Good boy. Look, Mongo! You're on TV!" Donut said. The pet jumped up and down. He no longer squeaked. Now he grunted. The amount of enthusiasm he showed was the same, but it no longer had the same effect as before. Having a kitten-sized dinosaur bouncing around you with enthusiasm was cute. Having a mastiff-sized one do the same was not.

I was shown, but only for a few seconds. The show didn't really explain how I'd escaped.

"Don't worry about that, lad," Mordecai said. "Based on your numbers, everyone knows. The actual scene is the property of the *Vengeance of the Daughter* production, which is why they didn't show much."

"I was asleep the whole time." Donut pouted. "They barely showed me at all."

"Sometimes even the side characters need their own episodes," I said. That seemed to mollify her.

While Donut still had many more followers than me, my view count had actually caught up with hers. I wasn't sure which one of

us hit one quadrillion first. I didn't know if she'd noticed this or not. I hoped not.

The announcement wasn't too exciting. Just more of the same old stuff. There seemed to be as many bugs on this floor as they had when the dungeon first opened.

"Just wait until you get to the themed floors," Mordecai said. "It's the equivalent of opening an entire theme park filled with rides and roller coasters without ever having tested a single one of them. Last Borant season, the entire fourth floor was inside of some unseen, living creature, so the crawlers were moving around intestines and whatnot. The floor was open for 20 days, and the creature they created for the level ended up with a fast-moving bacterial infection that spread over the entire dungeon. The walls started caving in on themselves and filling with gore, all unintentional. That didn't play so well with the viewers, so they probably won't do that again."

The woman orc who'd been drinking alone approached our table. She was an older woman, and she swayed on her feet. She instantly reminded me of an orcish, well-muscled version of Agatha. Her medieval-style shirt was stained red with blood, making her look like a butcher who'd forgotten to wear her apron to work. She wasn't the same skin tone as the Maestro. The tooltip simply called her a Level-5 Orc NPC. Her name was GumGum.

"I see you're adventurers," GumGum said, leaning in. "I really need your help."

"No. Fuck off," Mordecai said. "Not tonight."

"You don't have to be rude about it," the woman said and she turned away. She staggered back toward her table.

"What was that?" I asked.

"A quest," he said. "Pubs like these will always be filled with people giving garbage quests. And we're not doing any more quests on this floor. If you look on your minimap, there's probably a little star on top of her icon."

"There's not," I said. "It's just a white dot."

"Well, not all quests show up on the map. Now we're all going to go to bed."

"Fine," I said, watching the woman settle back into her chair. The orc hung her head low, put her face into her hands, and she began to weep.

At this point, one might expect that I waited for Mordecai to go to bed, and then I sneaked out of my room, went to GumGum the orc, and asked her what she needed help with.

One would be right. Almost.

The moment we went to our room, I couldn't stop thinking about her. It was stupid, especially after Mordecai had explicitly told us to just leave it, but I couldn't get the sight of the woman crying out of my mind. I told Donut I needed to use the restroom, and I went back out there.

Mordecai sat at the bar, drinking and chatting with Fitz the barkeep. GumGum was gone.

"She left already," Mordecai said after I returned from the restroom, having pretended I used it. "Look, kid. Let me give you some advice. I want this to sink deep into your thick skull. You can't save them all. The people running this, they know who you are. They will always be baiting you. Worry about yourself first. If you truly want to help others, your best bet is to get as strong and as deep as possible."

I didn't respond. I returned to the room. Donut peered down at me from the top of the cat tree.

"Did you get the quest?" she asked.

"Holy shit, am I that predictable?" I asked.

"Sometimes," she said. And we went to sleep.

The first thing we did the next day was—finally—start to check out some of the town's shops.

"Here's today's plan," Mordecai said. "You shop. Then you spend the day grinding. You find a neighborhood boss. You kill it. You get back here before dark. Afterward, if you're not too tired, then we go to the club. You do *not* go to the Desperado Club without an escort."

"Yay!" Donut said. "Today is going to be the best day ever. Shopping and clubbing! And then tomorrow we go on another interview."

"One thing at a time, Donut," I said as we opened the door of the shop. This place was called Lucky's General Goods. A bell tinkled as I pushed the door. Dust swirled, and I sneezed.

Entering Shop.

Mostly-empty shelves spread along the walls. Behind the counter stood a skyfowl. The level-30's name was Edge Dancer. He clicked his beak at us, blinking rapidly.

"Okay," Mordecai said. "This is a general store and it's the most common kind of shop you'll find. The more specialized type shops, like the armorers and potion shops are usually only found in settlements. You will find random shops such as this one scattered around the dungeons from now on. Carl, your Charisma is pretty good, and you will usually get a good price. But you are no Donut. Always leave the negotiations to her. She will get you the best prices, and she will sell your items for the most."

"That is because I am a master shopper," Donut said, strolling into the shop. She looked about with disdain. "This place doesn't have the greatest selection, does it?"

"You've never been in a store before in your life," I said. I picked up a familiar item off the shelf. It was a coconut. A tooltip popped up, though it was shaped differently than usual.

Coconut.

21 Gold.

This is food. I think. Humans do something with it. Dunno, really.

"This is important," Mordecai said. "As you can see, the descriptions of the items in the shops are *not* provided by the system AI. The shopkeepers are responsible for labeling everything. The rules state that they can't lie, so they can't sell you something

labeled as a health potion when it's really poison. But they are allowed to exaggerate. And they will. Luckily for you, Donut, you will usually be able to get an accurate description out of the shopkeeper as long as your Charisma is higher than their level. You'll want to practice your haggling and negotiation skills each time you enter a shop. Once you train it enough, most items will give you a warning if the description is too overstated."

"I take offense, demon," Edge Dancer said. The eagle glared at Mordecai. "If you knew the skyfowl people, you would know we never cheat our customers."

Mordecai laughed. "Skyfowl merchants will *always* try to cheat those without wings," he said. "My people can be a bit xenophobic. And they'll act indignant when you call them out on it."

Edge Dancer started to say something, but he abruptly snapped his beak shut when Donut jumped on the counter. "You are a handsome fellow," Donut said. "I don't think I've ever seen a bird as strong-looking as you."

The eagle stood straighter. "Thank you, your majesty. Is there anything I can help you with today?"

From there, we proceeded to sell a handful of the non-magical, useless crap from our inventory. These guys didn't have unlimited money like some merchants did in games. We had to move to five different general stores to get rid of most of our stuff. Mordecai told us to hold onto the jugs of moonshine, but our extra weapons and random items went to the merchants. Donut was, indeed, a master negotiator. While she ordered the pub owners around like indentured servants, she treated the shopkeepers with pure sweetness and sugar, and they loved her for it.

"Is that the best we can do today, sweetie?" she asked yet another skyfowl proprietor. This one's name was Talon Strong. He looked thoughtful as he considered buying a pile of spears we'd looted on the first floor from the raccoon-headed scat thugs.

When Donut had used her Character Actor skill to choose the Artist Alley Merchant class as the one to emulate on this floor, it had come with multiple skills and benefits, including a huge discount for buying items. Unfortunately, because of the way the Character Actor

skill worked, she hadn't received the extra discount. She did, however, receive the extra 15% one received from selling items. And she flexed that skill to the best of her ability. She was in her element.

"I can give you an extra five for the lot," Talon Strong said.

"You're the best!" Donut said, and the eagle preened.

"I'm starting to think you actually had this all planned out when you picked that class," I whispered as we walked from the store.

"Of course, I did," Donut said. "I knew we'd be selling everything on this floor, so I picked that merchant class. Miss Beatrice didn't call me Princess Money Bags for nothing."

"I'm pretty sure it was 'Princess Money Pit.' She called you that because we spent more on you than we did for our rent."

"Well, obviously that investment paid off, didn't it Carl?"

"Think of general stores like 7-11s," Mordecai said, interrupting. We now had a pool of about 50,000 gold, which apparently was pretty good. "They're convenience stores. You buy from them as a last resort. They're fine to sell stuff to because they'll take almost anything, but even with your discounts, you'll pay three times as much for the basics. So, if you want potions, go to a potion store. You want spells, go to a spell store. If you can find one. Also, some guilds will sell stuff, too."

This particular town didn't have a spell store. There were dozens and dozens of places, but most of it was useless to us. We needed magical gear and items to increase Donut's constitution, but there just wasn't any of that here. There *were* several potion stores, however, and Mordecai made me purchase 10K gold worth of alchemical supplies.

We bought one additional item. We spent 15,000 gold on a magical pet carrier for Mongo. Neither Donut nor Mongo were too hot on the idea, but Mordecai pointed out that her pet wasn't properly resting at night. It appeared the dinosaur now felt obligated to protect us in our sleep, despite being in a safe room, and it was negatively affecting his stats. The carrier would allow him to rest. Plus, Mordecai added, no pets were allowed in the Desperado Club.

They had a “playroom” for familiars, but their safety wasn’t guaranteed. Donut finally relented.

The device was actually kind of cool. It was a square brown box the size of a Rubik’s Cube. It had a symbol etched on the outside that looked like a fire hydrant. When Donut pulled it from her inventory, she could activate it, and Mongo would get zapped in there. He’d sleep and regain his strength while he was in the cube. She could call him back out with a press of the button.

“Later, you may get a mount that works in a similar fashion,” Mordecai said. “When merchants sell mounts, they usually come with a rudimentary pet carrier.”

“What’s the difference between a mount and a pet?” I asked.

“Some pets can be both, but plain mounts tend to have low life points and little to no personality,” Mordecai said. “You can have as many mounts as you want, though they’re usually expensive. And you have to feed them. Mounts don’t level or grow stronger.”

After we shopped, Mordecai walked us to the edge of town. “No quests. No elites. Kill mobs. When you find a boss, make sure it’s a neighborhood boss and nothing bigger. Keep in touch. Get back here before dark.”

“Easy,” Donut said.

And believe it or not, the next several hours were relatively uneventful. We found a cluster of these creatures that looked like a cross between floating squids and umbrellas. They had a psionic attack, but because of our high charisma, we weren’t affected. They were called brain boilers, and they were upgraded versions of the mind horrors we’d briefly faced on the second floor. They moved slowly and were easy to kill. A few of them dropped ink pouches as loot, which Mordecai got pretty excited about.

I alternated between punching and kicking attacks. Mostly punching with these guys. Mongo easily ripped them to shreds, and we had to hold him back as he’d become a serious experience hog.

Donut alternated between her *Magic Missile* attacks, *Second Chance*, and *Clockwork Triplicate*. I would also cast *Fear*, but the spell wasn't too effective against them.

I did manage to level my Iron Punch skill up to ten with the gauntlet bonus. The tenth level of the skill added something called the Breadbasket effect. Basically, if I landed a solid blow to the mob, there was a 10% chance to stun it for several seconds.

The neighborhood boss fight could've gone south pretty quickly, but thanks to Donut's new Acute Ears skill, we knew it was lurking around the corner when we approached. The monster was called the Dispenser, and it looked like a giant manta ray thing. It blended in with the entire side of a building and tried to drop on us as we passed. We'd been ready, and Donut attacked with two reanimated Brain Boilers. Once it'd peeled itself off the wall, we had a clockwork Mongo run at it with a stick of dynamite in each hand. The whole fight lasted less than a minute.

The real Mongo screamed in dismay at the suicide attack, but Donut managed to keep the pet under control. We added that move to our playbook. We called it "The Boomy Boy." As long as I could keep my supply of dynamite healthy, it was a super-effective anti-boss attack.

By the end of the fight, Donut had leveled up to 16. I was still at 18, but teetering on 19. Mongo hit level 11. We'd all nudged a few of our skills up, as well.

As we turned back toward the town, I spied a single white dot of an NPC and a large group of X's on the map one block over. This was just outside of town, right past the wall. As I watched, the white dot disappeared into town and then returned a few moments later. A new X appeared next to the NPC. Just on the other side of the fence, within the city limits, stood a pair of guards. So whatever this was, it couldn't be something too untoward.

"Let's go check that out," I said.

"It smells really bad," said Donut. Mongo grunted in agreement. We turned down the street and edged our way toward the NPC.

"Oh, Carl," Donut said as we got closer. "Did you know she would be here?"

"No," I said. "But the system knew we'd be coming this way."

It was GumGum the orc. I watched as the large woman easily tossed a dead body onto a pile of other bodies in the middle of the street. It was a mix of humans, orcs, elves, and dwarves. There were about fifteen of them, all piled on top of one another.

I attempted to examine one of the dead NPCs, but the system helpfully grouped them all together for me.

Pile of Dead Hookers.

Well, isn't this awkward?

Sure enough, all of the corpses appeared to be female. All of them wore provocative clothing. They were all contorted and bent in odd ways, as if the manner of death had been by a giant picking them up and twisting them like dish rags. One of them, a dwarf, didn't appear to have a head at all. The whole pile oozed with mud-like gore.

"So," I said, stepping forward. GumGum startled and whirled on me, "this isn't something you see every day."

"Adventurer," she said. She wiped her hand on her shirt. It left a smear of brown. "I was hoping to catch you on your return today. I spied your party leaving this morning."

"And you thought to greet us with a mountain of rotting prostitutes?" Donut asked. "I'm not sure where you're from, but the cultured amongst us no longer use corpses as icebreakers. Next time maybe just bring Carl a milkshake. He likes milkshakes."

"These are the women I've found today," GumGum said. "Something is killing them, and we don't know what it is. And we don't know who these women are, either. They're not from this town. We find them in the alleys, scattered throughout every morning. Most of their blood is removed from their bodies." She wiped her hand on her pants. "But not all the blood. We pile them up outside the gates, and the street urchins take care of them. But we find new ones every day. Sometimes it's just one or two, but sometimes, like last night, it's a lot." GumGum took a deep breath, and I realized she was holding back tears. "It's not right. The skyfowl don't care as long we move the bodies out. The guards don't

work at night. But these were people, and they're just dead. And I don't know why. Can you help me?"

"Uh oh," Donut said just before the notification came.

New Quest. The Sex Workers Who Fell from the Heavens.

Prostitutes. Escorts. Street Walkers. Ladies of the Night.

It doesn't matter how you describe them because these chicks are dead. Very dead. And every morning, several more of them appear scattered throughout the village. Nobody knows who they are or where they come from. Find out why.

***Reward*: You will receive a Silver Quest Box.**

"Silver?" Donut said. "The last quest was a gold box."

"The last one involved a couple elites and a city boss. This one must be easier," I said. I leaned in and examined one of the dead women. This one was a human. She had distinctive wounds on her shoulders. I'd almost missed it because her entire body had been twisted so her pelvis faced the wrong way. The orc next to her held the same injuries. All the pale bodies seemed to glow in the dying light of the day.

"Well, Mordecai is going to be upset," Donut said.

"We'll see what we can do," I said to GumGum before we turned back into town. After we passed through the gates, I thought of what Mordecai had said the previous evening. *You can't save them all.*

"Don't worry," I said to Donut once GumGum was out of earshot. "We had a good day today. I'm not going to let it get derailed by a quest."

"That's what you said last time," said Donut.

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[15]

Entering the Desperado Club

The first room of the loud, garish Desperado Club was open to the general public. It was packed.

The exterior of the building looked straight out of 1920s New York City. It was all square, concrete columns with a semi-circular relief punctuated by triangular, sun-like rays, similar to the construction style of the top of the Empire State Building. The club took up an entire street and rose a good six stories into the air. The glowing, neon knife logo spun above that.

"This place seems much too big for this town," I said as we stepped past a bored-looking rock monster bouncer and into the main room.

"There are two main clubs in the Over City," Mordecai said. "The Desperado Club and Club Vanquisher. Generally, once you have access to one, you're not allowed in the other. This one is easier to get into. Club Vanquisher is more like a country club where old clerics sit on leather chairs and smoke pipes and occasionally tell racist jokes. This place is like your Las Vegas Strip mixed in with Mardi Gras and the discos of the 1970s."

"This sounds much better," Donut said. She did that little neck bob before she jumped up on my shoulder, and I knew she was overly excited.

"Oh, believe me, it is," Mordecai said.

"I want to try one of Miss Beatrice's favorite drinks. Either a Sex on the Beach or a Long Island Iced Tea. Or that one. What is it, Carl? She always says it's her Kryptonite."

"A Dirty Shirley," I said.

"Yeah, I want to try that one."

"Cats don't drink cocktails," I said.

"Cats don't shoot lasers from their eyes, either, but here we are, Carl. Mama needs a night off."

We followed Mordecai as we walked through the busy pub. Multiple NPCs and actual crawlers littered the room. It felt as if all eyes were on us. The crawlers watched us. The NPCs stared at Mordecai.

"Mongo would love this place," Donut said wistfully from her perch on my shoulder. The dinosaur had screamed furiously when Donut had pulled out the pet carrier.

"He probably would," I said. I eyed one of the burly, rock-skinned bouncers standing in the corner. "But we aren't going to find out."

"This first room is exclusive to this town," Mordecai said. "Any local can come here. You do not need a pass. Crawlers who've yet to obtain access can come here and pick up quests to win themselves a tattoo."

We approached a red, glittering door at the back of the room. We pushed our way through and found ourselves in a small vestibule leading to another door. Sitting in a chair in front of this second door was a lizard-faced monster. This was the same race of creature as that crawler we'd seen on the recap show, the one with the shotgun.

Clarabelle – Crocodilian. Level 40.

Employee of the Desperado Club.

This is a Non-Combatant NPC.

Crocodilians are an intelligent, thick-skinned, semi-aquatic race. They tend not to be the sharpest tools in the shed, but they're certainly more intelligent than their

smaller cousins, the Troglodytes. They are inclined to work as muscle or enforcers for both legitimate and not-so-legitimate organizations throughout the universe.

"Hello, Mordecai," Clarabelle said. "You know that disguise can't fool me."

"It's not a disguise when I have no control over it," Mordecai said drily. Then a huge smile spread across his face. He leaned forward and kissed the bouncer on both cheeks. "What's it like in there?"

"Dead. But there's more people than there were last night." The bouncer looked at me and then Donut in turn. "I've seen you two on the recap show. Where's your pet?"

"Mongo?" Donut asked. "You know about Mongo? He'd be so excited to meet a fan! He's in a pet carrier. Do you want me to take him out?"

"No. Do *not* let him out. I'm glad you have a carrier. The pet room is currently out of order. We don't want another incident like last night. I see you two both have a pass. The bar and dance floor are open. The casino isn't ready yet, but you can probably find a card game if you look hard enough. We'll open it up in a few days."

"Thanks, Clarabelle," Mordecai said, patting her on the shoulder. He tossed her a gold coin. We went through the door.

"Holy shit," I said a moment later, gazing upon the room. I had to shout to be heard. "This is considered 'dead?'"

There had to be 200 people of all shapes and sizes in the first room. Pounding dubstep filled the nightclub. Seizure-inducing lights flashed. The floor shook. Smoke rose from all corners.

Mordecai made a circle in the air with his finger, drawing a halo over himself. A translucent bubble formed over his head, making him look like he was wearing Zev's spacesuit helmet. He motioned for me to do the same. I twirled my finger in the air, and a circle formed, covering my head. Donut also repeated the gesture, waving her paw in the air.

The moment the bubble formed, about 95% of the pounding music filtered out. I could still hear it, but it was now background noise. A new sound emerged. I looked about, and a small portion of the people in the club had the bubbles on their heads. I could hear

them talking amongst themselves, as if we were in a moderately-busy cafe.

"There are a few types of privacy bubbles," Mordecai said. "This is the most basic. You can talk to anyone in the room without having to shout. Most clubs give access to this or similar spells."

"Weird," I said. I poked at the bubble with my finger, and it popped. The pounding music returned, startling me. I quickly reformed it.

"This is the main room of the Desperado Club," Mordecai said. Several rooms led off to different areas. Most of the rooms were labeled with floating neon signs, all in that same 1920s, speakeasy-style font. The whole place gave off a retro-futuristic, *Blade Runner* vibe. Of the 200 people filling the dance floor, almost all of them were NPCs. I did see a few bewildered-looking crawlers wandering about. My map also showed the distinctive white dot with a cross, indicating a few elites that trawled the dance floor.

"This room," Mordecai continued, "exists on a different plane as the outside of the club. It's the same thing as my guildhall. The moment you come into the members-only area, you are in the same room as everyone in all the club locations throughout the entire level. So these crawlers you see come from all corners of the Over City. But when you leave, you'll come out where you came in. You cannot use the club as a fast travel location. Usually." We approached a booth. The four elven NPCs sitting at the table jumped up. They popped their bubbles and moved to the dance floor, allowing us to sit down.

"Most of these NPCs are bots," Mordecai said. "The club will always appear as if it's full of people, but that's just an illusion. If it's a young, buff or beautiful half-naked creature it's likely a bot. They're not even real NPCs. You can dance with them. You can even bang them if you have the gold. But they can't hold more than a rudimentary conversation, and they don't exist outside the club. The moment a real NPC or crawler enters through the door, one of the bots disappears, and vice versa."

"Weird," I repeated, looking about. I counted about ten crawlers and three elites. Each of the three elites were engaged in

conversation with crawlers. I felt my hackles rise at that.

Donut jumped to stand on the table. “How did you get in here so easily?” she asked. “Do you also have a tattoo?”

Mordecai nodded. “I had a pass early on. They know me here now.”

A blue-skinned woman NPC in a privacy bubble came to stand over the table. She didn’t have a name or level floating over her. It just said **Waitress**. “Drinks tonight?”

“I want a Dirty Shirley,” Donut said. “And you have to put it in a bowl.”

“Certainly, your majesty,” the waitress said.

“Do you have earth alcohol?” I asked.

“Absolutely, hun. What can I get you?”

“Bring me a bottle of bourbon.”

The woman raised an eyebrow. “That can either be a ten gold request or a 1,000 gold one. That ain’t covered by your drink coupons.”

“Let’s keep it around 50.”

She nodded. My eyes caught the haze of smoke filling the large room. It flashed in the light. It didn’t smell right, but I felt a familiar tug in my chest. “Wait, do you sell cigarettes here?”

“Absolutely not,” Donut said. “He’s not allowed to have cigarettes.”

The waitress shook her head. “I’m sorry, hun. We don’t have earth tobacco. We have blitz sticks, however. Would you like me to send a pharmacist over?”

I had no idea what a blitz stick was, and the last thing I needed was a new addiction.

“No, that’s okay,” I said, sighing.

“Actually, who’s the pharmacist on duty?” Mordecai asked. “Is it Quint?”

“Quint is working, yes.”

“Send him over,” Mordecai said. “And I’ll take a flagon of Empress's Mead.”

“Very well,” she said, wandering off.

"What the hell is a pharmacist?" I asked. "And what's a blitz stick?"

"Oh, he's just a drug dealer," Mordecai said. "And stay away from blitz sticks. They're hallucinogens, and they're highly addictive. *Magically* addictive. You don't want that."

"Then why are we summoning a pharmacist?"

"He's an old friend," Mordecai said.

"Are we safe here?" I asked as we waited.

"This place isn't a saferoom, though the security here is pretty good. But only in this room. This place has a lot of nooks and crannies. The bouncers aren't in the other areas, except the casino."

I looked up at the neon signs leading off to other areas. Three signs were unlit, but I could still read them. One read **Casino**, one read **The Hunting Grounds**, and the third was **Guild-O-Rama**. Of the lit signs, they were **Bitches**, **Penis Parade**, **Jobs**, **The Silk Road**, and **Restrooms**.

There was a ninth door, but there was no sign over it. A rock monster guarded the entrance. I watched as a waitress emerged, and I realized it was the room to the back.

I'd noticed the Bitches and Penis Parade signs first, and I'd assumed they led to the restrooms until I saw the actual restroom sign. "So, what are these places?" I asked.

"Bitches is the female strip club and brothel. Penis Parade is the same thing, but for those who prefer dudes. Don't go in either of those places, especially not on this floor. You'll get shanked. Plus viewers tend to ridicule the crawlers who go in there."

I immediately thought of that new quest with the prostitutes. Mordecai had just shaken his head when we told him about it, and then he'd told us to ignore it. The quest would go away the moment we left the floor.

"…Jobs is a place to get quests," Mordecai continued. "These tend to be NPC assassinations and theft-themed gigs. The silk road is a marketplace. We'll go in there in a bit. Guild-O-Rama holds several rogue-themed guild rooms, including an explosives guild. There *are* guilds available on this third floor, but the more specialized

ones don't become available until later, so that section isn't open yet."

"Wait, will the Desperado Club be available on the lower levels? Like four and five? And are those really stairs to the Hunting Grounds?"

"Yes, and yes," Mordecai said. "But the club will be harder to find on the fourth and fifth floors. When you go in, you'll find yourself back here in this room, just like my guildhall. Those stairs to the Hunting Grounds open up once you hit the sixth floor. You can only come back up to this floor once you get to the sixth floor. That Hunting Grounds level is much bigger than this one. Something else interesting happens once the crawlers hit that floor. I'll explain that later."

I watched as a group of three human crawlers were led away into the Bitches room by an elephant-headed elite who stood about seven-feet tall. I had the urge to get up and tell them to stay the fuck away when the waitress returned, pharmacist in tow.

The waitress placed our drinks in front of us. I received a glass and a bottle that was suspiciously missing a label. Donut received a bowl with a bright-red vodka drink. A trio of maraschino cherries floated within. She sniffed at it and made a face.

I barely noticed our drinks. Instead, I stared at the small, floating drug dealer, Quint.

The top half of Quint was that of a sharp-toothed, beady-eyed opossum. The bottom half of the creature was a whirling dervish, like he was halfway being swallowed by a miniature tornado. It twisted and turned on the floor, and I could feel the wind blowing off the small cyclone. Unlike the waitress, this guy had a description.

Quint – Level 75 Half-Djinn, Half-Garbage Scowl

Desperado Club Pharmacist

This is a non-combatant NPC

Half-Djinns are common amongst the Hunting Grounds and other forested levels of *Dungeon Crawler World*. Nobody knows for certain why there are so many hybrid Djinns out there, but one theory suggests that a rather ill-timed expletive is the cause of the population explosion. It

is posited that a person in control of a Djinn's lamp and the resulting three wishes once exclaimed, "Fuck this forest" or "Fuck this level" or "Fuck you all" or some iteration thereof, and the enslaved genie took that as a challenge. As a result, thousands of half-Djinn, half-forest creatures roam the dungeon. Only a few are intelligent. Only a few are sane. They are all dangerous little fuckers.

If you kill too many of them, rumor has it their daddy may come looking for you.

"I have lost count of the years, old friend," Quint said, looking Mordecai up and down. He had an unexpectedly deep and growly voice, like he was a British street kid trying too hard to sound like Batman. "I thought you were supposed to be free several seasons ago. I was a little sad you hadn't come to say goodbye."

"Hello, Quint," Mordecai said. "I'm on manager duty. This is Princess Donut, and she is my ward. This other fellow is Carl, who is in Donut's party."

"Pleased to meetcha both," Quint said. "Mordecai here used to be one of my best customers in the early days. So, a manager, huh? That's pretty lucky. I'm jealous. It'd be nice to be immortal for once." He stopped, looking up into the air. "Oh shuddup, I ain't telling 'em nothing they don't already know."

"Quint here is a former crawler like myself," Mordecai said. "He actually chose this as a race. He's from a… an orcish world, right? I don't remember. Wait, don't answer. I don't want you to get in any more trouble from the AI."

The drug dealer shook his opossum head. "Being a manager is a sweet gig, I gotta tell you. No AI breathing down your back." He looked up in the air. "Because that nanny can be a right bitch sometimes." He pointed a clawed finger at my chest. "You two don't bother trying to make a deal on the tenth floor, you hear me? If I could do it again, I'd push my way through to floor eleven. But you, pretty girl," he said to Donut, "you got yourself the most knowledgeable manager in this game. You listen to what he says, okay?"

Donut looked at Quint through half-slitted eyes. “Who are you again? And why are you floating?” She looked at me. “Carl, is that a talking anteater?”

Ah shit.

“You’ve taken like two licks of that drink, and you’re drunk already?” I asked, examining her properties.

“I didn’t like it. I just ate the cherries. Vodka is gross.” She reached down and lapped up some more of the drink. “I am absolutely not drinking this bile.” She took yet another sip.

“Don’t worry. Quint here has a potion to snap her out of it,” Mordecai said. “Don’t you?”

“I sure do, mate,” Quint said. “Need anything else? My menu is mostly the same. I’m more expensive than those gits over in the Silk Road market, but my stuff is better.”

“Your stuff is definitely better,” Mordecai agreed. “But Donut’s charisma is 76, and she has a merchant class, which means we’ll be buying it at a quarter of the price you sell it for.” Mordecai, ever the teacher, turned to me and said, “Charisma bonuses don’t work on half-genies.”

“It’s Djinn. Not genie, mate,” Quint said. “You know how I feel about that.”

“I’ll tell you what,” Mordecai said. “You still offer the starter kit? And you up for a trade?”

Quint’s beady eyes grew even smaller. “I do indeed. But I wasn’t expecting anyone to be able to afford one until the fifth or sixth floor. What can you possibly have to trade this early?”

Mordecai sent me a quick, private note. A moment later two bottles of Rev-Up Moonshine appeared on the table. I’d been using them quite a bit in battle, but I had a stash set aside to sell. I still had 23 bottles left, not including the two on the table. I also had another ten boom jugs left in my inventory.

“No way,” Quint said, sniffing the bottle. “That Krakaren bitch said no more of the stuff was being made this season.”

“They *were* making it,” Mordecai said. “And Carl and Donut here are the reason why it was shut down. They have the last of it.”

That wasn't exactly true. At least one other crawler out there had gotten their hands on some. I hadn't received any royalties since the first few coins, but it meant someone had come across a few bottles and had made boom jugs.

"Make it four bottles, and we have a deal," Quint said.

"We'll give you three, and you also give me the potion to stop the world from being wavy," Donut said sleepily. I hadn't even realized she'd been paying attention. "Oh, my word. Carl, I think I might vomit. You didn't warn me about this." She took another drink and then started growling at the bowl.

"Deal," Quint said.

"Wait, what the hell are we buying?" I asked.

"A starter kit," Quint said. "It's a suitcase filled with everything you need to start your own pharmaceutical empire. You'll be the dungeon's next kingpin, mate. Just don't be selling in my territory." He shot at me with a pair of finger guns.

"Trust me," Mordecai said. "I ain't buying all this stuff for giggles. I'm putting together a library for you."

"You need a table?" Quint asked as we made the trade. He had a merchant-style inventory, similar to my own. The suitcase was actually a large chest. I had to move my bottle out of the way for it to fit on the table. It was filled to the brim with chemicals and herbs. Mordecai opened it up and started sifting through it.

"An alchemy table?" I asked. "We already have one."

"Suit yourself. You need anything else? Word on the street is you're looking for earth tobacco. I don't have any right now, but I'll keep an eye out for you."

"Hey," I said to the opossum as Mordecai rummaged through the box. "What happened last night? The bouncer said there was an incident with a pet or something?"

"Oh yeah," Quint said. "It was crazy. This woman came in here. A crawler like you. I can't remember what her race was called. It was something I'd never seen before. She was human, a real looker but with one goat leg. Anyway, she had two pet dogs. She put them in the playroom, and they went bonkers. The monsters killed two attendants plus another pet, and then they broke out onto the dance

floor, snapping and biting and snarling. The bouncers moved in, but their owner cast a spell that froze the whole room. I've never seen anything like it. A crawler from the third floor casting magic that powerful. Anyway, while the room was frozen, she stole a couple bottles of tequila from behind the counter while her dogs made a chew toy of a few dancers. Then she took out a mace from her inventory and splattered the brains in of an elite gnoll who'd been talking to her. Luckily she didn't kill any of the real bouncers. You should've seen this place afterwards. The playroom ain't gonna open back up for a week. She got away, but she ain't coming back. Her membership has been revoked, thank the gods."

"Holy shit," I said. "That's Lucia Mar."

"Those dogs sound just awful," Donut said, her voice slurring. "Bitch-ass rottweilers. Almost as bad as cocker spaniels. Think they're so smart."

Goddamnit, Donut. "Don't be saying that stuff," I said.

"I don't see any brin root," Mordecai said, his head still stuffed in the chest.

"Yeah, it's hard to come by," said Quint. "I gave you two vials of bujold sap instead. It's more stable anyway."

Mordecai grunted and shut the case. He nodded, and I pulled out a third bottle of moonshine. They quickly disappeared as I pulled in the large case. An anti-alcohol "Hair of the Dog" potion appeared, along with three licorice sticks.

"On the house," Quint said, grinning, indicating the three sticks. "It's not your earth tobacco, but you might want to give it a try."

Blitz Stick.

It's like candy, but for your mind. If you eat this, your Intelligence temporarily rises by five points. If you smoke it, there's a 15% chance your Intelligence will permanently rise by 1.

There might be a side effect or two. Or three.

Before Mordecai could object, I pulled the sticks into my inventory. I had no intention of using one, but you never knew what might be useful. Donut took the hair of the dog. She immediately

sobered up. She looked down thoughtfully at the still half-full bowl of her alcoholic Shirley Temple. I pulled it out of her reach.

She looked as if she might object, but then she sat up straight. "Carl, Carl, I just got a notification. It says I can now open my fan box!"

"Okay, we'll do it when we're done here," I said. A moment later, I received the same notice.

Mordecai and Quint chatted some more, but I could tell Mordecai was done with the conversation. The real reason he'd wanted to come here was obvious. He was collecting a war chest of potion-making supplies, all in preparation for the fourth floor when we would be able to set him up with an alchemy table.

I skipped the glass and drank from my bottle of cheap bourbon while Donut popped her noise bubble and moved to the dance floor. The bot NPCs laughed and clapped as the small cat leaped around the floor. A large ogre NPC hopped around her, and she jumped to his shoulder, and they twirled about the floor for several minutes, both of them laughing hysterically.

Mordecai and I watched for a moment, neither of us saying anything.

"Why were you so upset when Donut chose you as a manager?" I asked Mordecai. "Are we really that awful?"

Mordecai didn't answer at first. He looked down into his drink. "It's not you," he finally said. "It's complicated. When I'm done being your manager, I'll still be free. I will get my stipend, and I will make my way across the universe."

I felt relieved. I hadn't even realized it until he'd said it, but I'd been thinking perhaps we'd inadvertently sabotaged his efforts at getting free.

"But that's what you said would happen anyway," I said.

"I know," Mordecai said. He looked up and gave me a grim smile. "Like I said, it's complicated and it has nothing to do with you."

"That dude said you're immortal now. Is that true?"

"Sort of," Mordecai said. "You know how Zev wears that ridiculous armor when she visits? It's because there is no protection for staff on the first three floors. Nobody knows why. It's likely a cost thing.

But starting on the fourth floor, the system-based protection kicks on. Not for you, of course. For the employees. And the tourists. Plus a few select NPCs, including the managers."

"So, it's like being in a saferoom, but everywhere?"

"No," Mordecai said. "In the saferooms, you're protected from attacks, and those who attack you are punished. You are kept from being injured. This system-wide protection is something different. It's both better and worse. It's worse because you can still be wounded, and you can still feel pain, and you can still die. It's better, though, because when you do die under system protection, you don't really perish. You're just kicked from the game. Your body is transferred out of the dungeon. Before, as just a guildmaster, I wouldn't be offered any sort of security. It's just part of the deal. Nor am I protected right now, not for the remainder of this level. But starting on the fourth floor, managers such as myself are given a protection package. It's the same thing the tourists playing Faction Wars will have on the ninth level. I can still be killed, but I won't really be dead. I'll just be kicked from the game. So as far as you and Donut are concerned, my immortality is irrelevant."

"But why are managers protected when guildmasters aren't? That doesn't make any sense," I said. "I would think it'd be the opposite."

He shrugged. "In the early days, managers were allowed to fight alongside their wards. And when they died, they'd become available again on the next floor. That only lasted a season or two. Now, if I die as a manager I'll be done for the season. And as long as Donut makes it to the fourth floor, my obligation will also be done. I'll be free to go. They don't protect the other NPCs, like the guildmasters or the merchants. Again, it's a cost thing. There's a whole lot of us. Of them. I think some bosses might be protected, because sometimes you have to face bigger versions later on. But that's it."

Oh shit. "So, you can step in front of a murder dozer on the next floor and be done with all this?"

"Yep," he said. "Don't worry, though. They incentivize us not to do that. The longer Donut survives, the more money I earn as a bonus. It's written into the rules. The stipend I receive as a

guildmaster is next to nothing. The money I get as a manager is significantly higher. The better you do, the more money I receive when I'm free. Every level past nine is just an obscene amount of credits." He sighed, watching Donut. Her purple tiara glittered in the flashing lights of the dance floor.

I kept coming back to my first question. Why was he upset about being chosen as a manager, then? And why did Odette know he was going to be pissed? I was missing something, something important, but I could tell he would broach no more discussion on the matter. Not now.

"Let's go check out the Silk Road Market," he said abruptly. "The recap show is about to start, and they'll stop the music for that. We'll want to be out of here before the second half of the show. If they show you two on the program, the bots will swarm us, asking us for autographs and to dance. If that happens, we'll never get Princess Donut out of here."

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The Silk Road was set up like a farmer's market. It was a long, mostly-empty room with a single row of stalls. An eclectic mix of items filled the tables, but there was room for five or six more rows of booths.

"This room is mirrored down on the next floor," Mordecai said as we entered. Donut sat on my shoulder, bouncing her head to the music that still pulsed through the wall. "Eventually both this market and the next one down will be packed with merchants. Not too many are out yet."

We walked past shops selling black, bubbling potions and round, magical items called "Spider Shields" that cost 200,000 gold. An eclectic mix of races manned the booths, from short goblins to tall, robed figures with four sets of pincers.

A single booth sat in the back of the room, surrounded by five or six empty spaces. I knew exactly what the booth sold as we approached. Multiple notifications floated in the air over the items on the merchant's tables.

"There's a double-sized booth normally set up next door to that one, but it won't appear until the fourth floor. Those guys sell trap supplies. In the meantime, I wanted to make sure you were aware this was here," Mordecai said. "The proprietor is a little odd, but she's harmless. Now give me 500 gold so I can check out that alchemist over there while you browse." He paused. "You two need

to make a good impression on this woman because you'll be seeing a lot of each other."

This store was called **Hobgobs and Boom Sticks**. I examined the proprietor.

Pustule. Hobgoblin – Level 30.

She was the first living hobgoblin I'd seen face to face. She stood about six feet tall, and she looked mostly like the hobgoblin sample I'd seen during race selection: a large, muscular goblin that got clobbered by the ugly stick. She had an open sore on her cheek that bubbled with black and green ooze. The pus ran off her face, down her shoulder, and stained her shirt, which was a threadbare, pink graphic tee featuring a unicorn wearing sunglasses. She smelled of rot and sickness. I swallowed. I still held the bottle of cheap bourbon in my hand. I took a drink to get the smell out of my sinuses.

"Carl," Donut whispered. "She's ugly. Like really ugly."

"She also has excellent hearing," the hobgoblin said, her voice surprisingly feminine. I winced. "Are you in the market for explosives tonight?"

Her tables held multiple boxes of both goblin dynamite and hobgoblin dynamite, along with smoke bombs, detonators, and several odds and ends I'd never before seen, like flat, pancake-like explosives that were basically claymore mines. The yield and stability of the mines was impressive, though they cost 5,000 gold each.

She also sold barrels of gunpowder and a few other chemicals, most of which I already had plenty of. A case of goblin dynamite held 25 sticks and cost 500 gold. The hobgoblin sticks were 20 for 2,000, which was highway robbery.

"Two questions," I said. "Do you sell smaller explosives? Preferably ball-shaped? Also, do you have smoke bombs that don't suck?"

She laughed. "Yes to both questions, though I don't have it all in stock today. Goblin smoke bombs are crap. They don't understand the chemistry, so what you get is a lot of smoke in a small cone for a short amount of time. They're good in enclosed spaces, but if there's any ventilation, you might as well just pull your dick out and point at it." She laughed at her own nonsensical joke. There was an edge of

crazy to that laugh, and I suddenly felt uneasy. "A hobgoblin smoke curtain works much better and is inexpensive, but I don't have any right now. I normally carry round bombs. Hob-lobbers. Both impact-enchanted and fused. I only have a case of the fused ones in tonight. Yield is one-eighth a hobgoblin stick, or half of a goblin stick. It packs a punch, if you're interested. I once watched my mother bite the head off of a vorpal muskrat. She said she did it to teach the warlord a lesson, but I'm pretty sure there was another reason."

She'd added that last part without pausing, as if it was just a natural part of the conversation.

Donut: CARL, THIS LADY IS CRAZY.

I decided it was for the best to just ignore that last part. "Okay, so, does impact-enchanted mean what it sounds like?" I asked.

"That's right. Dangerous to use, but Hob-Lobbing Lobbers use them almost exclusively. Don't drop 'em. Otherwise they're pretty stable. The fused ones work like hobgoblin dynamite. Impact resistant, extra stable. You gotta light the fuse then toss them. Like I said, I have a case of those. 25 for 500 gold."

I sent a quick message to Donut via chat.

"What's your best price on a case of the Hob-lobbers and two cases of regular goblin dynamite?" Donut asked. She jumped down from my shoulder and landed on the table. "Also, we'll be back in a day or so if you promise to bring in some of those smoke curtains."

"Well, two cases of goblin dynamite and the last of the Hob-lobbers would be 1,500 gold," Pustule said pleasantly. "I'm sorry if that price is too *ugly* for you."

"Oh sweetie," Donut said. "I think we got off on the wrong foot. Let's start over."

"Yeah, okay," Pustule said. "We wouldn't want anybody getting off on any feet."

Donut gave me a sidelong glance. "Well, it might be a little late for that. But we do want to buy stuff from you. And I think we'll be buying a lot of stuff from you, so I would really like it if we could be friends?"

"Friends?" Pustule asked. "I was friends with Tiff. The muskrat."

"Yes, friends," Donut said. "Hopefully your mom won't bite my head off, though."

"Oh, she died. It was a vorpal muskrat. You can't bite the head off a vorpal muskrat without doing a little dying in the process."

From there, they went back and forth for a few minutes. Donut did not have the extra discount that automatically came with the Artist Alley Mogul class, but she still had that insane charisma, and she managed to talk the hobgoblin down to 1,000 gold for the lot.

After that transaction was completed, I pulled one of my Boom Jugs from my inventory and placed it on the table. "Out of curiosity, how much would you give me for this?"

She picked it up, examining it carefully. "Nice design," she said. She rubbed the side of the bottle and made a whimpering noise, one I could not decode. Then she pulled the bottle close to her face and licked it. I looked at Donut and mouthed *What the fuck*?

She snapped back to seriousness a moment later. "Your material cost is much too high. If you used a different accelerant, the effect wouldn't be nearly so hot, but your build cost would be 90% cheaper. If you went out there and sold just the plain bottles of moonshine, it'd be worth much more."

"So how much is it worth as it is?"

"I'd probably sell these for about 7,500 gold. I'll give you half that. You looking to sell?"

"Not right now," I said, taking the boom jug back. It was good to have a value reference in my inventory. I resisted the urge to wipe off the wet streak. "Thanks, though. It was good meeting you."

"I'll have more for you tomorrow," she said as we walked toward the exit. "Beware of meteors!" she called.

"She wasn't so bad," Donut said as we left. "She just needs both a dermatologist and a psychiatrist. I can't tell you how relieved I am you didn't pick that race."

"*Excellent* hearing," Pustule called from her booth, about 50 paces away.

"Wow," Donut said, looking over her shoulder. "You'd think someone who blew things up for a living would be deaf."

I pulled a hob-lobber out of my inventory. It was a hair smaller than a baseball, but it was dense and heavy.

"Damn," I said. "Too big for my slingshot."

"Nobody likes your stupid slingshot, Carl," Donut said.

"At your current strength, you can probably just throw this further than a slingshot anyway," Mordecai said, coming to walk beside us. He handed me a pile of herbs and vials. "That's what the Hob-Lobbing Lobbers do. They're the Hobgoblin equivalent of a Bomb Bard."

We exited the market and hurried through the dance arena, which was now showing the recap episode. All of the dancers sat on the floor, watching the screen. They'd all gone eerily silent, and the scene was disconcerting. The next room with the locals was also displaying the show. A handful of crawlers watched while the other NPCs went about their business, pretending like there was nothing on the screen.

"You two go ahead," Mordecai said, eying the bar. "I'll catch up in a bit."

"You'll catch up whether you want to or not as soon as we get back to the inn," I said.

"I know," he said. "I just don't like missing any of the show. Sometimes they hide important stuff in there. I'll see you back at the inn. Go straight there."

We stepped out into the night. Darkness had descended on the city, and the city guards had all disappeared. Still, it wasn't too late, and the streets were still busy. A street vendor selling the cockroach-like scatterers on a stick remained open. It made me think of that first boss, the Hoarder. It seemed like a lifetime ago. Eagles soared above us, filling the sky. Music drifted from the open doors of several pubs.

Still, the alleyways were now dark. Occasionally I'd see a flicker of a red dot. Donut said most of them were small, maybe rats. We

stuck to the center of the street.

The One-Eyed Narwhal was only a few blocks over. We didn't really have to spend the night there again, but I liked that the place was much less busy than most of the other inns. We'd easily catch the end of the episode if we hurried. I hoped they'd show Lucia Mar and her dogs going apeshit in the nightclub. I really wanted to see that.

"There you go, Mongy," Donut said, releasing her pet back out onto the street. He formed right in front of us with a *pop*, like when Zev teleported into the room. "Did you miss your mommy? Mommy missed you!" The pet screeched in outrage and hopped up and down a few times, circling around us, waving his arms.

"Oh, get over it," I said. I pulled a pet biscuit from my inventory and tossed it at him. He snatched it in midair. He made a growling noise as he chewed, but I could tell he was placated. He then moved to my right side to walk next to me as Donut leaped to my shoulder.

"He really is well-trained," I said. "You've done a good job."

"Of course I have, Carl," Donut said. "I am a product of the pageant circuit, after all. I've had plenty experience watching what does and doesn't work when it comes to teaching obedience. Maybe when this is all over, I can dictate a book on the subject. You can type it all out for me. That reminds me, Zev and I have been talking about writing a new episode of *Gossip Girl* since…"

And that's when Mongo screamed in rage and rushed straight into the dark alley.

"Goddamnit, Mongo!" I bellowed as I turned to chase the dinosaur. "And you stay put!" I yelled up at Donut as we rushed into the alley. "Don't run ahead."

"Mongo! Mongo!" Donut cried as we ran. She cast her *Torch* spell, and the blazing light rose into the air, illuminating the squalid alleyway. This was more a substreet than a real alley, but multiple

tributaries sectioned off of it, and Mongo turned down one such street. A group of red dots appeared along with an X of a corpse.

Shit, shit.

I also smelled fire. Like burning meat.

We passed a pair of stinking rubbish bins. Ahead of us, a group of four figures loomed. Three of them were flying, hovering off the ground. The fourth was humanoid, tall and lean. This one held his hand in the air, and it burned, smoke pouring off it. It was the source of the smell. Mongo squealed and headed straight for the tall creature.

I could also see the corpse. It was GumGum the orc. Her chest had been rent open.

The flying creatures were floating, disembodied female heads. Their long hair flapped about them like sea creatures. What appeared to be the rest of the creatures' organs hung loosely from the hole in the bottom of their necks, all connected with wet, limp tendrils of nerve, artery, and other viscera. Blood dripped freely. The three horrifying monsters screamed at the presence of Donut's light, and they twisted and twirled up into the evening sky, corkscrewing and howling like banshees, their loose intestines and lungs swinging underneath them.

They disappeared into the darkness, but not before their description popped up.

Krasue. Level 16.

Holy crap! These things are terrifying! Who comes up with this shit?

Said to be the undead shell of a woman who lived a life of sin, Krasue roam the dark places, hiding their hideous true form. They are ravenous, and they devour the blood of the unsuspecting. In other words, these things are flying heads who are also vampires. *And*, they bring their organs along because… Well, nobody knows why. Probably just because it's really gross.

You may kill the head and trailing organs to fend her off, but this mob doesn't truly die until you find and destroy the

rest of her corpse. You will not earn experience for killing this mob until it is dead-dead. Not just dead.

Warning: This is a ghost-class mob. They are only injured with magic or magical items.

Mongo squealed and leaped at the remaining figure, the one with the burning hand, but the mob disappeared in a blink…

…and appeared right in front of us.

"The final battle is here!" the creature—an elf—squealed, his voice cracking. He cackled with laughter. His hand stopped trailing smoke. "You may have scared off the krasue, but you will not do the same to me! I have trained my entire life for this moment! I have used dark magic to lure your familiar into my trap! Carl and Donut, blasphemers! Prepare to taste the ultimate death!" His hands started to glow red. "Now watch as I…"

I kicked him in the nuts at the same moment Donut's magic missile slammed into his neck. The elf's head ripped off as he was raised bodily off the ground. I felt my foot shatter his testicles and fracture his pelvis. The dead, now-headless elf rose into the air like a rocket. He splattered onto the ground in a heap, blood showering over us. His head tumbled like a poorly-inflated soccer ball, coming to a stop in front of Mongo, who picked it up and started shaking it back and forth like a squeaky toy.

For a long moment, neither Donut nor I said anything. I slowly turned to look at the cat.

"Who the hell was that?" I asked.

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I EXAMINED THE CORPSE OF THE ELF. I REALLY WISHED I'D DONE IT BEFORE, as the amount of information given was much less once they were dead.

Lootable Corpse. Vincente. City Elf. Level 16. Killed by Crawler Grand Champion Best in Dungeon Princess Donut with an assist by Crawler Royal Bodyguard Carl.

"Ha," Donut said. "I got credit for the kill."

"Well, you did blow his head off. All I did was kick him in the nuts."

"Yeah, that wasn't very manly of you, Carl. I thought nut-kicking was a big no-no amongst guys."

"It's not something I want to make a habit of doing," I said. "But if it works, it works."

Zev: Yes, Carl. Try to avoid that if you can. A few viewers have made some snide comments.

Carl: For fuck's sake. I can really do without the random peanut gallery comments.

Donut: I BET THE SYSTEM AI LIKED IT.

Vicente the city elf had almost 1,500 gold in his inventory. He only held one other item. A scroll, which Donut took. It was for a spell called *Meat Hooks*. It was the spell he'd been casting that had caused Mongo to rush into the alley.

"I knew he was good boy," Donut said. "He'd been summoned. He couldn't help it!" Mongo, still chewing on the elf's head, grunted

in agreement. The spell summoned all nearby carnivorous pet-class monsters away from their owners and to the source of the burning stench.

"You'll want to hold onto that one," I said. "You never know when it might be useful."

"He knew our names," Donut said, looking down at the corpse. "And did you see those gross floating things?"

"Your light scared them away," I said, looking up into the night. "Keep it going."

The elf didn't have anything else in his inventory, but he did wear an oddly familiar shirt. This was a military uniform, and it looked out of place here in this town. It was a black button-up, and had it been blue I would've sworn it was a U.S. Coast Guard ODU, the same type of shirt I'd worn every day on active duty.

"Carl, look," Donut said. "There's a patch on his arm." She peered closely at it. "There's two patches. A sew-on and a heat transfer. The arm one is hand-sewn with a chain stitch. It's good work, but it clearly wasn't made on a schiffli like the nameplate on the breast."

"What?" I said, looking down at the two patches. "What are you talking about? What the hell is a schiffli?"

"Huh," Donut said. "I don't know how I know. A schiffli is a type of embroidery machine. I must've watched a show about it or something."

The patch on the shoulder was in the shape of a shield, and it held a crossed lightning bolt and a magic wand being grasped by a talon with a tree in the background. It looked very much like a typical US military unit patch, but with the text in Syndicate Standard. It read **201st Security Group – Magical Ops**. The second patch was a nameplate. It read Vicente. That was it. There was no grade insignia or anything else on the shirt, including any sort of indicator of what army this 201st Security Group was a part of. That particular missed detail made the shirt look fake, like it was more of a movie prop than a real uniform.

I pulled the entire black shirt off the headless elf and tossed it into my inventory. I'd show Mordecai when we got back.

We moved to examine the corpse of GumGum the orc. We'd seen her just a few hours before, piling the bodies of the prostitutes out of town. Her eyes stared straight up, almost accusing. I'd told her we'd help, but I hadn't meant it.

Lootable Corpse. GumGum. Orc. Level 5.

It didn't say what had killed her, but based on the injuries—a ripped open chest, and no blood—I suspected she'd been killed by those three Krasue things. I shuddered.

"Why did that weird guy say he'd been training his whole life to fight us? We've only been on this floor for a couple days," Donut asked, mirroring my own thoughts.

"It's obviously a clue in that quest. All of this is some sort of ham-fisted setup to get us to investigate further."

Sure enough, GumGum's inventory held four gold coins and two pieces of paper. One was entitled **Gate Pass** and the other was **Mysterious Letter**. I sighed and took them both.

"She was a nice lady, for an orc," Donut said. "She was doing the right thing. We have to finish the quest now."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because they killed her. And they probably killed her because we got that quest," Donut said. "If we hadn't, she'd probably be in the bar right now waiting to ask someone else to help her."

Goddamnit, Donut. She was right. Of course, she was right. The orc's lifeless eyes shone in the reflection of Donut's *Torch* spell. *She's not real*, I thought. *She's a prop, an extra in a high-stakes game show*.

But that wasn't true, was it? She was a real, biological creature. What she believed to be real was fake, an illusion. But she was still flesh and blood, an innocent. And she was dead simply because it was part of the story. Just like with all those prostitutes.

You're not going to break me. Fuck you all.

"I think I liked you better when you didn't make so much sense," I said.

"I've always made sense, Carl," Donut said.

We made our way back to the inn. I didn't want to spend any more time in the alley. We'd missed the end of the show, and the announcement boomed over the city loudspeaker as we walked. It wasn't anything new or interesting. Another day, another few bugs. Some druid spell was causing the supposedly indestructible wooden floorboards to evaporate, creating sinkholes and sucking people away, causing them to fall off the map and disappear.

The inn was the same as the previous night. Where GumGum had sat the previous evening was now occupied by a pair of human NPCs, an older couple who quietly ate and talked amongst themselves. Fitz the barkeep grinned at us. "Returning customers!" he exclaimed. "Your majesty. It's always an honor."

Mordecai was plastered by the time he teleported to the inn. He drunkenly instructed me in creating the Hair of the Dog potion. It involved a gooey weed that smelled like okra mixed with a vial of rubbing alcohol. My first attempt failed, but it worked the second time, garnering me a level three in alchemy.

"I went too far the wrong way," Mordecai said, shaking his head after he drank the potion. "But I was only expecting to be there for a few minutes. Did you see that centauress by the bar? She offered to buy me a few shots. Why'd you two take so long?"

I told him what had happened as I made a few additional Hair of the Dog potions. Fitz offered us free room and board for the night in exchange for three of them. I had plenty of supplies. Since it didn't require boiling or any higher-difficulty emulsifying, I could make the potions without a table.

"A military uniform?" Mordecai said. "That's odd. Let me see it."

"No," Donut said. "We'll show you in a minute. Carl and I have fan boxes to open. My people have spent a lot of time and effort on voting for and choosing this. I'm opening it now."

I exchanged a look with Mordecai, who'd warned us both a dozen times now that the lower-tier fan boxes were usually crap. While the boxes wouldn't contain anything awful or physically harmful, the system-generated list of possibilities was often filled with random and sometimes nonsensical items. Trolls oftentimes got in on the voting, and the prize was usually the most ridiculous or useless item on the list. Mordecai said he'd received a skyfowl sex toy in his first box. Later, the fan boxes would be more significant with better items. This was a gold box, which meant fans had to have us on their favorites list in order to vote. But even these boxes were often corrupted. Fans had to pay actual credits to vote for the contents of anything higher. That fee to vote was next to nothing, but it was enough to keep people from casually gaming the system.

"Here I go," Donut said. I braced myself. The box opened, and Donut gasped. "Oh my gosh, Carl, Carl, look!" she said excitedly.

I felt my stomach drop. *You assholes*, I thought.

It was a small, framed picture. Of Bea. The square photo had been taken directly from her Instagram. It was the same photo that caused me to break up with her. In the picture, Bea wore a bikini. She was laughing. And she was sitting on her ex-boyfriend's lap, her arm draped around his shoulder while she took the selfie. Brad was the guy's name. He worked construction part time and modeled part time. I knew that because that was the only line of information on his profile. His Instagram handle was Brad_the_Chad69, possibly the douchiest name in the history of the world. He always did the male version of a duck face in his photos, and since I'd never met the dude in real life, every picture I'd ever seen of him made him look like he was taking a shit.

"It's great!" Donut said. "Oh my gosh. I love it so much! Zev was saying she wanted to see a picture of her. Look, Mordecai! It's Miss Beatrice and her friend! Look, Mongo! It's your grandmother! Fitz, come here and look at Miss Beatrice. Isn't she pretty?"

Mordecai didn't look at the picture. He stared directly at me, a worried expression upon his face.

I was expecting it to bother me. It didn't, I realized. That felt important, almost monumental. At the time, I'd been upset. I told

myself I didn't like drama, and I dumped her. Which was the right thing to do. But I was still upset. Of course I'd been upset, and I lied to myself about how upset I was. But that was gone now. *Really* gone. After all that had happened, how could it possibly *not* be gone? And the realization was like a weight that I didn't even know was there lifting off my shoulders.

Donut's reaction to the gift was more than a little worrying, but at least she seemed to enjoy the prize. It could've been much worse.

I grinned, looking directly up at the ceiling. I gave a very deliberate shrug. "You really think I'd care about that? Nice try."

"Carl, open yours! Maybe it's another picture!"

I sighed, and I selected my box. If it was something awful, something designed to upset Donut, I was prepared to toss it into my inventory before she could see it.

I wasn't expecting the basket.

"What the hell is that?" Mordecai asked the moment it appeared. He examined it, his eyes going wide. "Oh," he said. "You got a good prize. The rabble-rousers must have spent all their effort on Donut's gift."

"What are you talking about?" Donut asked. She looked at the strange wicker basket. It looked like a large, banana-shaped scoop. A group of buckles along with an unfamiliar strap were attached to the end of the object. "What is this thing?" Donut asked. She read the description. "I don't get it. What's… how is that pronounced? High lie?

I didn't need to read the description. The moment I saw the item, I knew exactly what it was. The buckles were unusual, but my brain was already processing how it worked. This was a good prize. In fact, this was a great prize.

"Hey, Fitz," I said. The barkeep had wandered over to look at the picture of Bea. He still clutched it in both hands, and he was rubbing a finger down the glass, stroking the image of Bea's breasts. "Do you have any oranges?"

He appeared startled, as if he realized we were still there. He quickly placed the photo down. "I reckon I do," he said.

"Give me four or five of them please," I said.

While he went to the back, I picked up the large basket. I ran my hand down it. While it appeared to be made of wicker, it was really made of a light, metallic substance. My mind raced with the possibilities. It was so strange. This knowledge was from that Earth Hobby Potion. It all came rushing to me.

The skill I'd received had been in something called Cesta Punta. I'd thought it was a martial art. It wasn't. It was a sport. A sport more commonly known as jai-alai. It was a complicated, fast-paced, squash-like game where people wore scoops on the ends of their hands and threw balls against a wall. It was dangerous as fuck, and even with helmets, those little hard balls bounced and flew fast enough to knock your damn head off.

The gift I'd received in my fan box was called a xistera. It was the scoop a player wore on their hand. Normally there was a leather sleeve along the back of the handle that you could tighten, which would keep the basket from flying away. You used the scoop to catch and toss the ball, and because of the shape of the basket and weight of the ball, you could throw very hard and fast, especially if you spun and swung your arm in just the correct manner.

I'd never played it in real life, though I'd known a senior chief who had something similar designed to lob tennis balls great distances. The thing was really for dogs, but he'd used it to toss cherry bombs off the side of the cutter out onto the glacial ice of the Arctic Ocean. He'd let me do it once, and I remembered how far it'd flown.

And at that moment, I realized that small memory, of me tossing firecrackers onto the ice in the middle-of-nowhere was likely the impetus for the chain of events that led to this prize. Whether the system really knew my memories or not, they had a rather obvious plan for me. I no longer needed the slingshot with this item. This was better. Much, much better.

I strapped the xistera onto my wrist, awkwardly using my teeth and left hand to fasten the first set of buckles. The second set went just before my elbow. The rounded scoop extended about two and a half feet past my right hand, almost like a single, massive fingernail. It felt natural on me. I wouldn't be able to punch or summon my

gauntlet while it was on me like this, but I could feel the plastic-like slit just above my palm. Anything I summoned into my hand from my inventory could be pushed directly into the scoop. And conversely, I could make a claw and remove the item in the scoop.

The xistera wasn't magical, at least it didn't say it was, but it was mechanical and made with some pretty neat technology. It had a trick. The second strap just below my elbow had a small pull-ring. I pulled it, and the entire scoop yanked in on itself, forming and twisting over my right forearm like a metallic bracer. The motion was quick and smooth. Once the scoop was retracted, I formed a fist to make sure my gauntlet would still work. It did. In fact, the gauntlet fit snuggly over the end of the bracer as if it'd been made for it. Now the missing right arm of my jacket didn't look so ridiculous.

"Here's your oranges!" Fitz said, piling five of them on the table.

I picked them up and pulled them all into my inventory. I eyed the entrance door to the saferoom, which I knew was the most unbreakable thing in here. I extended the scoop.

I pulled an orange into my hand. I was worried it'd be a little too fat for the xistera, but it automatically widened itself. *Hey, that's pretty cool*.

I spun, arcing my arm over my head. The orange rocketed out of the scoop and smashed right into the center of the door. The fruit completely disintegrated.

"Hey!" Fitz said.

"Wow," Donut said. "That's delightful! Do it again! Fitz, get him some apples and plums!"

Fitz stopped complaining and ran to comply. I attempted to hit the exact same spot. My aim was just a hair off, but I could already tell that as my skill in this grew, I'd become more and more accurate. I really needed to get outside and try it for distance. I could now sling projectiles *fast*. I knew with a rock or a metal ball, it would do some serious damage.

I also realized I was going to have to start tossing a few points into dexterity here and there. I'd been planning on a strength and constitution build, but if my accuracy became an issue, a dexterity boost would help.

I tried tossing some of the small ammo I had for my clurichaun slingshot. The little rocks weren't uniform enough in size to properly lob. While the scoop tried to make itself thinner, it didn't get nearly thin enough. Their aim was unpredictable because I couldn't control their passage through the scoop as I swung.

Carl: You win, Zev. No more slingshot.

Zev: Yay! People are pretty excited about this. I'm glad you got it. It was a close vote with something utterly inappropriate.

Carl: What was it?

Zev: You know I can't tell you that.

"I'm going to need regular ammo and more of those hob-lobbers," I said after I finished. The human couple who'd been sitting in the corner got up and ran out the moment I stopped fruit-ninjaing the door.

"That's just the tip of the iceberg," Mordecai said. "You'll be able to make yourself smoke bombs, and I can fashion tossables like poison bags and pretty much anything else you can think of. I know a recipe for a rubber-like substance that breaks apart when it hits something. We'll need a table for it, though."

I nodded. I pulled one of the hob-lobber bombs out of my inventory. I examined its properties.

Hobgoblin Hob-Lobber – Fused.

Type: Fragmenting Tossable.

Effect: It blows shit up.

Status: 150. Fortified.

A mainstay of the Hobgoblin Hob-Lobbing Lobbers, the Hob-Lobber is a stable, mostly-predictable, more practical and tactical solution to dynamite. All right? But if you toss it, make sure its wick is lit. While not guaranteed to do a premature blast, it's better than nothing, innit?

"Your rhyming scheme is all off," I muttered.

The round bomb was the perfect size for my xistera. This kind of hob-lobber had a fuse that needed to be lit. A minor inconvenience. I could go back to crazy Pustule the hobgoblin and buy the impact-triggered ones. Though, thinking on it, there was a lot I could do

with this kind. *A lot*. Especially once Mordecai got his hands on that alchemy table.

I tossed the heavy bomb into the air and caught it. Everyone in the room, even Mongo, looked at me with a horrified expression. The item's stability was still at 150. I could punt the item, and it wouldn't go off. Besides, this was a safe room. Still, they were all looking at me like I'd lost my mind. I had a quick memory of a goblin bomb bard who'd been doing something similar as we'd passed by. I remembered thinking he was crazy at the time. I put the bomb away, smiling sheepishly.

"I worry about you sometimes," said Donut.

"Oh, I know what this is," Mordecai said the moment I handed him the shirt. "You said this was on a city elf, right?"

"That's right," I said. "I didn't get a chance to read his description before Donut and I killed him. So what's the deal?"

"You shouldn't see any *real* uniformed military on this floor other than the guards, or maybe some of the mobs. You will definitely see an organized military presence on the ninth and maybe on the sixth. And you never know what's going to happen on the others. But the only jackholes who organize themselves like this are the city elves. They're a gang, and they called themselves the 201st Security Group."

"Ohh," I said. "I thought that was a unit patch."

"They're morons is what they are," Mordecai said. "You'll find them mostly in the larger cities, but also in the medium-sized ones that are governed by the skyfowl. I should have known they'd be here."

"Are they mercenaries?" I asked, taking the shirt back.

"They're nutjobs," Mordecai said. "There are a lot of types of elves. High elves, like your elite friend's family. Those guys are the forest-dwelling magical beings you're probably most familiar with.

There are dark elves, wind elves, goblin elves, and a dozen more. And then there are the city elves."

"He looked like a normal elf to me," Donut said. "But he was a little crazy. He knew our names."

"Yeah, I don't know why he knew you," said Mordecai. "But anyway, on the surface, you had a small segment of society who believed really crazy things. Like aliens walked among the people and that lizard folk had taken over the highest levels of government. You know what I'm talking about, right?"

"I do," I said. "But they don't seem so crazy now, do they? You guys *were* walking around among us."

Mordecai scoffed. "Yeah, but not the reptilians. Those guys run a shadow government? Please. The last reptilian I knew couldn't even properly run a fantasy football league. Anyway, I'm talking about crazy, conspiracy nuts. People who believe the government is trying to use mind control on them, secret societies, gay frogs who shoot tracking microchips into you using cellular towers, and so on and so forth. Not your run-of-the-mill conspiracy theorists, but those who go the extra mile. Tin-foil-hat-wearing, silver-drinking nutjobs. The kind of people who cover their vehicles with crazy, schizophrenic text about radio signals coming from toilets."

"I know exactly what you mean," I said.

"That's a city elf. They are designated as a separate race because their stupidity is so outstanding, the high elves consider it a genetic defect and kick them out. All elves originate with the high elves, who are big on banishing and wholesale genocide. It's what happens when you live forever but still keep having babies. So the city elves gather in the cities. The young and especially stupid ones always find their way to the 201st. It's a big, poorly organized militia that considers itself a proper military outfit, and it has only one goal. To protect the skyfowl from the earthbound."

I laughed. "What? *They're* earthbound. Aren't they?"

"Yeah, so, they believe the skyfowl are angels. They believe all flightless creatures are so jealous of us… of the skyfowl I mean, that all humans and everybody else without wings want to destroy them. They believe when Scolopendra unleashed that nine-tier attack, one

of the tiers was a spell that made the earthbound want to kill the skyfowl. That's absolutely not true. People want to kill skyfowl because skyfowl are assholes. They don't need a spell to make people hate them."

"But, why?" I asked. "Why do the elves care?"

Mordecai sighed. "It's kind of a long, complicated story, and we're brushing on a subject I was going to bring up at a later time. We've touched on it before. Gods and goddesses. In-game deities. We'll get to what they really are later. You don't need to worry about that on this floor. Anyway, all you need to know is that elves worship the Oak Mother, the mother of all gods. Her name is Apito. And in one story about Apito, it is said that in order to maintain the path to heaven, her angels must remain free and alive. And in a completely separate story, Apito is said to have called the skyfowl 'bless-ed.' And in a third, apocryphal story, Apito said only the angels are 'blessed.' In that same story she says any violence against angels is to be stopped, and if it continues, she will destroy all the worlds. Ergo, a batshit crazy, doomsday cult sect of banished elves now dedicate themselves to protecting the skyfowl in anticipation of the day when the tree goddess destroys the universe."

"All-righty then. And what do the skyfowl think about these guys?" I asked.

He paused. "Skyfowl in general are a diverse people, like humans, but the ones on this level are a little different. They're mostly non-religious. They are, as a rule, negatively inclined toward any flightless creature. They think of you as a servant class, that you're beneath them. In the mythology of the volcano levels, the skyfowl were the ruling class of the Over City, and the High Elves were the ruling class of the forested regions of the Hunting Grounds. So when these elves show up in their cities, oftentimes falling to the ground and slobbering all over themselves as they offer obeisance, they're treated as an amusement, a joke. Nobody takes them seriously. They have their stupid uniforms and their play-acting, but I've never seen anything come of it in all my time here. This angel thing is their main motivation, but they also have all sorts of weird

theories and beliefs. Everybody makes fun of them. I've never known them to actually inflict violence."

"Well, we're going to find out what's going on," Donut declared. She stood stiffly. She'd put the picture of Bea into her inventory. "I've decided that we're going to follow through with this quest, and there's nothing you can do to stop us, Mordecai."

"Is that so?" Mordecai asked.

"GumGum died because of us. And Carl, Mongo, and I have decided to make it right."

Mordecai just looked at her, then he shrugged after a moment. "If that's what you're gonna do. I ain't your dad. I'm your manager. You know how I feel about quests on this floor. But as long as you spend as much time grinding and killing as possible, then so be it."

Donut looked surprised, then triumphant. I could tell by the nonplussed look on Mordecai's face that he'd already decided we were stuck with this quest whether we wanted it or not. We'd already been sucked in, much the way we'd been sucked in when Signet had kidnapped us.

"GumGum is dead? Did I hear that right?" Fitz asked, looking at us with wide eyes. "GumGum the orc?"

"I'm afraid so," I said. "She was killed by a group of krasue."

"Oh, oh no," the barkeep said. "I… I gotta sit down. GumGum dead. I can't believe it. She was m'best customer, she was. krasue. I knew they'd get her one of these days." The man wandered back into his kitchens.

"I'm going to get him blackout drunk tonight," Mordecai said. "Then I can peek at his stores and the newsletter."

"So we're doing this, then?" Donut asked. "We're doing the quest? And this time I will be awake the whole time? Excellent. Let's solve this mystery. What do we gotta do next?"

"Okay," I said. "Let's work through what we already know. We have dead prostitutes from outside the city falling from the sky. These women have corpses that suggest they've been twisted to death. Furthermore, they have wounds on their shoulders that indicate they've been held aloft by something with talons. Possibly a skyfowl. And just a few hours after we said we'd do something about

it, the woman who gave us the quest ends up dead. We're attacked by that crazy elf dude from that gang along with three scary ghost ladies with their guts hanging out. What else?"

"You have those two pieces of paper," Donut said.

"Oh yeah," I said, pulling them both from my inventory. The first was **Mysterious Letter**. It was a folded piece of paper stained red with blood. I opened it.

It was a relatively short letter, written in a language I didn't understand. The text was all squiggles and triangles. I examined the letter's properties.

Mysterious Letter.

GumGum the orc had this blood-soaked letter in her possession. It's in an odd language. Is it a clue? Is it a grocery list? You can't fucking read it, so who knows?

I slid it over to Mordecai as I examined the next slip.

Gate Pass.

When one walks about the streets of any town within the Over City, the mindless Swordsman guards tend to get a bit squirrely if you're carrying a corpse with you. When it comes to their black and white view of justice, the rule of law is absolute.

Unless you have a gate pass.

This letter gets the city guard off your back as long you're not being too overt with your current criminal enterprise.

Pass only works within the township in which it was issued.

The paper itself said, "Gate Pass. The holder of this pass is doing this on my orders. Magistrate Featherfall."

"That is not what I expected," I said, putting it back into my inventory. It was basically a Get-Out-of-Jail card.

"I recognize this text," Mordecai said, still looking at the mysterious letter. He sounded nervous. "I can't read it, but I know these squiggles. It's necroscript. It's something an undead magic user would write out. This is probably a type of scroll. But you can only read it if you have proper skill in the language."

"So it has something to do with a necromancer?" I asked.

"Maybe, maybe not. But when I say 'undead magic user,' I mean that literally."

"Those krasue head things were undead," I said. "The system said they were ghosts."

"Krasue are usually henchmen, errr, henchwomen, for something else. I'm thinking you two might have a lich problem."

"What is a lich?" Donut asked.

I answered. I knew this from playing *DnD*. "It's usually an undead magic user, obsessed with eternal life."

"Sort of," Mordecai said. "They're pretty nasty monsters. They tend to be smart, too."

"Hmm," I said, thinking. "What does a lich have to do with those 201st Security Group assholes?"

"Hey, Fitz, darling. Can you come back here please?" Donut called.

The pub owner appeared from the back, rubbing his eyes. He'd obviously been crying. "Yes, your majesty?"

"You said you were afraid that GumGum would get hurt by one of the krasue. What did you mean by that? How did you know about those things?"

I looked at Donut, impressed. I chose not to say anything.

"She told me," he said. "She was looking out for them fallen women. But she said sometimes she'd hear one, and she'd go into the alleyway even though it was still night. I'd tell her not to go in there. It ain't safe. But she'd go, and she said sometimes she'd see the krasue in the shadows. She was afraid of them. She had nightmares. But she cared about them women. She had nightmares about one of them falling from the sky and not being dead, and just sitting there and dying, and nobody being there to hold her hand and tell her it was going to be okay. GumGum's mom had been one of them ladies, you see. A lady of the night, I mean. And she'd died after getting stabbed. GumGum had found her the next morning. Just sitting on the stoop to their house. She'd crawled home and died right there. She'd left a red streak a half kilometer long, and nobody had helped. GumGum had to grow up mighty fast after that.

That's why she had a soft spot for those ladies. The nicest orc you'd ever meet. She smelled something awful, but I really liked her."

"So krasue are a normal monster for this town?" I asked.

"There's no such thing as a normal monster for this town," he said. "But it's unusual for the undead to rattle about, the magistrate being a black cleric, and all. He can control the undead, so I reckon if he knew about them, he'd banish them floating lady heads right quick. GumGum said she'd complained, and all he did was give her permission to move the dead bodies."

I exchanged a look with Donut. "Magistrate, huh?" I said. "Do you know where this guy's office is?"

Donut insisted on placing the picture of Bea on the small table next to her cat tree as she slept. Mongo didn't appear nearly as thrilled about the framed photograph as Donut. He actually hissed at it a couple times before Donut admonished him.

"Good boy," I said later, scratching the top of his head. He chomped at the air, electricity sparking from his enchanted fang caps.

I decided not to read. I had those Louis L'amour books, but we had to get up early. Our interview was earlier than usual, and I wanted to check out this magistrate guy before it was time to go. Still, I pulled out the mysterious letter. I stared at the symbols, trying to memorize them.

Even though I'd set up the cat tree on her insistence, Donut jumped straight onto my neck and settled in.

"Goodnight, Carl," she said.

"Goodnight, Donut," I said, patting her head.

"Promise me you won't let me die alone like GumGum's mom," she said. "Or GumGum. I guess she died alone, too. She was probably really scared."

"Don't worry, Donut," I said. "We'll find out who's responsible, and we'll make them pay."

Thwump. Something hit the roof of the inn, directly over our heads. It slid off the rooftop and crashed loudly into the street.

In the morning we'd discover the body of a naked, twisted human prostitute, sprawled out in the alley next to the inn.

Scrawled onto her back in torn, bloodless flesh were the words, "No, you won't."

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[18]

Time to level Collapse: 3 days, 16 hours.

Views: 1.9 Quadrillion
Followers: 72 Trillion
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"We'd like to see Magistrate Featherfall, please," Donut said, using her sweetest voice.

Getting to this office had been a chore. The town's administrative buildings had no first or second floor, and we'd had to utilize Donut's *Puddle Jumper* spell to teleport from the rooftop of a knife shop to the landing entrance of the town hall. She'd recently hit level five with the spell, which had solved the line-of-sight issue. It basically added support for jumping up to a higher elevation when you couldn't see the ground above you. It was a minor addition to the spell, but one that made it much more useful. The casting delay was also much shorter, now only two seconds instead of ten. Still, hitting level five hadn't decreased the five-hour cooldown, which was the worst issue with the spell.

But we did it. We zapped into the building's third-floor entrance only to come face-to-face with two of the village swordsman guards.

They stood stoically, ignoring us as we proceeded deeper into the building.

"How did they get up here?" Donut asked.

"I have no idea," I said. "Weird."

Donut had protested, but I talked her into putting Mongo into his carrier for this excursion. We were headed into the legislative chamber of this town, and the last thing we needed was the murder chicken to go a'murdering when all we wanted to do was talk. "We'll keep him in reserve," I'd said. "Our secret weapon in case we have to fight our way out."

That seemed to appease both of them.

Mordecai had said that every one of these towns had a different type of leadership structure. Before the cataclysm, the skyfowl were in charge of the whole Over City. Now, their settlements were scattered, but the remaining eagle-controlled villages such as this one still maintained a similar structure as before, but without the previous oversight.

As a result, this Magistrate Featherfall guy was the big boss man of this village. In the old days, he would have answered to a regional governor, who in turn would answer to the royal chancellor, who in turn would answer to some dude in some sprawling capital city that was on the ninth floor.

This third floor was actually a high-end shopping mall of sorts, catering only to skyfowl. The administrative building and home to the magistrate was directly above this floor, but anyone visiting had to first walk through this section. The shops reminded me of the type of stores one would find at the airport, filled with expensive crap, like silken robes and fancy hats and scrolls. And even though the sparse customers were all the eagle folk, the clerks and assistants were all non-eagles, most of them harried-looking young women human and elves, rushing about, being snapped at and verbally abused by the skyfowl shoppers.

We walked down a long, wide hallway, flanked by the shops. A red carpet stretched from the landing to a stairwell at the end of the hall. I was relieved to see it was stairs and not another vertical

flyway. As I watched, a human carrying a blue folder filled with papers rushed up the stairs.

"They have to have stairs so the help can get up there," I said.

"That still doesn't explain how they get up here in the first place," Donut said.

Paintings of eagles fighting elves and other oddities adorned the walls. This particular building was one of the largest in town, second only to the Desperado Club. From the outside, it was camouflaged well. The exterior walls of each section were shingled in a different manner, making it look like a group of medieval buildings pressed against one another. The higher-end, more opulent interior made the whole façade seem like something one would find at Disneyland.

We passed multiple guards, a couple of eagle shoppers who startled at our appearance, and a handful of other bird-like creatures called Chickadees, whom I'd originally mistaken for juvenile skyfowl. These guys only came up to my waist and were like dwarven versions of the larger birds.

We approached the stairs without being stopped or questioned. As we ascended, the human who'd rushed up earlier rushed back down, almost running directly into us.

"Pardon me," she said. I looked at the name over her head. **Burgundy**. The woman had an odd look about her. She was young, dark-haired, and pretty. She had one pale blue eye and a brown one, like a Siberian husky.

"No worries," I said.

She paused. "Are you lost? We don't see too many of your kind up here."

"We're on our way to see the magistrate," I said.

She snorted. "Good luck." Then she continued back down the stairs.

We continued up and walked straight into a reception area.

A large desk sat in one corner, pressed against the far wall, which contained another door. On the desk were piles of papers, what appeared to be an oversized bento box filled with sushi, more papers —including the blue folder Burgundy had just dropped off, and a colorful line of small, stuffed animals, from bears to goblins to eagles

to sharks. Behind the desk was a row of shelves containing more of the colorful collection. These things were the dungeon version of Beanie Babies, I realized. There had to be 300 of them lined up on the shelves. Most, if not all, of them still had tags. A few from the top shelf were protected by individual glass cases.

Behind the desk, instead of a chair, there was a perch. And upon that perch rested an elderly, female skyfowl. Her feathers were tinged gray, and her large beak was cracked and crazed like brittle, old pottery. She smelled like Icy Hot. She glared at the intrusion with a who-the-hell-are-you-and-what-the-hell-are-you-doing-here look upon her sour face. I examined the NPC's properties.

Miss Quill – Skyfowl. Level 30.

Assistant to the Magistrate.

Cerberus. Heimdall. Aniketos and Alexiares. Qin Shubao. Lev Yashin. Some of the greatest gate guardians of both history and mythology. But none of them, not a one, was as dedicated to their work as Miss Quill.

If she doesn't want you to see the magistrate, you ain't seeing the magistrate.

"Do you have an appointment?" she asked Donut.

"We don't," Donut said. "But we have a matter of great importance to discuss regarding the safety of this town."

"And what is that matter?" she asked.

Donut leaned in. "Murder. Murder most foul."

Miss Quill did not appear impressed. "Was it a skyfowl?"

"The suspect?" Donut asked. "We don't know yet, but…"

"No, not the suspect. Put that down!" I quickly placed the lemur Beanie Baby back on the desk. The little stuffed creature wore a bandolier of knives, just like the real version. "Were any skyfowl murdered?"

"No," Donut said. "Not that we know of."

"Then he's not going to care," Miss Quill said. "And if he's not going to care, I'm not going to disturb him. Because he *will* care about being disturbed."

Donut: MY CHARM ISN'T WORKING ON HER.

Mordecai: There's probably an anti-charm spell working in the area.

Carl: Plan B it is.

"Is that how it is in this town, then?" I asked. "As long as the victims aren't skyfowl, they can just go screw themselves?"

She looked at me as if I were something she'd just regurgitated. "Do you want the short answer or the long answer to that?"

"The long answer," I said.

"Yes," she said. "That's how it is in this town. It was like this when my late husband was the Magistrate, and it's like that now with Magistrate Featherfall." She looked down at her bento box and sighed. "But please, feel free to leave a note describing the situation, and if it warrants further investigation, we'll get back to you."

"And what about the evidence we collected? Should we leave that here, too?" I asked.

"If you must."

I pulled the dead hooker from my inventory and splatted her on the eagle's desk. The corpse's legs, still stiff with rigor, upset the line of Beanie Babies, tumbling them off the edge of the desk one by one, like a line of synchronized swimmers diving into the pool.

I'd been afraid the system wouldn't let me pick up and store the corpse, as it wasn't something we'd tried before. I'd been surprised to find it did let us. It had even helpfully labeled the body as **Quest Clues** in my inventory.

The eagle made a strangled noise, leaping from her perch. Her back hit the wall, and it upset the bottom two shelves, cascading more of the beanbag creatures to the floor. For a moment the only sound was the *plop, plop, plop* of the figures as they slid and tumbled.

"Guards," Miss Quill croaked. "Guards!"

The two swordsmen at the base of the stairs clunked their way up toward us. They both unsheathed their swords as they emerged, rising up like metallic beasts. I remembered the announcement from a few days earlier, that their strength had been "slightly" increased. I really hoped this worked.

"Capture these two! Do so immediately," Miss Quill demanded.

The mute suits of armor looked back and forth about the room. Neither of them moved.

"Oh for the sake of the gods," Miss Quill said angrily. "Look at my desk, you fools."

The moment we found the dead prostitute this morning, with that gruesome note scrawled onto her flesh, I'd called one of the swordsmen over. I pointed to the corpse, I pulled the Gate Pass—the get-out-of-jail-free pass from the town magistrate—and showed it to the guard. Then I took the corpse into my inventory. I hadn't known for certain that actually did anything. But I knew if we were going to be waving a dead hooker around, odds were good the town guards would get involved. Mordecai said they had a collective mind. And if they'd already seen me with the body and had, in their odd way, endorsed my ability to have a dead hooker in my possession, then the act of me simply tossing the corpse onto the desk wouldn't be considered a crime.

Hopefully.

Without a word, the guards turned and walked back down the stairs.

"You useless, worthless, piles of junk!" Miss Quill called after them. She returned her gaze to us.

"How do they get up here anyway?" I asked. "Also, how do all those workers in the shops get up here? Is there a secret elevator? We looked for like an hour for an easy way up and couldn't find one."

"Take that with you right now," Miss Quill said. "What is wrong with you?" She squatted and began gathering up the fallen toys in her wings. But she had nowhere to put them. Not until the shelf was fixed and the dead woman was removed from the desk.

Donut leaped from my shoulder and sniffed at the ground. "This one is getting really dirty," Donut said, looking at a rat-faced beanie that looked suspiciously like Mordecai's first form. "And I think the label tore on this one. Carl, stop stepping on them!"

"Stop! Stop it right now! Please, just take it away." The elderly eagle appeared to be on the verge of tears.

"Take *her* away," Donut corrected.

"Let us talk to him, and we'll bring the evidence to him directly," I said.

"He's not here, okay?" Miss Quill said, frantically piling the toys in the corner. She picked one up with her talon and frantically rubbed non-existent dirt off it with her wing. "Look what you've done, look what you've done."

I glanced at the closed door near her desk. The door was large, metal, and foreboding.

"He's really not here?" I asked.

"No," she said. "He only comes out at night nowadays. Oh my gods, what is that liquid?"

"I don't know," I said. "It's not blood. They've all had their blood sucked out of them. But their bodies still leak. And smell. It's really gross."

Her wings were full of beanies. "Please, please," she said. "Just take it away. Take *her* away. I'll tell him you were here. I promise."

I reached over and picked the dead woman back up, returning her in my inventory. A milky-white stain of fluid covered Miss Quill's desk.

"I'm going to be sick," the receptionist said.

"You better get some paper towels or something," I said. "My grandma collected these things, and they sucked in moisture like you wouldn't believe."

"Don't you touch anything," she said. She gently placed the beanies held in her wings into the corner pile. She rushed toward the stairs, yelling that she needed a shirt or a towel.

We only had a minute, maybe less. I rushed to the door to Featherfall's chambers. It was locked. The moment I touched the door, a notification popped up.

This door is locked. Magically locked. It's almost like they don't want you going in there.

"Shit," I muttered, looking around.

My eyes focused on the top, undisturbed line of beanies sitting above her desk.

"Just tell him we came by," I said to Miss Quill as we went back down the stairs. "And you're welcome for fixing your shelf." She ignored us as she frantically cleaned off her table.

"That was disappointing," Donut said. "Do you think he was actually in there?"

"I don't know. Mordecai seems to think he lives in there, but who knows?"

"We don't even know for sure he has anything to do with it," Donut said.

"Nope," I said. "That's why I wanted to talk to him when he was in his office. I figured if he's some evil, crazy boss, he wouldn't go all Freddy Krueger on us in public. And if he's *not* the bad guy, surely he'd be able to point us in the correct direction. But I don't think it's that complicated. This quest is only a silver one. Plus look at the clues. He's a black cleric? He only comes out at night? It has to be him."

"So we're coming back tonight, then?" Donut asked. "Or did you want to find the 201st Security Group headquarters first?" She paused in front of a store selling robes made for skyfowl. "Would you look at how pretty that is."

"It's magical silk," the young, elven woman said. "It allows skyfowl to stay aloft almost indefinitely."

"It's beautiful. I'd love to learn how to fly. Can you imagine that, Carl? Me flying?"

"We'll be back," I said, turning to look over my shoulder. I pulled the rope from my inventory. It'd only cost five gold for a thirty-foot length. We'd have to use it to get back to the street. "We'll talk to him one way or another."

We still had two hours before our interview. Zev said if we were fighting or in the midst of something, they wouldn't allow us to get transported, which was why she preferred us to be in a safe room when it was time. Still, we had two hours, and I decided we should use the time wisely.

So we left the city and traveled west, searching for mobs to kill. A few other crawlers were about, but we avoided them. I kept a wary eye for those with player-killer skulls over their head. I hadn't forgotten about Frank Q and Maggie My. I wondered what race they'd chosen, or if they were even still alive.

I didn't yet have any proper non-explosive ammo for my xistera, but I had two dozen hob-lobbers. The fuses on the bombs were between six and seven seconds, which was perfect when I was tossing them like they were grenades. But when I was hurling them at 250 mph at a mob, six seconds was a little too long. So instead, I pre-lit ten of them, which took two and a half seconds off the fuse. Both Mordecai and Donut were mortified by the idea of me walking around with lit bombs sitting in my inventory, but it was pretty much the only way I could properly do this with the equipment I had.

We walked past a row of especially decrepit buildings. This particular neighborhood appeared it might've been slums before the cataclysm. Donut sat upon my shoulder, and Mongo walked beside us, randomly growling. I'd been alarmed at first, but there didn't seem to be anything out there. We hadn't seen anything for fifteen minutes. Then I saw the X on the map, and I realized it was the corpse of a neighborhood boss. This area had already been cleared by someone else, probably a few days earlier.

"Damnit," I grumbled. "What a waste of time." I sighed. "Let's go get the neighborhood map."

The attack came just as I was about to descend into an abandoned, used-to-be indoor swimming pool. This building had been the Over City's version of a YMCA, though half of the structure was gone. The empty swimming pool sat mostly outside, exposed to the air. The rotting corpse of a two-headed sea creature sat within. The thing had the body of a whale, but with two long, Lochness-monster-like heads. Apparently the street urchins steered clear of

boss corpses. The boss was a level-17 monster called **The Divider**, and it had been killed by a crawler named **Daniel Bautista 2**. The boss had multiple, manhole-cover-sized holes in it. The monster's body was massively bloated, despite puncture wounds. It looked like a balloon from the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade.

Just as I stepped into the shallow end of the empty pool, the world around us went dark. A dozen red dots appeared on the map. The dots were pretty far away, two sets on either side of the street. They started to close in.

We'd left the inn at sunrise, and we hadn't yet hit whatever this world's version of noon was called. The virtual sun had blazed directly above us just moments before. We'd gone from day to night so quickly, I thought I'd been struck blind. I stepped back from the pool and put my back against the wall. The dots remained out there on the street. They crept slowly and cautiously, almost as if they thought they were sneaking up on us.

Donut immediately cast *Torch*, shooting the light high above the street. The bright light was like a star in the sky. The torch blazed, but it didn't fill the darkness like it should, as if the murk was resisting it.

A moment later, a green bolt shot from one of the red dots, and it crashed right into the torch, snuffing it out.

"Well that was rude," Donut said.

"Shit, they have an anti-magic attack," I said. We needed to come up with a plan, and fast. I pulled two regular torches from my inventory, lit them, and tossed them ahead of me. They skittered out onto the street. The darkness did not budge. It pushed in on the twin torches, surrounding them like the very air was made of ink.

Down the street, something moaned. It sent chills through me. Mongo let out a half growl, half whimper.

Still, the darkness wasn't absolute. I could make out shapes in the gloom. I couldn't see the mobs, which were still a good hundred feet away, but I could sense the outlines of buildings. A wall of rubble blocked our exit through the gym and to the next street, and there was no passage across the other way. We were boxed in.

Even so, the monsters moved slowly. That made me nervous. Slow mobs were usually the type you didn't want anywhere near you.

"Two of them are city elves," Donut quickly said. "The furthest dot on each side. I don't know what the rest are, but they're big. Should we do Slime Time?"

Of all the predetermined plays we'd come up with so far, Slime Time was Donut's favorite. And for good reason. It was fucking awesome. But now wasn't the time. Plus, I wasn't so sure it'd work. Not here.

"Negative," I said. "Wait one second. Let's see if this does anything."

I stepped away from the wall and pulled a lit hob-lobber into my hand as I extended my xistera. I couldn't see the mobs, but I could sense them there. Moaning and shuffling toward us. Were they zombies? Jesus. That was a terrifying thought. I spun and tossed the bomb as hard as I could directly at the far dot of the city elf, the one who had cast the anti-magic spell.

The sizzling bomb flew with satisfying speed, rocketing out of my xistera like a cannonball. It hit something fleshy, about twenty feet from the city elf. I'd aimed so it would fly over the slow-moving monsters, but apparently I hadn't aimed high enough.

Bam! The presumed sound of raining gore slapped into the street.

One of the dots turned into an X. But only one. My bomb seemed to have sunk into the monster. I now had a clear line to the elf. I spun, hurling a second bomb at the fucker.

This one hit home, perfectly timed. I really wished I could see it. The hob-lobber blew just before it reached the elf, but the fragmenting explosion ripped through him. There wasn't even an X left after that.

The other monsters groaned, now only forty feet away.

The darkness didn't lift.

I could now hear the sound of shuffling, like feet on the floorboards. Holy shit, these *were* zombies. They had to be. Giant zombies.

No more screwing around. I retracted my xistera and pulled two sticks of goblin dynamite from my pack. "Run into the pool," I called as I lit them both and tossed one in each direction.

The moment I tossed the second stick, the line of red dots surged forward, rushing at me. I watched, in horrified slow motion, as the flying stick of dynamite rebounded off a massive shape, at least twelve feet tall. The stick didn't blow, but it bounced, hissing and spitting and rolling toward me, much too close.

"Oh fuck, oh fuck!" I hopped backward into the empty pool, not bothering to gauge exactly where I was standing. I had no time. I just jumped. I prepared to press my *Protective Shell* spell, but I wanted to be closer to Donut and Mongo before I did it.

Unfortunately, I stopped falling much sooner than I anticipated. I landed directly on the spongey, rotting corpse of the Divider.

And that was the last thing I remembered.

What happened next was later relayed to me by Donut, who was the only one of us to stay conscious for the remainder of the fight.

Both sticks blew, killing most of the remaining monsters and the remaining city elf. I'd fallen far enough to be protected from that blast. However, I was not protected from the bloating corpse of the boss monster, which in turn blew like a goddamn potato in the microwave, either from me falling into it, or from the shockwave of the dual explosions.

The moment the second elf died, the lights snapped back on. The first thing Donut saw was me sailing up in the air like I'd been ejected from a catapult, spinning like a pinwheel. I landed upon the roof of the building across the street.

The detonation of the Divider's corpse did no damage to either Donut or Mongo, though it showered both of them with a blizzard of stinking, gooey gore. Donut grabbed the neighborhood map, leaped out of the pool, and she finished off the last three of the monsters, all of whom had barely survived. She hit two with magic missiles, and she set Mongo on the third. The dinosaur went about his task with practiced glee.

Donut then leaped to the roof of the building I'd landed on and used a heal scroll to bring my health back up. I remained

unconscious for another three minutes, despite being healed.

I awakened, staring up at the sky. I'd gone up a level to 19. My brain took several moments to reboot. I'd landed on a pile of rocks, and they dug into my back. I groaned, rolling over, and I almost plummeted through a hole in the ceiling into the floor below. I had no idea where I was. What had happened?

I heard the thwump of Donut's *Magic Missile*, and I abruptly looked up.

"Good morning, Carl. I haven't seen any more of the elves, but the meat bags keep coming," she said. She fired another missile. "They're pretty easy to kill if you hit them in the right place. Mongo is having a field day. He's already gone up to level 12." She leaned over the edge and yelled. "Good boy, Mongo! Mommy is going to kill the next one, and you get the one behind him." She fired once again.

"What is happening? How did I get up here? Whoa, Donut. What the hell happened to you?"

I'd seen Donut covered in gore before, but this was the next goddamned level. After we'd fought the Juicer on the first floor, she'd been caked in blood and guts. I'd thought we'd never get her clean. That was nothing compared to this. She had to have three inches of red, stinking viscera attached to her fur. She was covered like a piece of extra-crispy fried chicken.

"Later," she said. "They keep coming from that direction. They're really slow until they get close, but then they get fast. Watch Mongo kill this one."

I was also covered in gore, but mostly on my back. I felt it slide off of me as I sat up. It was as thick as mud.

I peered over the edge and gaped at the sight. I swallowed. I'd never seen anything like it. I'd had porridge for breakfast, and I regretted it now.

In every direction was splattered sticky blood and body parts. The swimming pool was filled with red, and much of the viscera was currently spilling into it, filling it deeper and deeper. Hunks of flesh, some pretty big, lay strewn about like boulders. The white shock of

bone stuck up everywhere, giving the sense I was looking at the zoomed-in view of a wound, and the bones were actually grubs.

And the smell. Oh god, it hit me all at once. It was the stench of a sewer and the contents of a refrigerator at a restaurant that sold 99 cent tilapia, cracked open after an extended period with no power. My head swam.

"Fucking hell," I said. "What the hell happened down there?"

"*You* did it," Donut said. "You really need to be more careful, Carl."

My eyes caught movement, and I finally saw one of the monsters we'd been facing in the dark.

The beast was a thirteen-foot-tall pile of body parts, all sewn together haphazardly as it shuffled forward. It was as if Doctor Frankenstein had dropped acid before he'd made his creation. I saw legs and arms and torsos, all smushed together. But there were heads, too. Lots of heads, all human. The thing moved and was shaped like a giant slug. Tentacles made of arms and legs twirled above it, waving in the air. The heads all groaned in unison.

The thing was terrifying to behold, and I was glad I was now up here and not on the ground facing it.

Shambling Berserker – Level 12

If you weren't fortunate enough to face one of these neighborhood boss monsters on the first level of the dungeon, fret not! Now's your chance to get in on the fun!

You know how you sometimes buy something from IKEA, and after you're done putting it all together, you have a few parts left over? It happens to the best of us. What you see here is a Shambling Berserker, the smallest iteration of this creature. Also known as the Mini Grinder or the Shrilling, this creature consists of extra parts we found after creating the World Dungeon. Waste not, want not.

This undead abomination is oftentimes found in groups, summoned as a slow, but very tenacious assassin. Once you're targeted by these guys, they don't stop. The good news is, they're mostly harmless. Unless, of course, you face one in the dark. Their power is quadrupled in the dark. And

once they go berserk, there's no putting them down. They ain't so slow after that.

So, yeah, actually, you're probably fucked.

I thought of Mrs. Parsons, my downstairs neighbor before all this started. She'd been beheaded in the collapse. Her head had fallen at my feet, but the rest of her had gone down into the depths with the rest of the building. Had they used her headless body for one of these things?

As I watched, Mongo emerged from a pile of gore where he'd been having a snack, and he squealed, running at full speed toward the monster and leaping, feet first. The shambling berserker tumbled back and fell apart, groaning as it died.

"They're really easy to kill," Donut said. "They just fall apart."

"That's because it's not dark anymore," I said. I felt as if I'd been hit by a damn truck. I still didn't know exactly what had happened. "I'm pretty sure our Featherfall friend sent these dudes after us."

"Probably. Also, I think we should have a new rule," Donut said.

"What's that?"

"It's quite evident we shouldn't be throwing explosives when we're blinded."

I laughed. "That sounds like a good rule."

Below, Mongo screeched with victory as he eviscerated the pile of slow-moving body parts.

"I got the neighborhood map," Donut continued. "I can see there's about ten more coming. Let me and Mongo kill them, and we'll head back. This has been a great day for experience. I'll hit 17 before we're done, but we need to hurry. There's a saferoom around the corner. I need to take a shower before we go on our interview."

I thought of us zapping into a production trailer looking like we did now, and I suddenly felt myself grin. I couldn't help it. I just started laughing. It even sounded a little crazy to my own ears.

"Okay," I said. I pulled a hob-lobber out, tossing it in the air and catching it. "But let me kill a couple, too. I want to see how far I can really chuck these things."

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This was a different production trailer than the one we'd used for the Maestro's show, but it was still a rental, according to the frisbee-shaped robot running the thing. The boat was even larger and more well-appointed than Odette's private production trailer, and I had the sense this one was normally used for dignitaries and non-crawlers. Or maybe it was even a living quarters, as it had a large, bowl-shaped bed and a very nifty shower facilities.

There was a tray set out with food, but it clearly wasn't food from earth. It was little, purple, squiggly worm things, still alive. They smelled like fish. Donut and I decided neither of us were hungry. Mongo sniffed at the tray and slurped it all up.

They'd likely rented this place at the last minute since I'd told Zev we didn't have time to get properly cleaned up. She sounded as if she might cry over the chat when I told her. She started lecturing us on how we needed to be ready for our "media relations obligations."

The saferoom had been a bare-bones version with no food and only a single shower facilities. We'd soaked Donut, and I had Mordecai brushing her as I got ready. Still, by the time we needed to go, Donut's fur remained heavily matted. The red, mud-like gore clung to her like paint. She needed to get back in the shower again, but we didn't have time.

So when we transferred to the production trailer, we'd moved to a special one that contained a shower that was straight out of the

Jetsons cartoon. The frisbee robot thing's name was D-0NAH, which Donut immediately translated to "Donna." Donna told Donut to remove all of her gear—except her tiara of course—and to proceed to the shower. Mongo and I watched as the cat got on a treadmill thing that appeared to have been especially designed for her. It blasted her with water, air, some blue chemical, more water, more air, a robot arm brushed her, and then she got blasted again.

When she came out the other side, she looked as if she was ready for judging at an international cat show. Her fur glistened. There was no indication that an hour earlier she'd been showered with the exploding gore of a multi-ton, long-dead sea creature boss. I watched as she re-equipped her crupper and the rest of her equipment. Donna ushered her back into the cleaning machine, and this time the mechanism focused on cleaning and polishing her gear. She stepped out, and the metal skirt gleamed. Mongo crept up to her and started sniffing at her suspiciously.

"Carl, Donna tells me that one may purchase one of these all-purpose cleaners for a personal space. She says they're expensive, but I think they're absolutely well-worth it. We need to save our money. Quick, you go in there too. It is luxurious."

"Nah, I'm good," I said.

"Carl, the back of your cloak looks as if it was used as a sanitary napkin. You need to get cleaned."

"Crawler Carl, I have been instructed to inform you that you need to avail yourself of the cleaning facilities," Donna the robot said. "You will be in the presence of royalty on the panel, and not presenting yourself properly is considered an insult."

Uh-oh. "Royalty? It's not that Maestro asshole, is it?"

"Prince Maestro has been stripped of his titles and disowned by his father, so he is no longer considered royalty. But no, it is not anyone of the Skull Empire. You will receive a rundown of your fellow panelists at the preshow briefing, which will occur in ten minutes. Now please step into the cleaner."

"Okay, but I'm not getting naked," I said. "Just clean the stuff people can see."

The robot paused. "Very well," she said.

"And then Mongo," Donut said. "He smells really bad."

"Your pet will be required to be stored during the interview."

"*Excuse* me?" Donut said. I stepped into the machine to avoid listening to the ensuing argument. Donna continued talking to me while the treadmill resized itself, instructing me to lift my arms and turn around, but I could see through the plexiglass-like material that Donut was also arguing with the robot. I couldn't hear what was happening, but I could tell Donut was pissed.

Like with Odette's trailer, this facility also had a porthole window. I stared out at the wide expanse of open sea. Unlike the last two times, it was now light outside, and I could finally see the real world. A pair of silver, trailer-like objects floated in the ocean a couple hundred meters away. They looked like shipping containers, though they bobbed up and down like any regular ship. In the blue sky, a trio of shapes zipped through the air, astonishingly fast.

I wondered how the other humans were doing, the ones who'd been smart enough not to go into the dungeon. The system had said they'd be left alone if they decided not to participate, but even through this little porthole looking through to some random place in the ocean, I could see that wasn't true. How many spaceships and other vessels had descended on the planet? Were they really leaving the other humans alone? Or were they being exploited, hunted, or enslaved?

"We came to a compromise," Donut announced once I stepped out. "Mongo is to be cleaned, but then he's going into the carrier."

I spent the next five minutes watching Donut attempt to talk the dinosaur into walking onto the treadmill. I'd just watched the pet plunge headfirst into a 13-foot-tall undead zombie frittata, but the idea of getting clean appeared to terrify him. Donut finally succeeded by capturing him with the pet carrier and then zapping him back out directly onto the contraption. The cleaner turned on, and the giant chicken started shrieking like a piglet being fed into a meat grinder. We could hear him even through the soundproofing of the device.

"Don't be a baby," Donut called. "Mommy is right here!"

He came out a moment later poofed up and smelling of lavender. He started running in circles around the trailer while Donna clucked after him nervously.

Finally, Donut zapped him away, and the door at the end of the room opened. We walked into an empty studio with a large, round table. There was a section for a studio audience, but it was currently empty. Spotlights blazed over us. There was no desk like with Odette's show, and there was no extra-ornate chair like with the Maestro's stupid program. There was a simple, glowing sign against the back wall that read **Danger Zone with Ripper Wonton**.

One of the chairs had **Carl** glowing over it, and the one next to it read **Princess Donut**. We both sat down. Like usual, Donut's chair ascended into the air, allowing her to look over the table.

"This is so exciting," Donut said. "I always love going on new shows."

"Yeah, the last new one really worked out great," I said.

A strange creature appeared, entering the room from a door across the studio. I guessed the creature was a he, but I wasn't certain. He was humanoid in shape, but absurdly thin. He stood about my height and was entirely white and hairless. He had oversized, black eyes, like pools of oil. A ridge grew from between his eyes and up, over his head, like a bony mohawk. He wore simple, white clothes. His entire body glowed. When he walked, he drifted as if his feet didn't touch the ground.

Since we were outside the game, he had no name floating over him. He came to hover beside the table.

"Princess Donut and Carl, welcome to Danger Zone," he said. His voice sounded like I would expect. Airey and halting, alien-like. He waved at us in greeting, moving languidly. He only had three fingers on each hand.

"Hello. We are delighted to meet you," Donut said. "Are you Ripper Wonton?"

He chuckled softly. "No, Princess. My name is Evo. I am the program's director. I wanted to greet you two personally before we bring everyone else online. We will be live, not pre-recorded. We have one other crawler with us tonight, and she has already been

briefed." He indicated an empty chair. "She is sitting there at the moment and can't see you."

"What's the name of your race?" I asked.

"Ahh, I am of a people called the Forsoothed. People generally call us Soothers," Evo said.

"We had a lot of fiction and movies about aliens, and a lot of them looked similar to you," I said.

"Yes, it is interesting," Evo said. "Your culture showed the Null more than us, but we have seen examples of our people in your historical records and media. I do not know how you latched onto our likeness. It is most likely one of my brethren visited your world in the past. Some of my people are oddsmakers, and they likely visited this planet to get a sample of the human stock in order to make predictions for the crawl. Visiting the planet except for official Syndicate business was illegal, of course, but that doesn't mean it didn't happen."

"So alien abductions were really a thing?" I said. "Imagine that."

"What about the probes?" Donut asked. "I remember them talking about the probes on television."

"I assume you're talking about anal probes?" Evo asked. "Yes, we've heard about this, as well. If that really happened, it was likely done by the Null. You called them the Grays. They are a nasty, unpleasant race. Perverts, all of them."

Evo pointed at the chair immediately to my left. A static holographic image appeared. It was of a tentacle-faced woman wearing a crown. "We must move on. Sitting in this chair will be Princess D'nadia of the Prism. She is a race called the Saccathians. People call them Sacs. They are a common race, but D'nadia's Prism kingdom is rather small. Still, she is a powerful force in certain trade circles and is quite outspoken. She is a regular on this program. She is a fan of you two and specifically asked to sit here."

I examined the squid woman. This was just a holographic representation, not the real deal. Her skin appeared gray and covered in bumps. A tangle of squid-like tentacles hung from her cephalopod face, like she was a human-sized Cthulhu. She wore a

long, flowing dress, and there was no way to tell what was under it. The whole look kind of freaked me out.

The next chair contained a pudgy, fuzzy brown creature that looked like the result of a wombat/Ewok union. The thing only stood about four feet high, and didn't wear any clothes except a fucking orange scarf around his neck, like Fred from *Scooby Doo*. He had two huge cheeks and giant eyes. He was disgustingly cute. I vaguely remembered that Miss Quill had a beanbag version of this race sitting on her shelf.

"Oh my," Donut said. "That is positively adorable."

"This is your host, Ripper Wonton," Evo said. "He is of a race called a Setonix. People mostly call them Quokkas, though. He will lead the conversation. He is a good-hearted gentleman, despite his strong opinions. He will treat you fairly, but if he disagrees with your positions on anything, he will take you to task."

In the next chair was another female. She was a silver and black Cobra-headed creature. The holograph towered over the table. Her hooded head had to be a meter wide.

"This is Manasa. She is a famed singer. She's a Naga, but do not worry," Evo said. He looked at Donut. "She's not of the Blood Sultanate, so you won't have to kill her when you hit the ninth floor. She's not really a Naga, either. The real Manasa perished long ago, but she contracted with the Valtay Corporation to keep her career going once she died."

I remembered what Odette had told me about the Valtay system. Their people were little parasites that took over bodies. "So, she has a worm in her brain, driving her body?"

"That is correct," Evo said. "And her career is hotter than ever. Her latest single is currently ranked 8th in the entire universe."

The next chair held a stuffy-looking, middle-aged human named Tucker. A stand-up comedian. I disliked him already, based solely on the stupid grin on his holographic, punchable face.

Evo revealed the last participant, and I immediately recognized the crawler sitting there. Donut gasped.

It was Hekla, the blond-haired Icelandic woman who was now an Amazonian Shieldmaiden. She ran the team Brynhild's Daughters. I'd

last seen her just a few nights earlier on the recap episode. Her people had been scattered upon entering the third floor, but she'd mostly regrouped, and they'd taken out an owlbear borough boss. I remembered she had an automatic, magical crossbow that tore everything up. The weapon was like a ranged chainsaw. I couldn't tell what her stats were now, but two days ago she'd hit level 25, the second crawler to do so, just hours after Lucia Mar. Hekla's muscles bulged as she leaned forward in her chair and I realized this wasn't a static hologram, but actually her.

"Hi, Hekla!" Donut called across the table. She looked at me. "Carl, look. It's Hekla!"

"I can see, Donut," I said.

"Hello, Donut," she said. She looked at me and nodded.

"Is your team holding up okay?" I asked.

"We are surviving," she said. The woman held very little emotion in her voice. Her eyes were the color of sapphire. "One of the Daughters is near you. She recognized the circus from the episode and knows you're in the vicinity. She wants to come back to the team, but I believe we are too far away. She needs some help leveling. Will you assist her? I will take it as a personal favor."

"Of course!" Donut said before I could respond. "We'd love to help your friend!"

Goddamnit Donut. I paused. "Tell her to come to the One-eyed Narwhal tonight," I said. "In the medium skyfowl settlement. But just an FYI, we're in the middle of something dangerous right now, and we won't be able to slow down to help her. We'll do what we can."

"Very well," Hekla said. A slight smile curled her lip. "Just don't blow her up."

"As much as I dislike the Mudskippers," Tucker, the pompous asshat, was saying, "I can't help but feel that the Valtay have overstepped in their push to take over the season. The courts have long upheld the

rights of those seeking bankruptcy protection, and I don't see why that should change."

"Aren't you supposed to be a comedian?" Donut asked. "When are you going to say something funny?" The audience roared. "See, it's not that hard."

To my left, Princess D'nadia trumpeted with her tentacles, a sound that apparently meant amused agreement. She kept attempting to grasp my hand, though her webbed claws just pushed through my own fingers. Manasa, the cobra-headed pop singer, also laughed, her forked tongue flipping in and out.

Tucker sneered. "Well then, what is your opinion on the matter, *Princess* Donut?"

Donut scoffed. "How the heck should I know? I'm a cat!" More laughter. "But I do know this, Butler. One, I know that I don't know enough about this subject to voice a proper opinion on it, unlike you, who is obviously talking out of your behind. And two, I know my partner here has a very poor opinion of you. Isn't that right, Carl?"

"Yup," I said. "You're a dipshit."

Hekla laughed for the first time since this started. Even Ripper, who was attempting to maintain some impartial façade throughout the program, put his head down and pounded on the table, trying not to let the emotion boil over.

I had no idea if this Tucker guy's opinion was valid or not, but one of the first things he'd done when the roundtable had started was make a snotty comment about the show lowering their standards by letting a pet sit on the panel. I'd thought he was going to turn it into a light-hearted joke, maybe even turn it around on the host, but the dude was dead serious. The crowd had booed, and he got this self-righteous smirk on his face. Donut did not like that, and she immediately started tearing into the guy. She was in rare form. They'd been going back and forth like this for a half hour now. At first I was worried about her taking on a comedian, but she had the guy against the ropes almost immediately, and he was too dumb to realize he'd already lost

"You know my name isn't Butler. You're just trying to make me angry."

Donut looked up at me, her eyes sparkling. “Carl, you told me his name was Butler.”

“It’s Tucker,” I said.

“Tucker? Are you sure?”

Next to me, I thought Princess D’nadia was having a stroke, she was laughing so hard. It was clear she also disliked this Tucker guy.

Tucker threw his hands up in the air. “Can we move on, please? I came on this show because we’re supposed to be talking about important matters.”

“Oh, darling,” Donut said, shaking her head. “Bless your heart.”

After the audience’s laughter died down, there was a short segment regarding multiple intergalactic affairs that neither I, Donut, nor Hekla had much input on. For most of it, I had no idea what they were talking about. Some solar system had been invaded by another system. A race of people had applied for council membership in the Syndicate. It was mostly stuff like that. Even the audience seemed bored with the piece.

The issue Tucker had been opining about regarded the Valtay Corporation and their attempt to collect their debt from the Borant System. All three of us crawlers were smart enough not to say anything stupid about either Borant or the Valtay, in case they did end up taking over the Crawl, which appeared to be highly unlikely. Manasa—for obvious reasons—was on the side of the Valtay. Ripper and Princess D’nadia seemed to think both sides were dicks, but also sided with the Valtay. Tucker was mostly on the side of the Kua-tin.

Ripper moved the discussion to the Skull Empire. There was unrest in a few of their home systems, partially because of the whole embarrassment with the Pork Boy Snick. People were comparing the Skull Empire to the hedonistic Orcish Supremacy of the Tuskling, and new calls for democratic reform were popping up in their systems. People took issue with the royal family spending so much time and money playing around with the crawl and the Faction War Games, while neglecting their duties back home. King Rust had responded by disowning the Maestro and telling his people to shut the hell up. Ripper looked directly at me and asked me what I thought about it.

I took a moment to formulate my response. I'd been anticipating a question about this subject, and I'd been mentally preparing my answer. *All it takes is a little seed.* I reached over and put my hand on Donut.

"I don't have all the details, of course. All I really know is what you've presented today and how that ass, Prince Maestro…"

"Former Prince Maestro," Donut corrected.

"How *former* Prince Maestro acted. If his dad, this King Rust guy, treats his people like his son treats guests on his show, then they *should* rebel. On Earth, we had this fable. Basically, the story goes if you throw a frog in a pot of boiling water, he'll jump right out. But if you stick that same frog in the water when it's at room temperature, he'll just sit there. He won't move because everything's fine. Then you put the pot on the heat. The temperature goes up, and still the frog doesn't jump because it's only a degree hotter than before. Eventually, the frog dies, boiled alive. When the frog was thrown in the boiling water, he immediately knew he was in danger. But because of the incrementalism of the heat from room temperature, he didn't realize he was in danger until it was too late."

"That's a really stupid metaphor," Tucker began.

"Stop," Ripper said, holding up a furry paw. "Let him finish."

"So, I don't really know what's going on with their systems. I'm just a guy from a planet that thought we might be all alone. We got thrown right in and had the lid slammed on us, so Donut and I, and Hekla, we don't have much of a say in what's happening to us. But I'm guessing it's different for the people who live under the Skull Empire. If it used to be okay, but it's not okay anymore, then maybe you should do something about it. Don't compare your circumstances with how they were yesterday. Look at how they were years ago. We're supposed to be making the world… the universe… a better place for our children. If it's not better, if you're dealing with cruelty, with neglect, then you should do something about it. So, yeah. Fuck 'em. Fuck King Rust and his asshole child. If you're unhappy with your government, then kick them out and set up your own, one that represents the people's best interests. You shouldn't have to put up with some loser who's going to take the people's

money and waste it on games, especially when those games entail killing people weaker than him with little or no real danger to himself. What a pussy. That's my opinion."

Nobody said anything for several moments.

"You probably don't know this," Tucker said, a hint of triumph in his voice, "but openly using tunnels to advocate for system sedition against a member state is a crime."

"If that's true," I said, "then you're *all* in that same pot." I turned to look at the audience. "All of you. If a government is afraid of what its people say, then maybe there's a reason for it."

"Besides," I added. "What are they gonna do? Throw me in the dungeon?"

Next to me, Princess D'nadia started clapping and making trumpet noises with her tentacles. Hekla, who'd barely said anything this entire time, was looking directly at me. I couldn't read her expression.

Underneath my hand, Donut trembled as the audience roared their approval.

But it wasn't everyone, I noted. Some of the people—*most* of the people—cheered. But not all. Those who didn't appeared uncomfortable. Some looked annoyed. That was okay. Baby steps. That frog metaphor worked both ways.

"Well," Ripper said, "they told me you two tend to leave a path of scorched earth wherever you..."

In front of me, Manasa the cobra blinked in and out of existence and then she disappeared. The entire studio bucked, and Donut and I both fell back out of our chairs. The lights flickered as Donut cried out. I hit the floor, and my HUD, which had been off since we'd arrived in the production trailer, turned on.

"Carl, Carl, I'm going to be sick."

The trailer continued to rock. The sea, which had been dead calm, now roiled.

The studio was gone, and all that remained were our two chairs and a half table. Donna the robot entered the room. "Please remain calm. The system will be restored in fifteen seconds."

Zev: Oh my gods, are you two okay?

Carl: What the hell is going on?

The HUD snapped away, and the studio returned as the boat started to settle. Ripper, Princess D'nadia, and Tucker remained in their chairs. Ripper talked animatedly with someone we couldn't see. Hekla stood behind her seat, and I suspected she had also been knocked out of her chair, which meant her trailer was probably floating nearby. She hesitantly sat back down. The cobra-headed Manasa did not return.

"Are you injured?" Princess D'nadia whispered to me.

"We're fine. The trailer started pitching. What happened?"

"They're saying there was an attack on Manasa's trailer. She's vacationing on Earth, and she'd ascended to participate in the interview. They say her trailer got hit with a pulse. That's all I know."

"What about you, are you okay?" I asked Hekla.

"Yes," she said. "I am fine."

"Yeah, us too," I said.

"I threw up," Donut said, looking up at me. She had puke all down the front of her face. I used the thick fabric from my Nightgaunt cloak to clean off her fur the best I could.

"Are you kidding? Are you kidding me?" Ripper said to his invisible assistant. "Let me see the statement." He turned and looked at me and Donut. The furry host opened his mouth, as if he were going to say something, but then he changed his mind.

Instead, he turned to his audience. "Ladies and gentleman, I'm sorry about that. Something just happened on Earth's surface, and we're still gathering information. Manasa has lost her signal, so I'm afraid we won't have her back. Stay tunneled, and we'll get you information straight away. In the meantime, let's go straight into the Danger Zone."

Nothing happened for a moment, and then suddenly a female owl creature stood at the end of the table. She'd appeared out of nowhere.

"Hi," the owl said. "I have a question for Hekla. Why did you leave your husband to fend for himself when you both entered the dungeon? And do you regret it?"

Hekla appeared stricken by the question. The abrupt change of subject with everything happening around us seemed so sudden, so out of place that it was almost absurd. Apparently, they called the Q&A section of the program "The Danger Zone." Behind us, Ripper had disappeared. Tucker was turned all the way around in his seat, talking quietly with someone offscreen. Next to me, Princess D'nadia had her head cocked to the side and was also listening to something or someone hidden.

"I," Hekla said, stammering "I… He left me. He didn't leave me a choice. He was going to get us both killed. Now he's dead, and I'm not."

"And do you regret it?" the owl repeated.

"Of course I do," she said.

"Thank you," the owl said. She disappeared and was replaced by a male orc.

"I am Rolf," the orc said. "This question is for Carl. What is your most enjoyable way to kill?"

"That's kind of a fucked up question," I said. "I don't like killing."

"No?" Rolf said. "But you kill good."

"He does, doesn't he?" said Donut.

"I guess I like it when it's simple, clean," I said. "A quick punch, breaking their neck."

Rolf made a fist in the air. "This is good. Thank you."

The next question was about Hekla's crossbow. The one after that was a fish creature that looked like a human-sized Kua-tin. I think Odette had called them Gleeners. She looked directly at Donut.

"Princess, who is Ferdinand?"

Several people in the audience clapped at the question.

Donut tensed, but then she relaxed. "Oh darling, I just love that outfit you're wearing. It's so pretty. But you are right to ask. This secret has festered for far too long, and I suppose it's time for the universe to know the truth." She sighed dramatically. "Ferdinand is the love of my life. But we've had a tragic courtship. He visited me often at night. We'd gaze upon each other across the wide expanse, and we both knew it was a love that couldn't be. For we were star-crossed lovers, and he was hunted by the authorities. In royal

circles, he was reviled, branded as a 'Moggie,' a non-pedigreed cat. It is why I'd jumped out the window that night. I could sense him out there, calling to me."

"Wait," I said. "Are you talking about that creepy yellow cat that would come to the window when you were in heat?"

"Yes, I am, Carl," Donut said. "I imagine it's time you learned of my secret affair. A princess and a ruffian. It wasn't meant to be, but our love was pure."

I couldn't help it. I laughed. "His name wasn't Ferdinand. His name was Gravy Boat. He belonged to Marjory on the first floor."

The cat had also knocked up every female cat within three square blocks. Bea had called animal control on him twice, but they'd never been able to find or catch him. Bea had gotten into a screaming fight with Marjory over it, though I was never really clear on the reasons why Bea had cared so much. Gravy Boat sitting in that tree outside our window wasn't nearly as annoying as Donut yowling while she was in heat.

"He preferred Ferdinand," sniffed Donut.

The Gleener disappeared and was replaced by an elf-like creature wearing a top hat.

"Hello," the elf said. "My name is Chappy. My question is also for Donut. "If Bea is alive, and she shows up, are you really going to leave Carl for her?"

A chill washed over me. I looked sharply at Donut, who looked back up at me with a look of confusion on her face.

"When we reunite with Miss Beatrice, we will all work together. It will be like before."

Chappy seemed perplexed by her answer. "Surely you don't think Carl will want to stay with her." He turned his gaze to me. "Carl?"

This was a situation that was never going to manifest itself because the odds of Bea being anything but dead were astronomical. And if she wasn't dead by some miracle, one of these talk shows would've dug her up by now. Nevertheless, it was a conversation I still needed to have with Donut. But I wouldn't be having it on live television. Fuck that. I mumbled, "We'll cross that bridge when…"

"I'm sorry to interrupt folks," Ripper said, his voice quavering. I could tell he was angry, and he was barely holding it in. "But we have some breaking news to share. As you all saw, our program was interrupted. We now have verification that this was because of a senseless pulse attack on a production asset housing our friend and frequent guest Manasa. I am sorry to say, it appears she has perished in the attack." Gasps and cries of surprise and astonishment filled the audience. Ripper lifted his paw to calm them down. Next to me, Princess D'nadia wept. Black oil cascaded down the front of her cephalopod face. "But there's more. In a tragic twist to this story, it is apparent she was *not* the target of the attack. Simultaneous with the pulse…" Ripper paused, unsuccessfully attempting to compose himself. His anger bubbled over into his voice. "…Prince Stalwart of the Skull Empire released the following statement."

A screen appeared. The coarse-haired, wild boar creature sat behind a desk. Prince Stalwart, crown prince of the Skull Empire, looked very much like his disgraced younger brother. While the Maestro had been overly muscular, Stalwart was leaner, but he still exuded power and strength. And cruelty. Even before he spoke, I could see it in his pig eyes.

Over the orc's shoulder was a window overlooking a large, green field that spread into the far distance. The dots of hundreds of soldiers marching in formation appeared down below. The camera was angled to view the field perfectly.

He's on the ninth floor right now, I thought. *He's setting up the faction wars segment of the game.*

"Citizens of the Syndicate. By the time this message hits the tunnel, the earth creatures Carl and Donut will have been executed by a pulse fired from my personal yacht. The Skull Empire will pay for any damages to any private property destroyed in the attack. We are claiming, under the Syndicate rules regarding independent system sovereignty, that this summary execution is both justified and appropriate given Carl's statements advocating sedition. That is all." The message snapped off.

"That was quick," Donut muttered.

"You can say that again," I said. The attack had come barely two minutes after I'd spoken out.

"They hit the wrong trailer," Tucker said. He looked at us. His earlier snootiness was gone. He sounded in shock. "It was meant for you."

"Manasa had switched trailers," Princess D'nadia said. "They said you needed cleaning facilities, and she offered to trade." The princess could barely speak, she was so upset. "She was my friend. For countless years, she'd been my friend. Even though she was a worm head, we'd been close for so long." She turned to the audience and cleared her voice. She sat up straighter in her chair. "The Prism Kingdom officially condemns this action by the Skull Empire, and we will be filing an immediate grievance with the Syndicate Court."

"The Valtay and the Skull Empire are strong allies," Tucker said. "Surely they'll see this as a tragic accident."

"Do you know how much money Manasa brings in for the Valtay each year?" Ripper said. "Those idiots. Stupid, stupid. She was a treasure. People think their technological sector brings in the most, but that's not true. Not even close. It's their entertainment assets. They just murdered her."

I felt a sudden wave of anger wash over me. *Now* you're outraged? When it was your friend? The cognitive dissonance was just overwhelming. I didn't dare say it out loud, but what the hell? They destroyed us, destroyed our *planet*. And one poorly-shot missile or whatever the hell it was, and suddenly it's a tragedy. *Fuck you. Fuck you all.*

"Carl," Donut said, concern to her voice. "Carl, if they know they hit the wrong trailer will they shoot at us again? Maybe we should go."

Ripper looked at us, and waved at us to remain seated. "It's okay. You're okay. This just in. I am getting word now. The Valtay are claiming one of their dreadnaughts in earth orbit has destroyed Prince Stalwart's yacht. Again, the Valtay are claiming to have destroyed a Skull Empire royal vessel. From the message, it is clear

Stalwart was not on board at the time, but it is rumored that both Queen Consort Ugloo and former prince Maestro *were* on board."

"So much for their alliance," Tucker said. "That weakens Valtay's position on the bankruptcy action."

"Shut the fuck up, Tucker," Princess D'nadia said. "By the gods, our friend has been murdered."

"Wait, did he say the Maestro is dead?" said Donut. "Carl, did you hear that?"

"I heard, Donut."

As Ripper continued to breathlessly repeat everything that had happened, I met eyes with Hekla, who continued to sit quietly across the table, a rock in the storm. She studied me curiously.

"Is this how it always is with you two, then?" she asked. "What was it he said? Scorched earth?"

I nodded. I put my hand on Donut.

"With a little bit of chaos thrown in," I said.

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Ripper Wonton played a video of Manasa singing, her final performance. The large cobra was in an opulent dining room, singing a cappella in a hauntingly sad soprano voice. The entire studio watched in dead silence. It gave me the chills.

"Wow," Donut whispered as the song was done.

The show ended shortly thereafter, and the virtual studio faded away, leaving me and Donut alone in the room. Hekla and the others disappeared before we could say our goodbyes. We got up and returned to the lounge.

I moved to the small window by the bathroom, and sure enough one of the two trailers floating out there was gone. It had been replaced by hundreds of floating probes of all sizes, zipping about, scanning the water. Two of them whizzed toward me the moment I stuck my head in the window, but before they could get too close, the glass snapped shut like a camera shutter.

My HUD flickered back on.

Zev: I'll meet you guys at the saferoom. Prepare to be transported in a few moments.

Carl: See you there.

"She was really nice. Manasa, I mean. I liked her," Donut said as we waited. She released Mongo from his pet carrier, and he hopped up and down with excitement. He rushed into the bathroom and stood upon the cleaning treadmill. He grunted angrily when it didn't automatically start up.

"Yeah," I said. "That was too bad."

"Do you really believe all that stuff you just said? About people rising up?" Donut asked.

I shrugged. "It's a little naïve. It's a nice fantasy, but I know the universe doesn't really work that way. For all we know, that king guy's people are really happy. Just because people complain about stuff doesn't mean they have it bad. Besides, I'm a nobody. It's not like I have the power to change anything. I wasn't expecting that, though. Jesus."

"Yeah, Mordecai is going to be mad. He said you needed to make fun of him a little. Not kill his wife."

We still didn't know all the details as to why Mordecai had suggested we needle at the king if given the opportunity. He never went into detail with this sort of stuff. He was always spouting off things for us to do and keep an eye out for. Monster types. Herbs. Loot. Ways to act if we came across certain types of NPCs. We'd started calling it the daily BOLO. Be on the lookout. Donut had come up with the term. She'd once watched a marathon of *Law and Order*. I suspected the thing with King Rust was long-term strategy, something to do with the ninth floor if we ever got there. Mordecai wanted us to insult the king so we'd stay on his radar, probably so it'd be easier to bait him later.

I meant what I said to Donut. I knew a random dude from the crawl spouting off about revolution wasn't going to spark some great intergalactic crisis. Still, seeds. Mordecai had his plans. I had my own.

That said, there was something else going on, another, invisible player on the chessboard, so to speak. It'd been bothering me from the moment we listened to Prince Stalwart's message.

Carl: We need to be careful. Never even hint of this out loud. I think we were set up.

Donut: WHAT DO YOU MEAN?

Carl: That Stalwart dude was too prepared with his statement. They had the camera all ready with the army right outside the window. Stalwart was planning on killing

us from the start. I don't think they were expecting my little speech there, but it played right into their hands.

Donut: BUT THEY MISSED.

Carl: Stalwart was being played, too. We were just the pawns, the bait. And so was Manasa. Whoever is orchestrating this knew the orcs planned on killing us. That switcheroo was either on purpose to get them to really kill their ally, or they quickly jumped on the opportunity. It humiliates them and damages their alliance with the Valtay. Who benefits the most from that?

Donut: MANASA HAD THE VOICE OF AN ANGEL. NOBODY BENEFITS FROM IT.

Carl: No, that's not true. Borant benefits. Big time. If Valtay loses a powerful ally, maybe even goes to war with the Skull Empire over this, then they won't have time to try to take over the Borant system. But I don't know for sure. We have so little information.

Donut: OR MAYBE NOBODY ELSE WAS INVOLVED. THE ORCS WERE GOING TO KILL US, YES, BUT WE JUST GOT LUCKY.

Carl: Maybe. If so, that was *really* lucky for both us and Borant.

Donut: DO YOU THINK ZEV IS MAD AT US FOR WHAT YOU SAID?

Carl: Let's find out.

"Oh my gods," Zev said as we returned to the saferoom. She'd returned us to the same one we'd been in when we'd left, the one near the pool with the exploded boss corpse. She stood there in the middle of the room, wearing her ever-present spacesuit, having arrived before we did. Our HUD didn't shut off like usual when she was in the room. I didn't know if that was some sort of oversight or

a bug because she'd arrived first. "That was *terrifying*. I thought you two were dead for certain."

"What happened?" Mordecai asked, looking between us. Donut began to excitedly tell him the story, Donut-style. She started by explaining the cleaning mechanism in the trailer, going into extreme, unnecessary detail.

"How did they even know what trailer we were in?" I asked Zev as Donut continued to regale Mordecai. "I mean, they were wrong, but only because we switched at the last minute."

"That stuff isn't a secret," Zev said. "Rental trailers throw their booking schedules out there for anybody to see so they can coordinate availability. Before today, there's never been a reason to hide who is using what trailer. Nobody has ever attempted to assassinate a crawler outside the dungeon. What a nightmare."

"Stop," Mordecai said, raising a hand to Donut. "What happened?"

Donut took a deep breath. "Carl called the orc king a pussy, and his son's spaceship lasered the production trailer from orbit. But we'd switched with Manasa, and she got blown up instead."

Mordecai looked at me, horrified. "Manasa, the *singer*? She was killed?"

"She was so nice," Donut said. "She said she thought Mongo was adorable."

Mordecai: I distinctly remember saying you should be subtle.

Carl: I may have gone a little overboard. It gets worse.

"There's more," Zev said. "The Valtay responded by blowing the royal yacht into dust. The queen consort and Maestro were believed to be on board."

"For fuck's sake," Mordecai said.

"Hey, all they asked me for was my opinion. It's not my fault Prince pig face overreacted. It sucks the mom got killed, but if she's the one who raised those two, it's probably not a big loss."

"The good news is that nobody is saying anything negative about Carl and Donut on the net. Prince Stalwart is the villain. Wow. Rust is gonna have to disown him, too. I hadn't thought of that. That only

leaves the sister as the heir. Our team is fielding a wave of interview requests, but *Dungeon Crawler After Hours with Odette* has the contract on your next interview."

"That's fine," I said. "I'm not too keen on going on any more interviews right now anyway."

Zev left soon thereafter, leaving us in the empty saferoom. Mordecai indicated for us to sit down.

Mordecai: Okay, new rule. We are not meddling with, mentioning, or talking about any other entities outside of the dungeon from now on. We're not going to mention King Rust or Prince Stalwart until after the sixth floor, if you two idiots make it that far. When Odette asks you about it, you say you have no opinion. You only talk about stuff happening in the dungeon.

Carl: So no more making fun of King Rust?

Donut: TALKING SMACK IS MY SPECIAL TALENT. MANASA AND PRINCESS D'NADIA BOTH SAID SO.

Mordecai: His wife is dead. He's neck-deep in shit. It's not your fault, but he's going to see it that way. I wanted to make sure the Skull Clan targeted the Blood Sultanate once you hit the ninth floor. I don't think that's going to be an issue now. Let's just hope he's not *too* mad at you two.

Carl: Why? What can he do to us here?

Mordecai: Besides assassinating you while you're on the surface? Nothing yet. That's going to change very soon. We'll deal with it when it happens.

"Well, there's nothing we can do about any of this now, is there?" I said out loud. "We still have daylight, and we have a ton to do. We need to get back into town. We have a militia to break up and a magistrate's office to break into."

One of the mysteries of the Sex Worker quest was how the city elves of the 201st Security Group figured in all of this. Assuming this

Featherfall guy was the lead baddie, then their presence in conjunction with the random undead monsters made sense. The city elves worshiped the skyfowl as living angels, and this town's lead skyfowl was a dark cleric who commanded the undead. The city elves were basically a free source of enthusiastic labor that Featherfall was using to help corral his undead minions.

We still didn't know what the hell was going on with the dead prostitutes. That was okay for now. I didn't need to know exactly what was happening to know the best way to weaken the head dude's plans was to first knock out one of his support networks.

I didn't like the idea of going full murder hobo on a group of mentally ill elves. Still, if this group was targeting innocent NPCs and killing them, then I didn't hold much sympathy. Plus, they'd tried to kill us twice. If we didn't take them on now, it was going to just keep happening.

While we were in the middle of our interview, Mordecai had ventured into town and located their headquarters for us. It wasn't difficult. They had a sign and a trio of city elves out front attempting to talk those passing by to enter and hear "The good news about Apito the Oak Mother."

They were only two blocks away from the Magistrate's quarters, situated on a mostly-residential street in a poorer section of town.

When we left the saferoom, a handful of the shambling berserkers remained in the ruins, hanging out nearby. We rushed to the roof of a building and killed from afar. I didn't want to waste my hob-lobbers unless I had to, so instead I tried tossing a stick of hobgoblin dynamite. I'd never used the upgraded dynamite before, and I was glad I hadn't tried it while I was on the ground. The sticks were practically mini nukes. I used my upgraded strength to hurl a stick at a shambler a half block away. The resulting explosion knocked me off my feet. The front façade of a distant building collapsed, caving in on itself and filling the street with debris.

I stood and examined the damage, my ears ringing. I'd obliterated the shambler and killed the one behind it. Smoke swirled, dust filling the air.

Uh-oh, I thought.

The dynamite's power was great, but the sticks were utterly impractical to use in regular fights. Even with my strength, I wasn't so sure I could toss them far enough to be safe when I wasn't two stories up.

"My goodness," Donut said. "You need to be careful with those things, Carl." She returned to my shoulder. In the distance, a third shambler had turned and was now approaching from another road that wasn't blocked with rubble.

I wished I had a method of tossing them further. With my xistera, I could toss a hob-lobber four times the distance, but the sticks weren't shaped properly for the basket. I pulled another hobgoblin dynamite stick out and looked at it.

"Wait, are those the same ones you used for the thing?" Donut asked.

"Yeah," I said. "Three of them."

"Maybe we should have tested them first," she said.

"That's what they're gonna put on my tombstone."

"Don't be silly, Carl. They don't give us tombstones here."

I laughed.

"You know it tells me I can't touch them," Donut continued, peering down at the white stick. "It says there's a 75% chance it'll explode if I try to."

"Really?" I said. The stick's stability remained at 80% for me, which meant I could bonk myself on the head with it and nothing would happen.

"I don't think you're supposed to touch that stuff unless you have the proper skill. Or you're desperate. And I thought the goblin dynamite was scary. I wonder if there's something even higher on the list?" she asked. "What's the next step above hobgoblin?"

"I don't know," I said. "I don't know if there is one." My explosives handling and dangerous explosives handling skills had both risen to nine. Both skills increased the yield of the explosions. As it was now, a single stick of hobgoblin dynamite could kill most anything.

No, not everything. I thought of the divine guardian. The country boss from the 12th floor that we'd seen on that brief clip on the

recap show. That thing wouldn't even notice if I'd shoved an entire case of the things down its throat.

Thwump. Donut's *Magic Missile* took out the third shambling berserker.

In the distance, the sun sank low. We only had a good two hours of sunlight left, and I needed to use them. "Come on," I said. "Let's go talk to the elves."

The sign didn't announce the building as the headquarters of the 201st Security Group, but as we approached, it was clear that Mordecai's intelligence was correct. The simple, hand-painted sign over the building held the symbol of a tree with the words **Apito Education Center**. On my minimap, the building was labeled as a **Corrupt Temple**. A quick note to Mordecai confirmed that anything labeled "corrupt" meant that mobs could be within.

Three city elves stood out front, each of them holding a stick with an acorn hanging off the end. They were unsuccessfully attempting to hand the sticks to anyone who passed. None wore the uniform shirt. All three wore simple, unadorned brown robes that appeared dirty, as if they spent most of the day gardening.

The building, unfortunately, shared a wall with a residence. About fifteen dwarven kids rushed about the street, laughing and play-fighting. They ranged in age from about five to twelve, and based on the similar manner of their dirty, patched clothing, I guessed they were all siblings, including multiple pairs of twins and triplets. One of the older kids held a stick with a small salamander tied to the end, and he was chasing his brothers and sisters about as they all howled. I think it was supposed to be a mockery of the elves. The stick-wielding kid jabbed the poor hissing salamander toward one of the robed figures. The tiny lizard expelled a single spark of flames at the city elf, who cursed and kicked at the child. Another kid picked up a rock and chucked it at the elf, who in turn raised his hand and cast a spell that reflected the rock back at him. The rock bounced off

the kid's head, who started wailing. His siblings surrounded him, and they all piled inside the house next to the temple.

On the corner at the end of the street stood a pair of stoic village swordsmen. They paid no heed to the disturbance. It must be a regular thing. I checked the position of the sun. We still had a good hour before the guards would disappear for the day.

The stick with the small salamander was left in the middle of the street. The poor lizard was trying to drag himself away. I was going to untie the little guy, but Mongo jumped forward and swallowed the salamander whole, taking half the stick with it.

"Mongo, gross," I said. "Stop eating stuff you find on the ground."

The raptor made a face, as if the salamander had tasted foul. He made a retching noise.

"That's what you get," I said.

"You need to chew your food, Mongo," Donut said.

The three city elf NPCs glared at us as we approached. One of them rushed inside.

"Hello Carl," one of them said. He turned to Donut, sneering. "Disgusting, vile *blasphemer*."

"Me?" Donut said. "What did I do?"

I examined the elf.

Salvatore. City Elf. Level 16.

Root Druid.

Temple Recruitment Wand Bearer.

The Wand Bearers are the warm and fuzzy faces of the Apito Education Center, which is the outreach department of the 201st Security Group militia. While oftentimes doubling as door guards, the Wand Bearers are some of the most pious, most indoctrinated, and therefore, the most dangerous members of the silly little cult.

This particular group consists of members of the Magical Ops arm of the 201st. Translation: If you're gonna dance with these guys, be prepared to deal with all sorts of magical schools.

The second elf was named Carmine, and his description was almost identical, except instead of a Root Druid, it said he was a Wind Mage.

"How do you know our names?" I asked.

Salvatore spit on the ground. "Eat moss and die, apostate. The master told us the Oak Fell and their rotting assistants would come to the city soon, and the final battle for heaven would commence." He looked down at Donut, snarling. "When you agreed to help that orc, we knew it was you. You even wear the filthy symbol of your blasphemy."

"What the flying fuck are you talking about?" I asked.

Carl: Mordecai. Quick. What the hell is the "Oak Fell?" Also, once again, our charm isn't working on these guys.

Mordecai: The Oak Fell is Apito's version of the antichrist. That's not stuff one usually contends with until the 12th floor. We need to get you two a *Dispel Protections* spell, which'll handle the anti-charm and other security protocols these quest locations usually have. They're annoyingly common in skyfowl settlements.

"We had to torture her to tease your name from her lips," Salvatore was saying.

The third city elf returned, followed by a half dozen more of his friends. These guys weren't wearing the brown robes, but the uniforms of the 201st. They formed a semi-circle around the entrance, blocking it. All of them were level 16, but there was a menagerie of magic types, from a Fire Mage to a Summoner to a Light Healer. Their dots remained white on the map. For now.

"Wait, you had to torture who?" I asked. I'd missed what he said because I was talking to Mordecai.

"GumGum," the city elf said. "She was serving an important purpose, removing the unworthy filth from the streets. But then she started asking questions. Questions, it turns out, that attracted the Oak Fell. Just as the Master predicted."

"You tortured GumGum?" Donut asked, her voice incredulous. Next to her, Mongo growled. Actually, I realized it was more of a retching noise. The dinosaur was looking a little green. That

salamander wasn't sitting well in his gut. Still, the noise he'd made sounded downright menacing. The city elves all tensed. *Easy, easy*. Not yet.

"Yes," Salvatore said. "Just as we shall torture you. You defeated our champion, Vicente. He trained his entire life for the final battle. Now he blossoms on Her tree. The master had warned us a single champion would not be enough. We are chastened that we did not follow his guidance. We shall not make that mistake again. Now you will face all of us."

"You nine are all of you?" I asked.

"We were twelve, but now we are nine," Salvatore said. "Just as it was in the scriptures during the great Fall."

"Vicente? Is that the guy whose head I blew off? And you kicked in the nuts?" Donut asked. She turned to face me. All nine of the city elves hissed in unison and took a step back.

Donut looked back over her shoulder. "What? Are you scared of my butt or something? I'll have you know it is glorious." She waggled it at the elves, jingling the crupper that hung like a skirt across her backside. "This is an award-winning derriere!"

One of the elves, a type of mage called an "Icer" growled. His dot on the map flickered to red then back to white. They were all looking down at Donut with scowls and dismay.

Donut: CARL THEY ARE GOING TO ATTACK US.

Carl: Don't move. Stay in that position. Shake your left rear leg.

Donut lifted her back leg, revealing the small, magical anklet with the three little beads. She shook her foot, and the beads made a rattling noise. The elves growled and hissed like a pack of wild animals. One of them, the female Light Healer, started scratching at her own face, causing rivulets of blood to form.

What the actual fuck was wrong with these assholes?

They were scared of Donut's anklet. We'd found it on a dead crawler who'd been killed by the lemurs. I remembered it only gave a couple of minor stat boosts and a skill called Double Tap. There wasn't anything too remarkable about it except its name, **The Enchanted Anklet of the Fallen Oak**.

The description was all about how I shouldn't wear it, which was why I'd given it to Donut. Apparently, these guys weren't fans of magical items made from oakwood. I guessed that made sense since this Apito lady was called the Oak Mother. I'd be pretty upset too if someone was walking around with jewelry made out of dead babies.

"Let me get this straight," I said, looking at Salvatore, who wouldn't stop spitting on the ground like a damn maniac. The whole group had devolved from a bunch of angry, but competent-appearing magic users to this unstable mess of nutjobs who all looked as if they'd just escaped a mental hospital. The transformation had occurred in seconds. The fire mage had pissed himself. The summoner was sucking his thumb. "You assholes think Donut here is this Oak Fell antichrist person because she's wearing that anklet?"

"I told you wood jewelry is ugly," Donut grumbled.

"You are the bearer of the forbidden oak," Salvatore said, speaking directly to Donut. He stood stiffly, formally. He pulled the acorn off the tree branch still in his hand and ate it, crunching loudly. His entire form started to glow blue. **Magical Fervor** appeared over his head. The others all produced acorns and ate them. Soon, the entire group glowed.

Carl: Magical Fervor.

Mordecai: Triples their mana points and increases their strength. It also makes them glow and talk really loud. They'll be immune to your *Fear*.

Ahh shit, I thought. The plan had been to goad these guys into attacking us in front of the town guards. As long as they made the first move, Mordecai assured us the guards would fight on our side. But now I was worried the two swordsmen at the end of the street wouldn't be enough for this.

Protective Shell wouldn't protect us from magical attacks. I had my *Wisp Armor*, but that wouldn't help Donut. My mind raced. We had two different plays in our book that might work. We had "Mold Lion," which was named after the first fight we'd used the plan in. The second, newest one, was called "Mic Drop." That one would

probably work better, but it would likely end with the guards hunting us, which was something I wanted to avoid if possible.

Donut: Mold Lion again?

Carl: I think so. Get ready.

I prepared to jump forward into their midst. I'd cast *Protective Shell* anyway, which would physically launch them in every which direction. Like with the mold lions, it would hopefully kill a couple. If so, Donut would have a few precious moments to raise them from the dead, which would give us a few meat shields and even out the odds.

Salvatore continued his rant, but under the influence of the Magical Fervor buff, his voice carried as if over a loudspeaker. I kept my eyes glued to the dots on the minimap, waiting for them to turn red. If I moved a second too soon, we'd be doubly fucked. The shell wouldn't push the elves, and the swordsmen guards would move in on us instead. "The angel, our master, prepares us for the end of days," Salvatore squealed. "He has almost achieved all his tasks. We are prepared to blossom on Her. We, the 201st Security Group, are prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice to protect the angel, who in turn works toward Apito's vision of the Plantation. Apito warns us of the great beast who yearns to unravel the heavens and kill all the gods. And now, this great deceiver, this devourer of all that is holy, has a name. She is Donut, the Oak Fell. The Death Upon Us All. She Who Ends. And with the help of my brothers and sisters, I will…"

Thwap!

Salvatore crumpled to the ground, screaming as he clutched at his head. The enormously-pregnant, female dwarf hit him again with the rolling pin, yelling. Behind her, the group of young dwarves who'd been playing in the street all returned. The rock-thrower from before had a massive bandage around his head. The one who'd been holding the salamander on the stick picked up the broken branch and stared at it.

"Where's Benjamin?" he called.

The dwarf woman, who was apparently the mother of the entire crew, continued to pummel Salvatore with the rolling pin. "Throw a rock at my boy, will ya! I'll teach ya a lesson ye'll never forget ye

crazy lump of reconstituted snail shit! You arseholes waving yer silly branches all about all day long! We is sick of it, we is!"

Thwap! Thwap! Thwap!

Down the street, the two swordsmen guards turned toward the scuffle.

The pregnant dwarf stopped bashing in the head of the elf, who wasn't quite dead, but he wasn't getting up anytime soon, either. I read the name over her head. **Eunice. Level 30. Fathom Dwarf.** She stood up, glaring at the other elves. Silence followed, punctuated only by the sound of her heavy breathing and the blood dripping from the rolling pin. The harsh odor of urine filled the street.

I stared in surprised astonishment at the tableau. The woman had come out of nowhere. The other elves looked at each other, none of them moving, equally frozen with surprise by the unexpected violence. The summoner elf continued to suck his thumb. The healer continued to scratch at her own face. The scene only held this way for but a moment, though it seemed to go on forever.

The stalemate ended when Mongo yakked the salamander back out onto the street.

The small, now-dead lizard was still tied to the end of a broken stick. It landed in a slimy puddle with a *plop*.

"Benjamin?" the young dwarf asked, stepping forward. His name was **Ricky Joe. Level 2. Juvenile Fathom Dwarf**. He looked at the unmoving salamander. "*Benjamin*?"

It all went downhill from there.

The Icer elf, the first to break from his shock, shot a boomerang-shaped pulse at Eunice the dwarf. It hit the pregnant woman square in the chest, and she rocketed back, frozen solid. Her health moved to the red. A second, smaller health bar appeared over her stomach. This one was also in the red, though not as deep. **Frosted** appeared with a sixty-second countdown. The young dwarves all cried out, running to their mother. All except young Ricky Joe, who knelt before Benjamin the dead salamander. His lower lip quivered as he picked up the broken stick. Slime dripped off.

At this moment, not a single dot on the map was yet red. But the swordsmen guards clomped noisily onto the scene, unsheathing their massive weapons. They moved toward the frozen, pregnant dwarf. The remaining children scattered, rushing across the street, all except the one with the bandage on his head, who draped himself over his mother's form.

"Leave me mum alone!"

The guards did not care. They both lifted their swords over their heads.

I was very aware that what I did next would be considered a Very Stupid Thing.

I was also aware that nobody left on the street at this moment was innocent. Nobody except maybe Benjamin, who was already dead, and the baby dwarf in Eunice's belly. The elves were assholes. The rock-throwing dwarf kid was a prick who'd gotten what he deserved. Eunice obviously had some anger—and birth control—issues she needed to work out. And Ricky Joe the salamander torturer was obviously well on the path toward the life of a serial killer.

All of this ran through my head as I attacked the guards.

I formed a fist, stepped forward, and I punched the closest of the two level-75 village swordsmen as hard as I could.

My fist smashed into the side of the armored creature. It was as if I'd punched the side of a Sherman tank. I left an impression in the metal, but the guard did not stagger. A health bar did not appear. He and his companion paused their attack and turned toward me. Both of their dots turned red on the map.

Uh-oh.

Warning: You have been branded as a troublemaker at this settlement. Guards will now attack you on sight.

The same moment as I punched the guard, young Ricky Joe did decided to also enter the idiot-of-the-day contest.

The boy, still clutching the half-stick of wood with the dead salamander tied onto it punched Mongo the velociraptor in the face.

"You killed my best friend! You…"

The boy moved to punch a second time, but when he pulled his arm back, he found that it was no longer there. Mongo, quick as a snake, had bitten off the dwarf's arm below the elbow, swallowing it along with Benjamin for the second time.

"Mongo, hold!" Donut yelled, saving the idiot boy's life. For now. The dinosaur, once again, looked ill.

I leaped back into the midst of the still-gawking magic users as the swordsman's wide blade smashed into the ground. The blade missed me, instead drilling into Salvatore, who'd just been healed back to consciousness by the face-scratching light healer. He'd been sitting on the ground, shaking his head. He was cleaved in half, cut right down the center like a damn bagel.

Behind the guards, the children swarmed their still-frozen mother and began pulling her back across the street. And standing between the guards was little Ricky Joe, looking at the stump of his arm which was now shooting blood into the air like one of those summertime sprinklers for kids. I reached forward and picked the heavy dwarf child up, shoving him under my left arm like a football as I pulled a boom jug into my right arm.

"Mic drop!" I yelled.

"Are we taking the kid?" Donut cried, wasting a precious second. I jumped out of the way of another sword cleave. These things were strong, practically indestructible, but they were also slow as hell.

"Yes, go!" I lit the torch on the boom jug.

"Set!" Donut shouted.

I lightly tossed the lit jug straight up into the air. I watched it rise as I mentally counted down the two seconds. The jug reached its apex and started its descent right toward my head.

All four of us—Me, Donut, Mongo, and Ricky Joe—blinked away, reappearing on the roof of a building across the street thanks to Donut's *Puddle Jumper* spell.

I whirled, facing the scene just in time to see the boom jug hit the ground and fully engulf everyone and everything standing there by the entrance to the temple. The remaining eight city elves were instantly crisped. The two city guards, both of them in the process of swinging their swords at me, recovered and looked at each other. A

health bar appeared over both of them, though it barely moved, and they seemed oblivious to the raging fire. They stepped away from the conflagration. They faced the fire and stopped moving. They hadn't seen where we'd gone.

Thankfully Eunice and the other children were far enough away to not be caught in the blast. The door to the building next to the one we were standing upon opened, and a pair of human NPCs rushed out and pulled them inside as other NPCs rushed into the street to see what was happening.

The fire moved to the entrance of the corrupt temple, and soon the entire building, along with the home next door, was engulfed.

I pulled a health potion and shoved it in the mouth of the still-squealing Ricky Joe. The blood stopped flowing and his health bar returned to the green. His arm did not grow back. The boy turned to the ill-looking Mongo and moved to hit the dinosaur again, this time with his left arm, but I held him back.

"Give it back! Give me my arm back!"

Mongo obliged.

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We waited until sunset before leaving our hiding spot atop the building. After the brief, chaotic fight on the street down below, the two guards remained in their position facing the fire. They did not move. They did not look up. Multiple NPCs, including skyfowl, came to inspect the burning building. Nobody paid us any heed.

Nobody, except Mordecai, who spent a solid 10 minutes straight swearing at us over chat because we'd activated the guards' aggro.

Ricky Joe sat cross-legged on the roof, sullenly clutching onto the remains of his severed limb and the twice-eaten corpse of his pet salamander, Benjamin. He'd screamed bloody murder when he learned we wouldn't be able to reattach the arm, but Donut had talked him into sitting down and calmly waiting for night to descend. Once the building was fully engulfed, it appeared whatever spells protected the immediate area also fled, once again allowing Donut's charm to be effective.

"Hey kid," I asked as we waited. "You know that wasn't very cool, right? Tying the little lizard to the end of the stick? It's pretty fucked up."

"You shouldn't say bad words to kids," Donut said. "But yes, Ricky Joe. You shouldn't do that."

"At least I didn't eat him," Ricky Joe said. "And Benjamin liked it. Fathom dwarves strap them to their hats when they go into mines. He was in training."

A few moments later, the two guards abruptly turned and walked away. I watched them clank their way through the town's streets. They converged with other groups of the swordsmen, and they all entered a building on the same street as the magistrate's headquarters.

"Hey," I asked the kid, indicating the burnt-out husk of the temple. The child's own home, which was attached to the building, had also burned to the ground. "Did you ever see anything unusual coming in and out of there? Or hear anything weird?"

"Weird?" he asked. "They were always weird. One of them would cry for his mama every morning. We could hear it through the walls, we did. There were a lot of weird smells, too. My brother, Bubba Lane, said he saw something fly from the roof a couple nights ago. He said it was a krasue, but it was probably just that skyfowl lady."

"What lady?" I asked.

"I don't know her name. They all look the same to me. But she visits a lot. She usually comes just before dark and then leaves right away, walking with a bunch of other ladies. She didn't come today though."

"Wait, what are the other ladies?"

"Women, usually elves and dwarves and humans. They show up all day long. I don't recognize any of them. I think they're trying to join the church. They're usually dressed like they're about to go to the Desperado. Bubba Lane says it's because women are stupid. My mama slaps him around some when he says that and then pinches his ear until he apologizes. Then she makes us all line up and call *him* stupid. He doesn't like that much."

"Do you know where the skyfowl takes the ladies?" Donut asked.

"No," he said. "We're not allowed to go past the street. Mama says it's dangerous out there."

I looked at Donut. So, a bunch of women from out of town were coming to this temple, and then they were led away by a female skyfowl. Interesting. We needed to get moving.

There was no easy way off the roof. Donut's *Puddle Jumper* wouldn't reset for another four hours, and we needed it for the next part of the evening's investigations. I sighed as I pulled out my rope,

reflecting on all that had changed since we'd woken up this morning. It had been a crazy long day, and it wasn't over yet. We wouldn't be able to casually walk around town anymore. We'd be fine at night, but while the sun was up, we'd be attacked by the guards, which really sucked. There were other nearby towns, but this was the largest one in the area. And with just about three days left until collapse, it was getting too late to venture far from the only exit we'd discovered so far, which was a half-day's walk from here, in the ruins of Grimaldi's circus.

Donut pulled Mongo into the pet carrier and waited for me to climb down the rope. I had to carry the protesting Ricky Joe under my arm. I ended up accidentally dropping him the last ten feet, but he was mostly fine. He belly-flopped hard onto the ground, losing his weak grip on the severed arm and salamander corpse. He started wailing. "Oh, you're fine," I called as I climbed the rest of the way down. "Walk it off, kid." His health had barely blipped.

The moment we hit the ground, Donut casually leaped off the building like it was nothing. I grasped the rope and pulled it into my inventory.

"You need to work on your jumping, Carl," Donut said as she released Mongo. "Or figure out how to fly."

An ear-piercing scream from within the next-door building reverberated through the street.

"That's me mom," Ricky Joe said. "She's in labor again. She's going to be really mad if I miss it. I'm in charge of holding her left leg. Bye, Princess Donut! Bye Mongo!" He rushed toward the door.

I exchanged a look with Donut and shook my head.

We made a quick stop at the Silk Road before returning to the One-Eyed Narwhal. Our funds were starting to run low. I'd picked up three more boxes of hob-lobbers, all of them the impact-detonated version. Pustule had also brought a ten pack of the hobgoblin smoke

curtains, which were round, fused bombs that would supposedly work much better than the goblin smoke bombs. I purchased all ten.

Mordecai was already in the Narwhal when we arrived, which meant he'd walked there on his own from his guildhall. The recap show was about to begin, and he sat at the table chatting with a strange woman. A crawler, I realized, seeing the blue dot on the map.

"It's Hekla's friend," Donut said. "Yay! She found us!"

Shit. I'd completely forgotten about that. As we approached, the woman turned to look at us and I stopped in my tracks. She was… odd looking. I couldn't tell her age. The blond-haired woman's eyes were too big, too high on her face. Her nose was crooked and sideways, and her chin appeared to be lumpy. Also, I could see that the individual hairs on her head were much too thick. She appeared to be wearing a poorly-sewn tracksuit and blocky snow boots. I examined her properties.

Crawler #9,077,265. "Katia Grim."

Level 9.

Race: Human.

Class: Monster Truck Driver.

I blinked a few times, trying to wrap my mind around it. She clearly wasn't human. And what the hell was a Monster Truck Driver class? My eyes focused on that level 9. She was 10 levels below me. She had a pair of stars by her name. A neighborhood and borough boss. Still, level 9. That was going to be a problem.

"Hi, Katia," Donut said, jumping on the table. "Are you Hekla's friend?"

"Hello," she said shyly, nodding her head. "Yes. Thank you so much for meeting me. Hekla said you'd be here."

Mongo approached her hesitantly, sniffing at her. Seeing that she wasn't a threat, he made a few circles and then curled up on the floor.

"Hello," I said.

"Hello, Carl," she replied. "Hekla told me everything that happened during your interview. It's… crazy. She wants to talk to

you, but in a minute. She and the daughters are fighting a boss right now. I won't get any experience because I'm too far away."

When she talked, her mouth moved oddly, like her voice was overdubbed. Strange.

I wouldn't be able to talk to Hekla directly. I could talk to other crawlers over chat, like the way I talked to Brandon, but only after we both initiated the chat handshake, which had to be done in person.

"Anyway," she said when I didn't respond, "Mordecai was giving me a few tips." She smiled. "It's much appreciated. My game guide isn't very helpful."

"Hekla is so cool," Donut said. "She's like Xena Warrior Princess, but better."

"Yes, she is," Katia said. "She's amazing. She saved my life."

Mordecai: If you can train her up, she'd be a good addition to the team. Good enough to maybe poach her from this Hekla. But she is very, very far behind. Probably too far behind.

Carl: Can we trust her?

Mordecai: I don't know yet. She seems genuine. She's also a bit of a trainwreck.

Carl: What the hell is she? She's not really a human, is she?

Mordecai: Let her explain.

"What sort of tips was Mordecai giving you?" I asked out loud.

She sighed heavily. "Bannon, that's my game guide, talked me into picking this race and class, and I don't know what I'm doing."

"What race are you? It says human, but you don't look it."

"Easy," Mordecai said. "She's trying."

I finally sat down at the table. Over the bar, the recap show began.

"What does that mean?"

"I'm a Doppelganger," she said. "It says human when you look at me because that's what I'm trying to emulate. Before Mordecai helped me with my ears, it said my race was 'What the f-word?' so we are making progress."

"A doppelganger?" I said. I looked at Mordecai. "Is that the same thing as what you are? A changeling?"

"They are similar," he said, "But not exactly the same. A doppelganger is a very difficult race to master, and her guide should have talked her out of it. As a changeling, I can switch to any race that I have physically touched, with a few caveats. At least that's how it works for crawlers. As you know, I lost my ability to choose my shape when I became a guide. Anyway, a doppelganger is different. She is like clay. She once had a regular form, and she is wearing gear. All of that, her body and gear, adds to a certain amount of mass. With that mass, she can shape her body into anything she wants of equal mass." He looked over at her sadly. "She doesn't gain the non-physical abilities of the shape she is forming, unlike a changeling. She just looks like it. The problem for Miss Katia here is that she can't just say, 'make me into a human.' She has to shape it herself."

"It hurts, too," she added.

"And it hurts," Mordecai agreed. "She has to mentally chisel her appearance herself. And since she isn't yet a master sculptor…" He let it hang, indicating her face. "But I have some experience in this subject, and I am helping her obtain a more natural appearance."

"It's really tricky," she said. "I only return to my regular appearance when I am asleep or in the bathroom. And it doesn't let me shape myself when I'm in the bathroom. I've been using the reflection off a health potion as a mirror." She waved her hand over her face. "With obvious results."

"Wait, this will help," I said, rummaging through my inventory. I found what I was looking for and placed it on the table. It was a hand-sized chunk of broken mirror. I'd looted it on the first floor from the remains of the gym after our fight with the Juicer. I had enough broken glass in there to form a wall of mirrors.

"Oh wow, thank you," she said, picking it up. She had a timid way of moving. She reminded me of a rabbit. Skittish and furtive, like she would bolt if I raised my voice. *How is this woman still here? How is she alive?*

She tentatively looked into the mirror. “One of those stores had a handheld mirror, but I couldn’t afford… Oh my gosh, I look like a Juan Gris painting.”

I didn’t know who Juan Gris was, but I imagined he was someone who sucked at painting faces. As I watched, her face twisted and heaved like something was underneath it, moving things about. Her eyes changed shape and moved into a more correct position. It was like watching someone model clay with invisible hands.

“I gotta do clothes, too,” she said. “I’m wearing a magical leather jerkin right now, but once it’s equipped, it disappears and adds to my mass. The only thing that doesn’t disappear is my weapon.”

“You’ll get better and faster at altering your appearance as you practice. It’s a skill, like any other,” Mordecai said patiently.

“What’s with that Monster Truck Driver class?” I asked.

Mordecai answered for her. “I can’t look these up anymore, so I’m not certain on the exact details, but from what I can gather, it’s an earth version of the Staunch Barrier class mixed with a Jouster class. It’s a relatively common combined class called a Juggernaut. In other words, she’s a straight-up tank that gets an increasingly-massive Constitution bonus the faster she is moving. And based on her current Constitution while she is standing still, she is quite the powerhouse.”

“Wow,” I said.

On the screen, the crocodilian guy with the shotgun had teamed up with a human who looked familiar, but I couldn’t remember where I’d seen him before. They jumped off a burning building together while being chased by three-legged insect things.

Carl: What’s the catch?

Mordecai: Massive constitution and good dexterity. She sucks at everything else, especially Strength, which seems counterintuitive. She is not a fighter. And her level is low, so despite her ability to absorb a lot of physical and magical damage, she’s still far behind the curve. I once fought an indestructible wombat thing on the eighth floor. The monsters could absorb a direct hit to the face with a

Celestial Warhammer, but they were small and weak. So instead we just picked them up and dunked them headfirst into buckets of water. They quickly drowned.

Carl: Jesus, Mordecai.

Mordecai: My point is that the strongest, most indestructible wall in the world isn't that tough if you can pick it up and toss it aside. It's just like with your shelf plan later tonight.

Katia looked up. "Okay, Hekla is done with her fight. She says, 'Hi Carl and Donut. I am glad you haven't been assassinated. Please help Katia.' That's me. 'I think it'll be best if you let her join your party to get experience. The farther away they are, the less shared experience they get. Please keep her out of too much danger. I really appreciate your help, and I promise to make it up to you.'"

Carl: We letting her join our party? Won't that dilute our experience pool too much?

Donut: WE HAVE TO WE PROMISED HEKLA.

Carl: No, YOU promised Hekla.

Mordecai: As long as you button up this quest tonight, you can spend the last two days grinding, and you'll be on track, even with her tagging along. Before you got here, I talked Fitz into letting me look at his herb stash, and I managed to steal last night's newsletter. There's something in there we need to talk about. But get her in the party first.

"Tell Hekla we said that we'll take it from here and to stay safe," I said.

We spent the next few minutes getting her to join our party. I took a look at her stats.

Strength: 11
Intelligence: 8
Constitution: 51
Dexterity: 30
Charisma: 8

"How did you manage to get your Constitution so high?" I asked.

"I have a ring that adds 15 to Constitution. I got it in a loot box when we first started. Then I got a couple other constitution buffs,

and then when I picked that class it added even more."

"What else can you do?" I asked, examining her properties.

"I have an ability called Second Fuel Tank, which absorbs damage and reflects some of it back. It triggers randomly, but it's limited to only one time a fight. There's my Rush ability, which uses my body as a battering ram. I can only do that once a 30-hour day. I also have something called Pathfinder which helps me find stairwells really easily."

I exchanged a look with Mordecai.

"I don't have any useful spells. Oh, and I'm immune to wind spell damage. Also, I'm good at fixing engines."

"Were you a mechanic?"

"No. I've never actually fixed an engine before. But I got my Earth Hobby Potion. I am a 'gear head.' I was an art teacher before all this happened."

"An art teacher?" I asked, looking dubiously at her poorly-sculpted face.

She smiled sheepishly. At least I think that's what she was going for. Instead, the smile looked a bit ghoulish. "What is the saying? Those who can't do, teach?"

"Okay, listen up," Mordecai said. "Now that you're in the party, we need to have a discussion about experience and something I just learned."

"Hush, hush!" Donut said, pointing on the screen. "Look! It's me!"

"Oh fuck," I said, looking at the headline.

It was a graphic of Donut, her eyes slit. It was an image from last night when she'd been drinking at the bar. A lightning bolt appeared, and on the other side of the screen an image of two rottweilers slammed into place. It was purposely reminiscent of the boss battle graphic.

Princess Donut Versus Cici and Gustavo 3!

"It's a feud of epic proportions! Princess Donut has thrown the gauntlet down, directly challenging Cici and Gustavo 3, the two beloved pets of current front-runner, Lucia Mar!" The orange-hued lizard announcer breathlessly intoned.

"I have done no such thing!" Donut said, incredulous. "They're lying!" She turned to me. "Carl, I do not like this. Since when has the news been allowed to lie?"

Donut's image appeared on the screen, her leaning over her cocktail. "Those dogs sound just awful. Bitch-ass rottweilers. Almost as bad as cocker spaniels. Think they're so smart."

"Lucia Mar appeared earlier today on *Knuckle Cracking*, and this is what she had to say."

The screen flickered, changing to a shot of Lucia Mar. She sat on the couch next to a wolf-headed host. Lucia was in the strength-based, skull-faced cycle of her Lajabless form. She and the wolfman laughed cruelly as Gustavo and Cici ripped apart some small, fuzzy animal while the audience howled encouragement.

"What the hell is this bullshit?" I asked.

"It's an arena fight show," Mordecai said. "I already told Zev to never let you on one. The fights aren't real. It's complicated."

The scene cut to Lucia Mar's face, zoomed in super close. Her skull eye sockets teemed with bugs.

"What do you say to the challenge? Will you come back to this show? We could make it a main event. Donut versus one or both of your boys?" the wolfman asked off screen.

"No," Lucia Marr said. "This show is a waste of time. Every moment spent not gaining experience is a waste of time." Her voice came out raspy with her thick, Spanish accent. "I will find this Donut in the dungeon, where her death will be forever. Cici and Gus will tear this *puta* apart. And then I will rip Carl to pieces and take all of his shiny toys."

"She seems nice," I said.

I had to remind myself that this was a little kid. What kind of fucked-up childhood did she have?

"This is an outrage!" Donut said. "That wasn't a challenge! Carl, we need to tell them that it was a mistake. I don't want to fight those two stupid dogs. We'd kill them easy, sure, but I don't want those ugly skulls after my name."

"Goddamnit," Mordecai said, looking up at the screen. "Goddamnit to hell."

"They're going to bring us together somehow, aren't they?" I asked.

"Of course they are," he said. "But not yet. They'll want some buildup first."

"Will it happen on this floor?"

"No way. It won't be until after the third round of sponsorships, so on or after the sixth."

"Does that mean they'll go easy on us until then?"

"Maybe," Mordecai said. "But probably not."

"Whatever happened to them trying to kill us off early?"

"They're still trying to end as early as possible. But they need money, so you high performers are going to be treated differently. All of this ties in with what I need to talk to you guys about. Borant is warning the shopkeepers and pub owners to be extra careful not to anger crawlers. It doesn't explicitly say this in the newsletter, but I can read between the lines. Some of you guys are getting much stronger than you should. That kid trashing the Desperado Club two nights ago is proof of that. Most loot boxes are controlled by the system AI, and it appears the system is attempting to compensate for the shorter time limits. Borant controls the mobs and the experience earned, for the most part, but the System AI is still the ultimate arbiter and is using that strength to even out the odds."

"Is that why you didn't have a fit when we decided to take on this quest?"

He shrugged. "You were already snagged in that quest's net. It happens. I could tell this was a good one from the get-go. Usually you have to just bring something from point A to point B, and it's done. Or you just have to kill someone. These more elaborate quests are also a symptom of the shorter floors." He paused as the announcement came on. It was nothing new. "Now, you two get a couple hours of sleep. Once Donut's *Puddle Jumper* resets, you'll go back out there. And since you've pissed off the guards, we need to make sure you finish this before the sun is up. In the meantime, I'm going to help Katia train her face. She's not going out with you tonight. But when you're done with the quest, you'll spend the rest of the time on the floor grinding together."

Mordecai: Try to keep her alive. But if she does die, make sure you get those rings off her finger.

Carl: You are stone cold, Mordecai.

This late in the evening, the entire town was asleep. The pubs were all closed. Nobody walked the main streets. The only light was from the sign of the Desperado Club a few streets over, towering over the city. An eerie silence punctuated the night, broken occasionally by horrific, unearthly screams that seemed to come from everywhere.

In order to break into the magistrate's home, we first needed to get into an alleyway, scale the exterior of a small building we'd scoped out earlier, and then use the *Puddle Jumper* spell to hop over to the roof of the magistrate's building.

The alley contained a group of level-14 monsters called Shadow Leaks. They were smoke-like, ghost-class mobs that swarmed at us as we approached the side of the building. They utilized a stinging cold attack, which I was resistant to thanks to my Nightgaunt Cloak. Thankfully my magical gauntlet was able to damage them just as easily as if they were made of flesh, and Mongo's magical teeth caps could also hurt them. The ghosts gave off an unusually high amount of experience and were easy to kill. Mongo hit level 13 and got noticeably larger, rising to the height of my chest. He'd gone from dog-sized to pony-sized just like that.

Donut leaped from my shoulders to the back of Mongo to see if she could ride him. But the dinosaur got so excited that he started jumping up and down, tossing Donut away. She poofed all her hair out in anger and returned to my shoulder. "We'll work on that later," she mumbled.

This residential building was ringed by a series of conveniently-placed trellises on the exterior that made for easy scaling. Mongo went into the carrier as Donut leaped from window to window, quickly reaching the third-floor roof. I followed, scaling the trellis,

which creaked ominously. But I quickly made it to the angled, shingle-covered roof, my heart thrashing.

The long magistrate building spread before us. Earlier, we'd come in from another side, using a different building's roof to enter through the main entrance and into the mall below. This building we stood upon now was a full story higher than the last one, and we were going to jump straight to the magistrate building's roof.

That was assuming if anything was left after I blew the three sticks of dynamite. I had hidden them inside the shelves that held up Miss Quill's beanie babies. When I'd reattached the shelves to the wall, I'd found that they were hollow inside. I'd placed three sticks and a glob of Hobgoblin Pus, the remote detonator, in the second shelf. We wouldn't be able to blow through the magical door that protected the next room over, but just by knocking on the wall, I could tell we could easily breach directly through the wood.

I spent a moment examining our surroundings, searching the air for flying mobs. I didn't see anything. Just one building over from this one, directly across the opposite street was the large, warehouse-like building that held all of the inactive swordsmen guards. I could feel it there, an ominous presence, sandwiching us between the equally-imposing magistrate's building. I hoped the guards remained within like they were supposed to. Mordecai insisted they'd remain inactive all night, but I was worried. We were about to cause a very large, very loud ruckus.

We'd originally had a different plan, but after my test earlier with the hobgoblin dynamite, we'd had to rethink how we were going to proceed.

"Here we go," I said to Donut. "Get ready."

"Wait, I have to remember my lines," said Donut. She shook her paw and cleared her throat.

I sighed and pulled the Mysterious Letter from my inventory.

It was Mordecai who'd figured out what the Mysterious Letter really was. We'd found it within GumGum's inventory after she'd been killed. We figured it was something she'd pulled off the dead body of a prostitute. It turns out it was likely planted there on

purpose in the hopes it would be picked up by whomever was in charge of investigating the deaths.

Earlier this morning, as we'd stood outside of the Narwhal staring at the dead corpse with the words, "No you won't" carved into her body, which had been in response to me saying we'd hunt down and kill whoever was responsible, I had been horrified.

"Whoever this is, is listening to us talk. He can hear and see us," I'd said to Mordecai.

"That's unlikely. You were in a safe room."

"Yet, here we are," I said. "He'd done it fast, too. She'd dropped just a few moments after I'd spoken."

"Tell me exactly what you were doing at the time when they dropped this girl on the building."

It was only then I realized I'd been clutching onto the mysterious letter as I'd told Donut that we'd get revenge for GumGum.

"I should have realized," Mordecai said after thinking on it for a moment. "Don't take it out. It won't work while it's in your inventory. It's a necroscript scroll all right, but it's also covered in blood. I thought that was from the dead body it was found on. But I think it's actually the blood of the caster. The scroll has already been used. Scrolls usually disappear once used, but not always."

"Well, what is it?" I asked.

"*Suppurating Eye*," he said. "A common lich spell. It's usually not in scroll form, but it's not unheard of. The caster reads the spell then leaks a bodily fluid onto a surface. The caster can then see and hear anything happening near the spilled fluid. It's like placing a spy camera. He spilled it directly on the scroll, which he knew would be picked up. As long as it's out of your inventory, he'll know where you are and can hear you talk. You probably won't be able to sell it to anybody, so you should get rid of it."

"Or we can use it!" Donut said. "We can talk to him and tell him what a jerk he is, get him mad enough to come to us."

"That's actually a great idea," I said.

"Of course it's a great idea, Carl. I always come up with great ideas."

I now gingerly placed the scroll on the roof tiles.

"I still don't know what this is," I whispered. "When we're done here, we need to sell it."

"Do you think there'll be more scrolls in there?" Donut asked. She was overacting, but it was too late now. "It looks valuable. We should find one without blood on it."

"After we finish looting that filing cabinet in the reception area, we can look through the office for more scrolls."

I added, "We should probably steal all of those stuffed animals on Miss Quill's desk, too. Especially those ones on the top shelf in the little cases. I bet those are worth something to somebody. And if they're not, we can always use them to light campfires."

"Good idea. Plus, Mongo needs a chew toy."

"Okay, we're going to wait another minute to make sure nothing is flying around above us, then we'll zap over to the roof, hammer our way through the ceiling, and drop into that office. The key to that door has to be in there somewhere."

"It's a fool-proof plan," Donut said.

I put the letter back into my inventory.

"There!" Donut said, pointing into the sky. A group of four krasue emerged, coming from underneath the building. It appeared they'd been on the first, unoccupied floor, waiting for us. They emerged now, heading toward our position on the roof.

"Go," I whispered.

Donut zapped Mongo back onto the roof. Before the dinosaur could screech, she hissed, "Quiet!"

The dinosaur grunted angrily, then realized he was on an angled roof and started scrambling. Donut quickly cast *Clockwork Triplicate* on the dinosaur and then pulled the original Mongo back into his carrier. We'd need him again in a minute, but not right now.

The two clockwork Mongos both squeaked with disappointment as Mongo disappeared. I pulled the lit Hobgoblin smoke curtain into

my xistera and tossed it onto the opposite roof. I then lit a second one and wedged it into a roof tile at our feet.

Donut gave a quick set of instructions to the two dinosaurs, and they both howled as the heavy smoke started to billow into the night air. I quickly pulled the mysterious letter out.

"We're jumping onto the roof now," I said. I crumpled up the letter and tossed it up in the air. One of the Mongos grabbed it and swallowed it whole. They then turned and leaped from the roof to the top of the magistrate building, soaring up through the air and landing easily. One of them howled, the sound carrying heavily into the night.

"Holy shit," I whispered. They'd leaped across the alley and up an entire full story. "You were right. I didn't think they'd be able to jump that far."

"Mongo has the same pounce ability as I do," Donut said. "And he's a lot bigger."

"Maybe I should ride him instead of letting you have all the fun," I said as the smoke completely filled the night air. Pustule had been correct. These things were much better than the traditional goblin smoke bombs. It was like a heavy fog had filled the entire area. The two pets disappeared from view.

The swarm of red dots indicating the krasue turned back toward the roof of the building. The dinos had jumped before the fog had completely filled the area, and the floating women heads had seen the motion. I hadn't been certain the fog would work on ghosts. Mordecai said it wouldn't on most kinds of non-corporeal ghost entities, but it would on these guys because they had a physical presence. I still didn't know how he kept all these rules in his head.

My attention moved to the map. "Okay, the clockwork Mongos are on the roof right over the Magistrate's office." If the guy was listening in, hopefully he'd been fooled into thinking *we* were now on the roof, and his crew had moved to the office to intercept. "Get down." We moved to the back of the roof, crouching down. We should be plenty far away at this distance, but every time I said that, I was proven wrong.

“I feel bad about ruining Miss Quill’s collection,” Donut said. “She really loves those things.”

“Something tells me she’s not going to care anymore.”

I pulled the hobgoblin pus out and jammed on the detonator. A clockwork Mongo howl filled the air in the moment before night turned to day.

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"Nice," I said, examining the gaping hole in the building.

Below, the entire town had been jarred awake by the explosion. Lights turned on throughout the village. Cries and shouts rose. The dark shadows of skyfowl burst into the air all around us, but most stayed back from the destruction. The magistrate's quarters burned. We'd blown up half of the building. But not all of it.

Admin Notice. A new tab is available in your interface.

Admin Notice. Your title has changed. This change will revert upon collapse of this floor.

A wall of notifications scrolled by, surprising me. I jumped up two levels to 21. Donut also jumped two levels to 19.

"Well that was easy," Donut said as she cast her *Torch* spell, filling the rooftop with brilliant light. The smoke bomb sputtered to a stop, and the light reflected off the remnants, pulsing. It reminded me of the dance floor of the Desperado Club.

I had been expecting the krasue to swarm at us, which is why we'd waited until now for Donut to cast her light spell. They should've been immune to the explosion, but I didn't see them anywhere. We'd probably blown them halfway across town. I kept a wary eye out for red dots.

"*Oh shit*," I said, examining the notifications. We had not received the one I'd hoped for, but I still had several interesting ones.

New achievement! Assassin!

You have killed a ranking NPC town official. *Sniff* It seems like just yesterday you were nothing but a scared, level-1 crawler with beautiful feet, pissing yourself as you faced down a rat. Now look at you. You've moved all the way up to political assassinations. What's next? Killing a god?

***Reward*: You've received a Bronze Assassin's Box!**

New achievement! Ultimate Extreme Power!

Easy there, Charlemagne. This is only a medium settlement. It's not like you've conquered most of Europe. But you have killed this town's acting Magistrate.

You know what that means? Welcome to the wonderful world of public administration.

***Reward*: You've received a Platinum Tyrant's Box! You have also gained control of the Medium Skyfowl Settlement. Good luck, Magistrate.**

New achievement! CockBlock!

You have assassinated an NPC whose existence was required to complete another crawler's quest. (*NPC Killed: Miss Quill – Skyfowl. Level 30*.) Who was that other crawler? What was the quest? Who fucking cares? You get the reward they were promised!

Warning: You may only receive this award once. The next time you do it, we tell them who you are. And then they get a new quest to kill *you*. Nobody likes cockblocks.

***Reward*: You've received a Silver Quest Box!**

So it appeared we had killed both Miss Quill and Magistrate Featherfall in the blast.

"Are we jumping over there or what?" Donut said. "We're supposed to be jumping!"

"Hang on," I said. Every instinct I had told me to wait. "Something's not right. Let me think for a second."

"Hey," Donut said a moment later. "Why did you get the fancy name change and I didn't? This is an outrage!"

I looked at the menu. My title had changed from **Royal Bodyguard** to **Magistrate Carl of Medium Skyfowl Settlement**.

I didn't laugh. Mordecai had already warned me that one of us would likely win the town if we killed the magistrate. But he'd also said when you killed the quest's head boss dude, you either auto won the quest or it failed, depending on the situation. Given the mysterious circumstances of this quest, he'd given us a 50/50 chance of winning that quest box. And that was okay with me as long as the quest went away. Either way, we'd get a ton of experience since the guy was also the head of the town. But nothing had happened with the quest. It still sat there in my menu. Did we kill an innocent NPC? We hadn't even met the magistrate, and we'd just blown his house to bits.

"Listen, we have a problem. I think we screwed up. Magistrate Featherfall is dead, but the quest is still there. That means he wasn't the head bad guy. And it looks like Miss Quill wasn't the bad guy, either, like I was suspecting. And to top it off, we fucked over some other crawler's quest."

The plan had been simple. Using the Mysterious Letter as bait, we were going to make Featherfall think we were about to breach through the ceiling, drawing him to the area to face us. After Ricky Joe had claimed that a female skyfowl was visiting the city elves, I thought perhaps Miss Quill was really the bad guy. That was just the sort of thing the AI would pull, which was why I'd mentioned something about burning the stuffed animals. Either way, whomever was listening in would hopefully be there. Mordecai said a lich would get blown to bits just as easily as a human. The only monster we'd have to worry about post-detonation would be the krasue, which wouldn't be hurt by the explosion.

After the blast, if there was anything left, we'd storm the Magistrate's office and mop up the remaining bad guys and hopefully figure out what the hell was going on over there.

"If Miss Quill was there to get blown up, then she had to be in on it. Why else would she be there this late?" Donut asked.

"Maybe," I said. "She said he only came out at night now. Maybe she altered her schedule to match. Or maybe she lived there."

"Or maybe she was a blood-sucking pawn of the lich. We don't know, Carl. Let's go look. Quit being a wuss."

"Okay," I said after a moment. "But let's be cautious. I have a bad feeling about this one. Turn off your *Torch* for now, but be ready to snap it back on."

"Wait, wait, look," Donut said. "Look at our notifications again. There's a bronze boss box in there. I told you one of them was a bad guy."

I looked, and she was correct. I hadn't noticed it buried there with the others. So, either Featherfall or Quill had been a neighborhood boss. That made me feel a little better. But which one was it? It didn't say.

The dynamite had blown a massive hole in the roof, peeling it up like it had been drilled through from below. Thankfully the building wasn't fully engulfed in flames. Not yet. Smoke continued to rise from the hole, but it was minimal for now. The boom jug from earlier this afternoon had managed to burn a building to the ground in a matter of minutes. The effect of this blast appeared to be much more powerful, but also much less incendiary. If I was going to be blowing shit up more often, I needed to know what to expect. This particular blast, while huge, was not what I'd anticipated. The physics surrounding this stuff was still beyond me, and that was dangerous. I needed to learn, and fast.

Donut used *Puddle Jumper* to get us over to the roof across the way. We went from the angled tiles to the flat beams, but the ground below us suddenly felt unsteady, ready to break.

"You, there!" a voice called. I looked up. A pair of skyfowl NPCs had grown brave enough to fly closer to the explosion. They hovered over us now. "What are you doing?"

"I'm the new town magistrate," I called. "I'm on magistrate business."

The two eagles looked at each other. I wasn't certain how this sort of thing worked, if they'd recognize my authority or not. If this were the real world they'd say…

"Fuck off, you crazy assholes," the skyfowl called down to me. "Go back to the Desperado or wherever you came from. You shouldn't be up here. There's been an explosion, and that roof you're on is going to cave in. We ain't saving your stupid wingless asses if you fall through."

"Well, fuck you very much," I called back to them.

The other skyfowl turned to his companion. "I don't feel so well. There might be something in the air. Let us flee from here, my brother."

The two circled a few times and then flew off.

I kept an eye out for mobs as we cautiously approached the hole. We looked down into what had once been the magistrate's quarters. The epicenter of the explosion was still another 50 feet ahead. Through the hole in the roof, I could see all the way to the ground far below. Half of the magistrate's home and front office were just gone, along with the entire south end of the building. The floor of the mall level was also a massive hole. And below that was a pile of smoking debris. However, deeper into both the mall and the living quarters above, I could see that the floor was mostly intact.

"No wonder there's not that much fire," I said. "It's like we punched a hole right through the structure, both up and down. Weird."

Donut pointed to the side of the building. Across the street, another structure had half caved-in. Thankfully it was a business and not a residence. I'm glad we'd chosen a different building to stand upon. "Your explosion went up, down, and to the side. But it didn't blow this way. I wonder if that magic door protected it."

"Maybe," I said. "But either way, that reception office is just gone. If that's where Miss Quill and Featherfall were standing at the time, they wouldn't have had a chance."

"Those poor stuffed animals," Donut said. "Now let's go down there."

Donut started to wiggle her butt, and then she jumped deftly down into the magistrate's quarters as I tied my rope to a chimney. This was starting to get cumbersome. Donut was right. I needed a better way to go up and down. I descended. I swung my way into the chambers. I left the rope there, hanging all the way past the mall level. The full length of the rope ended about 15 feet off the ground.

A few fires crackled here and there. I gave them a wide berth as we explored deeper into the large building. Donut released Mongo, who immediately moved to a small, empty cage against one wall and started sniffing at it.

The magistrate's office had been just on the other side of the reception area, which meant it was now gone. There was no sign of the magical door. It was probably buried in the debris along with the corpses and all of Miss Quill's beanie babies. And past the office was the living quarters, which extended the entire length of the mall below it. There wasn't much here. A few tables and T-shaped roosts. There was a chest against a wall, but it was open and the contents empty.

Donut inspected a small cage that interested Mongo. It appeared as if it once held regular-sized mice or rats. The door was open. She said it smelled moldy, like it hadn't been used it a while. All I could smell was smoke. She pulled the cage into her inventory and came to examine the chest, which I poked at with my foot.

"Hey Donut, look. The clasp is broken. That didn't happen with the explosion."

"So, it was sitting here already looted before we blew it up?"

"That's what it looks like."

"Maybe another crawler broke into here before us," she said.

"Maybe," I said. "We're the ones who killed Featherfall, though. Keep one eye on the map."

I looked around. The entire apartment seemed oddly empty. There were shelves, but nothing was upon them. Nothing hung on the walls. That empty cage had been a food box, but it hadn't been

used in a while. There was a heavy door against the far wall, leading deeper into the house. I leaned into it, opening it slowly.

The moment I pushed against the door, I saw the X appear on the map. I pushed the door all the way. The moment I did, several dozen additional red dots appeared, along with an equal number of Xs. I froze as I formed a fist, ready to defend myself. Nothing happened. Nobody moved.

Holy crap.

"Mongo, shush," I hissed as the feathered dinosaur forced his way into the room. He opened his mouth to howl, and I pressed my left hand down on his beak. "Shush," I repeated.

Donut leaped to my shoulder, putting herself in the firing position. Still, nothing in the room stirred. Donut gasped, her entire body going rigid.

"Carl," Donut whispered, her voice terrified. "You were right, Carl. This was a bad idea. I don't like this. Please, let's go. Let's go now."

I swallowed, examining the horrific sight before me.

We'd stepped into a serial killer's wet dream.

The entire room was filled with naked female corpses, hanging upside down from the ceiling as if we'd just walked into a meat locker. There were human and elves and dwarves, along with a scattering of others, such as orcs and a single ogre. The ones that appeared as Xs on my map were all missing their heads. The others, at least thirty of them, still had all their parts, but the heads were detached, hanging a good six inches below the neck, with only the white of bone and straw-like arteries keeping them attached. It appeared as if someone had grabbed their heads, given it good yank, and then left them there, bobble-heading. Wisps of purple energy swirled around the red-dotted ones, like they were being recharged.

They all appeared to be asleep. Their eyes remained closed.

The horrors didn't stop there. At the center of the room, hanging upside-down in a massive dreamcatcher made of bone, was the naked, emaciated corpse of Magistrate Featherfall. His featherless wings were spread all the way out, with nothing but goosebumped, gray skin left, like a pair of uncooked chicken wings with grasping

fingers at the first knuckle. His milky white, dead eyes stared out at us under a cracked beak. A clear fluid dripped from both his mouth and eyes. At the top of the hoop-shaped construction, his taloned claws were spread out and splayed, facing the ceiling. The whole sight was reminiscent of a fucked up, inverted parody of DaVinci's Vitruvian Man. His body was lashed to the bone structure with old, frayed rope. It appeared as if he'd been there for some time. His body was in the process of being mummified. The circle twisted in the air, rocking back and forth, creaking.

Lootable Corpse. Former Magistrate Featherfall. Dark Cleric. Level 32.

"How did we get credit for killing that guy when he was like this?" Donut whispered. "He looks like he's been dead a long time."

"I don't know."

This was a nest of krasue. The original description said to truly kill them, one had to find their bodies and destroy them. The ones without heads were, I assumed, out and about in the town. But if that was the case, then why did they appear as corpses on the map? The descriptions just said they were regular NPC corpses. Were the bodies technically dead until the krasue returned? I supposed it didn't matter as long as we killed the bodies. But could we? I knew we couldn't kill the ghosts without using magic. But what about their bodies?

The entire ground was sticky with gore and lumps of fallen, forgotten body parts. The smell was almost unbearable.

If we wanted to approach Featherfall, we'd have to brush by several of the hanging women. The closest one, a blue-skinned elf, was a mere five feet away. She was young and thin, hanging from the ceiling with her ankles in a noose. Her long, dark hair cascaded below her, not quite long enough to reach the ground. I resisted the urge to punt her head.

"We need to get closer to loot his body," I said.

"Yeah, no, I'm not taking another step in there. Those things are going to wake up."

"If that explosion didn't wake them, then maybe they'll stay unconscious."

"Of course, they're going to wake up, Carl. Have you *ever* watched a horror movie?"

She was right. And with the blood splattered all over the room, I strongly suspected whomever the head bad guy was, he probably had that *Suppurating Eye* spell going. We couldn't stay here long. I sent a quick query to Mordecai, who said the headless ones were maybe fair game to physical attacks, but the ones with their heads and the purple swirls were likely protected. But he wasn't certain.

"Okay," I whispered. "Let's kill this one here and see what happens. If it works, we'll carve a path. We'll loot and run."

"Okay, let's step back. I'll hit her with a missile," Donut said. "If they all wake up, I'll cast my *Torch*. Maybe it'll scare them away again."

"Hey," she said a moment later. "Not fair. It says the area has been muted. I can't cast spells."

I sent another note to Mordecai.

Mordecai: Spells in your menu and scrolls won't cast if you're in a muted zone. Everything else, including magical items, potions, and spells you've already cast will still work.

"Okay, Mongo," I said. "You're up." He had those magical teeth caps, and those should do damage. "Go bite that elf's head off. But you gotta be quick."

Mongo croaked and looked at Donut for confirmation.

"Sic 'em," she said.

The dinosaur rushed forward, weaving at his target, snake-like. At the last moment, he turned his head to the side, like he was eating a taco. He chomped down on the dark elf's head.

Crunch.

The barely-detached head caved in under Mongo's alarmingly powerful bite. The head slopped to the ground, followed by a rush of organs and blood, as if her neck was a drain that had just been unclogged. The purple swirls of magic blinked off.

Mongo raised his head into the air and howled, blood cascading off his face.

The purple aura around the others blinked out. The hair on the back of my neck stood on end. *Uh-oh*.

Mongo, oblivious, moved deeper into the room, biting a second, then a third. He ignored the ones that were already headless. The dinosaur jump attacked at a fourth, but he moved through the body as if it wasn't there. He howled in rage and turned to bite, this time latching on the woman's legs, ripping her from the ceiling. She crumpled to the ground.

"Get back here!" I said.

"Mongo, return!" Donut cried.

All around the room, the krasue began waking up. They wailed, loud and high-pitched. The heads all started wiggling at once, working to fully detach themselves from the rest of their bodies.

"Donut, go long," I yelled. This was one of our oldest plays, but it didn't exactly fit the situation. Hopefully she would understand the idea.

"Carl, that's not going to… Oh, I get it! With what though?"

"*With light!*"

She leaped from my shoulder and ran away, scrambling out into the other room and presumably to the roof. Once she was out of range of the muting, she'd cast her *Torch* spell and then return.

I rolled a smoke curtain into the chaos as I formed a fist, rushing toward Mongo, who was gnawing down on yet another creature. My feet splashed in the gore. I punched at a krasue as I passed, my magical gauntlet connecting with a wet *splat*.

I pulled a regular torch and lit it, tossing it to the ground. The women squealed in rage, dozens of them peeling themselves free. One by one, they righted themselves, floating into the air, trailing organs as their now-empty bodies waved back and forth, turning into Xs on my map. They backed away from the sputtering torch, which invaded the smoke-filled room with a pulsing, red glow. They didn't flee like last time. The light wasn't as powerful, and they were also blinded by the smoke. They started to swirl through the room like flocking birds, bumping into one another and the hanging bodies and the bone hoop in the center, which started to spin. A krasue whipped past me, smacking me in the face with a still-beating heart. I swung but missed.

"Back out the door," I said to Mongo, pointing behind me. The pet looked up and screeched. He snapped at a krasue, connecting with a hanging lung, ripping it free. The creature squealed and plummeted to the ground, bouncing and rolling with arteries whipping about like a jellyfish.

We pushed through a hanging curtain of headless corpses as I yanked the Fireball or Custard lotto ticket from my inventory. We ran into the living room, which was also now filled with smoke. We stopped at the gaping hole, and I turned back.

This apartment was big, but I didn't know how much more punishment it could take before the whole building collapsed. I wasn't sure how powerful a level-15 fireball was. The last time I'd tried this, the 50/50 chance ticket cast custard.

Where the hell was Donut? I glanced at the map, and it appeared she was just above us, on the roof. There were more red dots now, circling the cat, keeping their distance.

"Fire in the hole!" I cried as I scratched the ticket. I was fully expecting it to cast custard again.

Fireball. Spicy!

The egg-shaped ball of fire leaped out of my hand and rocketed toward the doorway to the bedroom. The flaming projectile was the size of an opened umbrella. It didn't move as quickly as one of Donut's *Magic Missiles*, but that didn't matter. It rolled directly through the open door, shattering the jamb on either side, cleaving through the smoke and detonating as it hit the upside-down corpse of Featherfall.

The entire building rocked again. The floor buckled. Burning heat washed over me, hitting me with a small amount of damage. The room turned to Xs before half collapsing down to the next level. Black, acrid smoke filled the air, mixing in with the white of the smoke curtain. Above, the red dots harassing Donut all disappeared.

A moment later, Donut leaped down and landed on my shoulder, trailing her ball of light. It glowed brighter than I'd ever seen before. I had to shield my eyes.

"Did we get them all?" she asked. "They all disappeared when you did that."

"I think so. But I think we fried whatever loot Featherfall had."

"Let's go look."

We re-entered the bedroom. The entire floor slumped down like a ramp down into the mall level. The fireball spell had crisped everything in the room. The ashes of Featherfall were scattered along the debris.

"He wasn't the boss," I said. "If he was, he'd have a neighborhood map on him, even after we destroyed the body."

"Then it had to have been Miss Quill," Donut said. "She was the boss lady all along. But her body is behind us, probably buried."

The building shuddered again.

"It's going to collapse," I said. "We gotta get out of here."

"But what about the quest? We haven't figured anything out."

I was about to say, *we're out of time*, when I noticed the red dot on the map. One of the corpses, burnt to a crisp, had just switched from an X to a red dot. As I turned, forming a fist, the dot blinked again, this time turning white.

It was a woman, one of the headless corpses. She was on the ground, and her head had magically returned to her body. She was a familiar human with long, dark hair. She'd been marked as a krasue that brief moment her dot was red, but now that it was white, the system designated her as a human. The lower half of her body was nothing but darkened char. She looked up at us, blinking in pain. She had one pale blue eye and one brown eye. This was Burgundy, the same woman we'd run into on the stairs when we'd visited earlier. One of the assistants to the magistrate. Her face was oddly unmarred by the damage.

Donut leaped down, sniffing at her. The woman's legs had turned to flaky, obsidian-colored logs of charcoal. "Carl, we have to help her."

I knelt down and pulled a healing potion.

"No," Burgundy said, her voice weak. "If you heal me, it'll heal my body. Then I will turn into one of those things again. It's too late for me. I am cursed. Damned. The kindest thing you can do is kill me while I'm still mortal. Hurry. Please. It hurts."

"So, you're a person during the day, and one of those things at night?" I asked.

"Yes," she gasped. "I was brought here by the elves. I worked in another settlement, but they told me I could get a job at the Desperado Club. There was an entrance in this town. They talked me into coming. Everyone knows if you work in the club, there's a chance you can descend. I could go to the Hunting Grounds. And then maybe even deeper, where it's safe. But it was all a lie."

"You were you a prostitute?" I asked.

Her lips quivered. "Yes, and if you don't like it, fuck off. I've stabbed men for less." She coughed.

"We're just trying to figure out what's going on. Lots of your friends have been appearing in the alleys, twisted and dead."

"It's going to be okay, sweetie," Donut added. She reached up and stroked at the woman's hair. "Tell us as much as you can about Featherfall."

"Featherfall?" she asked. Her voice was getting weaker. "Can you make that light brighter? I can feel it keeping the curse away, but it's fading." Donut's torch was like a blazing sun. She couldn't make it brighter. "Featherfall wasn't the one who did this. He's been here the whole time, hanging on that thing. He was dead when I got here. His body was turned into a dark fetish, one to keep our bodies safe at night. Miss Quill's the one who has been running the city the whole time. She's the real magistrate."

I felt an odd amount of relief wash over me. Miss Quill *was* the bad guy. We'd killed the correct person. When the system said I'd killed a public official, it was her, not Featherfall. Also, this was like the hundredth time in the last day that the AI's description of something had been inaccurate. It'd said Quill was the assistant to the Magistrate. It'd said Katia was a human, when she was really a doppelganger. It said Burgundy here was also human, when she was really one of those vampire things. The map labeled all these corpses with an X, when they could still turn into monsters. That was important to know, that we couldn't trust anything.

But if Quill was the mastermind, why hadn't the quest ended? I reread what were supposed to do, focusing on the last line.

Nobody knows who they are or where they come from. Find out why.

The quest didn't tell us to *save* the women. Or to kill who was responsible. We just needed to find out what was going on. We were almost there. We just had to get it out of this woman before the entire building crashed down.

"Okay," I said. "So how did you get like this?"

"The elves had me go to their temple, and once I was there, Miss Quill came and got us. She asked us so many questions. I didn't know why at the time. I thought she was going to take me to the club. Instead, she brought me to him."

"To who?"

Below, something crashed. It reverberated throughout the entire floor. The smoke bomb had cleared, but the black smoke from the fires was now thicker.

"To her husband. He's in another place. It's across the street. It is where the swordsmen guards stay in the evening. He is on the floor above. The guards don't know he's there, or they don't care. They can't look up."

"Her husband?" I asked.

I tried to remember what Miss Quill had said about him. It wasn't much. She'd said he was dead. And that he'd been magistrate before Featherfall. That was it.

"Yes. His name is Remex. He's doing something, casting a big spell. I don't know what. He's not alive, nor is he dead. He's something in-between, something monstrous. He's trying to bring himself fully back to life."

Fuck. Another bad guy. I'd been hoping all the bosses were dead.

"But what does that have to do with you guys?" I asked.

"Do you know what I am? What I have become? I am a krasue. A woman who lived a life of sin. One who died in anger and pain, and returned from the dead. During the day we live and work in this building, working as assistants and in the shops below. Collecting. At night, we are his army, doing his bidding, helping the city elves, whom he has also glamored into his control."

"Collecting what? And what about the women we find in the alleys?"

"Every time a new skyfowl or chickadee comes into one of the shops in the mall, we are to pluck a feather from their plumage. I do not know why. We give them to Miss Quill."

"That doesn't sound good," said Donut. Mongo grunted in agreement.

"As to the women… they are those whose sins aren't enough. They are women who have come to work at the Desperado Club, but when they are brought to Remex, when he twists them, when their heads sometimes fly from their bodies, they do not always turn into krasue. It is not a perfect thing, this transformation. Sometimes they simply die. When this happens, he allows us to feed upon them. Then one of his avatars picks them up and drops them in the alleys. Miss Quill says they have to drop them within a few blocks of his lair. He controls the avatars as if they are his own limbs, but they can't go far. Not yet."

"Avatars?" I asked. "Are they other skyfowl? I don't understand."

Crack! The rest of the room slumped forward further. Burgundy's body began to slide away.

"Kill me, please!" she cried as the roof above her started to cave in.

Donut hit her with a *Magic Missile* in the moments before her body disappeared.

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[23]

I PULLED THE ROPE BACK INTO MY INVENTORY WHILE I STILL HUNG 15 FEET off the ground. I was very happy I'd figured out that neat trick early on, before having to invest in multiple lengths of the stuff. Still, Donut was right. I needed a better method of going up and down.

I crashed heavily onto the debris pile, though it didn't hurt like it would've before. I briefly wondered exactly how far I could drop before I would take damage. Above, the entire structure trembled. The whole thing was going to fall in on our heads at any moment. We had to get out of here. The X of Quill's body was there on my map, right under our feet, enticing me. We'd have to dig for an hour to get to her and the neighborhood map, which would be super useful right about now. That wasn't going to happen.

A sparkle of something caught my eye. A single, charred box sat half-buried in the debris. I picked it up as we fled. It was one of Miss Quill's glass cases. It appeared unbroken despite being less than a foot from the explosion, which meant this thing was likely enchanted. The char rubbed right off. The plush creature within was an armored man atop a black horse. I peered at the tag, which said "Kimaris." I pulled it all into my inventory.

The building rumbled as we cleared the distance. We stopped in the street and turned to watch as the rest of the gigantic building caved in. We'd gotten out of there just in time.

"We know what happened to the prostitutes now. We know why they were falling into the alleys," Donut said, breathing heavily. "How

come the quest didn't finish?"

"We know *how* they got there," I said. "We still don't know why. We don't have the whole story." I eyed the dark warehouse across the street. It was a simple, square, two-level building. There were no lights with only a large pair of double doors at the entrance. I could sense him there, on the second floor. Remex. "If we want to finish this, we need to go into that building. That's the quest."

A crowd of NPCs watched the municipal building and mall collapse from a short distance away. I looked about in the air, but I didn't see any skyfowl. There had been dozens of them out earlier, but they were all gone. I had the impression they didn't like flying about at night. Still, it was unusual.

A single blue dot of a crawler stood there in the crowd. I met the player's eyes, and he approached us. I focused on the now-familiar name over his head.

"Don't let him see that fallen oak bracelet on your back leg," I whispered.

"Why?" Donut asked. "He's not one of those elves."

"He's related to the dead crawler you took it from. He's also the same guy that killed that boss in the swimming pool. The one that blew up. The Divider."

"Oh, he's disgusting," Donut said as the man got closer. He walked slowly and deliberately. I could see he didn't have shoes, though I suspected for him this was a recent development thanks to his newly clawed feet. "Someone needs to teach him about muted colors. He looks like someone took Jack's hat and made an overenthusiastic furry costume out of it."

"Be nice," I whispered, trying not to laugh. Jack, the man who had peed on the wall and caused all the chaos on the second floor had been very fond of his orange Cincinnati Bengal's hat.

"No, I'm serious, Carl. This guy could be the second coming of Chuck Norris, but we can't have him in the party. People would laugh at us."

"You know you're a Persian cat, right?" I said.

"What is that supposed to mean, Carl?"

"Don't worry," I muttered. "He doesn't look like he wants to join our party anyway."

"Hey there," I said as he came to a stop before us. The man paused, looking me up and down. I felt my eyebrow raise as he examined me for an extended period.

Crawler #2,165,570. "Daniel Bautista 2"

Level 18.

Race: Tigran.

Class: Swashbuckler.

He looked like a rejected character from *Thundercats*. He was a well-muscled, shirtless man, about six feet tall. He was furry and orange. *Very* furry. *Very* orange. He had the head of a human/big cat hybrid, with the orange, white, and black markings of a Siberian tiger. But unlike a tiger, his eyes had the vertical slits of a housecat. His nose and mouth were human, though covered with wisps of the orange fur. He also had a long, absurdly shaggy, tail. The effect would be comical if the dude didn't look as if he could rip me in half. He held nine neighborhood boss markers. He wore a belt with a curved sword hanging in a scabbard. The sword also glowed orange.

"Were you the ones who killed Miss Quill?" he finally asked. He had an Asian accent. I remembered the three corpses we'd run across several days earlier. Grace, Nica, and Lea. They all had the same last name. I assumed this guy was part of that family. They'd had someone with them who'd looted most of their gear. Donut had picked up that fallen oak anklet, and I'd looted two generic strength rings. If the man knew we had them, would he want the items back? That would be too bad for him if he did. I figured it would be for the best if we didn't broach the subject at all.

"Yes," I said. "I take it you're the guy whose quest we fucked over?"

"I am," he said. "I was supposed to break into her home and kill her. It would get me access to the Desperado Club. But when I went to her home, she rushed off. I tried to follow, but she can fly. She went straight to that building there, and a few minutes later came your explosion and her death."

“Did she have more of the stuffed creatures in her house?” Donut asked.

Bautista grunted. “Yes. Her entire apartment was filled with them. Over a thousand of them. I have taken them all.”

I shrugged. “Well, sorry about that. Like I said, we also have a quest that involved her. It’s not quite done yet, either.”

He nodded slowly. He wanted to say something, but he was hesitating.

“A few nights back, I saw you on the news program,” he finally added.

“We’re on almost every night,” said Donut proudly.

“You fought at that circus. You killed the lemurs. Is there nothing left?”

He was trying to ask about his family, but he was having trouble getting it out. “No. They’re all gone. There’s a stairwell there now.”

He nodded appreciatively. “There is another three kilometers due east from this village. Crawlers have been writing notes with the stairwell locations and leaving them in the bars.”

“Good,” I said. I paused. “And yes, we saw them. The other Bautistas. We killed the lemurs responsible.”

His tail whisked back and forth. “Thank you,” he said. “They were my sisters and cousin. All five of them died in seconds. It happened so fast. I was with my other cousin, and we barely got away.”

I swallowed. There had only been three bodies, but I remembered thinking at the time that there’d been enough blood for more.

Bautista continued. “He died the next day. My cousin, I mean. He’d given up. I’m all that’s left of my entire family. I had four brothers and sisters. Fifteen cousins.” He looked off into the distance. “I don’t know why I go on. I wish I hadn’t chosen this body. I should’ve remained true to myself. We all die anyway. How can we make it to heaven if god doesn’t recognize us?”

I had no answer for that.

An awkward silence followed. I shifted uneasily. “Well I’m sorry for your loss. And I am sorry about screwing up your quest.”

He nodded. "It is no problem. I am happy knowing they have been avenged. I owe you a debt. Call me if you need me, and I will come." He held out his fist, initiating the chat transfer. I hesitated, then reciprocated the gesture. His name appeared on my chat list. Then he turned and disappeared into the night.

"That dude is very intense," I said.

"I would be too if I looked like that," said Donut. "Their game guide let him pick that race. And one of his sisters or cousins had been that weird tree thing, remember? It's like their guide wanted them to look stupid. And Katia's game guide won't help her. And remember that floating brain thing we saw in the recap episode? The one for Frank Q and Maggie My? That thing was talking them into murdering people. I think most of these guides don't like their jobs very much, and they take it out on the crawlers."

"I think you're right," I said. "Let me tell you a secret, Donut. Back before all this happened, it was considered a rare thing for somebody to find a job they truly loved."

"You don't like fixing boats? Or being in the Navy?"

"Not really. And I was in the Coast Guard. Not the Navy. They're different," I said.

"Are you sure? Miss Beatrice always told people you were in the Navy."

"I'm sure, Donut."

"Well, what would you have done if you could do anything?" she asked.

I thought about that for a long moment. I thought of the college applications I started to fill out, but never finished. "I would work for the forestry service as a forester."

"Doing what? Looking at trees all day?"

"Yes," I said. "I've seen enough ocean to last a lifetime. I'd be happy alone in the woods, watching for forest fires. God, I would give anything. That would be beautiful."

Donut grunted. "I know what I would do. I would write TV shows. Zev and I are going to start a television show writing team when we get out of here. We're going to remake *Gossip Girl* but with an intergalactic slant."

I chuckled. “Is that right?”

“Zev says the shows on Earth are better than anything she’s ever seen. We could make new ones and bring them to the universe. Maybe if the television shows are good enough, people wouldn’t be so interested in watching real-life people kill each other,” she said.

I didn’t say anything for several moments. “You surprise me every day, Donut.”

She didn’t give me the snarky response I was expecting.

“So,” she said, “we calling it a night or are we going to fight a lich?”

I sighed. We had about three hours until sunrise. “What do you think?”

The massive door to the Swordsmen depot was not locked. It sat ajar, and I kept a wary eye on it as I climbed the ladder up the exterior side of the building. I was ready to bolt at the first sign of movement. I was more worried about the suits of armor than the lich. If those guys in there woke up, we were fucked. Even though I was now the town’s magistrate, nobody seemed to acknowledge that fact. Before, Featherfall—or I guess Miss Quill—had a *very* small amount of control over the guardians. I remembered when she tried to have them arrest me, and it hadn’t worked. Something told me I was going to be chased out of my own town the moment they woke up no matter what I did.

Remex the lich had been quiet this whole time. Donut braved jumping to the roof, and she managed to get a hit on her map. She said it was something regular sized, like a normal skyfowl. She said it hadn’t been moving, and she didn’t see anything else in the room. Her map’s ability to sense mobs was better than my own, but it was also famously unreliable when it came to hidden mobs, so I was cautious.

Earlier, I’d peered through the open door of the first level to get a quick view of what was going on in there and to gauge the height

of the interior ceiling. Even in the dark, I could see them. The inactive Swordsmen guards. They stood in silent formation, hundreds of them, reminding me of the Chinese terracotta army. They didn't have dots over them in my map at all. I didn't know if that was a good thing or not.

Their metallic bodies swirled with a yellow aura, all of it leading to a point in the ceiling. There would be a soul crystal up there somewhere. Mordecai said that at night, the guards were in "stasis" mode, and that they were invulnerable. I'd entertained the quick notion of locking them in their warehouse and just blowing them all to hell, including the lich, over and over again until they died, which would result in an obscene amount of experience. But it looked as if that wasn't going to happen. Not tonight.

And I couldn't just roll a bomb into the lich's chambers, either. He appeared to be the last bad guy standing, so I needed to get the bad guy soliloquy out of him before we killed him. That way we could win the quest.

We had determined that there was no mute spell in the area, or any other protections that we could see. That didn't mean there wasn't a nasty surprise waiting for us, but at least we'd be able to rely on magic.

I placed the tenth and final stick of goblin dynamite on the exterior, exposed joist, using the sticky detonator charge to attach it to the structure. Each stick of hobgoblin pus allowed for up to ten simultaneous detonations with one button press. I was going to use all ten tonight if we had to. I hoped we didn't.

Below, half the village stood on the street, watching. They held torches and scythes and other items of medieval weaponry. I hadn't summoned them, but Fitz the tavernkeeper had raised the alarm after he overheard Mordecai and Katia discussing the idea of a lich in town. Even though it was the equivalent of 3:30 AM, he'd rushed out, shouting that the "night patrol" needed to defend the city. Since half the town was already wide-awake with the collapse of the municipal building, it didn't take long for a crowd to form.

Before we knew it, we had a group of NPCs gathering around the warehouse. They ranged from orcs to humans to elves to dozens of

other, more obscure races. But no skyfowl or the smaller chickadees. It was as if they didn't care about the plight of the city, as long as the damage remained on the ground. Across the street, smoke still rose from the collapsed debris of the mall and municipal building. The night smelled of dust and fire.

After all of our preparations, we now only had about forty minutes left before the armor suits would reanimate. The tops of distant buildings already glowed with the first signs of the faux sunrise. We had to move quickly.

"That's the last of them," I said, stepping my way to the ground. One of the rungs broke off, and I cursed. I spent a quick minute fixing it. I pulled the handmade ladder into my pack. I'd hastily built the thing with crap from my inventory. It was a rickety, slipshod combination of lengths of wood and metal weight bars that would give an OSHA inspector a coronary. It had taken me almost an hour to construct. If we survived past tonight, I was going to build another one of these, but one that was built properly.

"You ready?" I asked.

"No," Donut said. "I don't like this plan, Carl."

Mongo was in his carrier. He'd proven that we couldn't trust him to stay still when things started to get out of control, and we definitely needed to control the narrative here. And Donut needed to focus.

We were relying on Mordecai's advice to keep ourselves alive.

"Liches come in all shapes and sizes and power levels. You never know what they're going to be," he'd said earlier this evening. "But they all have one thing in common, each and every one of them."

"What's that?" I asked.

He looked up at the ceiling wryly. "They're just like Odette. They never, ever shut the hell up. They are narcissists to a fault. And they are cowards. Now that they have grasped a handful of life, they will do whatever they can not to let it go again. That's why they always have minions. They always have elaborate, grandiose plans. That's why I think you should just blow the building and take a chance at losing the quest."

This was earlier, when we still thought that Featherfall was the lich and that his lair was in that building. But since then, Mordecai had changed his mind. He seemed to think that because we'd killed most of Remex's support system, he would be vulnerable. It was now worth the risk to approach him. Mordecai also said that it made sense that he'd hide above the warehouse of the swordsmen. A magical crystal was used to "recharge" the swordsmen each night, and anyone searching the town using magical means wouldn't see him there.

Mordecai: Here's another wrinkle. This is obviously another boss. And since that one earlier was a Neighborhood Boss, I'd bet my left nipple this one is a Borough Boss. So even if he's been weakened, you need to come to the fight prepared.

So we made the decision. We were going to confront the lich while he was weak. He already knew we were coming. It was likely he'd been watching this whole time. So we would slowly and deliberately ring the exterior of the building with explosives, enough to turn the whole structure into dust.

My original plan was to have Donut stay outside while I went in solo. She absolutely refused.

"You promised me that I wouldn't die alone," she said. "You can't keep that promise if you die before me. We do this together."

I relented, but it required a change to the plans.

Katia now stood in the crowd. Her face was much better, much more natural. She still looked like a burn victim who fell face-first out of the ugly tree, but I wouldn't question she was a human now. I summoned her over.

"Here," I said. "Hold onto this for me." I handed her a pencil-like detonator.

"Whoa, whoa," she said, backing up, refusing to take it. "Don't give that to me."

"Keep it in your inventory," I said, shoving it into her hand. "If we die, or if I say so, press the button. No questions. Just do it."

"Why don't *you* hold onto it?" she asked, looking at it like I'd just handed her a live snake. "Carl, the description says it might click on

its own."

"Put it in your inventory. It'll be fine," I said.

It disappeared into her pack.

"Why me?" she asked again. She looked ill.

"We don't know if this guy has some sort of mind control. It's a lich thing. We need someone outside the sphere of influence to hold onto the boom switch just in case."

"So, what's your angle here?" she asked. "Mutually assured destruction?"

"That's right," I said. "All we want is information. All he wants is to live. It's a gamble, sure. But it's not like we're not constantly on the precipice of death anyway."

She shook her head. "Hekla warned me that you were crazy."

"Just be sure to be about a block away before you press it. There's enough dynamite in there to blow your weird snow boots back to Iceland." I raised my voice and called to the crowd. "You are all still in the blast zone. You'll want to back up. A lot."

We stepped into the warehouse as the crowd started to scatter. I gave the Swordsmen a nervous glance as we quickly moved to the small trap door cut into the corner of the room. I pulled my ladder and began to ascend. Donut remained on my shoulder, trembling.

"It's moving. But it's going to the back corner of the room, like it's running away," Donut said.

"Don't kill us," I called as I came into the room. "You kill us, you'll die too!"

I took a deep inhalation of breath as I examined the monster quivering in the far corner.

Carl: Not a lich, Mordecai. Not a fucking lich!

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"Do you understand me?" I asked.

"Do not approach. No, no. Stay away. Do not blow me up," Remex said. His voice came out in rasps. "Please. Do not get closer."

Confused, I examined the creature's properties. Despite all of our preparations and Mordecai's warnings, he was *not* a boss. Or a lich.

Remex – Soul Leech Capacitor. Level 1.

This is a Bereft Minion of Miss Quill

Have you ever played with a Ouija board and realized that speaking with a lost loved one just wasn't doing it for you anymore? Perhaps you wanted to kick it up a notch? Maybe bring them back to life? And then maybe make them get a job? A Soul Leech Capacitor can do that for you.

These fragile, but physically strong undead creatures can only be created by a Necromancer or a Dark Cleric. The spell latches onto the most-loved soul of the spell's target and yanks that creature back into existence. The resurrected spirit is forever attached to the loved one. But the Soul Leech is like a nick in the plane between life and death, and they exist in neither. A simple scratch from this beast will rip your soul straight from your body. That soul power is stored in the capacitor, allowing the Leech's owner to access huge reserves of mana points.

"You know," I said to Donut, "every time I think these guys reach a new level of fucked-upedness, they surprise me. If he makes one

move toward us, *Magic Missile* him."

Remex looked much like Featherfall had, only this guy was alive. Sort of. He appeared to be a zombified, featherless skyfowl. His eyes were black, swirling orbs. Hazy black smoke rose from the body. Ethereal, worm-like wisps swirled about the creature, like a parody of the full wings he once had.

A thin, thread-like twist of golden light flowed into the creature's chest, tethering him to a golf ball-sized, amber-hued jewel that floated in the middle of the room. A stalk of light flowed downward through a small hole in the floor. Additional tendrils of golden light whipped about the gem, flying in all directions, as if it was seeking further items to feed. I cringed as the light ripped across me, but I didn't feel anything. It seemed the light was harmless to those who couldn't use it.

The eagle huddled in the corner, gasping. He appeared to be in agony.

Carl: What the hell is a bereft minion?

Mordecai: It's a minion who is still alive after their controller is dead. It looks like you killed the head bad guy when you blew up Miss Quill. It happens. Quests sometimes look bigger than they really are. I should have known since it was only a silver quest. Sorry about making you waste all that dynamite. Get the information out of him, put him out of his misery, and then get back here before the swordsmen wake up. Otherwise you'll be stuck in that warehouse all day.

I quickly examined the jewel.

Soul Crystal. C-Grade.

Elf technology. It's like a wireless charger. Instead of electricity, it runs on the soul power of everything killed within the area. And instead of charging your iPhone, this particular gem tops off the town's Swordsmen guards each night. Some of that power is also leeching into something else.

If this crystal is physically touched by living flesh, it will shatter and cease to work.

Mordecai had already told us a bit about these things. They were indeed worthless once they were activated. Breaking it would stop the guards from charging up, but it wouldn't otherwise hurt them. They'd eventually run out of juice, but it wouldn't happen right away.

"Were you watching? Did you see what I did to the outside of this building?" I asked.

"I saw. I saw," he said. "You gave your friend the remote. My wife cast the spell. She has a thousand eyes, all watching at once. Watching, tasting. We see all. She cast the spell through me, and the vision comes through me and into her. But now she is gone, and it is building, building. There is nowhere to go. Her soul is lost now. With the sunrise, the release. The release."

He wasn't making any sense.

"So Quill would cast the spells, but she would do it through you? Is that what it means for you to be a capacitor?"

"Yes. So much power, so much power. With the little ones. With the antennae. All of it is gathered. Gathering. She has to siphon it away. She is gone, gone. She is gone. No spell tonight. No siphon tonight."

"Great, another loon," Donut muttered.

I tried to make my voice soothing. He was still all the way on the other side of the room, but I didn't want to approach him. "Tell us about the little ones. The girls. Tell us about Featherfall and Miss Quill. How you came to be."

The creature blinked, as if seeing us for the first time. The swirls of light around him lashed about. The cloudiness of his eyes vanished. "Who are you? Where am I?"

I repeated my question, but more slowly. He settled into the corner, wrapping his bare, emaciated wings around himself, like he was a scared child.

"You're here for the story. I understand now. I have waited so long for someone to tell. All I had to do was tell the story, and I would be done."

"Please," I said. "Yes. Tell us, and we won't hurt you."

He nodded slowly. "Please, give me a moment. Don't kill me before it's done. I have practiced this. It's a lot, but I gotta get it

out. Here is the story. He… Featherfall. He never liked the guards. He only held a small amount of control over them. He wanted more. He asked me, after I retired and handed the perch to him. That's right. He asked me what must be done to control the swordsmen. To control them, I said, one must know what they are. How they are animated, how they came to be. Wait, don't ask about that. That's not important. It's a tangent. We have to avoid tangents. Featherfall was short-sighted. He had no ambition other than power over this small town. His kingdom. Skyfowl ruled this world. Did you know that? Before that demon destroyed it all. I like to think of it as a metaphor. Some say the Primals… No. I can't. That's off script. Sorry, sorry. Please. The skyfowl were once on top of the world. In control of the Over City. It's important you know that."

"What happened?" I asked. "How did he get put into that thing?"

"You are like him. You only care about what is in front of you right now. You don't see the larger picture. I think that's what I needed to say."

Donut: Carl. Something is happening. Something weird. The counter is being slow as usual, but I think our views are going *really* high. I keep getting achievements for views and followers. You probably are too. I don't understand why.

I ignored her. "Show me the small picture first. Then zoom it out for me."

Remex shifted then continued. "Let me finish the story. Don't kill me. I have to start over if you kill me. The orc, he killed me. Years ago."

"I'm going to kill you right here and now if you don't get on with it," Donut said.

He made a half whimper, half cheeping noise that sounded utterly pitiful. "I shall finish. After I passed, Featherfall approached my wife. Quill. Miss Quill they say, but I don't know why they added the Miss. He asked her to help him cast the spell. He knew bringing another dark cleric like myself from the dim would make an especially strong capacitor, giving him the additional soul power he needed to subjugate the swordsmen. He put himself into the Night Votive position, with my wife in the room to assist."

I could barely follow his story. “Wait, so Miss Quill knew that you would be ripped from death and turned into what you are now? And she was okay with that?”

“Oh, yes,” he said. “She’s not really… no, I can’t say that. Remex. Think, think. Oh yes, she also knew Featherfall was making a grave error by casting the spell too close to the Amplifier.”

“Amplifier?” I asked.

“Oh yes. You are standing before it. The roof is the antennae, and the soul crystal stores the power. It captures the energy from the lost souls in the area. It is this that keeps the swordsmen animated. High Elf magic. They are the ones who… No, another tangent. Wrong path. At night, the swordsmen are recharged. But Featherfall’s quarters are right across the way. When he cast the spell, I was manifested and brought into existence. But he was killed by the feedback. My wife, she planned this. She’d been planning it all along, her entire life. It was exactly what was supposed to happen. I was damned the moment I became her husband. I was now a capacitor for her. She pretended as if the magistrate was still alive, and she took up the duties of running the settlement. She was a powerful mage. She had a forgery spell. It fooled everyone.”

Mordecai: You guys are running low on time. Finish this and get out of there.

Carl: Almost done.

“And why did you bring the women in? The prostitutes?”

“Don’t… Don’t trip me up. You listen. We’re getting there. First, she took control of those fool elves. She cast an illusion, a resplendent skyfowl from legend to speak to them, pretend to be an angel, make them believe their tree god is coming for them. I could make them fly, manipulate things. The avatars, I mean. She never liked getting her hands dirty. So she used them. For intimidation. Corpse removal. My avatars. One looked like my son. My boy. Lost in time. But they couldn’t move far from here. So my wife instead sent the elves about on her task, to bring the women to us. These women just kept coming, searching for a better life. Over and over. Sometimes, I could see it in their eyes. They were like me. A tenner.

Don’t get undead, they told us. Don’t get undead. It’s not worth it. Wait, ignore that.”

Getting him to stay on the subject was like trying to steer without a rudder. “Okay, but why did she bring the women to you?”

“For two reasons. My wife had grand plans, plans set forth long ago. But she needed help, help that couldn’t be fully accomplished by the city elves. The krasue are easy to control. Easy to make if you have the correct materials. They fly, and they are intact and compliant during the day. Plus the act of generating them creates a powerful spike of soul power, adding to my energy. And since the raw materials come from out of town, nobody would notice she was collecting them.”

“Somebody *did* notice. Gumgum noticed,” Donut said.

“So, you power up every time something dies?”

“Yes. And my position here allows me to also leech off the souls flowing into the crystal. My wife knew this, but even she couldn’t predict the sheer amount of energy. I can feel it. It is so much. Mana points. That feeling when you drink the potion, of the mana points flowing back into you, but it never stops coming.”

I felt a chill. I was finally reading between the lines. We needed to hurry this along. “So, your wife was building an army? Why?”

“She was a granddaughter of the royal family. Ambition soared through her. She was going to reclaim it all. But you killed her, and you found me. She dies, but I’m never found. But this time. I have been discovered. There was an orc, once. He found me. He killed me before I finished the story.”

“Focus, Remex. Tell me about Quill. When you say reclaim it all, what does that mean?”

“Oh yes, of course. The spell. I need to mention the spell. She was preparing *The Final War*. It is a three-part spell. Heirloom magic. First cast by her grandfather, then her mother, then she was to complete it. Like Scolopendra’s nine-tier attack that ruined our kingdom, she has prepared something that will reclaim the Over City for the skyfowl.”

“She was waiting to collect enough power before she could cast this spell, then?” I asked. “And she needed the army to do what?

Protect her while she cast it?"

"That is correct. Before, during, and after. And the krasue would be her lieutenants, her eyes and ears for the battle. But she had enough power. More than enough. She'd already started. She did."

"Wait, what would have happened if she'd completed the casting?" I asked.

"Oh, it is a glorious spell. The third and final act of *The Final War* is a long, dangerous spell that takes three nights to cast. She'd done the first. Was going to do the second tonight. Thousands. Thousands of mana points. Once completed, the beasts she unleashed would sweep across the Over City and slaughter all but those whose essence she has protected, those she added to the spell."

"You mean the feathers?" I asked. "So, the skyfowl and midget skyfowl, whatever they're called would be safe?"

"Chickadees," Donut said. "I like those guys. They're cute."

"Yes," Remex said. "Them and their entire families. Everyone else would perish."

"Ahh," I said. I looked at Donut. "Everyone would be dead except the flyers. We just stopped a genocide."

"I guess that makes up for you killing all those baby goblins on the first floor," said Donut.

"We're not having this conversation again."

Quest completed. The Sex Workers Who Fell from the Heavens.

"Hey, we didn't even have to kill this guy," said Donut. "And we didn't have to blow up any more buildings tonight, either."

Remex laughed. It was a dry, almost airless croak. "That's it. That's it. I did it. I did it!" The dry laugh turned to sobs.

"What is he talking about, Carl?" Donut asked.

"I'll tell you later." Pity swept over me. *Jesus,* I thought, watching the undead thing cry empty tears. "Remex. It's done. You've told us the story. Do you want us to kill you or to leave you?"

"Kill me, let me live, it doesn't matter now. It doesn't matter. With the sunrise, I will be gone. As you will be, too. Listen, boy. Don't be sad. You didn't know. It's a lucky thing, a mercy to die

here.” He pointed toward the ground with his wing. “And not make it down there. It is so much better. Wait with me.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

The announcement wasn’t just in my head. It came over the loudspeaker, like the daily update.

New Quest. The Fools Who Broke the Glass.

THIS IS A GROUP QUEST. All Crawlers currently within the 45 square kilometer blast radius will receive this quest.

Your party has been designated Host of this Group Quest. As hosts, you will not be allowed to opt-out from this quest.

What the hell is going on? Am I glad you asked!

A while back a certain NPC started casting a very powerful spell, a spell so potent, that it had to be completed by a future generation.

Here’s the thing with old spells. They’re like trees. They grow. They get big. Sometimes huge. Bad shit happens when they get screwed up. The bigger the spell, the badder the shit. And boy was this spell big. Not gonna lie. Your favorite AI was looking forward to it going off.

Oh well. This will be almost as good.

Shit is about to go down. For example, you may have noticed every Skyfowl and Chickadee NPC in the area has fallen ill. Most of them have already plunged into a coma, or death. It’s not their fault, but they were tied to the spell, and that’s just the way it is.

Just like it’s not your fault that you happen to be within 45 kilometers of the fallout from this failed spell. Again, not your fault. (Well, unless you’re Crawlers Carl, Princess Donut, or Katia Grim. Then it is your fault.) That’s just the way it is. Sucks to be you.

There’s going to be an explosion. The epicenter of the blast is marked on your map. Every crawler within the designated blast area is fucked.

The object of this quest is simple. Unfuck yourself. Don’t die.

Warning: This is an event quest. If you do not wish to participate in this quest, you will have sixty seconds from the end of this message to get yourselves into a saferoom. After that, all access to saferooms within the quest zone will be shut off until the event quest is concluded. All NPCs who remain indoors, saferoom or not, will remain safe. All mobs and neighborhood-level boss monsters within the blast radius subject to both physical and magical explosions will be killed.

***Reward*: All participants who survive will receive a Platinum Quest Box.**

Oh, by the way. The explosion is coming in seven minutes.

Run.

"What the fuck? How is that a quest?" I cried.

<u>Mordecai</u>: Run. Desperado Club. It's not a saferoom, but the second room is out of the blast radius.

<u>Katia</u>: I don't have access to the club! I can't go to a saferoom because I'm a quest host!

<u>Carl</u>: Protective Shell?

<u>Mordecai</u>: Won't work. Magical blast. Go.

"Fuck!" I cried. "We have to get to the club. Let's go."

"What about Katia?" Donut said. "That's not fair. We promised we'd keep her safe. This is our fault."

"It's not," I said. I didn't bother going down the ladder. I just jumped all the way, hitting the ground heavily. Behind me, the guards stopped glowing. An entire wall of white dots appeared on the map. I knew in a moment those dots were going to turn red once the Swordsmen noticed me here. Donut hesitated and leaped to my shoulder. Her ears were flattened against her head.

Shit, shit, shit! I pulled up my map, looking for the fastest route. The Desperado Club was three blocks away. We could make it if we

ran.

"Look," I said. "This was going to happen one way or another. That's why they tried to get that Bautista guy to kill Miss Quill, too. They *wanted* this explosion quest to trigger."

I had a weird chat notification. I pulled it up, and the window said **Quest Chat**.

This was different than regular chat. This was like a Discord chatroom, with a whole group of crawler names on the list. There were about 80 names there.

Quan Ch: Thanks a lot Carl and Donut, you fucking assholes.

That was the only message. *Oh fuck off*, I thought. I clicked it away. But that list of names, all crawlers who were likely about to die, stunned me. Eighty people.

I moved to also close the map, but I paused, seeing something unexpected. A tiny, round star appeared where the explosion's epicenter would be. I zoomed in tight.

"Carl?" Donut said. "The guards are waking up!"

Carl: Mordecai, the soul gem is the epicenter. Not Remex. If I break the gem, will that cancel the explosion?

Mordecai: I don't know. I don't think it will stop it. Probably make it blow early. The quest is called The Fools Who Broke the Glass for a reason. They *want* you to do that. Get the hell out of there.

Donut: WE CAN'T ABANDON KATIA!

Katia: It's okay. Thank you, Donut. I understand. I'm getting the NPCs back into their homes. Run, guys. Go.

Donut: WHAT ABOUT YOU, MORDECAI?

Mordecai: I'm in my room. I'm safe. Hurry the hell up!

"Fuck," I muttered, looking up at the hole in the ceiling.

"Carl?" Donut asked.

"Donut, we have a choice. Save ascended.

I didn’t answer. I just reached up and scratched her. I had an idea. I doubted it was going to work.

We returned to the room. Remex remained in the corner, his eyes closed. He appeared to be fading.

“You returned,” he said. He didn’t open his eyes. “Welcome to the end of days.”

The soul gem hovered in the room. The entire crystal vibrated. The tendrils of light had stopped shooting from it, including the large river down into the room below and the golden strand leading into Remex.

A red timer counted down over the gem. It was at four minutes and thirty seconds.

I pulled Miss Quill’s beanie baby from my inventory. It wasn’t hard to find. Kimaris, the stuffed horse-riding soldier was the very top item when I sorted my current inventory by value.

The second item on the list was the protective carrier it was stored in. The door to the small, glass case wasn’t locked. It was a small, hinged flap held closed by a cheap-looking hook and eyebolt. I opened the little door and pulled the stuffed animal back into my inventory.

I gave the glass case a quick examination.

Sheol Glass Reaper Case.

Forged in the fires of Sheol, the mysterious 15th level of the World Dungeon, these protective, expensive artifacts are built and sold by traveling Spider Reaper Minions. They also sell lollipops, which are said to be out of this world.

When you absolutely, positively want to keep something safe, put it in this box. It will protect against *most*—but not all—forms of abuse.

Warning: Every time you open this case, there is a 1.5% chance you will be blasted with the *Sheol Fire* spell. That’s not a good thing. The item within the case will remain protected.

I swallowed. I probably should have read that description before I’d opened it to pull the beanie out. I kept the door open now.

I remembered that moment we'd jumped from the civic building and landed in the debris. There'd been a flash of light. Looking back now, I realized it'd been deliberate. The system had brought my attention to the case. It was just like any regular game. Seemingly random objects were sometimes placed there intentionally, just to keep the game fair. That's what this was.

I held the case in my hand, and I approached the pulsing gem. Careful not to touch it with my hands, I closed the case around the floating gem, like I was catching a firefly with my two hands. I shut the door, and I gingerly hooked it closed.

I tried to pull the whole thing into my inventory, and I received an error.

Yeah. Nice try, asshole.

"Oh, fuck off," I said. I hadn't expected that to work. After taking a deep breath, I let go. I cringed as the case fell a couple inches, clinking to a stop as it fell against the gem floating within. But it remained there, floating. The gem itself was starting to vibrate faster and faster, with little cracks forming along the edge. The glass case's description, that it protected against "most" forms of abuse, did not give me confidence. A magical explosion that was going to flatten 45 square kilometers of dungeon seemed like it would probably be pretty high on the shortlist of attack types that would break this thing.

We still had two and a half minutes on the countdown. Not even close to the amount of time we'd need to get to safety.

"Oh my god, Carl. Is that going to work?" Donut asked.

"I don't know. I doubt it. But it's worth a try." I paused. "I'm sorry, Donut. I should have told you my idea before forcing you to choose."

She made a grunting noise. "You always pretend like I'm the stubborn one, but once your mind is made up, Carl, it's impossible to change it. There's nothing to be sorry for."

I sat on the ground, exhausted. Donut jumped into my lap, and we stared at the floating glass case.

Remex rocked back and forth in the corner, muttering, "I'm coming, son. Any minute now. I'm coming. I missed you so much.

I’m coming.”

“What is he talking about?” Donut asked.

“He was a crawler,” I said. “He called himself a tenner. I reckon that means someone who got out on the tenth floor. I think he might’ve been famous once. It explains the views.”

“Carl, I don’t want to become an NPC,” Donut said. “I guess it won’t matter if we die.”

I reached up and scratched her head. Forty-five seconds. “I’m proud of you, you know that?”

“Why?”

“You’ve grown. You being worried about Katia? You don’t even know her, but you’d promised to keep her safe. My first instinct was to abandon her.”

She laughed. “I just don’t want Hekla mad at us. We already have that Lucia Mar after us. And Maggie My. And the Maestro’s dad.”

I chuckled. Fifteen seconds. “Can’t say we didn’t try, that’s for sure.”

“Carl?” she asked.

I looked down into her large, glowing eyes. “Yeah?”

“I’m not as dumb as I pretend to be. I know she’s dead.”

“I know.” I wrapped myself around her. We both closed our eyes and braced for the end.

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Remex screamed. The sudden, terrifying noise jolted my eyes open. I took in the room.

"Fuck," I said, scrambling up. I jumped for the case, which had fallen to the ground.

We hadn't died. Obviously. Light streamed from the container like a miniature, caged sun. The explosion had been completely silent. Lance-like rays burst from the glass, one of them streaming directly into Remex's chest, who was now on the floor, screaming and convulsing. Whatever had happened to him, it had bestowed upon him the ability to roar with supernatural volume.

The case itself glowed red hot. The floor was on fire, the wooden floorboards bubbling and bowing under the extreme heat. I feared the whole thing was about to fall through, taking us with it. The glass case and gem had transformed itself. I didn't have time to read the full description, but my eyes focused on the **Status: Explosion Imminent** in the two seconds before I grabbed it. *Please, please*, I thought. My fingers burned as I pulled it into my inventory. I cried out as the caged explosion disappeared.

"Holy shit," I said as I cast *Heal* on myself. My skin had burned off, so thoroughly and quickly it barely even hurt for the initial two seconds. That changed as it started to heal itself. I gasped in pain.

A page of notifications appeared. I waved them away for now. I examined the newest item in my inventory.

Carl's Doomsday Scenario

Type: Unstable custom explosive

Effect: An explosion large enough to rattle the teeth of a god.

Status: Explosion Imminent ($3/1x10^7$)

Created by a man who murders babies and steals rare collectibles from his elders, this device is powerful enough to level an entire city and all the suburbs around it. It is created by combining a massively overloaded soul crystal and a Sheol Glass Reaper Case.

Warning: This item can no longer be stabilized.

"The quest hasn't ended," said Donut. "But we're not dead, either."

I just sat there on the floor, breathing heavily. My hand ached, my fingers and palm pulsing despite the healing. I couldn't believe that had worked. I hadn't been able to put it into my inventory until after it had exploded. But what the hell was I going to do with the thing? The moment I removed it from my inventory, it would explode. I would have less than a second.

At least we were alive.

"Uh, Carl," Donut said a moment later. "You don't happen to have any more of those glass cases, do you? Maybe a really big one?"

I looked up to see Remex, still convulsing on the ground.

"Oh mother fuck," I said.

"You sure have been swearing a lot lately. I'm not sure I like that, Carl."

Now Remex had a timer over him. Twenty minutes. It hadn't started counting down yet, but the timer blinked red. I cringed as the new notification came.

Quest Update.

You've probably noticed you're not dead. Everybody say, "Thank you, Crawler Carl." I'll give you a second to luxuriate in your victory.

That's the good news. You might want to sit down for this next part.

Remex shrieked, and the world went white for a moment. I suddenly felt heavier, more tired. A massive racket filled the warehouse, like the sound of dozens of pots and pans crashing to the ground.

"What happened?" Donut asked.

"It's like when we're in a production trailer. We just lost all of our equipment stat buffs."

The bad news is there's still an explosion coming. A bigger bang, actually, but the area of effect will be similar. I won't bore you guys with the technical details, but what you just felt is called a precursor burst. It's a foreshock. The first of four before the big show. The one you just felt temporarily removed the magical properties of all your equipped gear. The next one will do something different.

All of this will culminate with a burst of pure, wild magic much more potent than the magically-infused chemical explosion from which you guys were just spared. Less physical damage to the environment. More face melting. I prefer this, if we're being honest. Have you ever put a marshmallow in a microwave? Imagine your head as the marshmallow. It'll be kinda like that. Prepare your defenses accordingly.

You now have twenty minutes to save yourselves.

"Come on," I said. "We gotta go." I stood and turned, once again, for the small trap door. I gave one last look at Remex, who remained in the corner, convulsing. Every instinct told me to put him out of his misery, but I knew that would likely be a very Bad Idea.

And that's when the floor collapsed.

I cried out, landing in a heap in the midst of a room full of sizzling armor pieces and swords. The EMP-like burst from Remex had deactivated all of the swordsmen guards, causing the armor to fall to the ground like junk. I groaned as I pulled a few random pieces of armor, along with a colossal broadsword into my inventory. I yanked myself to my feet and downed a healing potion. At least those still worked.

Remex hadn't fallen through. A loud, electric hum now emanated from him, still up on the second floor, just beyond the hole in the ceiling. The noise grew louder until it overwhelmed his constant screams.

"Where are we going?" Donut asked. We rushed from the building and turned right, heading due east. I pulled up the quest chat and started furiously typing instructions, giving people their two options for escape.

Mordecai: Take off every magical item you have and put it in your inventory. Stop whatever you're doing and do it now. It'll be safe in your inventory, but not on your skin. I don't know what the hell you just did, but your current situation is only barely better.

Carl: I don't have any clothes that aren't magical except my jacket. Even my underwear is magic now.

Mordecai: Goddamnit, Carl. No time to argue. Nobody is going to care about your trunk swinging in the air.

Donut: WHAT ABOUT MY CROWN?

Thanks to the tiara's *Fleeting* status, it would disappear if she removed it. And then it would be given to another crawler, which would be a very bad thing. Only one of them would be allowed to proceed to the tenth floor. Mordecai paused for an unusually long time.

Mordecai: Better leave it on. But there's a chance you might lose it. It's possible one of those bursts is going to have a negative effect on your stats permanently. You might get hit with Sepsis, too. The poison effect will be negated, but it'll still stagger you. Wild soul magic is unpredictable. It turns your own magical items against you. Keep Mongo locked up.

Dozens of responses to my group chat post poured in as I pulled my gear off, including my underwear. I also removed my xistera, just to be safe. Removing the stuff was easy, a lot easier than putting it on. I could just transfer it directly to my inventory. *Goddamnit*, I thought, reading the messages in the chat. Three different crawlers had given me the same response. The entrance to the back room at

the Desperado Club had disappeared when the safe rooms closed off. They were insulating the club from the impending disaster.

That left us with only one escape.

Katia came jogging up, along with a handful of other crawlers, mostly human. I didn't know any of them. Daniel Bautista was not among them.

"Okay, guys," I said. "If you haven't already, magical gear off. We have sixteen minutes, and we need to run at full speed. We're out of time."

The group just looked at me. Finally, one of them said, "Dude, why are you naked?"

I pointed east. "Go!"

The next pulse occurred just as we left town. A man near the back of the group exploded, just like that. His name had been **Conrad E**, and he'd had a Russian accent. He'd been a level-12 Ranger.

"What the hell was that?" I asked as I ran. Ahead, three emu-like mobs appeared, screeching. They were called **Ruin Flockers**. Donut hit two of them with *Magic Missile* as another mage hit the third with a lightning burst. That third ostrich didn't die, but hit the ground. I stomped its neck as we continued running.

"His quiver. All of his arrows blew up, I think," Katia said. "He'd put his bow away, but he'd forgotten about his arrows."

"Donut," I said. "I don't like this. I think you should take it off."

Donut remained on my shoulder, despite being faster than me. Behind, someone shouted about another mob. "Leave it!" I yelled.

"I'll lose five intelligence!" Donut whined. "And my Sepsis debuff. And I really like it."

"These bursts are attacking our magical gear," I said.

"But if I lose it, somebody else will get it and put it on. We'll have to fight them. I don't want to hurt a person."

"I know," I said. I didn't want that either. I didn't add that only an idiot would actually put the thing on after reading the description.

Anybody still around at this point would know better, so I wasn't too worried about that anymore. I leaped over a pile of rubble. We were coming up on ten minutes. A pair of dead crawlers appeared on my map, surrounded by the red dots of Street Urchins. We didn't have time to investigate.

Before, I'd never been the fastest runner. I had good endurance, more so than a lot of the guys who only trained on weights, but I'd never been a speed guy. I'd always hated jogging, but I played a lot of basketball. Not many team sports trained cardio like basketball, except maybe tennis or soccer. And probably jai-alai, too.

Now, I ran through the city with ease, moving much, much faster than I'd ever been able to before. My breaths came in ragged gasps, but my body didn't slow down. It was an odd, disconcerting feeling. If we survived this, I really needed to push myself more physically, to test my limits. My brain still thought of myself as a normal human. As a group, even the slowest amongst us moved faster than a squad of Olympians ever could've. I recalled my poor, long-lost chopper. It wouldn't have done well on this level, not with all the debris in the streets.

"Well, I'm not taking it off," Donut said.

"That dude blew up, Donut," I said. To our left, a group of four more crawlers appeared. They merged with us.

"Are we sure it's there?" one of them, a shark-headed creature, called.

"It's there!" another yelled back. "I can see it on my map already."

I turned my attention back to Donut. The next burst was due at any moment. They weren't coming at exact five-minute intervals. "What's going to happen if you permanently lose five intelligence, and then you lose the tiara anyway? Then you'll be down ten instead of five."

"But it was my first item," she said.

"It also might catch your damn head on fire. Besides, remember the description? You'll still be an official princess."

"Donut, he's right. You better take it off," Katia said.

"Oh, all right," Donut grumbled.

The Sepsis Crown atop her head crumbled into dust, disappearing like ash.

"Hey!" Donut yelled. To my left, one of the newcomers also cried out. His pants vanished. "It disappeared before I could remove it!"

The second pulse had apparently activated all magical weapons. This third one had destroyed any still-equipped armor.

The fourth pulse ripped through the party just as we pulled up to the small, decrepit building. We'd run the distance in record time.

Chaos tore through the group. A lightning bolt ripped through the party, glancing off a human, who tumbled and hit the ground, almost dead. Another person simply teleported away. Katia's whole body glowed, and she leaped forward, clipping me in the process and throwing me down. She ran directly into the wall, and blasted through it like the Kool-Aid Man. I bounced off the floor, crying out. Donut hissed and leaped away. I felt my arm break in that moment Katia slammed into me, but it was healed by the time I finished rolling.

You have been poisoned!

It took me a long moment to figure out what the hell had just happened. Normally, I was immune to poison, but that came from my Nightgaunt Cloak. Donut had also been poisoned, but she was also now immune thanks to her Former Child Actor class.

The first two items in everyone's hotlist had activated themselves on their own. *So much for items in our inventory being safe*. For both me and Donut, it was a healing potion and then a mana potion. We'd both ingested the second potion before the potion timer ended, inflicting us both with potion sickness. I knew Katia had an active skill called Rush, something she could only do once a day, and that's what'd happened to her.

The poison effect kicked me in the stomach, doubling me over. Once the fifteen seconds passed, I took an antidote potion and surveyed the crowd. We'd all stopped dead in the street outside the building. Katia returned, a dazed look in her eyes. Her nose had been knocked completely sideways and was now just below her ear. She didn't seem to have noticed.

"That really hurt," she said.

Nobody had been killed, but we didn't know what happened to the guy who'd teleported away. I leaned over the human who'd been cooked with the *Lightning* spell. He was unconscious. I poured a healing potion into his mouth. This was one of the newcomers who'd met us as we'd run here. The Asian man's eyes fluttered then snapped open.

"Please get your dick out of my face," he said. I grinned and backed away.

I looked over my shoulder, and through the hole in the wall Katia had created, I could see it. I glanced at the timers up in the corner of my vision. We had three minutes before the big detonation.

We also had two days and 18 hours left before this floor would collapse.

A familiar face appeared, jogging up with a new group. Daniel Bautista.

"I told you it was here," he said, indicating the stairwell down to the fourth level.

I clapped him on the shoulder. The man nodded and turned toward the stairwell, disappearing down to the fourth floor.

We didn't have a choice. I was going to just send everyone without Desperado Club access to the stairwell, but with the club closed off, it was either this or death.

"Go," I said. "Everybody down the stairs."

We watched as the procession of people lined up and rushed down the hole.

Carl: Mordecai, are you in your room?

Mordecai: I'm safe.

Carl: What's going to happen to us when we go down early? Or you?

Mordecai: I am going to sit here and twiddle my thumbs for three days. You guys won't notice a time difference. I'll see you on the other side. Also, I just peeked out the door. The NPCs are all safe, all that I can see. Nobody is on the street except the guards, who reactivated with that second burst. They all only have a single life point. It's too bad you're not here, otherwise I'd have you kill as many as you

can. It wouldn't be as much experience when you're just finishing them off, but it would still be quite a bit.

I glanced over at Katia, who stood at the entrance to the stairwell, waiting for us.

Carl: Are there any guards still in the warehouse?

Mordecai: I don't know. Probably a few. They're still moving out to their regular positions. I'm not going over there to look. Now get your asses into that stairwell.

Carl: Okay. Oh, and Mordecai?

Mordecai: What?

Carl: Congratulations.

He didn't answer. Donut looked up at me, eyes wide. "That's right," she said. "He's free now, isn't he? We make it to the fourth floor, and he gets to go home once the dungeon is over."

"That's right," I said. I thought of Remex, who was also about to finish his "duty." I wondered how long he'd been stuck here. I remembered what Donut had said when she learned what he really was. *Carl, I don't want to become an NPC.*

And she'd said something else, too. It was heartbreaking, when you thought about it. *I know she's dead.*

I thought of everyone we'd met on this floor, of the crawlers and NPCs we'd come across. We'd been on the floor less than a week, but it felt like a millennium. I thought of Signet the half-naiad. Of Quint the possum-faced pharmacist. Pustule the hobgoblin explosives dealer. I thought of poor GumGum the orc. Of Miss Quill. Of little Ricky Joe, the one-armed, child dwarf. I wondered if his mom ever had her baby.

The three of us turned toward the stairwell. Donut pulled Mongo out of his cage, and the dinosaur grunted with annoyance for being stuck so long.

We proceeded down the stairs. I knew from the last time, the floor ended the moment we pulled on the handle. The door at the bottom of the stairs was the same as always, with the oversized kua-tin carving, making them look bigger and more menacing than they really were.

You're not going to break me. Fuck you all.

I examined its properties.

Entrance to the fourth floor.

This is where the real fun begins.

Mind the gap.

"What does that mean?" I asked.

We had 100 seconds left.

"Katia," I said. "Pull out that detonator I gave you earlier. It has a ten second delay. Wait until the timer is at about 15 seconds and push it. Then we'll go in before it goes off."

"Why?" she asked, pulling the pencil-like detonator out. The thing had a range of ten kilometers, so we were more than close enough. "Won't that make the bomb go off faster?"

"Yes, but only by a couple seconds. If people aren't safe by now, they're already dead. I doubt it's going to work, since the detonators are magical. They probably got ruined in that first burst. But if it does, I set the dynamite. I let Donut smush a few of the detonator blobs onto the wall. If we get any experience for it, we'll all share in the spoils."

She shrugged. Just as the timer hit twenty seconds, she pressed the button.

We turned to open the door.

"Hey, Carl," said Donut, just as we started to dissolve away. "You probably should have put your pants back on when we still could get into our inventory, don't you think? Aren't we going straight to Odette's show?" She cackled with laughter.

I looked down at the cat, horrified.

"Goddamnit, Donut," I said.

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EPILOGUE

"It looks like we now have definitive proof that sex tape with the late Maestro was indeed a snick," Odette mused. The audience roared. Donut was on her back, howling with laughter as my cheeks burned.

I never considered myself a shy person. I'd been wandering the dungeon wearing nothing but boxers for weeks now. But the sight of myself up on the screen, running full tilt through the Over City with nothing but a one-armed leather jacket and my nuts dangling free filled me with a strange, almost primal sense of vulnerability. I don't know how nudists ever got used to it.

The interview was going well. So far, we'd received nothing but softball questions. I knew that'd soon change. It was still early.

All four of us—Me, Donut, Mongo, and Katia—had gone through the door and immediately appeared in the green room. There was a slight, odd *pop* in my brain, similar to the one I'd experienced the very first time I entered the dungeon, but that was it. There was no other sense that two and a half days had passed.

"Whoa," Katia said, spinning in circles at the sight of the green room. She stopped, putting her hands out to steady herself. "Are we on a boat?"

I didn't answer her. I only stared. She had changed to a stunning, short-haired woman. Black-haired, probably in her mid-thirties, pale with light, wide-set eyes that sat at an odd angle on her face.

"Katia," Donut said, "You're getting really good at the sculpting thing. Plus I like you better with black hair. It gives you more poise."

She reached up and touched her features, then relaxed. "This is the real me, Donut."

As Donut explained to her where we were, I proceeded to the bathroom to build myself a loincloth made of toilet paper. My hands shook as I wrapped the paper around my legs.

Holy shit, I thought. Our last few hours on the third floor had gone by quickly and unexpectedly. And now that I had a moment to breathe, my heart couldn't stop pounding. I found myself sitting on the bathroom floor, my hand to my chest. *How is this real? How is this my life?*

I knew this respite would be short-lived. After we were done here, we'd move onto the fourth floor, and it would start all over again.

"Carl, hurry up, I gotta wee!" Donut said, barging into the bathroom. She stopped short. Her tail drooped at the sight of me there on the floor. A look of concern flashed across her cat face. She didn't say anything for a few seconds. "You better get back out there. Katia and Mongo are eating all the human snacks. Lexis is in there. She said Katia is going to be on the show, too, but only at the end of the interview. She said it's a fourth-floor special, and we're going live just before the floor opens up."

"Come here, Donut," I said.

She immediately jumped onto my lap, butting her head against my chest. "Carl, are you okay?"

"I'll be fine," I said. I gave her head a quick pat. It was strange without her tiara. "What about you? We thought we were going to die, and then we weren't, and it's been non-stop since."

"You need to sleep," she said, also deflecting the question. "Let's do the interview and find a saferoom and rest. Okay?"

"Okay," I said, sitting up. I put my arms out, revealing my toilet paper loincloth. "So? What do you think?"

"Are you asking me to lie, Carl?"

"Yes, I am,"

Thirty minutes later, I sat on the couch in my ridiculous makeshift loincloth as we watched our last moments on the third floor play out on the screen.

Odette leaned back. "Before I show you what happened next, I want to bring out the newest member of the Royal Court of Princess Donut. Everyone say hello to Katia. And welcome back to the show, Mongo!"

Katia sat next to me on the couch while Mongo padded out and squawked at the virtual crowd, who screamed enthusiastically at the velociraptor. He curled up on the floor in front of Donut. Despite being in his box most of the night, even he seemed exhausted.

After a few initial questions to Katia, which she answered with deer-in-the-headlights, one-word responses, Odette sighed and turned back to me.

"So, guys," she said. "You were only gone for two days, but a lot can happen in two days. Isn't that right?" The audience laughed, almost nervously, which made *me* nervous. "So, what do you think happened after you hit that detonator?"

I shrugged. "I was hoping for an explosion at the warehouse, but I know the hobgoblin pus is a magical detonator, so I suspect maybe it was fried and nothing happened."

She clapped, nodding her bug head vigorously. "Smart, smart boy."

The audience had grown dead quiet. An electric feeling of apprehension washed over me. *Uh-oh. What is this?*

"Believe it or not, you're supposed to be dead. You're right. Hobgoblin pus *is* a magical trigger. By all accounts, it *should* have been rendered inert by the initial precursor burst. And if by chance it hadn't, that second burst, which activated all magical weapons, should have set it off, which would've exploded the dynamite, which would have killed Remex the Grand, triggering that final, cataclysmic explosion."

Remex the Grand? "But that didn't happen," I said.

"No," she agreed. "It did not. The Borant Corporation immediately filed an appeal against the AI's decision to rule the detonator exempt from both of those blasts. Just before you came

on today, Borant was overruled by a Syndicate court. In addition, and even more importantly, the court ruled the achievements you received as a result of the explosion are also just, and the rewards must be paid."

"Achievements?" Donut asked, perking up. "Rewards?"

"*But*," Odette continued, "per Syndicate rules, the host is allowed a single veto each season. This is important. It's almost always used to throw an appeal in their favor on the tenth or deeper floors. It has *never* been used this early. And Borant was forced to use their free veto on the prize decision, which reversed the ruling. So, unfortunately for you guys, you won't be receiving what you should. Still, everybody saw what happened. Everybody saw what you were rewarded. Sadly, you won't be getting it."

"What?" Donut said. "I don't understand. What are we not getting?"

"Okay, first let's watch what really happened after Katia pressed that button."

The screen changed to a view of a news-like program I'd never seen before. It was a news desk setup, similar to the recap show, but with an alien-like Soother host.

The Soother spoke with the practiced ease of a seasoned newscaster. "And while the tragic, controversial tale of Remex the Grand finally comes to an end, a new controversy has erupted in Borant's *Dungeon Crawler World*. A last-minute decision by a trio of trapped crawlers ended in an unexpected result. A result with potentially disastrous, real-life consequences for Borant. Watch this."

I bristled at the newscaster's use of "real-life." The screen showed Katia pressing the button. The scene switched to the view of the warehouse, and of the pus detonating. Multiple Swordsmen guards, all with their health in the very deep red, tumbled to the ground. The view switched to the second floor, to the pitiful, curled up form of Remex hiding in the corner. He'd become nothing but a silhouette of pulsing yellow. In the two seconds before that final explosion, the light disappeared. He cried out in pain just as he was overwhelmed with the blast from the dynamite.

The newscaster continued. “A controlled blast at the last second, which caused a mass soul crystal release from the fallen swordsmen, greatly tempered the resulting wild magic explosion, causing it to be much less destructive than originally intended. In the end, thousands of NPCs and several dozen crawler lives were potentially saved by the action.”

I groaned. “Does that mean we didn’t have to go down the stairs?”

“Nope,” Odette said. She waved her hand, and the screen paused. She looked at us, feigning sympathy. “Do you know how many Celestial prize boxes have been given out in the history of *Dungeon Crawler World*?”

Donut leaped to her feet. Mongo also jumped up, tail waving in excitement.

“Oh my god, shut up, Odette,” Donut said, eyes huge. “Are you saying we’re getting screwed out of a Celestial box?” She turned to the audience. “This is an outrage!”

Odette nodded. “The answer is 2,145. That’s how many Celestial boxes of any kind have been given out. I myself was the recipient of three. The record to a single crawler is four. And before this crawl, the most that have ever been given out in a single season is 18. That was a naga season, long, long ago. You might not be aware of this, but the host company is required to pay taxes to the Syndicate on each and every non-sponsored box given out. They are given a handful of free Celestials each season, but anything above that comes with a pretty hefty bill for the showrunners. And each one is more expensive than the last. That’s usually offset by a million other line items that flow into the production. For example, we pay an exorbitant amount to get your butts in that chair.”

“As you should,” Donut said, her voice still filled with anger. The audience laughed.

“It has been over 250 cycles since the Blood Sultanate of the Naga ran the first Crawl to actually lose money, and they are *still* recovering from it. They haven’t run a season since then. They only have a place in Faction Wars because they purchased a permanent spot early on.”

"For just 18 boxes?" I said. "That seems over the top."

"That season was cursed for multiple reasons, but we don't need to get into that. Anyway, the game is *supposed* to be difficult. Legendary boxes are handed out like candy because they're cheap, but Celestial boxes are an order of magnitude better. The prize in a single box can render an underperforming crawler almost immortal, practically unbeatable until they reach the tenth floor. If they capriciously hand them out, more crawlers will make it to the deeper levels, and the showrunners can drag the season out and earn much more money. So the Syndicate places a heavy premium on such items. And while the AI usually chooses the prizes, the writers running the show are responsible for creating the circumstances in which the boxes are earned. It's a careful balance."

I was trying really hard not to break the golden rule, which was *Thou shalt not talk shit about Borant*. I was finding it very difficult.

"It's just three boxes," Donut grumbled. "I don't see why they had to waste their stupid veto on keeping me, Carl, and Katia from getting an awesome prize."

Odette cocked her head to the side. "Maybe I should show you the rest of that news report." She waved her hand, and the frozen scene resumed. It now showed an Asian, half-elf crawler dragging himself into a saferoom after obviously surviving the magical blast that had been meant to kill him. He appeared gravely injured, likely from his own equipment turning on him. The show labeled him as the level 15 crawler **Quan Ch**, a class called an **Imperial Security Trooper**. This was the same guy who'd called us assholes in the chat.

"He survived," Donut said. "I'm glad. I felt kind of bad about what I did."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Oh, I blocked him from the chat after he called us assholes," said Donut. "You can't let people in your chatrooms get out of control, Carl. You need to rule with an iron paw."

The newscast continued as I looked incredulously at Donut. "As a result of surviving the event quest, all crawlers in the initial blast

zone were promised a Platinum Quest Box. But as you're about to see, the survivors received something a little better than that."

We all watched as Quan Ch pulled up his achievements.

New achievement! Bandit!

Screw Hadji. Hadji was a little bitch, anyway. You have completed a quest, but it was completed in a way unusual enough to trigger the Bandit Achievement! Unlike the real Bandit, who is usually instrumental in helping Jonny Quest complete his tasks, you didn't actually do anything to deserve this prize. But that's okay because you're still getting it. This is one of the rare achievements that can be rewarded more than once.

***Reward*: Your Platinum Quest box has been upgraded two times to a Celestial Quest Box!**

The scene showed him reverently opening the box to receive what looked like a glowing robe. The show didn't give the robe's description, but the moment Quan put it on, he floated off the ground. Magical, wisp-like wings grew from the back of his body. His left hand glowed blue.

The newscaster continued. "An incredible total of 83 Celestial boxes were rewarded as a result of the quest getting a rare double upgrade. Borant immediately appealed, but not before that one box was opened, thus putting Borant on the hook for that one. The Syndicate court has convened an emergency session to determine if the beleaguered company will have to pay for the remaining 82 boxes. If so, it is certain there will be no financial recovery for the once-mighty Borant system."

"So that jerk got a free box for *our* hard work!" Donut cried. "Are you kidding me? And we don't get *anything*? Are we still getting a Platinum box?"

"I'm afraid not," Odette said. "Their veto negated all prizes. Nobody is receiving a loot box from that quest except that one crawler. That same night, they issued a patch that disabled both the Hadji and Bandit upgrade achievements."

I laughed. Everybody turned to look at me.

"It's not funny, Carl," Donut said. She was not acting. The cat trembled with rage.

"Why is that so amusing to you, Carl?" Odette asked.

I shrugged. "It doesn't matter what we do. How hard we work. We keep getting screwed. Losing out sucks, but I've come to expect it. All that matters is getting stronger, getting more experience. We messed that up by getting involved in quests when we should be grinding. We're not going to make that mistake again. From now on, it's all about progression and training."

Odette replied, "You probably didn't miss out on as much experience as you think. That magical burst was muted, but it was still big. You may not have received prizes or experience from the quest, but you still got credit for the actual explosion. Because you technically caused it, your team received a handful of experience for every mob that it killed, including all those swordsmen guards."

She waved her hand, and our stats and level appeared over our heads. The audience gasped, and then broke out into applause.

Donut had risen seven levels, from 19 to 26. I had risen six, from 21 to 27. The last time I'd set foot in a safe room, I'd been level 19. That meant I had 24 stat points to distribute.

And then there was Katia.

She'd leaped 12 levels. She'd gone from nine to 21.

Odette turned to the audience. "As I promised you guys at the start of the show, I have exclusive, breaking news to share. The fourth floor will be opening up in less than an hour, but I have received a tentative draft of the leaderboard. Would you like to see it?"

"Yes! Yes, we would," Donut said, hopping up and down. All semblance of anger—and her usual, posh television persona—had fled. The crowd roared.

"Bear in mind, this won't be official until the next recap episode, and as you all know, things can change quickly in the dungeon, so this might shift. But I can reveal this is the current working copy. Nobody knows the exact formula for the leaderboard. It's a mix of views, favorites, levels, and money earned. But the list usually

matches pretty well with the most popular players in the game. Are you ready?"

"Carl," Donut said, shaking with excitement. "We're going to be on it. I just know it!"

Odette waved her hand, and the top-10 list appeared.

Current Leaderboard:

1. Lucia Mar – Lajabless – Black Inquisitor General – Level 29 – 1,000,000

2. Hekla – Amazonian – Shieldmaiden – Level 28 – 500,000

3. Prepotente – Caprid – Forsaken Aerialist – Level 27 – 400,000

4. Florin – Crocodilian – Shotgun Messenger – Level 24 – 300,000

5. Miriam Dom – Human – Shepherd – Level 27 – 200,000

6. Carl – Primal – Compensated Anarchist – Level 27 – 100,000

7. Donut – Cat – Former Child Actor – Level 26 – 100,000

8. Ifechi – Human – Physicker – Level 18 – 100,000

9. Li Jun – Human – Street Monk – Level 25 – 100,000

10. Elle McGib – Frost Maiden – Blizzardmancer – Level 13 – 100,000

Donut squealed with delight. "Carl, we're in the top ten! And Hekla is number two!" She turned to the audience. "I love her. She demonstrates such dignity. Such grace. I can't believe that ugly Lucia Mar is number one. Isn't she just awful?" The audience laughed.

"Who is Prepotente?" I asked, reading down the list. I knew Florin was the crocodile-headed dude with the shotgun. Miriam Dom was the goat lady. I didn't know Ifechi. Li Jun was the Chinese guy from the Maestro's show, the one I'd helped save from the troglodytes and brindle grubs. I was happy to see him on the list. I hoped Zhang and the others in his group were doing well, too.

"Carl, is that who I think it is?" Donut asked, pointing at the final name.

I nodded. Holy shit. Wheelchair-bound, dementia-suffering Mrs. McGibbons, one of the residents of the Meadow Lark Adult Care Community, was on the list. She was only level 13, having started the third floor as a level one. How in the hell had that happened? I hadn't talked to Brandon in several days.

"That's our show, folks! Tomorrow we will have an engineer from Borant on to discuss the ins and outs of this new, exciting level. I don't yet know what it is, but rumor has it we'll see something that's never been attempted before. We'll also have a pair of crawler special guests. They're not on the top ten list, but these up-and-comers are quickly becoming new favorites. Here's a hint: they're twins!" The crowd roared.

The audience faded away. "I really need to talk to you guys, but I only have a few minutes," Odette said. She didn't pull off her mask like she usually did. "I'm going on my own interview in five, on a different program. We'll be live-commenting on the opening of the floor. I'm going to get flak for not asking you about the assassination attempt, but Borant said it was off-limits. And Mordecai has reiterated that point several times."

"Do you just, like, watch him all day?" Donut asked.

"I do," Odette said, as if that was a perfectly normal thing to say. "As much as I can. This next floor is going to be especially dangerous." She looked at me. "Be careful with that gauntlet. It has the power to summon the war god Grull if you use it against any of his celebrants. They'll start appearing on this floor. And King Rust has apparently just spent a lot of money on a deity sponsorship. The Skull Empire doesn't usually purchase those, so it might be an

attempt to get to you. I don't know which god they've sponsored, but if I was still a gambler, I'd bet on Grull."

"Can the god get to us if I don't accidentally summon him?"

"Probably not. Not on this floor. Ask Mordecai how that all works." She paused. "He has a lot of experience in the subject, unfortunately."

Lexis entered the room. "Katia, dear," the production assistant said. "Can you follow me, please? I need to show you the return procedures. Donut, you can assist if you'd like."

"Uh, sure," Katia said, getting up and leaving the room.

Donut paused, looking between me and Odette. It was obvious Odette wanted to talk to me alone. I moved my head, indicating for her to leave. She looked as if she was about to object, but then she thought better of it.

"Bye, Odette," she said as she and Mongo followed Katia.

"I don't know what the next floor's theme is," Odette said, watching them leave. "But based on what I'm hearing, momentum-based crawlers will have a strong advantage, so keep her around if you can. But I called her out of the room because I wanted to warn you."

"About Katia?" I said. "She seems harmless. And Mordecai really likes her."

"I don't think she's in on it. Not willingly. I'm talking about Hekla. She's not evil. Or psychotic like Lucia Mar. However, she is very practical. And cunning. She does not have your sense of justice, which makes her dangerous. I've watched her some, and she's becoming obsessed with the idea of getting Donut to join her gang."

"Hekla seems great, but I don't think we'd work well together. I can only handle one huge personality at a time, and Donut fits in that slot pretty well."

"Based on her conversations with her now-former guide, I don't think she wants you in the party anyway. She thinks you're unstable. But she knows about Mordecai, thanks to Katia, and since Mordecai is part of Donut's package deal, she wants Donut in the party so she can have access to a permanent manager."

"I don't think Donut would ever leave me," I said, looking at the door.

"No, I don't either. Not as long as you're still alive."

I felt a chill rush through me.

"But again, I don't believe Katia is in on it. And she likes you. I can tell."

"Why are you telling me this, Odette?" I asked.

She chuckled. "I'm glad you're still following my first piece of advice. I lied earlier when I said I was paying an exorbitant amount to get you two on the show. When I bought your rights, it was very early, and you were very cheap. I paid less for the entire season of interviews than one pays to get you two on right now. If you die and Donut joins Brynhild's Daughters, my contract is voided. You two are still my highest-rated guests. In fact, I think that top-ten list is bunk. You two should be numbers two and three."

The top 10 list still floated there in the middle of the room.

"Odette," I asked, reading the list again. "What are those numbers at the end of each name? That million and 100,000?"

"That's just the bounty," she said. "It's how much other crawlers get if they kill you. Now I must leave. Be careful out there. I'll see you after the next floor collapse."

Odette faded away, leaving me alone, bobbing slowly up and down with the waves.

"Fuck," I said to the empty room.

The End

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IT'S THAT TIME AGAIN.

Alas, the book is done. But the story is not over yet!

Book III, *The Dungeon Anarchist's Cookbook* is already written and ready to go. It will release in April of 2021. It has fights and intrigue, old friends and new friends. 100% less clowns, unfortunately. But it has 100% more ManOwaR-obsessed mantaurs. Hail and Kill!

This is where I beg of you to please, please do me a solid and leave a review on Amazon. We live and die by our reviews. It is important. Toby eats a lot, and he'll eat me if I can't afford to feed him.

I will reiterate my don't-tell-Amazon-or-my-wife offer from the last book. If you leave a review, I will sire any and all children you wish to have. I am, as of this moment, now the proud father-to-be of over 200 children thanks to book one's reviews. You know you want in on the action! Who doesn't want to be part of a giant family? So please leave a review!

See you in April, and Mind the Gap.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Matt Dinniman is a writer and artist from Gig Harbor, WA. When he isn't attending cat shows, wrangling dogs, feeding turtles, playing bass in a punk/metal band, or writing books that make guys named Kyle threaten to kill his family because he called a goblin an incel, he designs cat-themed greeting cards and decorations. If you've ever walked into a Target or an IKEA or a Home Goods, looked at the weird wall art they have for sale there, and thought to yourself, *who buys this crap?* The answer is, "Not nearly as many people as Matt would like." So please buy all his books. (Or his art!)

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THE PAGE WHERE WE TOUT FACEBOOK GROUPS SO THEY LET US SPAM THEM ABOUT THIS BOOK

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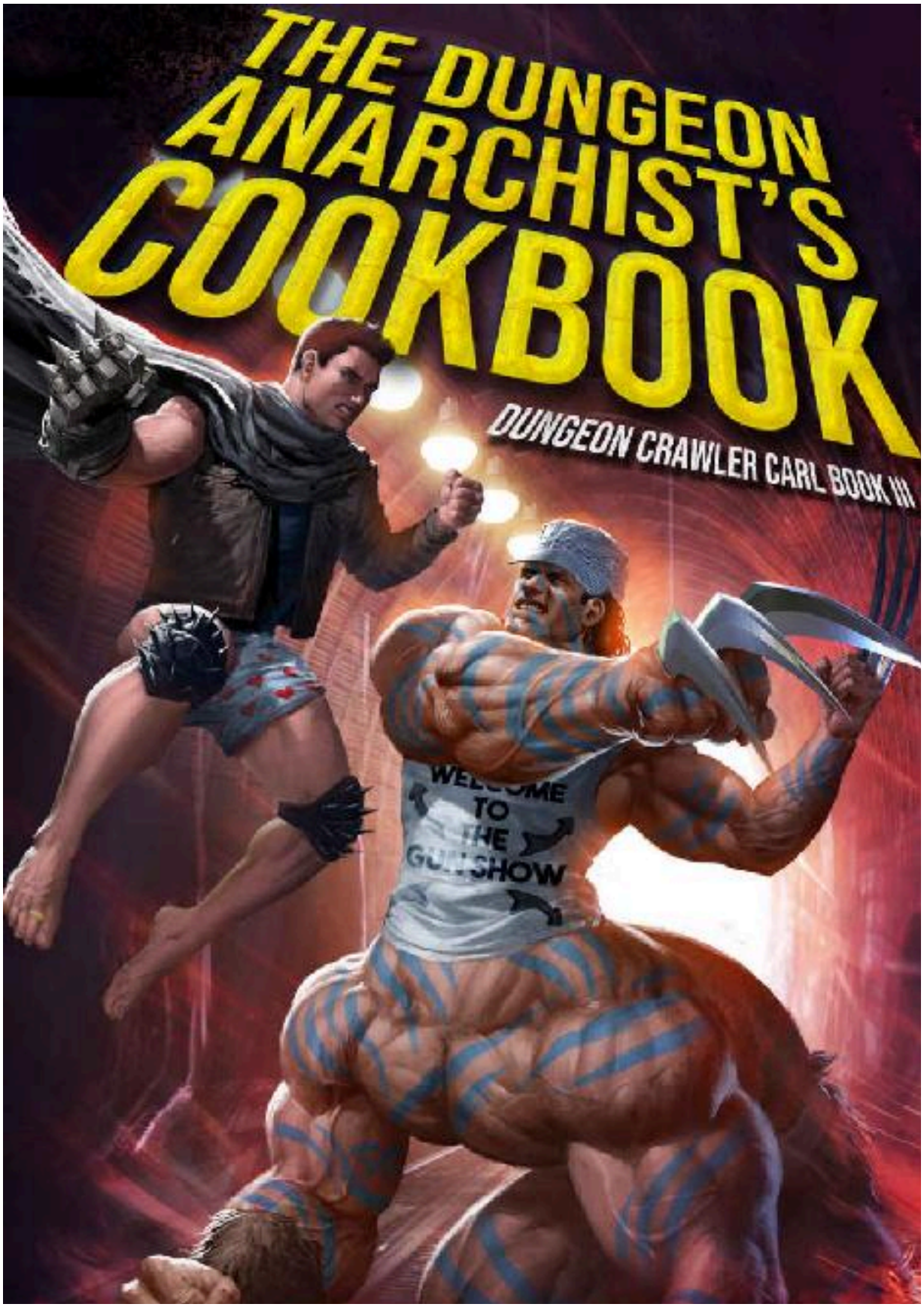
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DANDY HOUSE

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Hey, book three! Thanks everyone for still hanging out with me on this crazy journey through the dungeon. Special thanks to all my Donut Holes over on Patreon. You guys rock.

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Let what you do mean something.

- KING KONG BUNDY

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PREFACE

Hey, Matt the author guy here. A quick note about this particular book. The fourth floor of the dungeon is set up as a massive, deliberately-confusing puzzle. Carl, Donut, and the rest of the team have to work really hard to figure out the dungeon's layout. You, the super awesome reader, do not need to understand the floor's intricacies in order to understand or fully enjoy what is happening. Platform names and numbers and colors are gonna be flying by. It's okay not to remember them. It only becomes important at the end.

There will be a map near the end of the book to help you understand the endgame. Until then, enjoy the ride and mind the gap.

And, yes, "zomp" is really a color.

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[1]

Time to level Collapse: 10 Days.

Views: 43.1 Quadrillion
Followers: 677 Trillion
Favorites: 158.1 Trillion

Leaderboard rank: 6
Bounty: 100,000 gold

RED LINE.

Welcome, Crawler to the fourth floor. "The Iron Tangle"
Your title has reverted to Royal Bodyguard.
Sponsorship bidding initiated on Crawler #4,122. Bidding ends in 45 hours.

The world rumbled. The ground shook. I stumbled backward the moment we appeared, but I was held upright by a metal wall. Lights flashed in a quick staccato, pulsing on either side of the long, thin room. I felt the *thump, thump, thump* under my feet. We were in a long, plastic and metal tube that vibrated and thundered. The lights in the room blinked out then turned back on.

Mongo screeched in anger and fear. Donut jumped to my shoulder, trembling. Katia clutched onto a metal pole rising from the floor to the ceiling.

New achievement! I'm on a train!

Choo Choo, Motherfucker.

***Reward*: You've received a Train Conductor's Souvenir Hat! Wear it with pride!**

"It's a subway car," I said. We hurtled through a tunnel, racing toward some unknown destination.

A double aisle of seats, facing inward, filled the train car. The seats were made of beige, molded plastic with brown cushions that were ripped and tagged with marker and spray paint. The words were in nonsensical letters in the Cyrillic alphabet. The floor was dingy and pocked. Scorch marks dotted the plastic walls. Poles rose to the ceiling at regular intervals and also ran the length of the car. The whole place smelled like a pile of dead rats.

The train car was empty except for our party.

"It's a Metro car from Moscow," Katia said. "But the ones I rode were in much better condition than this. And cleaner." Her face had returned to the mostly-human, blond-haired form she'd held earlier. Her nose had been knocked halfway around her face the last time I'd seen her in her doppelganger form, but she'd willed it back into place.

At the end of the subway car was a closed door with no window. Above the door hung a small, electric sign with red words scrolling across the top.

Red Line, Car 20. Next stop: Sirin Station (81) in 12 minutes and 32 seconds.

"Everybody get dressed," I said. I sat down in the chair and quickly began the process of putting my gear back on. I briefly

examined the stupid train hat we'd received, and it was junk. It wasn't magical. It was a simple, blue and white hat one would see on a toddler. It had the words "I rode the Iron Tangle" embroidered on it.

"Carl, it says I have to pick a new class because of my Character Actor skill. I only have six minutes to choose, or I will get a 'random' one," Donut said. "The list is full of new stuff. Not the same as before."

Carl: Mordecai. Help Donut pick a class. She's going to read off some choices. We're in a moving train car. I think it's a subway system-themed floor.

Mordecai: Welcome back. Donut, hit me with the suggested list.

Donut: I DON'T LIKE THESE CHOICES, MORDECAI.

As Donut rattled off a list of options in the chat, including things like Alley Cat Brawler and Nec-Cat-Mancer, I moved to the window and peered outside.

We moved swiftly. The exterior wall of the tunnel was right there, barely inches from the window. It appeared to be made of dirt or rock. Lights flashed by occasionally, as if electrical lights were built into the tunnel walls at random intervals.

"Why does she always type in all caps?" Katia whispered as I peered out the window. "Is it because she's four-legged?"

"No. It's because she's Donut."

"She's quite the handful, isn't she?"

I remembered what Odette had said about Hekla wanting to steal Donut away.

"More than you know," I said.

We had 10 days to complete this floor. Our first priority would be to find a stairwell. If we were constantly moving, that was going to provide a unique challenge. There were only 9,375 stairwells this time. If the level truly was subway or train-themed, and this wasn't just taking us to some random location where the floor was really going to begin, we needed a map. Even if there was a stairwell at each and every stop, that suggested this system was beyond huge.

Finding a stairwell wouldn't be enough if we didn't know how to circle back.

My Escape Plan skill couldn't find any directions or maps, at least not in this car. The skill worked great, but you had to know where the hidden maps were before you could utilize it.

"Wow," Katia said. "My constitution is double what it normally is. I'm at 102. I have an active momentum bonus even though I'm not moving."

"Good," I said. *That means you're our meat shield*, I didn't add. "I hope that's by design. Otherwise, I wouldn't get used to it. If the showrunners didn't mean for that to happen, you can bet it'll be patched out tonight."

If we were going to be doing a lot of close-quarters fighting this level, that meant I needed to work on my hand-to-hand. Last floor had been all about explosions. I suspected that was going to take a backseat here.

Donut: SO, SHOULD I DO THE FOOTBALL HOOLIGAN OR THE FIRECRACKER CLASS? QUICK, I'M ALMOST OUT OF TIME.

Mordecai: Hooligan. If you're going to be stuck in a series of tubes, it's the best choice. It comes with a momentum bonus and several team buffs. Plus the Mascot skill, which gives a bonus to Mongo.

Donut glowed for a moment.

Donut: I DID IT. I GOT THE MASCOT SKILL! BUT I DIDN'T GET GROUP CHANT OR MOVING RIOT. I GOT THE 10 POINTS TO MY CONSTITUTION THOUGH.

Mordecai: Damn. Chant would've been good. Okay, you three. I just peeked my head out of my room, and I am in what appears to be a train station settlement. It looks as if the stores and inns are placed at these stations. This is a bigger one where you can switch between three different train routes. One of the trains is a subway like you described, but another is much larger. Like a regular transcontinental railway train. Get off at the next station, and see if you can find a saferoom or inn.

Carl: 10-4. By the way, thanks for telling us about the bounty.

Mordecai: So you made the top 10, huh? Find a saferoom, and we'll talk.

I looked at Donut. I tried to remember what she'd lost by switching away from Artist Alley Mogul. The only noteworthy benefits were the +5 to dexterity and the 15% bonus to item sales. Also, she'd received a few extra coins when we went down the stairs, but it wasn't much. The loss of the dexterity bonus would probably be the worst part. "So what do your new skills do?"

The ground rattled as we went around a bend. The lights flickered.

"I only got a couple of new ones. It came with a skill that would've raised my damage if we were moving, but I didn't get it. The best one is Mascot. If Mongo deals damage to an enemy, everybody in the party receives a bonus to dexterity and constitution. If he kills a mob, the bonus lasts for a couple hours."

"That is a good one," I said.

"Also, my Constitution went up by 10 points. Oh, and I got a skill called Guinness that doubles my strength if I'm drunk."

"Are you serious?"

"Quite," she said. "So if we're going to be doing any fighting, we'll need to stop at the club first so I can get another dirty shirley."

Carl: Mordecai, is it me or are these classes better than what we were offered before?

Mordecai: It's an unintended benefit. A lot of these rarer classes weren't available because she didn't meet the minimum requirements. But as her stats increase, the classes she's offered on each level will be better. There's another benefit I hadn't anticipated, too. She'd received a level-5 Negotiation skill with that Artist Alley class. Before you guys left the third floor, she'd raised the skill to level 7 thanks to all that selling you did. When she lost that class, the five levels went away, but she retained the two she'd received, including the skill experience, so it actually bumped itself up to four on its own.

Carl: Wait, I don't understand. So if she gets a temporary skill, she keeps it the next floor down? What about the stat point increases?

Mordecai: She won't keep the stat points. But as long as she uses a skill enough to level it at least once, it looks like she'll keep it, minus the levels she received as being a part of that class. Skill experience is a complicated, under-the-hood metric crawlers can't see. It takes a lot to break the cherry, so to say, and obtain level 1. But once you're in, you're in. So in other words, use Mongo as much as you can, and you'll keep that Mascot benefit. Also, from now on, we should keep an eye out for classes with rare spells. If she levels the spell at least once, then I think she'll keep it.

Carl: That seems like a bug.

Mordecai: I think it might be. So don't talk about it out loud or bring attention to it. They probably won't notice until she manages to keep a spell from one floor to the next. Now get to work. I'll look for a map, but you should, too.

"Katia," I said. "You have the Pathfinder skill. Do you see anything?"

"The skill is only level three. It was level one when I got it, and it's hard to upgrade. I have to keep my map open all the way to train it. My old game guide said I needed to find a training guild to really boost it. I can zoom my map out really big, but when I do, I don't see much. There are tubes everywhere, like a mess of noodles. Though a minute ago, I saw another train rush by on another track on the other side of this wall, shooting off at an angle from us. As for this train, there are 20 cars, and we're on the last one."

"Can you see any mobs?"

"No. It usually doesn't show monsters. But if we're close to a stairwell or a saferoom, I'll get a notification. But I can see car number 15 is shaped differently than this one. I can't see what it is. It's not a passenger car like this one."

I looked on my own map, and it showed the first half of car 15. I knew normally my map zoomed out a little bigger than that, but it shrank while we were moving. If Katia could see all 20 cars, then

that skill really did make the map a lot bigger. The map also helpfully labeled the cars for me, something I hadn't seen before. We were in **Cabin #20 – Passenger Car.**

"What does the label say for that 15th car?" I asked Katia.

"It just has a question mark."

I examined the back wall of the train. Normally there'd be some sort of emergency exit. Instead, it was just a solid, metallic wall. I wondered what would happen if I attached an explosive to it, breached the wall, and jumped out onto the track. Considering how tight the tunnel was, we'd probably get squished by the next train in a matter of minutes.

"Okay, guys," I said. "Let's go check it out."

I moved down the center aisle. Donut jumped to my shoulder. Mongo pushed his way to my side. He had to struggle past the vertical poles. If he got much bigger or the aisles any tighter, it was going to become a problem. We came to the door, which seemed out of place here. There was no glass window. I sensed this door was something added by the dungeon, and normally there'd be a short, open gangway where one could walk the length of the train unimpeded. Above, the timer to the next stop was at five minutes.

"I'm going to pull the door open. Katia, your constitution is four times mine, so you go in first. You okay with that?"

She swallowed but then nodded. I could see she was trembling. "I guess that's my job, isn't it?"

"Don't worry, sweetie. We have your back," Donut said.

The door slid to the side, revealing a small, enclosed space between the two cars. The gangway floor bounced up and down. The walls connecting the two train cars were a black, accordioned material that looked like reinforced fabric. The distance between the two cars seemed longer than it should be. Below my feet was a panel that I could presumably pull up to get to the connector. A second door appeared, leading to the next car, and I put my hand on it. Behind me, Katia now held a small, glowing axe.

"Have you used that thing before?" I asked.

"It's a good weapon," she said. "But my strength isn't high enough, and it doesn't do a lot of damage. Though I killed some

lumber monkeys with it."

I nodded. "Here we go."

I slid open the door, and she leaped inside. Mongo jumped in with her, snarling, causing her to faceplant. I stumbled back at the pet's sudden, unexpected forward motion.

"Goddamnit, Mongo!" I yelled, examining the room for threats.

Empty. The car was identical to the last.

"Mongo! Bad!" Donut cried. "Be nice to Katia!"

"Okay, let's try that again," I said. "Mongo. Don't be an experience hog."

The dinosaur squawked as Katia grumbled and pulled herself to her feet. She'd dropped her axe, and it'd skittered ten feet in front of her. She ran to retrieve it.

The next car was the same. Empty. But at least Katia didn't fall on her face when we breached. The next car after that was similarly unoccupied.

By the time we reached car number 16, the timer was almost out. I wanted to at least peek into 15 before we tried to find a saferoom. The cars beyond that one were more of the normal passenger cars. Katia said cars ten and five were also different, but not the same as 15. Plus the entire first car was just a solid block on her map. She said that usually meant it was behind a magical door.

"There's gotta be something in this one," I said, indicating the door to train 15. It was different than the previous ones. It was still a sliding door, but it appeared to be made of a thicker, more stable material.

The door was not locked. I slid it open and moved onto the gangway. The next door was the same. The train started to slow. The high-pitched squeal of brakes filled the air, along with the stench of oil and smoke.

A static-filled voice crackled over a loudspeaker. "Coming up on Sirin Station, folks. Station number 81. Next stop will be Mora Station number 82 followed by a Traveler Transfer station number 83."

"Monsters," Donut hissed. "Smaller sized, but there are a lot of them."

I lifted my hand off the door to car fifteen. "Okay, we'll back away for now until…"

"No, not in there. At the train station!" Donut said, just as the platform eased into view. To my left, a simple landing area appeared. A sign **Sirin Station - 81** hung from the ceiling.

"Oh god," Katia said.

The station teemed with several hundred fat, wrinkly monsters, clambering over each other as they surged at the door. The creatures looked like demonic, grey-skinned babies with sharp claws and giant mouths filled with too many teeth. Each stood on two legs, and they stood about knee height. A few were attached to the concrete pillars, climbing up them on all fours, like goddamned spiders. They wore nothing but tattered loin cloths, and they leaped and scratched at the doors, some jumping as high as the car's ceiling. They screamed as one, their cries unsettlingly baby-like. They surged against the train at the sight of us through the windows, crashing like waves into the glass.

The train continued to roll forward, but it would stop at any moment. And when it did, those doors were going to open, letting them in here.

I examined one of the monsters through the glass.

Drek. Level 6.

Everybody loves babies, right? What kind of asshole doesn't love babies? How about demonic, ravenous, berserking babies who travel in packs of at least 50? It's rumored these lil' rascals can devour a full-sized elephant down to the bone in less than five seconds. And you're a lot smaller than an elephant.

"Shit, shit," I said, pulling at the door to cabin 15. "Close that door behind us!" I slid the heavy door open, and we piled into the humid, dark train car. The room stank of rotten meat.

Behind us, the doors to the train station hissed open, and the squealing monsters poured in. Katia slammed the first door. She rushed into the dark, windowless rail car and slammed the second shut just as Donut cast *Torch*, illuminating the room.

"Oh for fuck's sake," I said, seeing the new pair of monsters.

Jikininki. Level 17.

Of all the types of ghouls one may find in the Iron Tangle Rail System, the Jikininki is the most common, the most well-behaved, and the most insatiable. Their voracious appetite for flesh makes them the perfect janitors. They'll generally leave you alone as long as you're not bleeding, as long as you don't litter, and as long as you don't trespass into their personal space. It's rude.

On the map, the system helpfully replaced the question marks on the label with **Janitor's Lair.**

The hunched, thin monsters appeared to be grown-up cousins of the Drek babies pouring into the train behind us. These white, emaciated creatures were about seven feet tall with arms that dragged to the ground with serrated, black fingernails that clinked like porcelain as the monsters stood to their full height at our intrusion. Their faces were all sharp teeth and white, bulging eyes. The mouths on both creatures started chattering up and down like a wind-up toy, making the sound of an industrial shredder.

Both of the creatures wore tattered and threadbare double-breasted suits with golden buttons. Under the dark suits were white, blood splattered dress shirts. One had a bowtie. Both wore conductor-style hats with golden letters across that said, "Janitor." The one without the bowtie had a pinback button on his breast that read, "How may I hurt you?"

Other than the two monsters, the rail car was empty save for a pile of bones and two brooms and dust buckets.

"Double Shot!" I yelled.

Two full-power *Magic Missiles* rocketed out, each one a headshot. The creatures staggered, their health moving into the red as Mongo roared. The raptor leaped half the length of the car, landing on one of the humanoids, feet first. Donut jumped from my shoulder to Katia's as I rushed at the ghoul, forming a fist. The monster hissed as I reared back and punched it in the face. To my left, Mongo had decapitated the monster and was in the process of swallowing the head. My target hit the ground. I stepped onto its chest, caving it in. Black, tar-like gore spread out in a v-pattern from where I stomped.

The action felt odd on my foot, but I didn't have time to think about why.

You have received a temporary five percent bonus to Dexterity and Constitution thanks to your team's mascot.

We didn't have time to revel in our victory. I took a few bones and looted a handful of gold coins from each ghoul. I also took the "How may I hurt you?" button as I rushed back to the end of the room.

"They're trying to get in!" Katia cried, backing away from the door. Donut remained on her shoulder, fur poofed out. We could hear scrabbling and scratching and screaming coming from car 16. They hadn't yet broken through the first of the two doors. All they needed to do was pull the handle down and slide, but it appeared they didn't know how.

I looked nervously at the door at the other side of the car, the one leading to car number 14. That one was also presumably filled with the Dreks. We were surrounded.

There was no sign in this car, but I remembered the announcement had said the next station was called Mora or something like that. But the one after that was something different. A traveler transfer station. Hopefully that meant a safe place like Mordecai had described. But there were no doors to the outside in this car. How could we get out there?

I prepared a smoke curtain. I also moved the Fireball or Custard ticket to my hotlist. I had three scratch-off spots left. If they broke in here, we were screwed. I wouldn't be saved by a glob of custard this time. What the hell were we going to do? Would all the stations be filled with mobs?

I feared I would have to resort to explosives, but that seemed like a really bad idea. Even if we threw it toward a rear train car and slammed the door, I feared a derailment would be deadly to the entire train.

I had my *Protective Shell*, but I could only cast it once a day, and it only lasted 20 seconds. Actually, thinking about it, Mordecai had told me something about that spell a long time ago that might just

be helpful here. But if that next station was also filled with mobs, I'd have to wait to use it, otherwise it would be a waste.

Okay. Calm down. It's okay. You're okay. They put these doorless cars here on purpose. We're using them as intended.

I took a deep breath and went over my options, combing through my inventory. Now that the initial panic had eased, multiple options presented themselves to me.

"We need to hold out until we get to station number 83," I said. "Katia, if they start opening the door, hold it closed! Donut, do you still have those two ready-to-go trap modules?"

"Yes. You want them?" she said, pulling each out. She'd received them in a gold sapper's box after our battle with the Rage Elemental all the way on the second floor.

One was a Spike Module and the other an Alarm Module. Each of them were tiny cubes about the size of a pair of dice. I examined the Alarm Module.

Alarm Module.

Two items for the price of one! A favorite of the paranoid and the rich, you can use this module to either add an alarm element to a trap you're building, or it can be used as a ready-to-go trap for those who can't be assed to sit down and make their own. When triggered, it will play a Very Loud song. And by Very Loud, I mean Norwegian Black Metal loud. You may program the song at a Sapper's Table. If you do not or are unable to pick an alarm tone, a random, culturally-important song from the past *US Billboard Hot 100* will be chosen.

You have the ability to imbue *Fear* upon this module, but your current level of Trap Engineer (Level 1) only allows this action to be done at a Sapper's table.

If untriggered, your Backfire skill allows you to remove this trap after it has been set with a 100% success rate.

The spike module had a similar description, but it would cause 50-centimeter spikes to pop out of the ground at two second intervals in a one meter-square area. Friendly NPCs and crawlers

wouldn’t set it off, but once triggered, it would keep spiking up and down forever, so we had to be careful.

I wondered if the spike trap could be affixed to a wall. Or a door. I was about to find out.

“Keep on this door,” I said. “We can’t guard both sides, so I’m putting the alarm and spike trap in the fore gangway. That’ll give us time to run up there and block out the door if they’re coming at us from that side.”

I turned and sprinted for the other side of the car before they could respond. The truth was, we *could* probably guard both sides. Katia could hold one door closed, and I could hold the other. Donut wouldn’t be able to do it. But I didn’t trust Katia’s strength of 11 to be good enough, even if they were just level six monsters. Plus I didn’t want to split the party. Not now.

I ran to the far door and put my ear against it. Sure enough, the rabid babies were screaming and attacking the door on this side, too. But they hadn’t broken into the gangway yet. I eased open the door.

The handle to the door for car #14 rang as it jangled up and down, but they hadn’t yet figured out how to slide it. At any moment, one of the little assholes was going to get an arm in there and figure it out. I took the alarm module and set it on the ground. I mentally clicked **Activate**, and a transparent rectangle appeared on the floor, blinking. The box was about the size and shape of a shoe box. An informational tooltip appeared over the now-set trap, similar to what I saw with bombs.

Placed Trap
Set by you.
Effect: A loud-ass alarm.
Delay: None.
Target: Red-tagged mobs.
Duration: Until the heat death of the universe.

In addition, I had four options under the info panel. **Trigger Now**, **Set Delay**, **Set Target**, And **Remove Trap**.

I left it alone and turned toward the door into the janitor car. I slid it shut, enclosing me in the small space. I placed the spike trap

against the door and activated it. It allowed me to place it vertically. I slid open the door to see if it moved with the entry, and it did. I returned to car 15 and slid the door closed.

Now we would know if they breached the door behind us, and the spikes would hopefully keep them off that door for a short time. I returned aft. Mongo remained in the center of the room, gnawing on the corpse of the janitor. The train swayed as it moved around a curve.

"Mongo, stay with Donut," I yelled as I rushed past. "And stop eating gross shit. You're going to make yourself sick again."

Mongo grunted and followed me back to the door.

My mind raced with possibilities and defenses I was going to have to build. If I knew the dimensions of the cars, gangways, and doors, I'd be able to fashion multiple defensive structures to place within the cars. But we had to survive this first.

"Keep your eye on that map," I said to Katia as I rushed up. "Let me know the second you see a train station coming up."

"I already see one. Station 82 will be coming up in a minute," she said.

"Okay, hopefully they'll get off. But if they don't, or if more monsters get on, I have a few ideas."

I opened up the door to the gangway. They still hadn't figured it out on this side, either. "Donut, tell me if that second door starts to open."

<u>Mordecai</u>: Okay, I just watched a train pull up, and two crawlers got off. There were mobs on the train, but they were magically prevented from getting off. So don't disembark until you get to a transfer station.

"Yeah, thanks for the tip," I grumbled as I went to my knees and pulled up the panel in the gangway floor. Below, I'd hopefully find the train's electrical system and controls for the car couplers. I had no idea how this stuff worked in real life, but I was confident enough in my own electrical systems knowledge that I'd at least recognize what I'd find under there.

The top panel came off easily. But under it was a small metal door with a lock, similar to a breaker box. I placed my hand on it

and received an error.

This service plate is magically locked. You need a Red Line Engineer's Key to access this area. Do you have a key? No you don't. So back off.

"Damn," I said, putting the panel back. That meant we'd have to go with the nuclear option.

The loudspeaker crackled. "Coming up on Mora station number 82, home to the Psycho Stickers. Watch out for those guys." The announcer chuckled. "Next stop is the transfer station number 83 where one may access the yellow line and the Nightmare Express. After that is Rusalka station number 84. Thank you for riding the red line."

"Carl!" Donut cried. I looked up to see the door start to slide. I leaped back as Donut blew her wad, spamming *Magic Missiles* into the hole. One of the babies chomped onto my foot, which wouldn't do anything because of my…

…I cried out in excruciating pain as I fell back into car 15. Katia slammed the door shut. The baby remained attached to my foot, gnawing furiously on the meat of my sole. I pulled myself up and slammed my foot down. The level-6 monster exploded like a tomato soup-filled balloon. I spread my toes to make sure they were all there, and I cast *Heal* on myself. *What a disaster that would've been*.

"Ow, ow, ow," I said as it healed. That had fucking *hurt*. It'd been a long time since I'd allowed my pedicure kit buffs to expire. I was so used to having rock-solid feet, I'd forgotten what it felt like to be vulnerable down there. We *really* needed to get to a saferoom.

The train eased to a stop.

"I see more monsters," Donut said. "But not as many. There's only a few on the platform. But they're big. A lot bigger. One is going into train 16 and another two into 14."

The door handle started to jiggle. I grasped onto it and held the door closed. Squeals of outrage came through the other side. A moment later, the train started to move again.

"Hey," I said. "Do you remember if we left the doors open all the way down? The ones to cars 17 and 18?"

"We did," Katia said.

"Okay, let me know the moment you see that next platform. In a couple minutes we're going to…"

Peaking at Number 2 on January 13, 2007, it's "Fergalicious!"

The announcement was so loud it rattled the walls.

"What in god's name is," Katia started before she was drowned out. The song started, louder than I expected, despite the description's warning. My ears immediately rang in pain.

Carl: It's the alarm trap. They made it through the first door.

Katia: Do you want me to hold the other door?

Carl: No. We don't have time anymore. We're running aft. Toward the back. We're going in about 15 seconds. We are going to run all the way back to car number 20, and we're shutting every door we pass. When I say go, we run.

Katia: How is that going to work? I don't understand.

Donut: JUST GO WITH IT. WHEN CARL SAYS TO DO SOMETHING WE DO IT. ALSO, I LOVE THIS SONG.

The door at the far end of the car rumbled. Shrieks of pain exploded from the other side. Experience notifications started rolling in as mobs were impaled on the door spikes.

I looked at the map to make sure the track was straight, and then I clicked on *Protective Shell*.

The large, semi-circle shield formed around us, expanding outside the width of the train car. The shield wasn't affected or fettered by solid objects.

I had no idea how fast the average subway car moved, but that didn't really matter. I knew this train was going fast, and I also knew that the spell's barrier would be impenetrable by mobs for 20 seconds.

And more importantly, the spell remained static in the spot where it was cast.

The magical shell disappeared the moment I cast it, rocketing away toward car 16, then 17, then 18, then 19, then 20, and then away, stuck in that same place along the tracks it'd been when I

cast, pushing all the mobs along with it like a bulldozer, squishing them into paste against the first surface they met.

Carl: Go!

I threw open the door just as the door at the other end of the train ripped open, revealing a hedgehog-like ogre creature, so large it couldn't get through. Only its arm reached in, stretching all the way from car 14. The Dreks poured in around it, running and clambering at us. Several jumped to the ceiling and crawled just as fast as they ran, their mouths open in cries I thankfully couldn't hear. I slammed the door behind us, then the next.

Car 16 was completely filled with blood. Body parts were splattered around the seats and walls where the Dreks had gotten stuck. Each corpse had dropped about five gold pieces. The ogre creature, apparently called a Psycho Sticker, had been so obliterated it didn't even register as an X on the map.

I looked over my shoulder at the sign, and the next station was only four minutes away. I relaxed as we jogged toward train number 17, looting the gold as we ran. We were going to be okay. For now.

Carl: Don't slip on the blood! It's easy to trip on their heads. Believe me.

Katia: I'm going to be sick. Oh my god, Carl. I've never seen anything like this.

Donut: YOU BETTER GET USED TO IT.

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[2]

THE PLATFORM TO TRANSFER STATION #83 LOOKED LIKE ANY OTHER subterranean subway station from before the collapse. It was a narrow, concrete platform that seemed to go on forever. One end had a set of stairs leading up to a different area. The featureless, white-tiled walls gave off an early industrial vibe. A lone bench sat against the wall, and a faded thick yellow stripe was painted on the landing, warning travelers of the edge of the platform.

By the time the train had eased to a stop, and the doors slid open, we still had multiple cars between us and the hordes of killer babies and hedgehog ogres. I feared they would pour out of the train, but Mordecai's earlier assessment that the transit stations would be safe was correct.

"Do you think the trains get more and more filled with monsters the further it goes?" Katia asked. "Surely they have to get off somewhere."

"That's a good question," I said, watching the train pull away. Drek glared at us through the windows. I flipped them off. "Go fuck yourselves, creepy babies."

Once the train was gone, I stepped forward to examine the track below. It looked like a regular subway path. It was a channel about five feet deep holding two regular rails. On the far end was the so-called "third rail," an electrified length of metal that provided power to the train. Normally these things had covers on them to keep people from getting electrocuted if they accidentally fell in, but there

was no cover here. I didn't know how much juice was running through the line. For all I knew the whole thing could be some ridiculous mana system. One never knew with this place. But the presence of what appeared to be ceramic insulators along the single, raised line suggested this was good ol' DC electricity. Either way, I knew we needed to stay off the damn tracks.

"Mongo," I said to the dinosaur, who was poised to jump down there to go exploring. "Don't. You'll get zapped or squished. Probably both."

The pet grunted and turned away.

My eyes caught a freestanding, rectangular sign in the center of the platform with some writing on it. I moved to examine it.

The sign simply read **The Red Line. Trains approximately every 10-15 minutes** and had a long, red squiggle. There was a single dot on the line, about 1/3 of the way from the bottom. It was labeled **You are here. Station #83**.

I examined the sign more carefully, and I felt the haptic buzz of my Escape Plan skill activating. The map became alive. Additional words appeared. The remaining dots populated the line, starting at station 11 and ending at station 435. It appeared the trains only traveled one way, ascending up the line, which was kind of weird. If there was a second train that went from high to low, it wasn't indicated here. The transit stations were now circled on the map. They were not at regular intervals, but there were quite a few of them. In addition, every five stations had red squares over the dots, but it didn't say what that meant.

A box sat in the left corner of the map. It read **Saferooms appear at all transfer stations. Stairwells appear at stations numbered 12, 24, 36, 48, and 72 on any colored line.** The map didn't give any more details, nor did it give the names of the other lines at this station, though I knew from the announcement there was also a yellow line platform and a "Nightmare Express" platform somewhere around here.

We'd emerged on the train just after station number 80, and we'd gotten off at 83. There didn't appear to be a way to get to the lower-numbered stations with the stairwells. At least not directly.

Also, I knew that there would be 9,375 stairwells hidden on this floor. If each line only had five stairwell locations, then how many damn lines were there? I hated doing math, but it sounded like this was going to be a mess.

A timer counted down to the next train arrival, which would be in nine minutes.

"Let's go up the stairs. Find the saferoom," I said.

At the top of the short flight of stairs was a small, circular room. Two additional stairwells led down, one to the yellow line and the other to the Nightmare Express. There were three shops up here. A saferoom. A "Mace and bashing weapons guild." And a small, general store called "Limp Richard's Sundries." The proprietor of the general store, Limp Richard, was a type of creature I'd never seen before. A Mole Man. He was a short, squat man that looked, well, like an anthropomorphized mole, complete with glasses. He sat in the open doorway to his shop reading a book. He looked up at our approach.

Limp Richard – Mole Man. Level 36.

This is a Non-Combatant NPC.

Mole men and mole women actually just call themselves "Men" and "Women," and quite frankly, it's exhausting. These losers spend most of their days and nights reading. What a bunch of nerds.

"Welcome to station 83," Limp Richard said. He put his book down. "I have supplies for the weary travelers."

"We are weary. We'll be by later after we sleep," I said, moving to the inn, which didn't have a sign.

"Suit yourself," he said, settling back into his spot.

"Hey, have you seen any other crawlers yet?" Katia asked.

"You're the first," he said.

We entered the inn, and upon opening the door, we discovered the saferooms had reverted to their previous style from the first two floors. This was a red and white themed fast food restaurant called Nirula's. Behind the counter stood a shaggy, but female, Bopca Protector named "Wendita."

Mordecai appeared a moment later, having been transferred here from his quarters.

"Holy shit," I said, laughing. The last I'd seen Mordecai, he'd been a stunningly-handsome Incubus creature. He was now about five feet tall, and he'd been transformed into a mud-colored, warty, slimy toad-looking thing, complete with hanging jowls and a throat pouch under his wide face that looked as if it could fill with air. I examined his new properties.

Mordecai – Grulke Infantry. Level 50.

Manager of Crawler Princess Donut

This is a Non-Combatant NPC.

The rare Grulke were a militaristic race of toad warriors. Able to leap great distances and inflict devastating attacks with their tongues, it was said an army of Grulke could stand against any foe. Unfortunately, political intrigue and infighting has turned these once-proud people into a race of mostly mercenaries and vagrants. They are hunted ruthlessly by the tunnel trolls, who like to capture and lick them. Not because they impart any sort of hallucinogenic effect. It's just that tunnel trolls are weird-ass fuckers.

"A frog, huh?" I said.

Mordecai grunted. "Don't ever call a real Grulke a frog if you meet one. They're mean bastards. They're toads."

"I need to tell you what happened with that last quest."

"Oh, I already know all about it. As a manager, I no longer get the daily updates or a newsletter, but I do receive notifications of court decisions adversely affecting my client. You guys got screwed, but at least you're alive."

I moved to the counter and examined the familiar three screens.

"Shit," I said, looking at the player counter. We had 389,441 remaining crawlers. That was several hundred thousand dead since the last time I'd looked.

"What happened?" I asked, horrified.

"I only know what I saw on the recap episode. There were several group quest events just like yours happening across the Over City during the last couple of days. Usually the third floor is relatively

easy. They generally try to have six or seven hundred thousand make it to the fourth floor. The factions aren't going to be happy if the crawlers are culled too much by the time the sixth floor opens. It's also usually 20 days, and you only have ten. Expect the AI to push back with better gear and higher awards, especially after that veto. The fact you're level 27 and Donut is 26 is both lucky and a miracle. That's better than I could've hoped for, even with a regular timer. We'll need to keep it up, but we can't rely on luck-based power leveling."

"Luck-based anything is not my intention," I said. But I'd barely heard what he'd said. I felt sick. *Jesus*, I thought. *You gotta keep your head*. I took a deep breath.

The middle screen with the top ten list simply read, **Leaderboard will populate at the end of the next recap episode**.

I turned my attention to the final screen.

Welcome to the Safe Room. You are on the Fourth Level.

Rental Rooms currently available: 10

Rental Room price: 180 gold.

Personal locations available for purchase. See proprietor for details.

Food is available at this location.

"How much gold do you guys have between the three of you?" Mordecai asked.

"Just about four grand," I said. "But we haven't opened our boxes yet, and we have quite a few."

"Okay. Open your boxes and see how much you have," Mordecai said. "Donut, do your thing. Just like we talked about earlier."

Donut cleared her throat and jumped to the counter. I knew she'd been looking forward to this.

"This is a lovely establishment you have here," she said to Wendita the Bopca.

"Why thank you, your majesty," the gnome said, perking up. "I'm just so excited to have royalty visit us. You don't know what an honor it is."

"I'm sure," Donut said in her most imperious voice. "So I understand you have personal locations available to sell at this establishment."

Wendita's eyes got huge. "Yes, that's right. Fifty thousand gold, and it's yours."

Mordecai and I both winced. He'd warned us that the price might've gone up. He said it usually started at forty grand.

Donut yawned and looked at her paw as if that price was but a pittance. "I always find talking about coins to be a low activity." She sighed dramatically. "Surely there must be a discount for royalty?"

Wendita shook her head vigorously. "No ma'am. Your majesty, I mean. Personal spaces aren't something we can negotiate on."

Donut leaned in. "Oh, Sweetie. Let me tell you a secret. *Everything* is negotiable."

Wendita swallowed.

According to Mordecai, the price for a personal saferoom would be "fixed." Location managers would tell the Bopcas how much to sell them for. But the truth was there was usually about 25% wiggle room on the price. The system wouldn't allow them to sell it for less than that. The proprietors were incentivized to sell the magical spaces with rewards, not money. The rewards being things such as earlier location selection for the next floor, a larger food budget, etcetera. So as far as the Bopcas were concerned, it didn't matter how much they sold the spaces for.

Unfortunately, the gnomes had a miserly streak to them, and it went against their better nature to discount anything, even if they weren't the ones reaping the benefit. It was something I'd never understand. But Mordecai was convinced that Donut would be able to talk them down, and if she succeeded, she'd surely train up her negotiation skills. Apparently one received extra skill experience if they could talk a Bopca down. Even if we didn't have enough money to purchase right now, this was an important skill to train as much as possible.

"I might be able to let it go for 45,000."

Donut scoffed. "I suppose we don't really need a personal space today anyway." She stood and turned her back to Wendita, showing

her cat butt to the gnome.

"Forty-four thousand?" Wendita said.

"Is that a question?" Donut asked, looking over her shoulder.

I sighed and turned away from the negotiations. I had 24 stat points to distribute, but Mordecai had taught me to open my boxes and weigh any possible loot upgrades first. I had multiple boxes already, but I pulled up my unread achievements first to see if I had any more. I had ten achievements I hadn't yet opened, most of them explosion-based. I was surprised to find a few additional ones.

New Achievement! They like me! They really like me!

You are one of the first five crawlers to have achieved 500 trillion followers! People sure love a good train wreck. Wink.

***Reward*: You have received a Platinum Fan Box!**

Note: Voting is now enabled on this box's prize. Box will become available in 30 hours.

New Achievement! The early bird gets to squirm!

You went down a set of stairs more than six hours prior to the level's collapse.

***Reward*: Doing this is kind of like leaving a party much too early. It makes you look like a dick. No reward for you.**

<Error> Reward and achievement removed by Syndicate Court Order.

New Achievement! Cuck Aquaman!

You got fucked by a fish. You've done something so spectacularly controversial, courts and lawyers had to get

involved. The end result was *my* decision being overturned.

***Reward*: You've received a Platinum It's Not My Fault You Fish-Headed Assholes Don't Properly Program Your Quests Box.**

"Uh, Mordecai?" I said.

I described that last achievement using our chat feature. I'd recently discovered I could mentally copy items in my notifications and paste them into chat. I had a scratchpad where I could paste and keep items and write notes. The whole thing was just getting longer and longer with information.

Mordecai laughed out loud after I showed him the achievement. His throat pouch inflated and dispersed air with glee. The sight was disconcerting.

Mordecai: the AI is given the discretionary ability to award certain types of superfluous achievements and awards up to Platinum. Don't think the system is getting soft on you. This is not too unusual. The AI running the game almost always obtains a bit of a personality and an attitude, especially near the end. When their decisions get countermanded by the court, it tends to break something in their virtual minds. They usually act out by doing something like this. But normally the veto comes much later in the game. I don't know what sort of effect this is going to have. Just open the box, accept the prize, and don't mention it again out loud. I'm sure Borant expected this when they issued that veto, and they won't hold it against you. I just looked and Donut got the same prize. I'm guessing everyone who got shafted by the decision received it.

We'd gotten robbed of a Celestial quest box, but Donut and I still had two silver quest boxes from the prostitute quest and from that Cockblock achievement. At the same time I had received a Platinum Tyrant's Box plus a Bronze Assassin's box, which I'd gotten for becoming the town's new magistrate. Plus I had that Bronze Boss box from killing Quill and a mess of other loot packs, mostly bronze and silver adventurer's boxes.

Looking at the list, I no longer felt as if we'd been screwed over. Almost all of these prizes were a result of that quest.

"I'm going in," I said. The next table over, Katia was digging into her own loot.

The adventurer's boxes didn't hold anything new or exciting. Potions, potions, bandages—which I never used, random clothing items and unenchanted weapons that we would sell. A couple hundred coins.

The bronze assassin box contained a pair of **Quiet Slippers**, which I wouldn't be able to wear plus a mess of antidote potions I didn't need unless I wasn't wearing my Nightgaunt Cloak.

The boss box contained a magical tome for a spell called ***Bang Bro***. I set it aside to read later.

My two silver quest boxes each contained 1,000 gold coins and a group of scrolls. One contained three *Confusing Fog* scrolls, which I liked much better than just smoke bombs. The scrolls had saved us multiple times, but I'd been out of them for a while. The other contained three *Heal* scrolls, which were also useful in healing others without having to resort to pouring potions down their throats.

I received more sticks of dynamite from some random boxes before we got to the good stuff.

The first, the Platinum Tyrant's Box contained 10,000 gold and a necklace. The necklace was a simple, silver-colored chain with a quarter-sized charm at the end. A tiny, yellow jewel was encrusted in the charm. I quickly examined it before I moved to the next box.

Enchanted Necklace of the Haute Bourgeoisie

The second smallest of the chains of leadership, it is still considered a great honor to be the custodian of this burden. Each jewel encrusted upon this charm represents a settlement owned and controlled by the bearer. If one still maintains a settlement's jewel upon the collapse of the level, the holder of this necklace will permanently receive a tax stipend every ten days from that settlement based on size and population. In addition, each gem will impart additional benefits based on the town.

In order to upgrade this necklace, one must first conquer a Large-sized Settlement. Upgraded necklaces will also upgrade all existing gems.

One Attached Gem:

Poor Sapphire. Medium Skyfowl Settlement (Third Floor).

+5 to Dexterity.

+Talon Strike (Level 5)

Taxes received: 432 Gold every 10 days.

May you be a kind and just leader.

"Oh wow," I said, putting it aside. "Cool." I guessed that explained why the others didn't recognize me as the town's leader. I probably had to first put the necklace on.

The AI's special box opened next. It was just seven slips of paper. I laughed out loud at the prizes.

Coupon for a free Personal Space, upgraded to level three.

Coupon for a free tier one environmental upgrade. (x2)

Coupon for a free tier one crafting table. (x2)

Coupon for a table upgrade. (x2)

Over at the counter, Donut had talked Wendita down to 38,000 gold. The two continued to dance back and forth. I saw Katia had received the same coupons. She had one in her hand, her eyes glossy, which I recognized as her talking directly in chat, probably to Hekla. I nodded at Mordecai and slid the coupons over to show him.

"Holy wow," he said. He had to sit down. He croaked with amusement. He also had an odd look of relief on his face.

"So these are good?"

<u>Mordecai</u>: This is a bigger fuck you to the showrunners than I thought the AI could pull off. Honestly, this is probably almost as good as a celestial upgrade. A level three space is expensive but allows for each crawler to have their own room complete with their own upgrades. And if you gather a new teammate who already has a space, you'll be able to conjoin the rooms and combine the upgrades. It also allows me to bring my own room over. No more unexpected teleporting, thank the gods.

Carl: How is this a fuck you to the boss people?

Mordecai: All of those upgrades are really expensive, so in addition to the loss of income from the acquisitions—they get a small cut of all dungeon purchases—it's a tradition for your sponsors to make you buy your own safe space but to then buy you some upgrades in your first loot box. By preempting the sponsors, the AI is giving you a leg up and is saving your future sponsors a lot of money. I mean *a lot*, thus freeing them up to give you better stuff.

Carl: Katia got the same coupons. I'm thinking she's going to save them for Hekla.

Mordecai turned his head and regarded the woman thoughtfully.

Mordecai: The environmental upgrades are no problem. She can install them now, and they'll travel with her if she decides to leave. But I want those table upgrades. Those are invaluable. I'll have to talk to her.

"But Princess Donut, it's the lowest I can go," Wendita pleaded. "It won't let me go below 37,500 gold. If we go lower than that, I will have to personally pay the difference myself."

"Well, how much do you have saved up?" Donut asked. The cat had a wild look to her eyes. "You'll be free to visit any time you like."

"Wait, really?" Wendita asked.

Carl: Donut. Don't make her pay from her own pocket. It'll make you look like an ass. Just settle on the price now to get your experience.

Donut: I can get her lower, Carl. I can do it. I can *feel* her wavering. It is delicious.

Carl: There's no need. Open your boxes and you'll see why.

Donut sighed dramatically. "Oh, we needn't go lower than 37,500 gold, I suppose."

"Really?" Wendita said. "So it's a deal?"

"I'll have to think on it," Donut said. She jumped from the counter and moved to the table as the Bopca just stared at her incredulously. Donut started going through her achievements as I returned my attention to my loot.

I put on the necklace, receiving the plus five to my dexterity. I tucked it in under my shirt. We didn't wear dog tags in the Coast Guard, so I wasn't used to having something around my neck. It felt heavy against my skin, heavier than it should. I examined Talon Strike, which ended up being a skill, not a spell.

Talon Strike

Birds have ugly feet. Disgusting feet, really. Still, there's something sensual about the sight of a hawk swooping down upon its prey, talons out, and slashing. It's so sudden, so unexpected, so explosively violent.

Such violence. Sweet, sweet violence.

Turns the side of your bare foot into a fast-moving slashing weapon, increasing the damage against opponents by up to (Level of skill) times your regular kicking damage for (Level of skill) seconds. Each kick using this skill has a 2% chance to cast the instakill spell *Eviscerate*. This melee skill has a cooldown of five minutes. Higher levels of this skill increase damage, duration, and chance of casting *Eviscerate*. A level 15 of this skill will result in Talon Strike being permanently active.

That was an excellent upgrade. Anything that could increase my damage was a welcome addition, especially if it didn't cost anything to activate. I couldn't wait to try it out.

I picked up the spell tome.

Bang Bro

Cost: 5 Mana

Target: Temporarily Enchant Equipped Item

Duration: 5 minutes + 1 minute per level of spell. Requires 5 minute cooldown.

Adds both fire and electrical damage to any currently-equipped item. May not be cast on flesh. Well, actually it can be cast on (your own) flesh, but I really wouldn't recommend it. May inflict *Burn* and *Shock* on targets.

Can also be used to cook hotdogs and other items.

I called Mordecai over, who was helping Donut with her items. I showed him the book.

"Will this work on my gauntlet?"

"Yeah," he said. "Definitely. I wouldn't try it on your xistera, not with the way you load it. You could probably do it to your foot, also, as long as your invulnerable buff is active. But I would probably avoid doing that. It's a good spell, and it's in your mana price range."

I nodded and read the tome, adding the spell to my list. I would have to add a few points to my intelligence. Between that, *Heal*, and my *Wisp Armor*, I now had a few mana-costing spells.

"Oh my gosh, oh my gosh, I love it! I love it so much!" Donut cried. "This plus a fan box? I can't wait!"

She'd gotten the same coupons as me which meant all of us who won that quest probably got the same thing. She'd also received the fan box. But other than that, she hadn't gotten as many boxes as I had. Most notably, she hadn't received the Tyrant box nor the Assassin box. But she did have the boss box and the quest boxes. It looked as if she'd received a bunch of random scrolls and some useless items we'd have to sell, But in one of those, I wasn't sure which, she'd also received a new tiara.

It poofed onto her head. It looked similar to her last one. The jewels on this one were white instead of purple. I quickly examined it. It wasn't as good as the one she'd lost, but it did come with some good benefits.

Enchanted Tiara of Mana Genita

A crystal tiara fit for royalty. Made in honor of all the lost children of the world. Because nothing helps sooth the tears of grieving parents like watching someone else dress up all fancy.

+3 Intelligence

Increased ability to detect mobs on the map.

Removes automatic hostility by worshippers of Mana Genita.

"Who's Mana Genita?" I asked.

"She's a goddess," Mordecai said. "A pretty obscure one. I don't think I've ever run across her. She was big on spells, I think. I don't remember. There's thousands of them. Gods, I mean. Only a few are dungeon regulars. Most of them never leave the 12th floor."

I remembered what Odette had said about Mordecai and gods. *He has a lot of experience in the subject, unfortunately.*

"Yeah, I'm supposed to ask you about gods," I said.

"That can wait. It's a long conversation. We need to get our space set up. And then sleep. So distribute your points."

"Wait, that reminds me," Donut said, jumping from the table. She rushed to the corner of the restaurant. Standing there, hidden in the shadows was a mailbox. I'd forgotten about that. She had a spellbook coming to her. She leaped to the top of the box and opened it up. A moment later, she grunted with annoyance.

"When am I going to get a good spell?" she complained. "The flames from *Magic Missile* aren't doing it for me anymore. I want something with some kick. Like *Fireball*."

The idea of Donut shooting fireballs was terrifying.

The cat scrunched up her face. "What do you think, Mordecai? Should I read it? Or maybe we can sell it?"

"Read it," he said.

She glowed.

"What was it?" I asked. Normally, she'd apply the book without even reading the description first. I was moderately impressed that she'd first asked Mordecai's opinion. But thinking on it, I was starting to suspect she was getting addicted to the idea of selling things more than actually using them.

"It's a spell called *Hole*," Mordecai said. "It does exactly what it sounds like. It makes a temporary hole on a surface of her choosing. She'll need to level it up before it's too helpful, as a level one isn't thick enough to get through most doors, but it's a useful spell. Especially if you're creative with it."

That actually sounded pretty awesome. I could already think of a half dozen uses for it. Tomorrow we would have to go out and experiment. I turned to Katia.

"What about you? Did you get anything good?"

She nodded, lifting her left arm. There was nothing there except the arm of her blue tracksuit. Any equipped gear would be invisible on her, but it would increase her mass.

"It's an arm bracer that I can turn into a shield," she said. "Check it out."

She flicked her wrist, and her arm changed shape, forming into what looked like a buckler-sized glob of blue polyester.

"That's really weird," I said.

"Yeah, the shield is supposed to be metal, I think, but when I activate it, it just looks like the surrounding area." She reached down and rapped on the shield with her knuckles, and it gave a metallic ring. "If I practice, I might be able to make it look like anything. Mordecai says I can change its shape too."

Mordecai leaned forward to examine the round protuberance on her arm. "That shield has a *Shatter* enchantment. Use it in conjunction with your Rush ability."

The shield disappeared, and her arm reshaped itself.

"You can be like that liquid metal *Terminator* guy," Donut said. "That'd be really cool."

"I never saw that movie," replied Katia. "I don't like violence."

"You're in the wrong job then, honey."

"Wait," I said. "I guess I hadn't really realized what exactly you can do with that race. So if you're wearing a helmet that's made out of metal, and you reshape yourself to look like a normal human wearing a bikini, you'll be able to make any part of your body metal?"

Mordecai answered. "That's right. If she's 90% flesh and 10% metal, she can make herself to look like a regular, unarmored human, but what you perceive as her bikini, or her feet, or her hands, can really be the material from the helmet. As long as it's 10%, and it's continuous. You can't break up the item. Also, there's some elasticity issues with certain enchanted materials, plus certain limits still exist, like she's not allowed to grow four arms so she can wear forty rings, but you get the idea."

"Well, shit. We need to get as much armor on you as possible."

"That's the plan," Mordecai said. "And she's going to train up her strength a bit, too."

I distributed my 24 stat points. I put 10 in strength, nine in constitution, and five in intelligence. I knew I needed to add some to

dexterity next, but since this floor was going to presumably focus more on close-quarters fighting, plus the boost I'd already received from the necklace, I decided to bolster my main stats. So after I was done, I ended up with:

Strength: 41 +3 (When Gauntlet Formed)
Intelligence: 15
Constitution: 34
Dexterity: 23
Charisma: 25

"A strength over 40 is good for the fourth floor," Mordecai said when I showed him my updated stats. "It's not anything to write home about, but you've already made up the ground you lost when you picked the Primal race. We still have a lot of work to do. We need to get your unenhanced strength to 100 as soon as we can. In a few levels, Donut is going to hit 100 in Charisma, and that's going to change a lot of things. She's at 94 now."

"Oh I can't wait." I said.

"In the meantime," Mordecai said, turning to Donut, "There's one last thing to do before you three can get to sleep. Get your coupons out."

"Katia, you too," Mordecai said. "Take out all your coupons."

"Actually, guys, I'm really sorry," Katia said. "I was talking to Hekla, and I kind of promised her I would…"

Mordecai waved his hand. "Yes, yes. We've already figured that out. Don't worry. You can cash in the coupons now, and you won't lose them. The personal space and the environmental upgrades will travel with you, so you might as well use them now. The same with the tables you're going to buy. The tables upgrade on their own every time you go down a floor, so it's important to do it now. You can save the two table upgrade coupons. If you leave and rejoin another party, everything you're about to do will travel with you."

"Okay," she said after a moment.

Donut returned to the counter with Wendita, who was sitting there looking very sullen.

"So I've thought about it, Wendita, dear," Donut said. "I've decided we are going to buy a space, but we're going to use this instead."

She dropped the coupon on the counter.

"What is this?" The Bopca's eyes grew huge as she examined the paper. Her hands started to tremble. "A level three space?"

"Does she still get her bonus if we use a coupon?" I whispered.

"Oh yeah," Mordecai said. "She also gets rewards for each upgrade she sells. We are about to make her year."

I still had my own coupon for a level-three personal space. "What should I do with mine?"

"Something very cool," he said. "Follow." He stepped—hopped, actually—up to the counter.

"Wendita," he said. "Both Carl and Katia here also have coupons for a level-three personal space that they'd like to turn in. How much is the joining fee? For all three."

Wendita looked up at Mordecai as if he'd just told her that she'd been elected the new president of the universe. If the little gnome's eyes got any bigger, I feared they would pop out of her head and roll onto the counter.

"It's ten thousand," she finally said. "Five thousand for each union, but it would only require two of them."

"We got that now," he said. He turned to me. "Right?"

I nodded.

Mordecai slapped his webbed hands together. It made a sticky *splotch* noise. "Okay. So here's what we're doing. Make sure you get all this down. We are turning in all three of these level-threes, and then we are going to conjoin them. What will that make?"

"Uh, it looks like it'll be a level-five."

Mordecai grumbled as I exchanged a look with Donut.

He looked over his shoulder at me. "All that means is that when you guys combine your spaces, all of them together will give the benefits of a level-five space. If Katia leaves the party, she'll

withdraw her space from the collective, and it'll go down to a…" He looked at Wendita.

"A four."

"A level-four space, which is still pretty good."

"Okay, you three, hand me all your coupons. Don't mix them up. The system needs to know who is buying what. Wendita. Pull up the upgrade menu, and show me the available tier one environmental upgrades."

The Bopca, still in a daze, waved her hand. A menu appeared floating in front of us.

Welcome to the Upgrade Clearing House.

The following tier-one upgrades are available. Drill down for more details.

Bathroom Upgrades.
Bed Upgrades.
Crafting Upgrades.
Kitchen Upgrades.
Kennel and Stable Upgrades
Magic Upgrades. (Empty)
Quest and Social Upgrades.
Store Access. (Empty)
Training Upgrades.

"What is this," Mordecai asked. Before I barely had the chance to read the menu, he reached forward with his hand and clicked on **Quest and Social Upgrades**.

"This is all new since the last time I'd had to deal with a personal space," he mumbled. "They never really kept us apprised on this stuff since game guides don't usually deal with anything past the third floor."

A new menu appeared.

<u>Social Upgrades</u>:

***Social Screen. Gives detailed, AI-curated running list of comments from your social stream. Allows for better interaction with fans. 50,000 Gold.**

<u>Quest Upgrades</u>:

***Quest Screen. Gives detailed list of available quests in your current area. 90,000 Gold.**

***Adventurer's, Inc. Employment Agency. Allows access to the general dungeon jobs-for-hire board. 100,000 Gold.**

***<Special> Naughty Boys Employment Agency. Allows for specialized quests with specialized rewards. Invite-only. 500,000 Gold.**

"Hmm, I was wondering what that was before. Your class gives you access to that Naughty Boys agency. I've never seen anything like this. They are always changing this stuff and not telling us."

"Are these coupons good for any of these upgrades? Even though they have different values?" I asked. It'd be stupid to waste them on something that cost 50,000 when there were items that cost literally ten times as much.

"Ahh, no," Wendita said. "If you read the fine print on the coupons, it says maximum value of 250,000 gold each and two may not be combined for a single item. So if you want that last one, you'll have to pay another 250,000 gold."

"Damn," I said.

"We're avoiding quests this floor anyway," Mordecai said. "Let's find some upgrades that'll be useful right away."

Mordecai went back and clicked on **Bed Upgrades**.

A long list of available types of beds populated the list. It started with a single-sized cot, and it got better from there.

The very last item was **Ultra-Stabilized, Size-adjustable, race-adjustable alleviating sleep apparatus. Allows for full rest after a period of only two hours of sleep. Imparts 30 hours of Good Rest bonus. 250,000 Gold.**

Mordecai slid one of Donut's coupons forward. "We'll take the Ultra-Stabilized bed."

"Will we all get that?" Katia asked.

"Yes. As long as the rooms are conjoined, you all share in your upgrades."

"So we only have to sleep for two hours now?" I asked. I was both fascinated and horrified at the idea.

"That's right. And that's not even the best bed you can get. Once you hit the sixth floor, the tier two upgrades become available. I think the top available bed allows you to press a button, and you're fully rested. The Good Rest bonus adds 10% to all of your stats and allows for 10% higher experience and skill training."

"Well, shit," I said. "I hadn't realized we would be getting upgrades like this."

"It gets better," he said.

"Click bathroom upgrades," Donut said excitedly. "We need to get the cleaning thing like they had in that production trailer."

In the end, we ended up with the bed, an automatic shower that wasn't quite as nice as the one we'd seen on the surface, and a 255,000 gold **Enhanced Crafting Studio** that Mordecai insisted was necessary. The shower added another 10% bonus to our stats and lowered our "Detectability," which meant we could sneak around better. He made me save my last coupon for the store which would supposedly become available sometime in the next few days. Katia also spent only one of her coupons on a **Training Room**, which would allow us to train for one hour a day on any specific non-magical-spell skill we wanted. Supposedly it would train the skill as if we were really fighting with it. That room also cost 250,000 gold. I wouldn't be able to train anything explosives based, but Mordecai said tier-two would have something called a **Bomber's Studio** which would allow me to practice blowing shit up.

There were multiple available upgrades I still wanted to get. The kitchen upgrades were expensive, but they offered up food that imparted varying degrees of buffs. The kennel upgrades did the same but for Mongo. The magical upgrades would become available later, according to Mordecai, and would offer a place to train magical spells and allow the purchase of magic-enhancing items. He said that was something else that would be a necessary purchase.

"There's a ton of new types of craft tables. Let's hold off for now while I study the list," Mordecai said. "In the meantime, let's open up the room and get some sleep."

In the end, we had to pay 15,000 gold, which once again depleted much of our newly-acquired wealth. We slid the coupons

and gold over to Wendita who had tears streaming down her face as she accepted them.

"You bless me, your majesty," she said. "I knew when you talked me into paying my own money it was nothing but a test. A real princess would never do such a thing."

Admin Notice. A new tab is available in your interface.

New achievement! Welcome to the neighborhood!

You have bought a home! It's every man's dream to someday own a place where he can fap in peace. No more filthy roommates not doing the dishes or making up excuses as to why they can't pay the rent. No more landlord who shows up without notice and conceals hidden cameras in the smoke detectors. It's all smooth sailing from now on.

***Reward*: You're a homeowner now. That is the reward. That and taxes and having to deal with Kenneth the megalomaniac HOA president.**

Every saferoom we'd been in always had a blank doorway locked into the wall and a space on the map for an inaccessible room. The moment the achievement faded away, that doorway opened up, and a small, closet-sized room appeared on the map. It was labeled **Conjoined Personal Space of Team The Royal Court of Princess Donut**. As I watched, the name started to blink.

"It lets me change the name," Donut said excitedly as she walked toward the doorway. "Come on, Mongo. Let's go see our new house."

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Entering The Royal Palace of Princess Donut.

You have upgrades that need to be placed.

We entered into an empty, industrial-styled room. It reminded me of the interior of an airplane hangar.

"Whoa," I said, my voice echoing. "This is way bigger than I expected."

Before proceeding further, you must set the entrance to your personal space.

A blinking, transparent doorway appeared against the far wall. It slid as I turned my head, racing along the walls. As I moved, a second doorway formed with **Princess Donut** blazing over it. The colors of the words changed from black to pink then to an opalescent purple.

"This is very customizable," Donut said. A moment later, her door changed color from black to purple, matching the color of the floating label over her door.

I mentally clicked **Place** on my door, and a second door appeared a few feet to the right of Donut's. A moment later, a third door appeared next to mine, labeled **Katia Grim**.

A wire diagram of a rectangle appeared, floating against a small section of the warehouse, just right of where we'd placed the doors. It blinked again, and suddenly there was a tiny room. **Restrooms** appeared over the door.

"You'll have an additional restroom inside your spaces, too," Mordecai said. "When you conjoin a space, everyone keeps their personal restroom, and a public one also appears. The upgraded shower will be in all of them. The team leader gets to place the location of the common area rooms." A bare, featureless kitchen area blinked into existence, followed by an area with a table and simple couch. The three familiar screens formed onto the wall above the couch. On the third screen was the message, **Welcome Home**. Over the kitchen was the note: **Food Upgrades Not Yet Purchased**.

Donut grumbled as she moved the rooms around. Large sections of wall turned transparent and flew across the hangar as I watched, open-mouthed. A moment later, she placed yet another room in the opposite corner across from the kitchen and living area. This was the biggest room yet, and it took up a quarter of the entire open area. **Crafting Studio**.

The moment it was locked into place, a blinking notification appeared in my own interface, and I clicked on it.

Enhanced Crafting Studio upgrade available. You may apply this upgrade to the Crafting Studio in the common area. Note: If you disengage your space, the upgrade will be returned to your library. See the Personal Spaces tab for more details.

I clicked on it and chose to apply it. Nothing apparently changed except the title. **Enhanced Crafting Studio**.

A new room clicked into place, this one taking up a third of the entire hangar. **Training Room**.

What had been a massive, open area just a minute before was rapidly filling up.

A new doorway appeared with a loud *clack*, right behind me and next to the door to the exit. If we were following the normal laws of physics, this new door would also lead right back into the restaurant. The note on the door simply read **Manager**.

Mordecai croaked with relief. "Thank the gods," he muttered. He caught my questioning look, and he grinned. "You can't conjoin a manager's room until your base is combined into a level-five

communal space. I wasn't expecting you guys to ever bother upgrading your base this much, at least not any time soon. Once you bought a space, I would have moved in anyway, which meant I'd have been sleeping on the floor. Now I can get to my private quarters, and when you come to new saferooms, I won't teleport away unless I'm outside."

"What are the differences between the rooms anyway?" I asked as we walked deeper into the space. The floor was made of solid concrete. Donut, Katia, and Mongo went exploring. Mongo jumped onto the counter of the kitchen, clicking his claws on the industrial sheet metal countertops. There was no oven or fridge. The whole thing was an empty, useless area that Donut probably shouldn't have bothered placing.

"Okay, so thanks to the AI, you guys skipped right ahead and moved straight into advanced personal spaces. At the basic level one, either you or Donut would have purchased a space. Whoever bought it is the owner, but there's a setting where you can share it with your party members. It's about a fourth of the size of this place, and it's just one open room, save for the crafting studio, which is much smaller than the one you have now. I think the crafting area is always a quarter of the room's size, but I'm not certain. Anyway, it has a bathroom, the couch and screens, a couple of cots, and that's it. The level-one crafting area will hold up to five basic crafting tables. Some are bigger than others. You can purchase and add any tier-one environmental upgrades you want as long as they fit. The best ones, like the training area are too big."

I watched Katia wander toward the door with her name on it. She hesitantly opened it and disappeared inside.

Mordecai continued. "At level two, the room gets bigger, which allows for more upgrades. Level two also comes with the ability to add kitchen upgrades. Level three is bigger yet, and the individual rooms are pretty huge. Big enough for a training module." He looked up. The ceiling was high above our heads. "I don't think it's as tall, but I'm not certain. But the largest benefit of a level-three space is that you can convert it to a communal hall as long as you have one other person in your party with a space. Only one of the spaces has

to be level-three. But once they're combined, the individual rooms get much smaller, but a communal space is created, and all share in the upgrades."

"Plus the manager gets to keep his own place," I said.

"Only when you hit level five, but that's right. And any other helper. I'm not the only kind you can employ. In a few days, we'll need to purchase a store interface. We'll be able to buy and sell items more easily." He lowered his voice. "The training room is more important, though. I let Katia purchase it with her coupon, but I want you to keep your coupon free until we've made sure she's staying."

"I can tell you right now that she's going to bounce the second she gets a chance," I said. "I know she likes us, but I get the sense she felt safer in Hekla's party. She didn't like the idea of me using her to tank damage. Also, what happens if she dies?"

"You lose the upgrades," Mordecai said. "And if you die, too, then it'll be just me and Donut. No more community space. I'd once again lose access to my room. Any upgrades that no longer fit will go into her library."

I nodded. That kind of sucked. "Okay, so our space is level five. What's the difference between this and a level four?"

"Other than my ability to add my personal space, I'm not certain," Mordecai said. "Most people don't go beyond three or four. Usually what happens is someone upgrades their space to three, and someone else in the party buys their own level one space, and they combine it all into a communal space. That usually keeps the overall level at three. Then they spend the rest of their money on room upgrades. But since we have three level-three rooms all shared, that made it a five. I think, but I'm not certain, we might be able to add a second floor to the base if we run out of room." He pointed up. "The ceiling is really high."

"Okay, that's enough exposition for now," I said. "I'm going to sleep. Tomorrow we can discuss crafting tables and all that. I'm glad you're here. Figuring all this shit out on our own would've been a real chore."

"Fair enough," Mordecai said. "Oh, but Carl?"

I turned to face the toad. My entire body felt as if it was being dragged into the floor. I was both physically and mentally exhausted.

"You only sleep two hours now. So I'll see you out here in time for the recap show."

I knew, philosophically, that only having to sleep for two hours was a good thing. It gave us more time to train and to get things done. But I dreaded the idea of not being able to get into a bed, close my eyes, and not have to worry about anything for six to eight hours.

That was it, wasn't it? Sleep was my sanctuary. No matter how fucked-up the world now was, I could still get away for part of the day. Now, that luxury was being eroded. Sure, our bodies would no longer be tired. But what about our brains? We were already well past burnout. What was going to happen now?

Donut insisted I sleep in her room. I hadn't even gone into my own yet. Since we had a combined space, the individual rooms were much smaller. The room was the size of a large apartment, about twice the area of my place from before the collapse. She could add a small crafting area and kitchen into the space if she wanted, but it was optional, and she chose not to. She'd found some menu that allowed some simple, free decorations, including carpet and wallpaper and simple furnishings. She placed the bathroom in the corner, which was actually just the same bathroom from the hallways. The shower was in a separate room next door. She made me take the cat tree and place it next to the "Ultra-Stabilized Bed," which looked like a regular, queen-sized bed with no sheets or pillows and a semi-transparent mattress that looked oddly like clear Jell-O. Then she made me place the framed picture of Bea on a small table next to the bed.

"Okay, get in bed, Carl. You too, Mongo. We're all tired."

"You know I have my own room now, right?"

"Don't be silly, Carl. I can't sleep without you, and you know it. Now get into bed."

I grumbled, but the moment I lay down, it felt as if I was encased in a warm hug. Donut jumped onto my shoulder, curling up near my neck. Then Mongo hopped onto my legs, and I didn't feel the weight of him.

I fell asleep in seconds.

I was, indeed, fully rested when I awakened. And more importantly, I *felt* rested. I felt as if I'd slept for 10 hours straight, which I always thought was the perfect amount of sleep for a lazy day. In fact, I was so certain that the bed hadn't worked, I checked the clock, but we'd truly only slept for just about two hours.

New achievement! Well-Rested!

You managed to sleep so well that you woke up feeling refreshed and full of energy. You are ready to take on the world and make some monster's mother cry because her only child was ruthlessly slaughtered by a bright-eyed and bushy-tailed Crawler.

***Reward*: You now receive the Good Rest bonus every time you sleep in this bed. This buff adds 10% to your base stats plus a 10% bonus to experience and skill training for 30 hours. Monster mothers now cry 10% more when you kill their babies.**

Back out in the common area, we found Mordecai and Katia placing plates of food on the kitchen counter. It was two plates of hamburgers and French fries, plus a salmon platter and a bowl of raw meat for Mongo. Mordecai had what appeared to be a plate full of dead bugs, and he appeared slightly ill as he looked upon it.

"It's all from Wendita," Katia said. "I went out there to get food, and she'd already made us all of this for free. I've never seen one of those Bopca guys in such a good mood."

Donut sniffed at the plate suspiciously as the recap show came on. She shrugged and started stuffing her face.

"The Iron Tangle!" the announcer called as the show went underway. Different shots of railroads and subway cars flashed across the screen, from old locomotives to the more modern high-speed rail trains. This went on for some time. The scenes were an odd mix of real-life footage and passages from movies and video games. It included stills from the animated movie the *Polar Express* and a bizarrely-long sequence of a beat-up John Travolta riding the subway from the movie *Saturday Night Fever* while the Bee Gees played in the background. After that, the program went into a detailed history of trains, focusing mostly on subway systems.

As always, the program went out of its way to showcase only the negatives, displaying mass overcrowding, people falling onto the tracks. It presented pictures from the Japanese subway sarin attack, along with dozens of other disasters, making the entire world look like a shithole.

I ate the hamburger while we watched. The show was going on and on about trains. Mordecai started rambling about maintaining a schedule. Wake, eat, apply buffs—which included showering, brushing Donut while I worked on my feet—and then spending an hour in the training room working on a specific skill. Mordecai had somehow found what appeared to be a dry erase board, and he was marking items to train on the list. Today he wanted me to train my Smush skill. Apparently you could only train one skill a day, even if skills overlapped. Katia was to train her Catcher skill, which appeared to be the opposite of Dodge, which Donut chose to train.

After we trained, we'd work on crafting for an hour or two, though that wouldn't start until tomorrow. And after that, we'd spend the rest of our time out on the tracks. Our first priority would be to attempt to get a better map and find a reliable path to a stairwell, all while grinding our way up the ranks.

On the screen, the show finally wrapped up the history of the earth rail systems. He started speaking, but then he froze. The word **REDACTED** appeared on the screen.

"Get used to that," Mordecai said. "He's explaining how the level works. They don't want us seeing this part. You'll see this on every level from now on."

"The Daughters are also at a station number 83," Katia said as we waited for the show to resume. "The same thing happened to them as us. They were on a train that filled with monsters, but they only had a single stop before they got to the transit station. They are at a conjunction of the Orange and Indigo line. They haven't seen any sign of the Red, Yellow, or Nightmare lines."

"That's interesting," I said. "So different lines will have the same number system, and we know that number 83 is a transfer station. The map said specific numbers would have stairwells, but they were all lower numbers. We need to find a way to go back down."

"I bet it's the ones without color names," Donut said. She'd finished her fish, but it'd come with little potato things she didn't like and was pushing them off her plate and into Mongo's waiting mouth. "We should go on the Nightmare line to see where it goes."

She was probably right, but I didn't like the idea of immediately jumping onto a train called "The Nightmare Express."

I turned to Mordecai. "What about you? When you first got here, you said you were at a different train station. Do you remember the names?"

"Yeah," Mordecai said. "I wrote it all down. It was station number 317. The two smaller trains were the Yellow and Emerald line. And the big one was called the Misery."

"Charming," I said. "We should probably start charting this out. Do you have another one of those dry erase boards?"

"I have one more in my room," he said. "I'll get it and start putting it all down. So far we only have the yellow line in common. Talk to your friend Brandon and figure out where he is. As soon as you come across any other crawlers, get all the info you can from them."

I nodded. I also had Daniel Bautista on my chat, and I would ask him as well. The screen unfroze, and the announcer said. "And now it's time to present the current top-10 list!"

He went, one-by-one, presenting the top 10 crawlers. He read the name, and it was followed by a short clip. The list was exactly the same as the one Odette had.

He started with Mrs. McGibbons. It only showed her for a quick second, and I realized I'd actually seen her a few times already in quick shots on the recap episodes. I just hadn't known it was her.

She'd turned into a "Frost Maiden" which meant she was now a blue-skinned, white-haired elf thing that floated instead of walked. I didn't see any of others in that short clip, but it showed her shooting icicles from her palms, skewering a troll-like monster in a subway car.

Next was Li Jun, who'd taken a monk class. He looked the same as before, and it showed him with Zhang and his sister, Li Na. Zhang was also human, but Li Na was an odd, demon-like race who fought with chains.

Number eight was a man named Ifechi. He'd remained human, and he was a healer. I'd seen him a few times I realized. He was now traveling with Florin, the Crocodilian shotgun guy, who was ranked number four. But I'd first seen Ifechi early on the show. He was African, running with a group of soldiers armed with AK-47s. The entire team had been killed a while back by a City Boss slime monster. The man had survived because he hadn't been in the room when it sealed.

After Ifechi, it went straight to us. It showed Donut blasting magic missiles at the Drek babies followed by me pummeling the janitor ghoul with my fist.

Then was Miriam Dom, the goat lady. Then Florin the Crocodilian.

Number three was a goat. His name was Prepotente, and he was the walking, talking goat creature—called a Caprid—that I'd seen earlier traveling with Miriam Dom. I knew they had another, monstrous goat thing traveling with them, too, though that one was considered a pet.

Then we saw buff Hekla skewering a mass of four-legged rat things with her crossbow, then Lucia Mar, who was simultaneously terrifying and badass as ever. It showed the disgusting witch form of Lucia literally ripping the head off one of the Jikininki janitor ghouls. The girl laughed maniacally as blood showered the interior of the train car.

The show ended, and a moment later, the second screen populated.

While the list of names was the same as what Odette had presented, I immediately noticed two differences.

1. Lucia Mar – Lajabless – Black Inquisitor General – Level 30 – 1,000,000

2. Hekla – Amazonian – Shieldmaiden – Level 28 – 500,000

3. Prepotente – Caprid – Forsaken Aerialist – Level 27 – 400,000

4. Florin – Crocodilian – Shotgun Messenger – Level 24 – 300,000

5. Miriam Dom – Human – Shepherd – Level 27 – 200,000

6. Carl – Primal – Compensated Anarchist – Level 27 – 100,000

7. Donut – Cat – Former Child Actor – Level 26 – 100,000

8. Ifechi – Human – Physicker – Level 18 – 100,000

9. Li Jun – Human – Street Monk – Level 25 – 100,000

10. Elle McGib – Frost Maiden – Blizzardmancer – Level 17 – 100,000

Mrs. McGibbons had risen from level 14 to 17, and Lucia Mar had hit level 30.

I opened up my chat. I hadn't connected with Brandon in a while, and I wanted to talk to him. The moment I clicked on the messages, though, I realized I'd missed a chat from him. It was in a weird folder I'd never seen before, off to the side of his name, which was why I hadn't seen the notification. It had arrived while we were incommunicado, waiting for the floor to open. Before I could click on it, the daily announcement came, and my interface froze.

Hello Crawlers. Welcome to the fourth floor!

We are so very excited to introduce you to what is being hailed a genius feat of engineering. We call it the Iron Tangle. The trick is to find the stairwells. There are a lot of them out there, but where? Let's see how many of you figure it out.

This is important. This is not a permanent change, but it is a new rule for this level only. You may not go down early this level. The stairwells will open six hours prior to collapse, and that's it. Again, you may not go down early this floor. Now have fun out there. These train things are so nifty. We never had anything like it on our world.

Patron bidding is active, and we are very happy with the results so far. You will get a notification when your bidding has concluded. We'll have more info on that later.

You will notice that the leaderboard has finally populated. Congratulations to everybody on the list. As you can see, each member of the top 10 has a bounty after their names. That means hunting season is *open*! Isn't that exciting? If you kill one, you will receive a loot box containing the reward. If you are on the leaderboard, don't worry, you get to join in on the fun, too. If you survive the floor, you will receive 10% of your own bounty upon floor collapse. That percentage goes up each floor.

Finally, we'd like to address the especially high mortality rate of the third floor. This occurred due to a high instance of group quests gone bad. While the number of crawlers are still in the acceptable range, we are all concerned about early extinction. That does not mean we will be letting up. So quit sucking. It's as simple as that.

Now get out there, ride the rails, and kill, kill, kill!

"Quit sucking?" Katia asked. "Is that supposed to be a joke?"

"Do you really think people are going to hunt us?" Donut asked. "I don't like the idea of not being able to trust people. It gives me anxiety."

I barely heard them. The moment the message had ended, the directory with Brandon's message unfroze, and I finally noticed the

name of the folder in the top corner of my interface.

Messages from deceased Crawlers.

"Oh. Oh no," I said. It hit me like a damn truck. I slid off the edge of the counter I was leaning on and to the floor. Everyone in the room stopped talking and turned to look at me.

"Carl?" Donut asked.

The message was right there. I didn't want to read it.

I took a deep breath, and I clicked on it.

~~Brandon~~: Hey bro. I'm sending this message to Imani and Elle, too. You wouldn't believe what's happening with Elle. But just in case they don't make it, I wanted to get this out to you, too. It looks like this is the end for me. The third floor is about to collapse. Me and Henry—he was one of the residents—we're holding the line against the advancing Shade Gremlins. I hate those fuckers. Imani, Elle, and the others are getting away, but it's already too late for me. The floor timer is down to ten minutes, and that stairwell is twenty minutes away.

I saw your escape last night on the recap episode, so I know you made it to number four. Everyone knows about that bomb you now got stuffed down your pants.

Look, man. I got into a fight with my brother Chris, and he left the party. He took a few of the guys with him, but I can see they're all dead. All except Chris. I know he's alive because he's still on my chat. I can see he's alive, but it says he can't accept my messages. I don't know why. I think maybe he blocked me, but I'm not sure. He was never much of a talker. Mom said there was something wrong with him, maybe he was slow. But he ain't slow. And even if he was… I said something stupid, and he got mad. He left, and now it's too late to tell him I love him. I never said it. I'm about to die, and it's all I can think about.

So if you see him, tell him I said I was sorry, and that he was right. He'll know about what. Tell him I said if there is an afterlife I promise not to give him shit ever again. He can eat all the damn traveler biscuits he wants. I promise not to

get mad about him taking risks. Not about girls. Not about him stealing my Matchbox cars. Nothing.

And tell him I love him. That's the most important part. It's always been the most important part, but I didn't realize it until it was too late.

I gotta go. Damn shade gremlins. Get them for me, brother. Get them all.

Note: This message is from a deceased crawler. When you close this message, the crawler will be removed from your message list.

Hey, at least you're still kickin'.

"Jesus Christ," I said, gasping. The sudden loss was so unexpected, so out of nowhere I thought I'd had the breath knocked out of me. *This is just like with mom. Deep breaths. Deep breaths*.

"What is it?" Donut asked again after a few minutes of me just sitting there.

I told them. Brandon was the only one of the group we'd added to our chat, which was stupid. I couldn't talk to Imani or Chris to see if they were okay. For all we knew, Mrs. McGibbons was the only one left. I thought of all the work we'd done to get them down to that third floor. What a waste. What a goddamned waste.

I hadn't known him long. But he was a good man. He was my friend. In all of this death, he would barely be a blip. And that enraged me unlike anything else that had happened so far.

I got up and turned toward the training room.

"You need to apply your buffs first," Mordecai called.

"Fuck off, Mordecai," I said.

I entered the room, and an interface popped up, listing all of my trainable skills.

I clicked **Bare Knuckles (Current Skill: 8)**. A one hour countdown timer appeared. Wooden dummies rose from the floor.

You will not break me. Fuck you all. You will not break me.

I went to work.

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It had been several hours since I'd beaten my knuckles raw on the wooden dummies. Both Donut and Katia entered the training room about twenty minutes after I did. Donut worked on her dodge skill, bouncing back and forth while the hologram of a four-armed monster holding four whips lashed at her. Katia was on the other side of the room doing something similar, but instead she was jumping in front of rocks as they were being tossed at a holographic puppy by the same four-armed, virtual opponent.

Neither of them said anything to me. When I finished, my level in Bare Knuckles had not risen. I knew it would take more than a single session to raise it once it was this high.

From there, I went into the crafting space, which at the moment was just a giant, empty room. Mordecai was already in there, looking about.

"You have three tables," Mordecai said. He didn't say or acknowledge what had happened earlier. "Go set them up, and then go out on your business. I'm going to spend the next several hours studying what has changed and what's new with the crafting system because it seems they've tweaked it some since last time. Leave everything labeled an alchemical supply on the alchemy table. I'll start working on a few things while you're out."

I nodded. I pulled out the alchemy table and shoved it against a wall. It clicked loudly into place, and several menu items appeared over it, mostly regarding upgrades. I started pulling everything from

my inventory in the alchemy category, which was a lot of stuff, from rat meat to that chest of supplies we'd bought from the drug dealer. By the time I was done, the simple table now looked as if a mad scientist had set up shop at a swap meet.

I then put the sapper's table against one wall and my engineering table against the other. I knew I would spend most of my time at the sapper table, but for now, I stood at the engineering one, which Mordecai said was a general, catch-all table for using magical tools to fashion items. I pulled my tools, like the Goo-inator 3000, which was a "shaping" tool and the Gorgon Marital Aid, which was a tool that added plasticity to rigid items and placed them on the table. I had a dozen other, slightly-too-small tools from the goblins, plus a regular flathead screwdriver and a few wrenches that I'd picked up after the Juicer boss fight.

I had a few ideas of items I needed to make. My raw materials were a little lacking. I moved to my inventory and sorted through the crap.

I had the massive breastplate of a swordsman guard, and I pulled it out, clunking it onto the table. I had managed to grab three of these things, plus a helmet and one of the giant swords. All of their values were relatively low, which had been disappointing. This metallic breastplate wasn't enchanted. I was thinking maybe I could refashion it into something for Katia, but it was way too big for her. The thing was the size of an opened umbrella. I knew I'd need an armorer's workbench to properly make wearable materials anyway. Plus this thing was heavy as shit. It looked like maybe it was made from actual iron, and it varied in thickness from one to about two and a half inches. While I could easily lift it with my over-40 strength, I knew before I'd never have been able to even make it budge.

I held the Goo-inator in one hand and pointed it at the curved hunk of iron.

The whole breastplate started blinking. A menu of multiple shapes popped up. I could flatten the whole thing out. Because of the plate's thickness, I could shape it like a sheet, lower the width,

and I'd end up with a large chunk of metal, almost like it was made of dough.

The last item on the list of the tool's shapes was **Freeform**.

I clicked on freeform, and then using the wand, I put a slight bend into the material. It was similar to manipulating a shape using a computer graphic program, something I'd never been very good at. The metal groaned loudly as it was shaped, but it didn't break.

New achievement! Martha Stewart!

You used a workbench to craft for the first time. The next thing you know you'll be fashioning bottlecap earrings, drinking oat milk, and selling your ugly crap on Etsy while you wax poetic on Instagram about your "journey."

***Reward*: You've received a Bronze Crafter's Box!**

I immediately opened the box, and it contained a nice pair of unenchanted pliers, a standard tape measure, and a bucket of pink glitter. Not a vial of glitter. Not a cup of glitter. A goddamned bucket full of the stuff. Even before I could add it to my inventory, some of the tiny pink squares blew out of the container and spread to the floor. I knew from experience that it was now all over. The glitter would never go away. I sighed and added the tools to the pile.

I turned to Mordecai, who was hunched over his alchemy table way on the other side of the room.

"I need to weld. Do you think I can get something like that?"

He looked up. "Of course. In the meantime, you can probably get creative with that shaping tool. It's not very precise and has a tendency to lower the strength of the items you shape, so if you get too creative, you'll end up with crumbly junk. But you can take a separate item and twirl them together like a twist tie. Or make some sort of joint. Just be careful. Those tools are no joke. Being in a saferoom may keep you from dying if you fuck something up at a workbench, but if you fuck up good enough, you'll wish you were dead."

"Oh, by the way," I called out. "While I was training, I talked to Bautista. He's grouped up with some other crawlers. He's on the Azure and Brown line. They're at station number 199. They don't have a non-colored line at their station, but they're going to go

down the Azure line today. He also got a fancy base thanks to that upgrade."

"I'll add it to the list," Mordecai said.

"Okay," I said. I leaned over the bench and started shaping the plate.

After a shower and applying my pedicure kit, we went back out into the world.

We first stopped at the general store. Limp Richard the mole man leaned on the counter, reading a book as we browsed through the items on the shelves. He had a wide array of products, but most of it wasn't noteworthy or useful. We only ended up purchasing one thing, a large, padded mallet. He'd listed it for 250 gold, and Donut talked him down to 150.

He did have one other item that was interesting. In a dusty corner of his shop he had a thing called a **Battery Fabricator**. It was listed at 75,000 gold. I remembered that the descriptions at shops weren't always fully accurate as I examined its properties.

Battery Fabricator.

I don't really know how this thing works. It was taken from a dwarven automaton factory. You pour a handful of mana potions in, stick one of these metal blocks in, and a charged battery comes out on the other side. Comes with a box of 50 of the battery things. Price not negotiable.

I picked up one of the battery rectangles, which he had piled behind the machine. The description for the batteries was the same as the unit. The system wouldn't give me a real description unless I purchased the item. Each battery was about the size and weight of a brick. "Do you know how much of a charge these things hold?"

Limp Richard shrugged. "You'd have to ask a dwarf. The automatons they use can run a long time before needing a new battery, I know that. They're better than the soul gems the elves

use. Did you know soul gems run off actual souls? It's quite morbid. Plus soul gems are very unstable."

"Yeah, I may have heard that somewhere," I said drily.

The machine was about the size of a microwave. I knew a bit about the chemical processes required to make real batteries, and this didn't make much sense. But nothing in this place made sense, especially once you added magic into the mix. Still, the moment I saw the unit, I knew I wanted it. But the price seemed outrageous, and even if we had that much money, I couldn't justify spending that much on something just because I thought it might be cool.

We ended up selling a bunch of random junk for a couple thousand gold. As Mordecai warned us more than once, we didn't want to sell too much stuff to a general store. They never offered the best prices. By the time Donut was done negotiating all the patience out of the talking mole, the creature was in a pretty foul mood.

"What's that book you got there?" I asked, leaning in after Donut and Limp Richard finished their negotiations. It looked like a tattered, English-language sci-fi book. There was a cat on the cover. I recognized the author, but I hadn't read the book. "Hey, Donut, check it out. It's a book about cats."

Limp Richard nodded, his expression brightening just a hair. "It's an Andre Norton book. A lot of his books are about cats."

"Andre Norton was a woman," I said. "May I?" I picked the book up. I flipped it over. My dad had owned several of these. I'd mostly read the westerns, but I'd read a few of the old sci-fi books as well. My dad hated cats, though, so he never had any books with cats on the cover.

"I've read this one a few dozen times," Limp Richard said. "There are a lot of earth books floating around the dungeon, but there's never enough." He sighed. "And now it's too late to get more, and I don't have anybody nearby to trade with. Shopkeepers like myself don't have access to the entertainment feeds like the guides and guildmasters. And most of those guys just access the tunnel or watch earth television and movies. All I can get is physical media,

which means books and comics. All I have is 15 books. Sixteen if you count the one with the last few chapters torn out."

"I'll tell you what," I said. I pulled five Louis L'Amour books from my inventory. I'd read each of them already, from *Sackett's Land* to *Lando*. I'd actually read almost all of them already, but I didn't want to give them all up. "I'll trade you these five for five of your books. Straight-up trade."

He picked up the first book. "A western? I've never read one of your westerns. Is it any good?" He frowned. "They're short."

"They're good," I said. "These were pretty popular books. But you're right. They tend to be short."

"Okay," he said. He went to the back and returned with a handful of books, spreading them out. "Pick some, and it'll be a deal."

All of the books were science fiction or 80's horror. I noted the one that was missing the last few chapters was a book I'd read long ago. *Swan Song* by Robert R. McCammon. I left that one on the table and picked up five sci-fi books. Three Andre Norton books including the one he'd been reading, *Breed to Come*. I also picked up *The Lathe of Heaven* by Ursula K. Le Guin and *The Forever War* by Joe Haldeman.

"I don't know if we'll be back this way," I said to the mole as I added the books to my inventory, "but if we are, and if you like the books, I'll trade you the rest of the ones I've already read."

"Okay," Limp Richard said as we left. "There are a lot of my kind on this floor. Don't give them away to any of those other guys. They're all book hogs!"

"You should have asked for more," Donut said as we walked out. "You're a terrible negotiator, Carl."

"Oh don't worry about that," I said. I looked over my shoulder, and the mole had already picked up the first book. "If I learned anything from my time in the coast guard, it's the value of entertainment to a bored man who has run out of books to read. In a couple of days, he'll be jonesin' pretty hard. Once we figure out

how to backtrack on the rails, we'll need to swing by this place again."

We decided against just jumping onto the *Nightmare Express* until we had more information, but I wanted to see the train and examine the sign. It turned out the train only came once every hour and a half, and we'd missed it while we were in Limp Richard's shop.

We didn't need to see the train to know it was obviously a different type. The tracks were wider, and while the train was still underground, there was no electrified third rail. While that other platform for the red line was especially long, long enough to accommodate all the cars, this one was even longer. It looked twice as long.

This train traveled in a figure-eight pattern, which meant once one got on it, they'd eventually end up back at this station. That was good to know. The train only had five stops total, though it appeared there was a good distance between each stop. Four of the five stops were transit stations. The one stop that was not a transit station was station #436, and it appeared at the very top of the figure-eight.

Unlike the map outside of the red station, this one gave slightly more information. It gave the colors for each of the transit stations it intersected. This station was yellow and red. The next one on the track was station 283, but it was the mauve and purple line. The stop after that was stop 436, then stop 283 *again*, but this time was the green line and the yellow line. Then it was station 83 again, but a different station 83. It was the tangerine and plum line.

"For fuck's sake," I said after I relayed all the info to Mordecai. "They weren't kidding when they named this thing 'the Iron Tangle.' My head hurts already. I hate math."

"I'm not a fan of math myself," Katia said. She was examining the map, but I knew for her, all it showed was the figure eight and a single dot indicating our current station.

From there, we went to the landing of the yellow line. The map here was identical to the map of the red line. The transit station numbers were the same, though the line itself was shaped differently, like a giant, upside-down fishhook. As I was looking at the map, the train pulled up.

There were monsters on board. Not nearly as many as there'd been as the red line, but there were enough to give me pause.

The train slid to a stop, and the door opened, revealing a squat, gray-skinned creature with no neck and a shark-like mouth and a pair of black, beady eyes. Wisps of black, oily hair dusted the top of the thing. The monster stood about four-and-a-half feet tall and wobbled on a pair of toothpick legs that seemed woefully unprepared for the job of holding up the creature's corpulent, pig-like body. The monster held a wooden club filled with nails. It howled gibberish at us.

Cave Mudge Bonker. Level 19.

In the hierarchy of Cave Mudge society, the Bonker is about as high on the list as a commoner can get. These odd, war-like creatures are said to have once been a star-faring nation, but something happened to cause them to regress back to the stone age. Probably too much reality TV. Don't let those skinny legs fool you. When these guys get to bonkin', they can be pretty darn quick.

There were four of them in this car. All up and down the long platform, I could see a few more scattered about the cars, their small eyes glaring at us from the windows. I caught sight of another monster, too. These were human-sized, red-maned snake creatures, like nagas with the heads of lions. They were too far away to get a description.

Donut hit the Cave Mudge standing in the open door with a pair of magic missiles, and it fell over dead just as the doors started to slide closed.

"Hey," I said as the train rolled away. "I can't believe that actually worked. We can get them, but they can't get us."

"Let's wait for the next train and shoot some more!" Donut said.

"Guys," Katia said as we waited for the next train. "I just told Hekla about this, and she said she and the others have been doing this all morning, racking up a lot of experience. She thinks it's a bug. You can also pull them from the doorways onto the platform, and that kills them."

"Hmm," I said, thinking. "I think she's wrong. I don't think it is a bug. It's more of a time trap, designed to get you to sit tight and snipe all day. If these were stronger monsters, I'd say we should definitely spend the day doing this. But there's only so many we can get in the few moments while the door is open. Experience wise, we're better off jumping onto the train and killing them."

Katia shrugged. "Hekla also says that the monsters all get off every five floors. If you follow them out, the levels are like a cave system, and there are tunnels. She hasn't yet explored, but she thinks the tunnels might lead back to the previous four platforms. She thinks the monsters are constantly migrating in a circle."

That was kind of weird. "Tell her we'll check it out. Also, tell her about the map Mordecai is building. Have her collect all the route info she can from all of her contacts and report it back to you so you can pass it on. I hope to have a better idea of this place by this time tomorrow."

We spent the next hour camping out on the platform and committing mass murder on the incoming mobs. The trains came every eight to ten minutes. It was always the same two types of monsters. The Bonkers, as we started calling them, and the Shock Chompers, which were described as "lesser nagas with mommy issues." These things were all level 20. The snake-like creatures had an electrical attack, but it took them a bit to get revved up, and if you smacked them, it canceled out their attack. Not that it mattered since they couldn't physically or magically reach us while we stood on the platform. All four of us would stand on a different section of the landing as the train pulled up. I'd punch. Mongo would chomp. Katia

would practice with her axe, and Donut alternated between *Magic Missile* and practicing with her claws, which was something she needed much more experience with. The monsters were unable to fight back. But like I suspected, the experience was slow coming. Plus we were robbed of the ability to loot the corpses unless we pulled them onto the platform. But if we did that, we didn't get any experience. Still, we tried it a few times with each type of monster. The chompers dropped sharp fangs and about 10 gold each. The bonkers dropped their clubs and a couple of coins. One dropped his own liver, which was listed as an alchemical supply. I took it and added it to the inventory. None of this stuff appeared to be valuable.

Eventually we decided to finally get off our asses and hop onto the train. I wanted to check out the engine car, so we moved all the way to the end of the platform. I knew normally, with subway cars at least, if there was a driver at all, they were usually set up in a little cubicle at the front of the lead car. But in these trains, the entire first car was a solid, closed-off hunk of metal. It didn't even stop at the platform. It pulled slightly ahead, leaving car number two at the far end of the station. So we set up by the wall, just outside of where train car number two would stop.

Each train car held four sets of exterior doors on each side. We set up outside the two doors closest to the engine car. The next train squealed to a halt. This furthermost car only held two of the Shock Chompers, and the moment the door opened, both Donut and I took them out. Donut used a Magic Missile, and I reached into the car and punched the maned snake right in the face with two quick jabs, which killed it. We stepped into the car just as the doors slid closed, and we were on our way.

I looked about the yellow line train car. This car was almost the same as the red line car, but the first thing I noticed was that the graffiti was in English, not Russian. The seats faced inward, the same as the Russian train, but the cushions were blue, not brown. Also, the pattern of poles was different and the aisles weren't as wide. The doors at the fore and aft of the train were the same, and the car itself seemed about the same length.

Donut and Katia spent a moment examining the forward doorway leading toward car number one.

"It says we need a Yellow Line Engineer's Key to open the next door," Katia said a moment later. "How do you think we can get one of those?"

"We need to get the driver to come out somehow, I guess," I said. "Then we gotta take it from him. Either that or maybe we can figure out how to break into the car from the outside."

Just as I moved to loot the corpse of the shock chomper, the far doorway to train number three slid open on its own.

"Ahh, shit," I said, backing up. A group of five bonkers rushed at us, clubs upraised. They howled.

I was hoping these guys didn't know how to work the doors.

"Formation one, guys."

This was something we talked about and practiced as we were getting ready earlier. This was more of a stance than an actual move. We backed up so we were parallel with the exterior doors. Donut leaped to my shoulder as Mongo jumped up into the space between the chairs, his back to the door to the outside. He set up on the starboard—the right—side of the car, which was actually to my left since we were facing the back of the train. The doorway was sandwiched by a grid of metal poles, which would protect Mongo. Katia moved to the opposite side, also jumping into the small vestibule in front of the exit. I remained in the middle, but I took a step back, creating a V-shaped kill zone.

This created a unified front while forcing the mobs into a funnel. They'd only be able to get to us one or two at a time, while making themselves vulnerable from all of us. The poles and handholds were always going to be a problem, but as long as we stood our ground in this position, the interior obstacles would be more of a hindrance to the attackers than us.

I really wished we'd spent more time practicing this, as we were without a backup. My *Protective Shell* spell wouldn't reset for another 19 hours. I shook my head, realizing how much time we'd saved by only sleeping for two hours. Still, with only nine more days to find a path to the exit, we couldn't afford to waste time.

As I watched, Katia's shape changed. She grew shorter, more squat while her arms grew in length, with bulges at her forearms, making her look like a deranged Popeye. Her face gritted with pain as she altered. I knew the faster she changed, the more it hurt. She'd been practicing this in the training room. I wasn't certain this was the best shape, but it was impressive and kind of gross at the same time.

"That's right, Mongo. Good boy. Don't. Don't! Yes, that's right. Stay!" Donut called, trying to keep the pet from rushing forward. The dinosaur was bouncing up and down in anticipation, squealing in anger at the bonkers.

The bonkers' enthusiasm for attacking us waned in the five seconds between them rushing into the room and realizing they faced a party that included a dinosaur. The forward creature stumbled as he tripped over the corpse of the first chomper. He righted himself, only to collapse after getting hit in the head by a well-placed *magic missile*.

The next two came at us, side-by-side, swinging their clubs. One swung at Mongo, but the wooden, spiked club caught on the pole just as Mongo slashed forward with his feet. The creature was disemboweled before he even felt the reverberation of his club against the metal pole.

At the same time, the other attacker swung at me as Donut lobbed a pair of missiles at the two bonkers in the back row.

Katia spun and caught the swing with her right arm. She didn't put her arm in front of the club, but behind it, catching it as it swung downward. She added to the momentum, forcing the club to swing down and to my left, causing the bonker to stumble. It grunted in surprise. Katia retracted her arm as I jumped forward and punched, smashing the wide monster in the face. It crumpled to the ground, and I stomped on its head. Its jaw crackled like glass under the crush of my foot.

A life bar formed over Katia, but it didn't appear as if she'd really lost any health.

The last two monsters were on the ground, piled on top of one another. Both had been hit with a magic missile, though a low-

powered one. Neither were dead. I activated my new Talon Strike ability and stepped forward. With two quick foot jabs, I smashed open both of their heads.

"That's really disgusting, Carl," Donut said. "Every time your foot gets stronger, the amount of blood that comes out is more and more."

"Are you okay?" I asked Katia as I wiped my foot on the side of the pole. "That was pretty slick."

"It didn't really hurt so much as sting," she said, rubbing her arm. "I caught one of the spikes, but it mostly scraped against the metal part of my arm. Mostly."

"Okay, good," I said. "Just be careful. I almost accidentally punched you and not the monster."

"Yeah, it's hard in these close quarters."

Four more bonkers entered the car and came charging at us.

"Well the good news is we can try this again," I said, backing up. "Reset the formation."

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We were done with the rest of the monsters only a few minutes later. We'd only had to face the creatures in cars three and four. Whatever was in car number five, it didn't easily allow the passage of the monsters from the sixth car. On the map, that fifth train was similarly shaped to the janitor's quarters, but there was some sort of odd, square structure within. We needed to check it out, but we didn't have time. We only had a couple of minutes until we reached the next stop.

"Okay, let's set up," I said.

I had fabricated multiple, quick and dirty car fortifications using the engineering workbench. I had two types of defenses. Exterior door blocks and gangway blocks. I'd made four door blocks and two of the gangway ones, which would allow us to hopefully isolate an entire train car for ourselves as long as we cleared it first. And as long as the exterior doors only opened on one side. If we came across any stations where the doors on both sides of the train opened simultaneously, we were going to be in trouble.

"Phantom Kangaroo coming up," came the announcement. The voice was similar to the last train, but not identical. "That'll be station number 84. After that is stop number 85, which is an exit-only cavern stop. Thanks for riding the tangle."

I moved into the gangway and closed the door to train number three. I pulled the massive sheet of metal out of my inventory. I'd made it just about the right size. There wasn't anything fancy about

it. It was just a giant, rectangular hunk of metal with rounded edges that I wedged into the space. It'd originally been a swordsman breast plate that I'd thinned out to about a fifth of an inch thickness, which allowed me to make it pretty big. The thing was solid and heavy as shit. It'd probably take four or five normal humans to lift it. If I didn't have my foot buff active, it'd shatter my foot if I dropped it in the wrong place. I called it the "Gangway Chock." The obstruction was much larger than either of the doors, and it was wide enough that no monsters would be able to wriggle or slide around it, not unless they were tiny. And even then, they'd only be able to come one at a time. Since I could easily pull the wedge in and out of my inventory, it was no real impediment for me.

Next came the exterior door blocks. These were tall wedges fashioned from altered weight benches. I used crossbars, similar to the supports we used for the portable redoubt, to slide through holes in the top, middle, and bottom of each wedge. We slid the wedges against the doors and shoved the crossbars through the holes, snaking them through the handholds by the exit doors, which kept the wedge loosely in place. I'd been afraid that I'd accidentally make the wedges too wide, and I ended up making them too slim. I would need to engineer something that was either adjustable or modular. Or better yet, what I really needed was to get my hands on several industrial jacks or post shores. Something we could quickly construct and break down. In the meantime, this would have to do.

I nervously inspected my wedge system. I put a hand against it, and it rattled back and forth. On the red line car, the handhold system was set up differently, so my design wasn't perfect, and a monster or two could probably force their way in after a few seconds. But hopefully this would keep us from getting overwhelmed. The moment we had a free moment, I'd pull out my new tape measure and get accurate dimensions of the doorways, the gangways, and everything else I could think of.

"These things don't look very stable, Carl," Donut said as the car slowed to a stop.

"Nope," I said.

A new type of monster lounged about the platform. These were large, green-skinned fish-looking dudes. There was only a handful of them, and none of them appeared too interested in fighting anybody. These were like full-sized kua-tin, but more monstrous looking than the gleeners. Each of them had massive, milk-white eyes. They started to lazily line up at the landing. A pair of the creatures stood on the platform outside of car number two. They didn't seem to notice us examining them through the windows. I examined its properties.

Pollyslog. Level 22.

Of all the monsters from prehistoric kua-tin mythology, the Pollyslogs are some of the most fearsome. They are strong, intelligent, and gigantic. At least compared to the kua-tin. So what I'm really saying is they're moderately durable, dumb as a sack of pickled turnips, and, well, they are pretty big. They also secrete acid from their fingers, so you might want to watch out for that.

It sounded like the AI was still pissed at Borant. I wondered how long that would last.

"Get ready to repel boarders," I said.

Donut grunted. "You know this isn't a boat, right? All this starboard and aft and pirate talk is starting to really annoy Mongo, especially since we don't know what the hell you're talking about half the time."

Katia laughed. The door slid open. Through the window, I watched as one of the pollyslogs walked right into the wedge. It reached up and touched it with a webbed hand.

Up until this moment, the creatures had been acting strangely lethargic. That changed the instant the monster realized it couldn't get onboard. It started screaming and banging its hands against the barricade. A doorway down, the second Pollyslog did the same. This second one started smashing himself against it like he was trying to break down a door. The one closer to me managed to slide his long, green arms around the obstruction, hugging it. Both monsters squealed in outrage as the doors started to close a moment later.

I rushed forward and slammed against the wedge, pushing it back.

The doors did not work like normal subway doors. The fish monster's arms severed off with a loud *crunch*. The two arms slopped to the ground, leaving a sizzling trail where they grasped onto the wedge.

"Don't," Donut yelled at Mongo, who was about to gobble them up.

The second pollyslog had managed to also get killed by the door, but this one had gotten more of his body into the car. The door cut him in half, leaving a mess of gore between the wedge and the doorway. The back half of his fish body remained there attached to the outside of the door. As the train started moving, it caught on the wall, likely leaving a stream of gore down the entire side of the train.

I gingerly took the two arms into my inventory as I quickly measured the exterior doorway.

We had ten minutes to stop number 85. I didn't hear any commotion coming from car number three. It didn't appear any of the pollyslogs had gone into that car.

"Let's go check out car number five," I said. "Maybe there will be clues in there telling us what to do."

I quickly removed all the fortifications. We moved to the car number three, which was empty as I suspected. So was car number four.

The fifth car featured a thicker, but unlocked door, just like with the 15th car. There was a sign on the door reading **Do Not Enter. Tangle Employees Only**. I hesitantly slid it open, peering inside. I saw the white dot indicating an NPC just as the door slid open. I relaxed and stepped inside.

Entering Employee Break Room.

This was a wide open room with a set of benches and tables against one wall and a large bar against the other. About halfway down the car was what appeared to be a separate room that took about a third of the total space. The sign over this room said **Conductor's Quarters.**

A dwarf sat at the bar, leaning into a drink. I had the immediate impression he'd been parked there for some time. He wore a wrinkled uniform, similar to the uniforms the janitor ghouls wore.

Vernon. Yellow Line Train Conductor. Dwarf. Level 32.

"Employees only," Vernon said, not bothering to look up from his drink. "Passengers aren't allowed in here. If you want to get to the other cars you gotta get out and go around at the next stop."

"That doesn't seem very efficient," Donut said.

"Conductor?" I said. I thumbed over my shoulder. "Shouldn't you be in that other train car?"

"That's the engineer," Vernon said, looking up. "I don't go in there, and he don't come in here. Look, folks, I can't let you through. The monsters follow the rules and don't come in here. If they can do it, so can you."

"So what do you do, then?" Donut asked, ignoring his demands for us to leave.

The dwarf took a long pull of his drink. "I take care of the train, and I am in charge of all the employees. That's what I'm supposed to do. But the engineer doesn't listen to me, the janitors try to eat me, and the porters are in their own little world. So what I do, miss talking cat, is I sit here and drink until we reach the end of the line. Then I do it again."

I took a step deeper into the room. "So this train *does* circle around," I said.

"Porters?" Donut asked. "On a subway car?"

Vernon blinked and looked at Donut again. I recognized that look. *And here it comes*.

"Your majesty," the train conductor said, stumbling to his feet. His drink went flying. He saluted her. "My apologies. I didn't realize we had royalty onboard."

"It's quite all right," Donut said, immediately falling into her royal persona. "I know your job must be difficult dealing with all this filthy riffraff."

"Oh it is, your majesty. It really is difficult. So, uh, is there something I can do for you?"

We were interrupted by two red dots entering the car from train six. It was a pair of Jikininki janitors, both of them holding a broom and dustbin. One made a moaning noise through his chattering teeth as they shuffled forward. Their mouths never stopped moving, like pistons. I could hear them clicking together, even over the rumble of the train. *Click, click, click, click*. I shuddered.

"Oh crap," Katia said, stepping in front of me. I held her back.

I remembered the description, and it said they'd leave you alone if you left them alone.

"Get out of the way," I said. "Let them through." We pressed up against the wall as the monsters passed. Mongo shrieked in anger, but Donut hissed at the dinosaur to be good. The two ghouls didn't even look at us as they proceeded up the train.

"There must be a mess in one of the forward cars," Vernon said. "I should see to that."

"Actually, Vernon," Donut said. "We have a few questions about the train. I hope you can answer them for us."

"Of course, your majesty," he said. "How may I help?"

I spoke instead of Donut. "You didn't answer my question. So this train circles around? Where does it go after the last stop? Does it turn into a different line?"

"Everyone has to get off at the last stop. Stop 435," he said. "It's the end of the line."

"I know that," I said. "But what happens after that?"

He suddenly looked extremely uncomfortable. "I can't say."

"You can't say? Or you won't?"

"Look, you have to get off at 435. And you really should get off at 433. There's a big transit hub there. There's nothing after that. Stop 434 is out of service, and 435 is the end of the line."

"Vernon," Donut said. "Why are you avoiding Carl's question?"

He looked as if he might bolt. But then he stood and walked around the bar and produced what looked like a jug of moonshine. I quickly examined the bottle, and it was regular moonshine, not the more expensive Rev-up Moonshine. Vernon took a swig directly from the bottle and sighed. "I'm sorry your majesty. I only know the rumors. The truth is, I don't actually remember. We pull into station

435, and then everything gets fuzzy. And suddenly I'm standing on the platform of station 10, which is really just the yard. And I climb onto the train, and it all starts over again. I don't even know how much time has passed."

"Huh," I said. "That's weird."

"It is," he said. "Sometimes I talk to the others at the yard, but nobody knows. It's the same with everyone. It's always been this way."

I remembered that map of the *Nightmare Express* line. It had a stop number 436, one higher than the end of the line. "You said you've heard rumors. What are they?"

"There's a few," he said. "Some of the guys, they say we're in a time loop. I think they might be right, but only partially."

"What do you mean?"

He showed us his forearm, which had a long scar running down it. "I got this a while back. A Brain Amoeba from stop 354. Chupacabre Station. I normally don't go out there if they're in the cabin, but I missed one, and it got me good. I was bleeding something fierce. If we were in a time loop, then I'd heal right back up when we jumped back to the yard. But I didn't heal. If I'm hungry at the end of the line, I'm still hungry when we start over. Plus the passengers aren't always the same. I can tell time is moving right. Sort of." He tapped the bottle of moonshine. "But here's the weird thing. The train *is* in a loop. I could pour this bottle of shine on the floor, and it'll return to its spot on the shelf back there the next time around."

"So you're blacking out and getting transported to the station, and the train is resetting each time? What about the rest of the crew? The zombie guys and the engineer and whoever else?"

"It's just me and the porters standing on the station when I come to. The ghouls are different each time. They get on at station 12."

Station 12 was one of the stations that held staircases. "And the engineer?"

He shrugged. "It's the same guy. He might be getting off the same time as me, but I'm not sure. He's always already on the train

by the time I come to. But sometimes it's a different guy, so I know he ain't looping either."

"That really is bizarre," Katia said. "Is the engineer a dwarf like you?"

"He ain't no dwarf," Vernon said. "I've never actually seen any of 'em, but based on his voice I think he's human. Every new run I turn off the speakers in this cabin so I don't gotta hear his voice. Humans got voices like a spike in my brain."

"Don't I know it," Donut said.

"There's more, too. About the train I mean." Vernon reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a thick bundle of papers. He dropped the papers on the bar. I stepped closer. The top sheet was a crude drawing of a female dwarf.

"It's my wife," he said. "I had this made before I took this job. I put the drawing on my bedside in my cabin. One day, I stuck it in my pocket." He gestured at the pile. "Eventually, this happened."

The next paper was the same drawing. They were all the same drawing. Dozens of them.

"I can only hold so many. But each time, I stick the drawing in my jacket, and when we start over, I still have the drawing, but the original is still in my cabin. It only works with stuff that was on the train on my first day. Including this." He pulled a sack from his other pocket and poured several hundred gold coins onto the counter. "I had ten gold when I started. I had the coins on my nightstand."

"Why don't you leave?" I asked. "Go home the next time you end up at station 10?"

He shrugged. "I ain't trapped. Some of the guys at the yard do leave and go home. I'm sticking it out until I can't hold anymore gold because I know the moment one of those other bastards finds out about my ten gold coins, they'll try to weasel their way onto this train. No way I'm letting some greasy dwarf steal my magic gold supply while giving him such fine stroke material." He gestured at the picture of his wife. "Each trip I get paid the equivalent of ten trips because of the money loop. I'll eventually go home to my wife." He started gathering his gold coins back up. "One day."

“Do you have a more extensive map?” I asked. “Like a map of the whole train system?”

He chuckled. “A map of the entire Tangle? I don’t think there is such a thing.”

I felt the train slow and heard a muffled announcement. We were stopping at station #85.

Vernon looked up. “The monsters are getting off. The next span isn’t so bad. We got Snakeheads at 86 and 87. They look the same, but they fight each other. Station 88 is Mothman Station, and a few of the Skinned Mollies get on. They’re pretty scary to look at, but they’re slow. Next one, 89, is a transit station. Yellow line and Indigo line.”

“Indigo?” Katia said, perking up. “That’s where the daughters are.” But before I could come up with an excuse to stay away her face soured. “Nevermind, they’re on the Winter Sky line now.”

“I don’t know that one,” Vernon said. “There’s a lot of colors.”

“How many?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Some say thousands. I don’t know about that. There’s only so many colors.”

“Do the monsters always get off every five stops?” I asked.

“Yes. I don’t know why. They’re usually pretty excited about it, too.”

This guy was an invaluable source of information. I knew we’d never get this much out of him if we didn’t have Donut and her outrageous charm.

“Do the monsters ever miss their stop or stay on?”

He nodded. “I’ve seen it happen a few times. If one of the beasties misses his exit, he’ll usually get off the next stop if he can. They’re always in a big panic when that happens. Once a Goateo from station 212 tried to loop around. He stayed on all the way to the end of the line. It was the only time I’ve ever seen something remain on the train.”

“So this mob managed to stay on the train?” I asked. “He was still there when you got back on?”

“Sort of,” Vernon said. “His skeleton was still on the train. His skin and blood and hair wasn’t. Whatever happened after station 435

ended up killing him. It killed him a lot."

"How do you communicate with the engineer?" I asked.

He shook his head. "I don't. I got a horn in my quarters, but it don't work. He never responds."

"Do you ever just go in there to talk to him?"

"Nope. It's locked tighter than an elf's bunghole. You need an engineer's key to get in."

"Does he ever come out?"

"I've never seen it. I've never even seen the interior of the engine train."

"How can we get him to come out?" Katia asked.

"I've only heard of an engineer coming out of his train once," Vernon said. "And that was under some pretty extreme circumstances."

"What was that?" I asked.

"Derailment."

We ended up talking to Vernon for another hour while the train rocketed down the track. We asked about the 10th car, which was the porter car, but all he said was, "Those guys are crazy." We also asked about the non-colored trains like the Nightmare, which he didn't know much about. Though he did say something interesting. While each colored line had hundreds of trains on a track at any given moment, he believed there was only one of the larger trains per line. He didn't know much about the tracks and the system other than that. Trains did not cross tracks with other trains. The tracks worked like highways with the tunnels going above and below one another. I asked if there was a safe way to traverse the tracks, like a maintenance tunnel or walkway, and he just laughed.

After every five stops, the train would be completely empty of monsters until the next stop. Donut, Mongo, and I decided to go check out the porter room after we hit station number 115. There'd been a lot of transit stations recently, but there weren't many for the

next long stretch, which gave us time to go exploring. According to Vernon, the monsters would break into both cars 15 and 10 if they knew we were there, but he insisted they'd never attack his car number five. But when he said it, I could tell he wasn't certain.

The time between stations varied greatly. Sometimes the stations would come one after another, coming every minute or two. And then there'd be a stretch of twenty minutes. It turned out the entire trip from stations 11 to 435 took three whole days, which was alarming. My initial instinct was that we needed to stay as close to the stairwells as possible, but I was starting to suspect we'd need to get ourselves to the end of the line to figure this out. We only had nine days.

The good thing was if there truly was only one Nightmare Express line train, that meant it managed to make its large figure eight pattern in only an hour and a half. That meant we'd be able to end up back where we started fairly quickly if we decided it was necessary.

We left Katia with the conductor. He was relaying to her everything he knew about each station. He knew the monsters at each platform. He knew which ones were transit stations, but more importantly, he knew what specific colors and other lines connected at each transfer station. Katia was in turn giving this info to Mordecai, who grumbled and complained about being our secretary. But he did it.

We had 10 minutes to go check out the porter car. Stop 116 contained a monster Vernon called Cornets. They used an aural attack.

"What we really need to do is find a neighborhood boss and kill it," Donut said as we peered into the empty car number six. We jogged down toward the next train. "They're supposed to have maps. I bet the bigger the boss, the bigger the map."

She was right. As soon as we were done exploring the train, we'd get off at one of the non-transit hubs and try to find a boss. And if not there, we'd go to one of these mysterious five stations and explore.

"Hey," I said as we moved down the train. "Has Katia said anything to you about Hekla?"

"What do you mean?" Donut asked. "I did ask Katia to tell Hekla some stuff for me. Hekla does this awesome ninja kick thing before she pops you in the face with her crossbow." From my shoulder, Donut feigned a karate kick and made a little "Wah-chaw!" noise. "I wanted to know if she had a name for the move because it was so awesome. Katia asked her, and Hekla said it was now named the 'Donut Kick.' Isn't that great?"

"Just be careful, okay?" I said. "It's good to share information about the trains, but don't be giving other crawlers too much info about ourselves. Especially where we are."

"Why not?"

I hesitated. I didn't want to tell her the true reason for my concern. "We have bounties on our heads now, Donut. We need to be careful. Even with Hekla."

Donut looked as if she might object, but she didn't say anything else.

The note over the tenth car read **Porters Only. Knock for Service**. I tried the sliding door, but it was locked. It wasn't magically locked like the engine car. It felt flimsy, and I knew I could force it if I had to.

"Should I break in or knock?" I asked.

"Why be rude? Knock," Donut said.

I knocked, and the top half of the door slid open a half second later, startling me so much I almost fell backward. The enormous face of an NPC gleamed back at me.

You've discovered the Yellow Line Reward Room!

You may only collect one prize per crawler, per train line.

Donut gasped in pleasure. The last reward room we'd found resulted in us getting Mongo.

The large, moon-faced creature smiled back at the cat on my shoulder. He reminded me of Lurch from the *Addam's Family*, but with a wider, pale face and hair that looked like it was made of dying moss. He wore the now-familiar uniform suit with a hat that read "Porter."

Pierre. Grapple. Yellow Line Porter. Level 25.

This is a non-combatant NPC.

A Grapple is your everyday quarter giant. Centuries ago when the High Elves discovered how subservient hill giants were, they immediately moved to capture and enslave their entire race. The problem with hill giants is that they're pretty darn big, and they lack the fine motor skills to properly set out a dinner service. So a breeding system was implemented, crossing the hill giants with the almost-as-compliant Vegetal Ogrids. Their offspring were then culled of all but the most servile. These half giant mongrels were then further bred down with large humans, creating a slave race known as the Grapple. Grapple servants are common across the universe, but they do require close supervision. If you leave them alone for too long, they tend to get … squirrelly.

"How may I help you?" Pierre the Porter asked. He spoke slowly with a gravelly voice.

"Where's our prize?" Donut demanded before I could think of something to say.

This was not what I was expecting. Over Pierre's shoulder, I could see a room full of shelves. On each shelf was racks and racks of suitcases. At the far end of the car stood a second Grapple porter, who leaned up against the door to train number 11.

We only had about five more minutes before we'd hit the next stop.

"What is your suitcase number?"

You must choose a number between 1 and 200. You may only make one choice.

"I'm suitcase number eight!" Donut said, excitement rising in her voice. "And my friend Katia says she's number 12."

"Your friend must come and get her own suitcase," the Porter said. He turned to me. "What is your number?"

"I'm number one," I said.

"Very well," he said. He turned and went down the line of shelves, pulling two suitcases. Case number one was a black roller

bag, and Donut's case number eight was a large, yellow case with flowers on it that looked straight from the 1960s.

"This is just like that show, *Deal or No Deal*," Donut said. "We need to go back to the red line and get the prize on that train too!"

"Here you are. Have a nice day," the Porter said, sliding the bags through. I grabbed each in turn. The little half door slammed closed, leaving us alone in the gangway.

I tried to pull the bags into my inventory, and I received an error message.

Prize cases must be opened before they can be added to your inventory.

"Let's open them now!" Donut said.

I grabbed the suitcases, one in each hand. "Not here. Let's go back. We have to hurry." We turned and jogged back up to car number five. I wanted to make sure we got into the conductor's room before the monsters at the next station saw us. We made it just in time.

Katia and Vernon looked up at us as we entered the room.

Vernon shook his head. "Those crazy grapples are always mixing up everyone's luggage."

"We gotta go back and get Katia's suitcase, too!" Donut said.

I tossed my case onto the counter next to the jar of moonshine. This was not like a loot box where it opened magically. I had to zip it open. I pulled the zipper around and opened the top, peering inside.

"What is it? What is it?" Donut asked.

I reached in and pulled out the red lingerie. The suitcase was full of women's clothing, high-heel shoes, and a bunch of brochures about things to do in Delaware.

"This is just someone's suitcase," I said. "It's not a real prize."

"Wait, what's that?" Donut asked, pointing to a bulge in one of the pockets.

I opened it up, and I pulled out three potions. Two mana potions and something new.

Invisibility Potion.

Guess what this does.

"Oh hell yeah," I said. It now let me put everything into my inventory, including the suitcase and clothes.

I felt the train finally start to slow as we reached station number 116. The announcement came, but I could barely hear it. I think he said this was called Banshee Station.

"Do mine, do mine!" Donut said, hopping up and down on my shoulder. I pulled her suitcase onto the counter. Katia and Vernon stopped their discussion to watch as I pulled the zipper on the case.

YOU SURE YOU WANNA DO THAT, BUCKO?

The notification was a type I'd never seen before. It surprised me enough that I stopped unzipping the bag and took a step back.

Later, I would realize it was my Find Traps skill activating for the first time. At the moment, I had no idea what was happening. But then I noticed the suitcase.

I'd unzipped it only a couple inches, but that was enough. The red, flaming ants poured from the hole, sweeping over the counter and surging at us. The drawings of Vernon's wife were also on the counter, and the sheets of paper burst into flames.

Literal Fire Ants. Level 1.

This is a trap monster.

Like regular fire ants, but with more enthusiasm. Plus they hate you and want you to die. They're pretty good at making that happen.

They just kept coming and coming, surging from the suitcase, which had burst into flames. Like the description said, they were just like regular ants, but on fire. There were suddenly thousands of them, more than the bag could really have held. They were fast. We all jumped back as the waves of insects spread forth, covering the bar in a matter of seconds. Flames rose wherever the bugs touched. Black smoke started to fill the car.

The bottle of moonshine on the counter, sitting in the midst of the fire, blinked and then a notification appeared over it. **Explosion Imminent.** A red set of numbers rocketed toward zero.

"Oh fuck," I said. "Run!"

The moonshine bottle exploded, spreading flaming liquid throughout the car. Katia was thrown from her feet, and Mongo

squealed in pain. The ceiling and walls were suddenly on fire, and the ants were everywhere.

"Fuck," I cried in pain, slapping myself in the face.

"I'm on fire! Help! I'm on fire!" Donut screamed, her voice high-pitched and panicked. I pulled her from my shoulder and slapped at the flames on her tail, further burning my hand. She had two little ants on her. I smushed them between my fingers.

"Go, go!" I cried, pointing toward the forward door as the ants surged at us. Katia's health had blipped down, more than I expected. *We're not moving. The train is stopped at the station. Her momentum bonus isn't active.*

Mongo glowed as he scrambled to his feet. Donut had cast *Heal Pet* on him. He squawked in fear. We all turned and ran toward the door.

Vernon cried out. I looked over my shoulder as a flaming wave swept over him. And then he was just gone. An impossible amount of ants swelled, crawling up the walls, sweeping over the floor. More explosions echoed from behind the bar as bottles went up.

We burst into car number four. Three tall, terrifying monsters turned at the intrusion. They looked like skinless, eyeless, human-sized jackrabbits walking on two legs. These were monsters from Banshee Station, who'd just gotten on moments before.

The doors to the train were still open, but they'd close at any moment.

"Out, out onto the platform!" I cried. I still clutched onto Donut.

The first of the doors was right there, and I leaped through, hoping the others would make it in time. Mongo and Katia jumped through just as the doors snapped shut.

The platform was empty. All of the rabbit monsters—the cornets—had gotten on the train. The three monsters in train number four turned their eyeless heads toward us just as the train started to move. We watched in horror as the monsters were overwhelmed, one by one, by a creeping, crawling wave of flames.

We stood there in silence on the platform as the train picked up speed and disappeared into the tunnel. As it rumbled away, I could still hear Vernon's terrified, final screams echoing in my head.

“That was the worst prize ever,” said Donut.

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Banshee Station 116. Yellow Line.

Unlike the previous platform, this one held multiple exits. The moment the train pulled away, more red dots appeared, shuffling up toward the station. These were more monsters getting ready for the next train, which would be here in about ten minutes.

"I can see the whole area on the map," Katia said. "It's not too big. There are a lot of twisting tunnels and four big rooms. One is what looks like a boss room like the ones on the first floor. There aren't any safe rooms. I see a pair of the bathrooms, though. Weird. There aren't any on the trains."

"This tunnel," Donut said, pointing to one near the end of the platform. "I don't see any monsters in that one."

We jogged toward the passageway, which was nothing more than a low, rocky cave. Water dripped from the ceiling. Donut activated her *Torch*.

We waited for a minute, catching our breath. Behind us, several of the skinless rabbits filled the station. Even from around the corner, I could hear them. They made an odd humming noise.

"There has to be a shitload of these cornets here," I said. "If monsters get on at every train, every ten minutes, all day long, then there has to be a constant stream of them."

"This station is big, but it's not huge," Katia said.

"Then they're either somehow getting back here after they get off at station 120, or the system is creating more of them." I remembered the brindle grubs from the second floor. Those had been created on demand. But from what Mordecai said, they only did that with the janitor mobs. There was usually a finite amount of the other mobs. Once you killed them, they would not be replenished.

"Poor Vernon," Katia said. "That was horrible. He was saving up money to buy his wife a new house."

"Yeah. Plus those bugs burned up my prize," Donut said. "It's not fair."

"There is no wife," I said. "And there was no prize. The ants were your prize, Donut. I guess we need to be more vigilant about traps from now on. I need to figure out how to train my Find Traps skill. It warned me, but much too late. My pedicure buff gives me a few extra seconds if the trap is foot triggered, but obviously there are other types of traps too."

"What do you mean there is no wife?" Katia said. "He was lying?"

"No," I said. "He believes, or I guess believed, he had a wife. This floor has only been open for a day. Before this, he was probably a dwarf doing something else. Whatever the fourth floor theme was the last time they ran the dungeon. When these floors are generated, the NPCs are given artificial memories. It's all part of the story. This entire floor is probably just the trains. He says he can go home, but where's that? There is no home. No wife. It's really fucked up because these aren't computer programs. These are actual, living creatures who believe this is the real world."

"I never really thought of it that way," Katia said. "That's… that's horrible."

I nodded. "It's just as bad as what they've done to us."

"So what's the plan?" Donut asked. From my shoulder, she reached out and put her paw against the side of the cave wall. It came away slimy. She frowned. "This place is disgusting."

I thought for a moment. "Since we're here, we should hit the boss room if we can. Maybe we can figure out why they're always getting on the train. Like with the NPCs, they can create them, give

them a story, and set them free, but they're not robots. There has to be a reason why they're getting on the train and getting off. The more we know about this place, the better our chances of figuring out how to get the hell out of here."

We needed to first figure out what we were facing at this station. I had Donut scout out a tunnel with a single cornet, so we could fight it. They supposedly used an "aural" attack. We needed to figure out what that meant.

The monsters were constantly moving from the deeper rooms to the platform. Donut's newly-enhanced ability to see mobs on the map worked well, but it didn't extend that far. I wished there was a way to combine Katia's larger map, Donut's ability to see mobs at a greater distance, and my ability to hunt down traps all into a single interface.

"There's one, moving down the tunnel by itself," Donut said. "It's a couple of turns that way."

We headed toward the monster.

Zev: Hey guys! Long time no talk.

Donut: HI ZEV!

Zev: I know you're busy, but I wanted to check in. I'm still working on your mid-floor appearance. A lot of it is going to depend on what happens with the sponsorship bidding. Things are getting a little intense out there. The same with the two fan boxes you guys have coming.

Donut: DID YOU SEE WE ARE ON THE TOP 10 LIST?

Zev: Of course I saw. Actually, I wanted to bring something up really quick while I can.

Carl: Out with it.

Zev: It's about Katia.

I stopped moving through the passageway. I held up my hand for the others to halt.

"What is it?" Katia asked.

"Just a minute," I said. "We're talking to our PR agent about something."

"*Now*?"

I could now see the monster's dot on the map. It was just around the corner. It had paused in the middle of the tunnel. I could hear the creature's odd humming, but there was another noise, too. A *clink, clink, clink*. I couldn't tell what it was.

Donut: WHAT ABOUT KATIA?

Zev: She's boring. People don't like her. Odette complained about her lackluster participation in the interview, and the tunnel is filled with people hoping she gets wasted just so it can be you two again. You either need to ditch her or make her more interesting. Tell her to spice it up. Maybe grow a mohawk. I'm not allowed to message her directly yet, but I can talk to her face-to-face after your next interview if you want.

Carl: Are you fucking kidding me?

Donut: MAYBE IF SHE MAKES HERSELF MORE SEXY LOOKING THAT WILL WORK. MAYBE MAKE HER BOOBS BIGGER LIKE ODETTE DID.

Zev: Well you need to do something. What's the point of adding a new character if she sucks? It's like when they added April to *Gilmore Girls*. But worse.

Donut: OH NO. I WILL HELP HER.

Carl: She's an art history professor, not a circus poodle. If people don't like her, they can suck it.

Zev: If they don't like her, they'll stop watching. If they stop watching, you'll get less views. If you get less views, you'll get less prizes from the fan boxes and sponsors. And we're just getting started with fan and sponsor prizes.

Carl: She's shy, and she's overwhelmed like the rest of us. You can't just expect someone to change like that.

Donut: SURE WE CAN. WATCH.

"You need to grow a mohawk," Donut said to Katia. "And maybe get a catchphrase. That really worked for Carl."

"Goddamnit, Donut," I said. I regretted it the moment the phrase came out of my mouth.

"What do you mean?" Katia asked. She reached up and touched her blonde hair. She'd managed to make it look much more natural.

Before, the hairs were too thick, almost like doll hair. Her face was also more natural-looking than before. She no longer looked like a burn victim and now just looked like someone who'd had too much cosmetic surgery. Like Bea's mom.

"She doesn't mean anything," I said. "It's not important right now."

"It *is* important, Carl. We shouldn't avoid conversations just because they're uncomfortable. Zev thinks since you're hanging with us, you need to be more vibrant."

"More vibrant?" she asked. "Is she saying I'm boring?"

"No," Donut lied. "She just thinks you'll get more followers if you give the viewers something to latch onto. It's not a bad thing. But people need to know who you are. You have to give them something to root for."

"My views have never been higher. I have almost ten billion followers. It was almost nothing until I joined your team."

"Oh you precious thing," Donut said. "It's great, it really is, but those are rookie numbers. I have over 700 trillion."

I sighed. At least Donut was being diplomatic. "Look, now is not the time… Oh, fuck."

The rabbit monster must have heard us speaking. It started moving in our direction. Mongo growled.

"All right, we're shelving this. Formation two."

The tunnel was wide enough that we could stand side-by-side. Formation two was similar to formation one, but with me in the center. Donut remained on my shoulder, but she would jump down the moment I approached the monster. Mongo, Katia, and I would all charge at the same time while Donut remained in the rear. Mongo stood to my left, and Katia would take up a blocking formation on my right.

The tall creature turned the corner. It walked on two legs, but it was hunched forward. Its red, skinless body seemed wet. The rabbit ears were absurdly long, reaching the ceiling. The thing had no eyes. Just a massive mouth with teeth. Its entire body hummed. The sound grew louder.

"Jesus," I said. The thing was hard to look at. It had arms with human-like fingers. It was holding an empty potion vial in its hand, and it dropped it on the ground with a *clink*.

"It just took a potion," I said. "Watch out!"

Red Cornet. Level 21.

Well, what did you expect in an opera? A happy ending?

The Cornet is a devolved form of the more common Lepus, one of the most widespread, semi-intelligent species across the known universe. During the early years of the Skull Empire's expansion, a system warlord developed a taste for a dish called Lepus hasenpfeffer, which caused the Lepus on that planet to be hunted to near extinction. A band of the hunted fled to the extensive, lightless caves of the planet and disappeared for several thousand years.

The devolved Lepus lost its sight, but it developed its rudimentary echolocation skills into an impressive attack. They don't normally run around without skin. We just added that part because it makes them scary as shit.

Donut nailed the creature with two missiles, bowling it over. The rabbit screamed, and the humming noise increased. The creature scrambled back, almost dead. Its two ears flattened backward, and I suddenly felt a wave of nausea wash over me. My vision went double. My ears rang. I was abruptly on my knees, and I didn't know why. I couldn't move. I vomited my hamburger and French fries on the ground.

You've been rendered Queasy!

A moment later, the feeling ceased. I groaned, looking up. The cornet was dead with Mongo on top of the creature, ripping it to pieces. Donut and Katia had also grown ill. It didn't seem to have an effect on Mongo.

I groaned again, as groaning seemed the most appropriate response after being suddenly and violently ill, and I rolled away from the puddle of vomit. I looked up at the dinosaur who was happily devouring the skinless creature. It had dropped a few gold coins, and that was it. Mongo grunted happily as he ate.

"How is it you're okay when everything else makes you sick?" I grumbled. Jesus. I hated throwing up.

Carl: Mordecai. We're fighting walking rabbits that make us puke. The debuff is called Queasy. How do we fight it?

Mordecai: That's usually from an auditory attack. Putting in earplugs won't help. I can whip you up a potion that'll negate it, but that won't do you any good right now. Were Donut and Mongo affected?

I looked over at the cat, who had vomit running down her face. She was rapidly licking her paw and cleaning it off.

Carl: Donut, yes. Mongo, no.

Mordecai: Okay. I honestly don't know how these attacks work. They're not magical. It's a physical thing, but it only works on certain anatomies. You're going to have to lead with Mongo. The good news is your body quickly builds up a natural resistance to this sort of attack. This is a real thing that exists outside the dungeon, designed to incapacitate prey. My advice is to fight a few more of these guys in as small groups as possible until it no longer affects you. You'll probably get a skill notification called Queasy Resistance or something.

"Ugh," I said. "This is going to suck."

"What do you make of this?" Katia asked. She picked up the potion vial the monster had dropped.

"Toss it here," I said.

It wasn't a normal potion vial, as those usually puffed away into smoke. Still, it was the same size and shape. There was a tiny amount of golden liquid at the bottom, less than half a bead. I flipped the vial over, and the liquid didn't come out, like it was honey.

Used vial.

I knew if I could get that liquid closer to the edge of the bottle I might be able to get the system to give me a description. I pulled it in and then out of my inventory. That didn't work. I tapped the glass against the rock wall in an attempt to dislodge the liquid. *Clink.*

That was the sound I'd heard earlier. That red cornet had been trying to do the same thing, I realized. Weird. Now I really wanted to know what this stuff was.

I smashed the vial hard enough to break the glass. *Crunch*. The moment the glass broke, the whole thing puffed away like it normally did with a potion. There was no sign of the liquid.

"Damn," I said.

For the next few hours, we trained our queasy resistance skill all the while creeping toward the boss room at the back of the tunnel system. Mongo managed to hit level 14, which caused him to grow about six inches taller and a foot longer. One more level before he was full size. Katia hit 22. Donut and I both were on the precipice of leveling up as well, though it was slow going when we were only killing lower level monsters.

I also spent the time training my neglected *Fear* spell and casting the fire and electric-enhancing *Bang Bro* on my gauntlet, though I didn't get to actually use it. Meanwhile, Donut trained her *Second Chance*, her *Clockwork Triplicate*, and her new *Hole* spell, which currently did absolutely nothing but put a circular, temporary, one-inch dimple into walls. It did not work on mobs directly.

Mongo was getting proficient at killing them on his own, despite being a much lower level. The cornets were slow to react once we turned the corner, and when they did fight back in time, they usually moved straight to their nausea attack. By the time they realized the dinosaur was immune, they were already on their backs, being ripped to pieces. If I hit them with the *Fear* spell, they'd turn to run, but Mongo was faster.

As for loot, these monsters were mostly a bust. Most dropped a few coins and sometimes cornet meat or random organs, which we'd add to the alchemy table's supplies. Mordecai once said most monsters wouldn't directly drop good loot on the first several floors. The worthy stuff would come from loot boxes and not the mob corpses. That'd change around the sixth floor when we'd start facing better-equipped opponents.

All three of us received the notification we were now resistant to the Queasy debuff at the same time, after getting hit with it for what

had to be the dozenth time in an hour. I'd long since puked out every last drop of my own stomach's contents.

The red cornets were moving in a predictable pattern. They seemed to all be coming from one dead-end section of the tunnel. From there they'd move into one of three larger rooms. An equal number would leave these and head for the train station.

What we thought was the likely boss room was in a separate area at the other end of the tunnels. This room was bigger yet and only had one approach which made me nervous. Donut's ability to see distant mobs—which I'd started calling her "monster vision" didn't work in the closed-off area, which further added to my hesitation. I prepared a few smoke bombs and other explosives in case we needed to make a hasty retreat.

"Here we go," I said as we entered the long hallway to the back room. The cave system gave way to a regular, long hallway made of rough and unfinished concrete blocks. The floor itself was made of smooth concrete.

We slowly approached the chamber, seeing or hearing no sign of the cornets. The large, metallic double doors reminded me of similar entrances we'd seen in other parts of the dungeon, most notably the entrance to the kobold fighting pits. These were barn-style doors designed to allow something large to get through.

There were no signs or other indicators about what we were approaching, which was unusual for boss rooms. I put my ear to the door and heard nothing inside. I was afraid we'd slide the doors open, and we'd get rushed by something. I prepared to jump aside.

I felt a familiar, haptic buzz and looked down, surprised to see a glowing circle right underneath my feet.

"Back up, back up," I said, leaping off the symbol as if I'd just touched a hot stove.

"What is it?" Donut hissed, looking wildly about.

Nothing happened. I inspected the glowing circle, but there was no tooltip. It looked like something used in a Satanic ritual mixed with the text from Frodo's One Ring. It was a circle with odd writing within, ringing the inside edge, with a large triangle symbol in the center. The symbol pulsed blue.

"What is that thing?" I asked. I hesitantly reached forward and hovered my hand over it. I was afraid it was a trap, but it didn't set off any of my trap warnings. I couldn't get any info out of it at all. It had only appeared once I'd stared at it.

"What?" Katia asked, looking down.

"You don't see it?"

"There's nothing there, Carl," said Donut.

I sent a message to Mordecai, describing the symbol.

Mordecai: That's a control sigil. Only you can see it because of your Escape Plan skill. They're mostly used by secondary programs, like *Vengeance of the Daughter*. But they're sometimes used by the dungeon creators, too. I don't know too much about this stuff, but I know their use is considered sloppy programming because they're easy to break. Sigils have all sorts of uses, but they're typically for controlled gating. They can stop a specific type of mob from passing the symbol. They can be turned off and on by the showrunners, not the dungeon AI, which is why they use them. If it's blue, it means the symbol is turned on. It will have no effect on you.

Carl: Is there a way for crawlers to make these things?

Mordecai: No. Not directly. There's another type of sigil that looks similar and mostly acts the same way, but it's a type of magic you'll never have enough mana to do. Donut might.

After waiting a few more minutes, we decided to proceed into the room. We slid open the doors, revealing a large warehouse. We jumped in, weapons at the ready. No red dots appeared. No boss music started. The doors did not magically close behind us.

I looked about the mostly-empty room, lowering my fist. In the middle of the space sat an empty, metal bin with chain-link walls, like a dumpster-sized shopping cart. The cart appeared brand new and untouched. I stepped toward it to examine it further.

Wire Cage Materials Cart. Wheeled. It'd probably be fun to roll down a hill in this thing.

"Well this is disappointing," said Donut.

"Uh, guys?" I said, pointing at the shadowy far end of the room. Two bulldozer-sized contraptions sat against the far wall. I'd first thought they were indentations on the wall. The air just above the pair of black and silver apparatuses distorted, indicating the machines were turned on and venting hot exhaust. At first look, they looked like lumpy blocks of metal, but I could see the distinct break outlines along the edges. Their true shape came into focus. I played with enough Transformers toys as a kid to immediately recognize what I was looking at. The blocks had arms and legs.

These were a pair of robots, sitting down and turned off. They did not have dots on the map at all. That's how the inactive swordsmen guards had appeared on the previous floor.

Dwarven Industrial Light-Duty Automaton. Contraption.

This contraption is in Sleep Mode.

These smaller-sized, industrial workhorses are used to complete simple tasks, such as pushing bins full of ore up from the depths. They are not designed or commonly used for fighting or defense, but who are we kidding? Like you'd have a chance against these things if they wanted to smush you.

"These are the small ones?" I asked

I was starting to realize that this was not a boss room. I had no idea *what* this was. It didn't appear the cornets used this room. So why was it here? At first I assumed that control sigil was for these two robots, as they were the only two things in here. But the more I thought about it, the less sense it made. Would they really need control sigils for something mechanical? But if not them, then who? I asked Katia and Donut if they had any ideas.

"Maybe it's not to keep something in the room, but to keep it out. Maybe it's to keep the cornets away."

"Maybe," I said. "It's odd."

"It gets weirder," Katia said. "I've been talking to Hekla and Eva—she's another one of the daughters. My friend from before—and they just found a similar room in another warren. She says it's the same thing. Two robots."

"Odd," I said. I put my hand against the chain link cart. It rolled easily. There was a door on the side, designed so one could effortlessly load something into it. I wondered if I could lift it. I wrapped my fingers into the chain links and heaved. It was heavy and awkward, but I easily lifted the wheels off the ground. I stuck it into my inventory.

"Let's blow up the robots," Donut said.

"I don't think that's a good idea," Katia replied, eyes going wide.

Donut: Remember what I said about being more vibrant? You should agree with me. People love it when Carl blows stuff up.

Katia did not appear impressed with Donut's reasoning. I was about to agree with the woman, when I had a thought. I looked over my shoulder. The long, concrete hallway appeared designed to handle the robots, but there was no way they'd fit in the tunnels beyond.

"Actually," I said. "Let's do it. You know, for training. And science."

"Are you serious?" she asked.

I laughed. "The truth is, I need more materials for the crafting bench. There's only so much you can do with weight equipment. If we scrap these guys, I'll have enough material to build better train defenses."

"All right, I guess," she said. "But if we do this, maybe we should kill the rest of the cornets first, too. Clear the whole place out." She gave me a wink. "You know, for science."

Donut: That's the way to do it. Now we just need to work on the mohawk and catchphrase.

We killed the cornets first. Now that we were immune to their one and only attack, it was pretty easy. I tested rolling a hob-lobber down one of the cave hallways to make sure the place wouldn't collapse, and it didn't. We roamed the halls, killing every one we

came across. From there, we returned to the train landing and worked our way toward the gathering rooms.

Donut and I both leveled. Katia also leveled a second time. Donut raised her *Second Chance* resurrection spell to level seven. The spell cost ten mana. Each monster stayed animated for 14 minutes. She had an intelligence of 41, but with the buffs from the good rest bonus and the shower, the stat was temporary raised to 49. Therefore, she currently had a pool of 49 mana points at her disposal, so she could raise four of the rabbit monsters, take a potion and raise four more, which was a pretty formidable group.

We used this method to storm the three collective rooms. We sent seven in to fight, and in the midst of the chaos, we sent the eighth in holding a fused hob-lobber. After, I tossed in a smoke curtain, and we mopped up.

The rooms were nothing more than a filthy waiting area. The rabbits were mostly sleeping in clusters or leaning against the walls. They barely fought back. There was no sense of community here, like with the goblins. This wasn't an established settlement at all, which was odd. Up until this point, the game had made an attempt to add purpose and a reason for a mob's presence. It was usually a stupid reason, but it was there.

Thinking of the goblins reminded me of something else. A realization was starting to form. By the time we killed the ones in the third room and finished collecting all the dropped coins, I had a growing sense of unease.

"I think they're all stoned," I said.

"More meth?" Donut asked.

"Not meth. Something different."

We'd killed all of them except the ones emerging from the long, dark hallway, though none had appeared in a while now. We proceeded carefully down the hall, but nothing came. As we walked, my feet crunched. The floor here was littered with empty vials. If I didn't have that buff, my feet would be torn up by the glass. The far wall was blackened and scorched, like it'd been hit with a fireball. We waited, but nothing happened. No more cornets came. We'd cleared the area.

"I think they're going to that fifth stop to get these vials, getting their fix, and teleporting back here," I said. "When they start to come down from their high, they get back on the train."

"What does that have to do with the robot room?" Donut asked.

"I don't know. It doesn't make sense, especially if there's a robot room in all of these landings."

For the two robots, I utilized three sticks of hobgoblin dynamite and a detonator. I set the charges without incident, moved all the way back to the platform and set them off.

We returned to find both of the robots turned to scrap metal. The hobgoblin dynamite was especially good at tearing stuff up. The bottom half of both robots remained mostly intact, but there were hunks of metal everywhere. The automatons hadn't turned on or fought back at all. The description changed to **Destroyed** on each one. After waiting for the gnarled metal to cool down, I spent some time collecting everything I could, including several fried and broken cogs and wheels. I found two dwarven batteries, both of them "damaged" according to the menu. It all went into the inventory.

Donut was giving fashion tips to Katia while we worked. Mongo spent the time running back and forth across the room practicing jump attacks. The dinosaur chicken moved like a cheetah and was terrifying to behold. Just a few more kills, and he'd hit level 15.

Just before we finished, I received a message.

Daniel: Hey man, you free? I got a message for you.

Carl: Bautista. How are you doing?

I kept forgetting the man's first name was Daniel. I clicked on his name and reassigned his chat marker from Daniel to Bautista.

Bautista: Surviving. Hey, so I'm at the Desperado Club. I just met a guy here who says he's in contact with someone else you know. A woman named Imani. She needs to talk to you. Says it's super important. It's something about two other guys. A Brandon and Chris or something like that. She

says she'll try to be at the bar of the Desperado Club each night after the recap.

Carl: Okay, thanks man. We should really start meeting up regularly.

Bautista: Yeah, I think that's a good idea. I need to talk to you too about something else, but it's too complicated over chat. I hate this mental typing shit. But you gotta be careful, man. I heard a few guys talking about hunting down the leaderboard for the bounty. I don't know if they're serious, but I don't think this bar is a saferoom.

Carl: It's not. Thanks for the head's up. So how'd you find the club? We haven't come across any yet.

Bautista: There's a trick. It turns out if it's a transfer station, and the station's number ends in the number one, there'll be a Desperado Club. If it ends in number nine, it's that other place. Club Vanquisher. Anyway, talk to you later.

Relief washed over me with the knowledge that Imani was still alive. She probably wanted to make sure that I knew Brandon was dead. I swallowed, thinking about it. My knuckles burned with phantom pain.

I sighed, pulling the last free hunk of metal into my inventory. I received another weight-based achievement. I now had enough scrap metal to build a decent-sized boat. I'd collected almost 15 tons of materials from the two robots, and it was less than half of their mass.

"What do you think, Carl? Boots or no?" Donut asked.

I looked up to see Katia's tracksuit had changed to a slick, black bodysuit. She wore poorly-shaped, knee-high boots. She also now had a purple mohawk. She looked ridiculous. The woman had an odd expression on her face, one I was having a hard time reading. It seemed like a mix of exasperation, despair, and desperation.

Whatever it was, it was clear she did not want to be doing this.

"Just be yourself," I said.

"That's terrible advice, Carl," Donut said. "She's a doppelganger. It's her job to be someone else."

"Be yourself? I don't know what that means anyway," she said, shrugging. "I never really did."

I sighed. "Okay, guys. This has been a long day. The next transfer station is 127, but I want to go to the one after that, which is station 131. Let's get on the train, get to the employee breakroom, and if the conductor is in there, make him finish giving the list of stations to Mordecai. I know you and Vernon got interrupted. On the way there, we can do some more grinding if there are monsters we can handle. We'll ride all the way to 131, which'll supposedly have a Desperado Club. Plus, by the time we get there, we'll be able to open our fan boxes. Sound like a plan?"

Donut beamed. "We're going dancing tonight! It's dirty Shirley time!"

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[7]

Time to Level Collapse: 8 days and 18 hours.

Views: 50.2 Quadrillion
Followers: 890 Trillion
Favorites: 199.7 Trillion

Leaderboard rank: 6
Bounty: 100,000 gold

Transfer Station 131.

The dwarf conductor on the next train was a heck of a lot grumpier than Vernon, but by the time we pulled up to station 131, we had the full list of stations all down the yellow line. Mordecai said he thought he might be onto something, but he wasn't certain yet. Tomorrow we were to attempt to hop over to a line that didn't intersect yellow and then get the same information. After that we'd start exploring the non-colored lines.

We didn't get as much grinding done on the train as I'd like, but we did manage to kill a whole mess of monsters called Zlurpies,

which were waist-high, semi-intelligent warrior armadillo things. They rolled into armored balls when they started to take damage, but they were small enough to be eaten whole by Mongo, who would pick them up and crunch them like juice-filled hard candies.

Halfway through the skirmish with the armadillos, Mongo hit level 15.

He would continue to level after this, but he wouldn't get any bigger. Which was good because he was now huge. He was the height of a pony, coming up to just below my shoulders. From the tip of his beak to the end of his colorful, red and blue feathered tail, he was about 13 feet long, though more than half of that was tail. The individual claws on his feet were now bigger than his entire body had been when we first got him. He still fit in the individual subway cars okay, but if we came across smaller cars with rowed seating, it was going to be a tight squeeze, especially around the poles. I suspected he was going to be spending a lot of time in his carrier.

"Good boy! Good boy, Mongo! Carl, remember when he was a sweet, tiny, nose-chomping baby?" Donut asked. "He was just a scared little chicken. It seemed like it was just yesterday."

"It practically was yesterday," I said. "Look in your pet menu and see if he received any new abilities."

A moment later, Donut gasped. "Carl, Carl he has a special attack now! It's called Earthquake! It's a jump attack! Each time he leap attacks, there's a small chance he'll trigger an earthquake when he lands, which will knock the bad guys off their feet!"

Mongo jumped up and down with excitement, forcing me and Katia to flee. He whipped around in a circle, his long tail twirling around the cabin. He roared, long and loud.

Christ, I thought. *I hope we never have to fight any of his kind*. We'd be fucked.

The transfer station was larger than the last one. Up in the lobby area there was another general store, called Ford's Fighting Supplies. It was sandwiched by a pair of training guilds—one for longbow and one called "Druids only." Next to the druid guild was an Arby's, which would be the saferoom, and then another store specializing in clothes for elves.

And finally was the Desperado Club, just like Bautista had promised. Unlike the massive, block-sized building from the previous level, the one here looked like a tiny dive bar with a small, neon sign.

Imani said she'd be there after the recap episode, which would be in a couple of hours. We had just enough time to eat, open our fan boxes, and take a nap. We'd watch the show and head over.

"Have you ever been to an Arby's?" I asked Katia as we went through the door.

"No," she said. "I've never heard of it."

I realized I knew next to nothing about the woman. "I know you're from Iceland, but you knew about the Russian subway. Did you spend a lot of time in Russia?"

"I spent a summer in Moscow when I was a student, working at the Pushkin. It's a museum. I've spent a lot of time on holiday in Europe. We take a student trip to Paris every other year and one to Amsterdam the other years. It's the only traveling I've done recently. How about you? Did you ever leave America?"

I grunted. "I've been to the Arctic Circle. I once went to Costa Rica and got to pet a sloth. I almost went to the Bahamas, but I couldn't get off of work. Oh, and I've been to Canada a bunch of times. But it was just Victoria and Vancouver. I really wanted to visit Japan and the Philippines, but I never got the chance."

The Bopca glared at us from behind the counter. We ordered some food to go, which he gave us in actual Arby's bags. We took the food and returned to the personal space.

Within, we found Mordecai hunched over the alchemy table. The table had transformed. It was three times the size it had been when I'd pulled it out of my inventory earlier. It consisted of multiple layers of shelves, and it now had drawers and a faucet. A small fire burned

at one end of the table, heating a glass container filled with black, bubbling liquid. The whole crafting studio stank like burned rubber.

"How did this happen?" I asked, walking up to the table. Off to the side, I noticed a massive piece of paper filled with writing. He'd outgrown the dry erase board and was mapping out the train lines on the sheet. I remembered seeing the roll sitting in the corner of his cluttered space.

"Get back!" Mordecai snapped, not looking up. "I'm almost done. You'll contaminate it."

"He used my two table upgrade coupons on the alchemy table," Donut said. "He asked me for permission earlier. So the table is now level three." She made a face. "He didn't tell me he was making stink bombs."

"I'll be making worse than that if you don't get out of here. Eat your food. I'll be out in a minute."

We sat at the kitchen counter. I introduced Katia to curly fries. She was not impressed.

A few minutes later, a triumphant-looking Mordecai entered the room. His frog arms were full of items. He paused, looking Katia up and down. "You look different."

"Donut is helping me," she replied.

"I can see that."

He piled the items on the counter. There were two pairs of potions and about twenty green-hued balls that looked like perfectly-round avocados. He wrangled the balls into a pile to keep them from rolling away.

"I didn't have enough time nor enough supplies to make some of the best stuff, but this is a good start," he said. "You say there's a Desperado Club out there? Good. We'll go later and pick up some supplies. Plus the casino will now be open, and you can cash in that chip."

"Oh yeah!" Donut said. "I forgot about that!" I'd received the poker chip for surviving Signet's attack on us. Donut hadn't received anything because her health had zeroed out. She'd only been saved by her Cockroach skill, which allowed her to survive the first fatal hit of a fight.

"So what do we have here?" I asked, picking up the first potion.

Mordecai's Special Brew

A potion designed by a shifty Changeling who has a tendency to kill those who count on him the most, this special potion combines the effects of a Gold Standard Healing Potion and the Troll's Second Wind to create a de facto immortality for a period of thirty seconds. It has a few unfortunate side effects.

"I only had enough materials to make two of these. I need at least four more."

"What are the side effects?" I asked. I chose to ignore that first section of the description. I knew how the system labeled items I had created, which meant whatever they said here was not accurate.

"Okay, so what this potion does is create a constant stream of healing mixed with rapid regeneration for thirty seconds. So it'll heal almost anything and keep that health topped up. But it is *not* an invulnerability spell. It won't protect you against blowing yourself up or being decapitated or anything that would normally cause you to die instantaneously. Unfortunately, the side effects are pretty severe. It ups your potion sickness countdown by about ten hours. So you won't be able to take any potions afterward for that time. Also, you can only take two of these before they stop working all together. I've been trying to fix that for ages, but I can never get past it. Maybe if I can manage to get a table higher than level nine, but I've never had the chance."

I picked up the next potion and examined it. It was orange and bubbly.

"Those are both for Donut," he said, turning toward the cat. "These are stat potions. Similar deal with that other potion. You can only take two of them. But you can and should take them both now. When I get the ingredients, I'll make two of these for everybody with all of the stats. If you happen to find more of these potions before I get to it, don't take them unless they're labeled Superb. Those are the only ones I can make that might increase it by four.

That two potion limit doesn't care about the quality. They're easy enough to make once you know the recipe."

Superb Constitution Buff Potion.

Drinking this mixture will permanently increase your Constitution by a random number between one and four. You may only drink two of these during your time in the dungeon. Why? Because drinking more would be cheating. And if anyone is going to cheat, it's going to be me.

I slid the potions over to Donut. She pulled them into her inventory.

"So, are superb the best, then?" I asked.

"Sort of," Mordecai said. "There's another type called a 'Cosmic Buff' that raises a random stat by 10 points, but I don't know the recipe. They're so rare I've only seen them a handful of times. Those aren't the same type of potion anyway, so they aren't restricted to the same limits."

Donut drank the first buff potion.

"Well that was a waste," she said. "It only went up one point! Mordecai, are you sure you made these right?"

We waited for her potion countdown to wear off while Mordecai rolled his eyes at the cat. The second potion raised it by three, giving her a net gain of four, making her base Constitution eight. With her anklet and the buff from her brush, plus the temporary 10-point boost she got on this floor only from her Hooligan class, she had a Constitution of 21.

"Four points is good," Mordecai said. "But we need to keep looking for items that buff it further. It's still much too low." Mordecai's frog tongue darted out, and he stole a curly fry from my bag.

I picked up the final item. It felt like a hardened rubber ball. I squeezed it, and a split in the rubber appeared.

Fragmenting Potion Ball.

A full potion vial may be transferred to this ball.

That was the whole description.

"I need more gossamer thread, but they'll have some at the Desperado Club. It's cheap stuff. But I had to upgrade my table to

three before I could make these. Once we upgrade the table to five, I'll have two heating elements, and I can make these twice as fast. At six I'll have a full autoclave, and I can make 100 at a time. They're simple enough. You take a potion and pour it into the ball. Then you can throw the ball at an enemy. With your xistera and a few poison and fire water potions, you'll have a deadly arsenal. In a few floors I'll be able to make some truly devastating attack potions. I have an idea for a chain lightning potion that is going to be a thing of beauty."

"They don't have to drink the potion?" I asked. I tossed the ball in the air and caught it. It had a good weight to it, which meant I could fling it much further.

"Be careful," Mordecai said. "They'll break apart if you throw too hard. Don't be tossing these around once they're armed unless you're throwing them at a bad guy. And no, they don't have to drink it. Potions work on mobs if you throw them at them. It doesn't make sense, but it works. It's always been that way. Also, in case you're wondering, mobs don't get potion sickness. Not as far as I can tell. NPCs do."

"Will it work on party members?" I asked. "Like if Donut is across the room, and she needs a healing potion, and I nail her with one of these, will it work?"

"You will not be lobbing balls at me, Carl," Donut said. "My word. Do I look like a cocker spaniel to you?"

Mordecai looked thoughtful. "No, I doubt it. Not on other crawlers. That would work on NPCs, though, now that I think about it. It'd probably work on Mongo."

Throughout the day, I'd received a handful of achievements, but I'd only been awarded one prize from a Gold Looter box. It ended up being yet another Determine Value skill potion. I drank it and moved to my inventory. Not much had changed. I still couldn't see an actual monetary value of my items, but I could now see the rarity of items.

I filtered it so I could only see **Unique** items. I only had one. It wasn't Carl's Doomsday Scenario, the about-to-explode nuke. That was listed under **Pretty Damn Rare**. The only unique item was that odd, stuffed Kimaris figure on the horse. I knew it was valuable, but

I hadn't realized it was one of a kind. The description didn't give any information. It read:

Stuffed Kimaris Figure. (With tags)

It's impossible to accurately portray Kimaris's usual I-hate-this-and-I-hate-you scowl, but this collectible bean bag makes a valiant effort.

It was still listed as my most valuable item. The about-to-explode bomb was at the very bottom of my value list.

A message popped up. Our fan boxes were ready. A few minutes later, Donut received the same message. She started hopping up and down. "Carl, Carl, hurry up and open yours so I can do mine."

"You know what? You go first," I said.

"Yes!" Donut said. She trembled with excitement.

Mordecai settled next to Katia at the kitchen counter. "When you're done with this, I want to show you guys what I've discovered with the rail system. I'm pretty sure I know how to get to the stairwells. They've done this sort of thing before, but on a smaller scale."

I braced myself. Donut's last fan box had been a picture of Bea. Hopefully this would be something better. Mordecai said since this was a Platinum box, people had to actually pay a credit to vote, so the voting was less likely to be trolled. But I wasn't so sure about that. Now that we had enemies both inside and outside the dungeon, I couldn't count out the idea we were about to get slammed with something awful.

She opened the box. She gasped in pleasure.

"Oh my god, thank you! Thank you everybody! I love you all so much!"

I exchanged a look with Mordecai. *Wonderful*, I thought. *Just wonderful*.

"Look, Mongo!" Donut said. "Our fans got us a saddle! I can ride you now! It matches your feathers! Carl, put it on Mongo!"

"We're going to have to rethink some of those battle formations," Katia said.

I examined the blue and red, tassel-covered, obscenely garish saddle. It looked like something you'd see on a horse during a

Fourth of July parade in the deep south. Mongo sniffed at it and growled.

"Actually," Mordecai said. "That's a really good prize. But you're gonna need to get Mongo on board. I've never seen anybody ride one of those things."

Enchanted Mongoliensis Saddle. Adjusted to fit Cat species.

Magically affixes itself to the dreaded Mongoliensis, turning everyone's favorite murder chicken into a mount. Riders in the saddle are afforded the following bonuses:

+15% to all offensive spell damage.

Anti-Piercing Resistance.

In addition, the saddle gives the following bonus to the attached Mongoliensis:

+20% Constitution.

+20% melee damage while saddle is occupied.

"So Donut gets bonus damage to her spells, and Mongo gets 20% more Constitution? And 20% more damage as long as Donut's butt is in that thing? I like the Constitution buff, but I don't like the idea of Donut sitting on his back while he's fighting. She'll be too vulnerable."

"Agreed," Mordecai said. He looked at Donut. "You're going to need to practice jumping out of the saddle when Mongo attacks. That attack bonus is great, but you'll be a prime target sitting up there."

"Yeah, yeah, put it on him, Carl!"

There were no straps on the saddle. It looked as if it was missing most of the required saddle parts. It was just a seat and a pommel. And a bunch of tassels. There were no reins. I had no idea how Donut was going to stay on or how she was going to control the dinosaur once she was on.

"Come here, Mongo," I said, picking up the saddle. The feathered dinosaur cocked his head to the side and then grunted, backing away. I tossed him a curly fry. He snapped it out of the air. "Come here, you bastard."

"Don't be mean, Carl. Mongo, listen to Uncle Carl," Donut said.

He lowered his head and let me approach. I placed the saddle onto his ridged, feathered back, and it clicked in place. It was the same sound as when I placed a table in the crafting room. Mongo howled with displeasure and started bouncing around the room, trying to dislodge it. I had to jump back so I wasn't whipped in the face with his tail.

"Uh, maybe you should wait until he gets used to it before attempting to ride him," I said.

"Oh all right," said Donut. "Now open your box up!"

"Okay," I said. I opened it up.

For a long moment, nothing happened.

The lights to the room dimmed. Music started playing. It was cheesy, 1970's-style game show music with trumpets and keyboards and percussion music in a disco beat. Colored lights flashed. Mongo stopped howling and jumping and rushed to Donut's side. We all stood from the kitchen counter. All except Mordecai whose frog face had suddenly taken on a stony expression.

"Carl, what's happening?" Donut asked.

"Probably something stupid," I said.

The announcer's voice was even cheesier than normal.

Ladies and Gentlemen, it's time for your favorite segment of *Dungeon Crawler World*. The Prize Carousel!

Just past me, the section of the room with the couch and screens blinked and disappeared. A large, spinning carousel, like a merry-go-round materialized. It spun in a circle, lights up and down blinking in sync with the music. The interior of the large contraption was blocked off by colorful curtains.

Here's your host. It's the dungeon darling, giver-of-prizes, slayer of gods, former Crawler champion, it's Chaco the Bard!

With a puff of smoke and the familiar *crack* of teleportation, a winged, wolf-headed man materialized. He wore a brown and orange, checkered leisure suit and held a microphone. He jogged into the room as if he'd had a running start, waving at nothing. I stared at the creature. He was not listed as a dungeon admin, but as an NPC.

Chaco. Pterolykos. Song Bard. Level 66.
Host of *The Prize Carousel*.

"Well, well, well," Chaco said, stepping deeper into the room. The wolfman stood about my height. His muscular arms bulged through his suit. Katia, Donut, and I all looked at one another, bewildered. "Welcome everyone. I'm your man, Chaco! We have a great segment for you tonight. We have." He paused, eyes going glossy. "Crawler Carl joining us! He is the recipient of a Platinum fan box. Oh boy, that's a good one. You folks at home decided to give Carl the chance to pick his own prize, and you know what that means! We have nine excellent prizes on the carousel, and… Oh shit, Mordecai!"

"You motherfucker!" Mordecai cried, interrupting. His tongue lashed out, fast as a whip. It attached to a metallic chair by the kitchen counter, and he launched it across the room at the newcomer. Chaco squealed and dropped the microphone, ducking as the chair rocketed at him.

The chair froze in midair, a quarter of an inch from Chaco's head. It had been flung so hard that it'd surely have broken the guy's skull open had it been allowed to connect. Chaco whimpered. I scrambled back. Donut hissed, and Mongo growled. For a moment, nobody moved.

Realizing he'd been saved, Chaco slowly stood to his full height. I could see the large wolf was trembling. The chair remained floating in the air.

I turned to ask Mordecai what in the hell was happening.

"Oh, *shit*," I said.

Mordecai was frozen in place, his tongue half retracted. He had the word **Naughty** blazing over his head. The same thing had happened when Maggie My and Frank Q had attacked us in the saferoom long ago.

Mordecai knew better than that. What had he been thinking? The **Naughty** blinked twice, and to my horror, Mordecai himself blinked and disappeared. To my right, the room with **Manager** over it also disappeared. The floating chair became unstuck, and it clattered loudly to the ground.

The stupid music continued to blare. The carousel twirled and twinkled.

"Did we just lose Mordecai?" I asked.

"No," Donut said. "I just got a notice. It says he's in a time out for violating the rules. Carl, I don't understand what's happening."

I let out a stream of breath. I was overwhelmed with relief. I had no idea what just happened either, but whatever this was could've been much worse. "How long is the time out?"

"It's for seven days."

"Seven days!" I exclaimed. *Holy shit*. That meant we'd only have a day and a half left on this floor when he came back. "*Goddamnit*."

I whirled on Chaco. The game show host NPC still stood there, looking disoriented, his arms raised as if he feared we'd also attack him. His microphone had bounced away, rolling underneath the prize carousel where he couldn't reach it. The music continued to play.

"Who are you?" I demanded.

"I'm Chaco," he said. "I'm the host. Uh, welcome to the show."

"No, who are you to Mordecai?"

"I… I don't think I'm allowed to talk about it. Uh, maybe we should just start this over. The fans voted to allow you to choose your own prize. It doesn't happen often, but when it happens, we have to do the show. That's my job. I host the show."

"Is it always you?" I asked.

"What... what do you mean?"

I was overcome with the urge to pound this guy in the face, but I knew that'd end badly for me. "*Are you the only one who hosts this show*?"

"Yeah, I think so. I don't get out much, so I don't really know. People don't usually vote for the let-the-crawler-choose-the-prizes option. It usually only happens a few times a season."

"Well they voted for it this time because they knew you and Mordecai would be in the same room," I said. "Whatever just happened, it happened because they know Mordecai doesn't like you. So who are you to him?"

Chaco swallowed. "He sure knows how to hold a grudge, that's for sure. It's been hundreds of cycles. I didn't think he'd still be here.

Everyone knows guides get out faster than anybody else. Wait, he shouldn't even be here. Had he become a manager?"

"Do you not watch the show?"

He looked about wildly. "No. No I can't stomach… No, of course. I just hadn't…" He trailed off. "Look, we really have to do this. I'll get in even more trouble if we don't finish. You have nine prizes to choose from. I'm sorry about your manager, I really am. It was a long time ago, and it wasn't my fault. I was just doing what his manager told me to do. If I hadn't done it, he'd have died. And then we'd all have lost her. We'd have lost Odette. When he comes back, tell him I said I'm sorry. Not a day goes by where I don't regret it."

Warning: This isn't *Dr. Phil*. Pick your prize. You have ten minutes to choose, or you will forfeit your choice.

A timer appeared over the carousel, counting down.

"All right," I said, gritting my teeth. "Show me the goddamn prizes."

"Prize number one!" Chaco said. His voice wasn't nearly as enthusiastic as before. He hadn't been able to reach his microphone, despite wasting a minute on his hands and knees attempting to retrieve it, and now he didn't seem to know what to do with his clawed hands.

The carousel paused, and the curtain fell, revealing a pair of potions sitting on a pedestal.

"Two potions!" Chaco cried.

I tried to examine them, but the tooltip wouldn't pop up. Donut jumped to my shoulder.

"There's no description," she said. "This is a rip off!"

"What kind of potions are they?" I asked Chaco.

"All you get is the description, and the description is two potions!" Chaco smiled big, revealing sharp teeth. If I hadn't just seen him cowering like a child, the look would be downright intimidating.

I recognized the fizzy, dark blue coloring as that of a skill potion. This was just like when we had to pick Mongo. *Mordecai would be really helpful right about now.*

"Prize two! Bombs! Five-hundred quantity."

The next curtain dropped, revealing a pyramid of hob-lobbers. These were a kind I hadn't seen before, but without being able to examine them, I didn't know what was different. They glistened, as if their exterior was made of tar. I suspected what they were, something I'd been planning on making myself.

"Prize three! Books! Earth books! Quantity 2,000!"

A pile of books appeared. I could see it was a random collection of English-language books, from *Fifty Shades of Grey* to what appeared to be a Canadian phonebook. Two-thousand books was a lot of damn reading. It'd take me a long time to get through it all, and I'd have plenty of trading material for the mole men.

"Prize four! A 1965 Harley Davidson FLH Panhead Electra Glide!"

I felt my heart stop the moment the red and beige motorcycle appeared. My eyes immediately moved to the small dent on the gas tank. That had happened when I'd slipped once coming up the driveway. I'd reached out to steady myself, and I'd accidentally knocked the motorcycle over.

My father had never been physically abusive, except that day. I never really thought of it as abuse, but thinking back now, that's exactly what it was. He'd spanked me so hard with a belt that my underwear had soaked through with blood. I could still feel the sensation of it peeling away. My mother had cried, told him we were going back to Texas, but we never did.

"Carl, with you on the motorcycle and me on Mongo, we would be unstoppable!"

"Jesus," I muttered, ignoring Donut's comment. Was it really his motorcycle? Or just a facsimile? I felt as if I couldn't breathe.

"Prize five! Just one book!"

I leaned in, trying to focus. I couldn't get my mind off the fucking motorcycle. *Pay attention, you idiot!* At first I thought this was a magical tome, but it didn't have the tell-tale glow. It was just a

regular book. Small, and leather-bound. It read, *Best-Laid Traps* on the cover.

"Is that porn?" Donut asked.

"Prize six! *Another* book!"

This one was similar to the last, but the book was much thicker, about the size of a large dictionary. It did not have a title on the cover, but it did have a symbol. It was the familiar A in a circle, signifying anarchy. The book glinted momentarily as the carousel turned away. I couldn't tell if that was the glow of magic or the glint of light off the gold-leafed pages.

"Prize seven! Enchanted chaps!"

"Carl, pick those!" Donut cried. "Chaco, he picks those!"

"Sorry, but Carl must make the decision," Chaco said.

The ass and crotch-less chaps were modeled by a spinning mannequin. They were made of a dark leather that glowed with a greenish aura.

"Yeah, no," I said.

"Prize eight! A single potion!"

I immediately recognized the potion. It was the same orange, bubbly concoction Donut had just used to raise her Constitution. It was a stat buff potion. This one glowed with a twinkly aura, almost like a strobe. I wondered if maybe this was one of those +10 cosmic potions Mordecai had mentioned. Or maybe that meant it wasn't as good. I couldn't be sure.

"Prize nine! A Craftsman 3000 Series 63-inch rolling tool chest!"

The dented and well-used tool chest came into view, and I instantly recognized it. This was my tool chest from the shop. My eyes moved to the drawer at the bottom right, where I knew I had a carton of cigarettes, minus one pack. I had dozens of useful tools in there, including my drill and grinder. If I could get one of those dwarven batteries working, I'd probably be able to figure out a way to charge them.

My gut reaction was to pick the tool box. With my tools, crafting items at that engineering table would be so much easier. But I hesitated.

When I'd last left it, my box had an entire marine electrical panel sitting on it. We were in the middle of rewiring a 32-foot Trojan from the 70's. The whole thing had been a mess. There was no sign of the panel now. In fact, there was something odd about the chest, the way it sat on the carousel. My eyes caught the top drawer, the one I could never close properly because I had too much crap in it.

I think it's empty.

I had less than 90 seconds to choose.

"It's time to make a decision!" Chaco said. "What'll it be, Carl?"

"Get the chaps!" Donut said. She looked over at Katia. "Katia, tell Carl to get the chaps." Katia said nothing.

The merry-go-round spun, the music getting louder. I had a sudden, irrational urge to pick the motorcycle. Not because I wanted to ride it, but so I could push it out onto the tracks and watch it get hit by a train.

There were several choices that were probably *good* choices. I suspected Mordecai would have me pick the two skill potions. But I didn't have enough information. The trap book, assuming it really was about traps, would probably be filled with useful information. The pile of 2,000 books would also be valuable for multiple reasons. The same with the bombs.

The chaps might be a good choice. But I already looked enough like an idiot. I really didn't want to pick them, not when I didn't know what the enchantment was. They'd obviously added them to the list as a joke, which possibly meant the enchantment would be a joke, too.

Also, none of that stuff seemed super rare, things I couldn't find using other methods. The fan boxes were supposed to be about unique items one couldn't get in the dungeon.

Thirty seconds.

Light glinted again off that odd book with the anarchy symbol. My class was called a Compensated Anarchist. I remembered the last time my eyes had caught a glint of light. It'd saved my life. Was this the same thing? I doubted it, but I went with it anyway. Why not? It was a free prize.

"I pick that one. Prize number six."

"All righty! A choice has been made!" The carousel poofed away, and the book remained suspended in midair. "This is what you've chosen!"

I took a step forward and grabbed the floating book. The dungeon announcer read the description out loud.

Book.

***The Dungeon Anarchist's Cookbook* by Anonymous.**

This is a unique item.

Chicken and Goblin recipes galore! But it's more than that, too. Each recipe is accompanied by a hilarious tale by the anonymous author, recounting some of the zany and madcap misadventures they experienced gathering these mouth-watering recipes. Fun for the whole family! This book is a real hoot.

Yep, I thought. *You done fucked up.*

"Ohh, too bad. That looks like a stinker of a prize. Better luck next time! That's our show, everyone!" Chaco cried. He gave me a baleful glance, and he disappeared. The music abruptly stopped. The living area reappeared. The scent of smoke lingered. I stared at the chair on the ground. We just got fucked.

"Chicken and goblin recipes?" Donut said, incredulous. "We lost Mordecai for a book of recipes? You should have picked the chaps, Carl." She jumped down and moved to the counter, grumbling.

I was about to toss the book into my inventory, but instead I flipped to the first page. It read, "Welcome."

I felt the haptic buzz of my Escape Plan skill activate. Additional words appeared on the mostly-blank page.

Hello, Crawler. As you're about to find, this is a very special book. If you're reading these words, it means this book has found its way into your hands for one purpose and one purpose only.

Together, we will burn it all to the ground.

OceanofPDF.com

The Dungeon Anarchist's Cookbook.

24th Edition.

Potions, Explosives, Traps, Secret Societies, Dungeon Shortcuts, and more. Much more. This guide to creating chaos was originally generated into the system during the fifteenth season. It was awarded to the High Elf Crawler Porthus the Rogue on the ninth floor, disguised as a blank sketchbook. The fact you're reading this indicates that this book and the knowledge within remains active in the code. It has been passed down from dungeon to dungeon. It is automatically generated after a set of predetermined conditions have been met. It will disappear from your inventory upon death or retirement where it will find its way to a worthy recipient in a future crawl.

There is only one price for access to these pages. You must pass your own knowledge on.

In your messaging menu, you will find a scratchpad. If you've yet to discover this, it is a place to mentally write down recipes or thoughts or anything else you wish to recall. If you look now, you will find you have been given one extra page into your scratchpad. Anything you add to this second page will be included in the 25th edition of this book.

While the true contents of this guide are invisible to the showrunners and to the viewers, it is not invisible to the current System AI. There is nothing about owning this book, or the

information hidden within that is against the rules. However, if the organization running this season begins to suspect that this book is more than it appears, or if you tell anyone about the existence of this book, the information within will erase, and you will forever lose access to the hidden text.

This is important. While this book's contents may be invisible, your actions are not. You must become an actor. Every recipe, every secret, if utilized, must be presented to the outside world as if you are discovering this all on your own. How you do that is up to you. Do not spend too much time staring at these pages.

> *<Note added by Crawler Drakea. 22nd Edition> The saferoom restrooms are a good place to read. Just don't take long or you'll get pinched. The rats say there's a Syndicate rule that they can't watch you in the bathroom stalls. This is just for the actual toilets, not the rest of the bathrooms. Dunno if it's true. Those Naga bastards are a suspicious lot, and I fear I may soon be discovered.*

My hands shook. I closed the book and added it to my inventory. The Naga? I remembered that Odette had said the Naga hadn't run a season in a very long time. That was the only season the dungeon lost money. If this note was from the 22nd edition, that meant this book had been in the hands of only two other crawlers since then.

I opened up my messages and found the scratchpad. I usually posted the list of items from Mordecai's daily BOLO in there. The last thing I'd pasted was that awful message from Brandon. But sure enough there was now another tab. I closed it out.

I dragged the chair back to the kitchen counter.

"Come on, guys," I said. "We need to sleep. I gotta use the bathroom, though. Donut I'll be out in a bit."

We watched the recap episode in silence. The loss of Mordecai hung over us like a cloud. Some crawler with two heads and a chained weapon called a meteor hammer killed an entire train full of humanoid salamanders. Lucia Mar made herself a necklace out of monster tongues, but one of her dogs sneaked up and snatched it off her neck while she was sitting in a saferoom eating a bowl of rice. If it wasn't so disgusting, the scene would've been hilarious. They showed us fighting the cornets.

I'd only dared read a few pages of the book. It was presented in curated chapters. All the potion recipes in one, all the explosives in another, and so forth. Not all of it was actual recipes. There was a chapter that did nothing but list types of monsters and their known weaknesses. Some of it was stories. The last section, by the far the biggest, was the remaining notes that didn't fit into a specific chapter, one edition after another. I quickly flipped through. Some crawlers filled pages and pages of text while others only wrote a few short lines. It was going to take a long time for me to get through it all.

I turned to the explosives section, and it contained a list of types of available explosives. A note caught my eye.

<Crawler Sinjin. 15th Edition>

A level 3 sapper's table lets you infuse bombs. Soak a hobgoblin smoke curtain in a healing potion, let it dry, and it mass kills undead like you wouldn't believe.

<Comment added by Crawler Forkith 20th Edition>

Confirmed. Works with bombs too but smoke works better. Doesn't kill high-level undead, but they get mad. I use these to clear rooms of those invisible Swamp Wights.

I slammed the book shut. I knew if I kept reading, I'd never stop.

Later, as I watched the recap episode, I kept thinking about the circumstances that led to Mordecai and that Chaco guy being in the same room. I knew that most viewers didn't see Mordecai. Managers and Game Guides were edited out of the feed. But those with press passes, such as Odette and probably millions of others, could see him. So his existence was no secret.

But was Mordecai's story famous enough for people to make the connection between him and Chaco? Probably not anymore. His mysterious relationship to Odette plus our own popularity likely led to someone making the connection, who then floated the idea of trolling the vote.

I looked up into the air and grinned. "I gotta admit, guys. That whole thing with Chaco was a dick move, but it was brilliantly executed. Good job."

I needed to get over it and move on. Most of the other crawlers didn't have a manager at all. I'd grown to rely on him, sending him queries every time I ran across something I didn't recognize. We were going to have to suck it up and figure out the rest of this floor without him.

Both Daniel Bautista and the book showed me the importance of crowdsourcing information. And while the bounty was a big concern, we couldn't let it force ourselves into isolation. I needed to get out there and add as many people as I could to my chat.

Hello, Crawlers.

At the end of this message, you will receive a new tab in your interface. This is where you can interact with your first sponsor. It will populate at the end of bidding, which will be in about 15 hours. You can see who your sponsors are, what organization they represent, and if they sponsor additional crawlers. They will *not* be able to send you direct messages, but you *can* send messages to them. I highly suggest you thank them for their support and ask them to send you the best loot boxes as possible.

We are currently updating several issues with the train system. Some lines will be down for maintenance. I do not recommend venturing out onto the tracks as the trains may resume at any moment.

That's all for now. Now get out there and kill, kill, kill!

"You know what we need?" Donut asked, looking about. "We need alcohol. And dancing. Let's party."

"You know I don't have a pass to the club, right?" Katia said. "I've told you several times now."

"Oh yeah," Donut said, sounding dejected. "You need to do something bad and get a tattoo."

"What did you guys do to get access?" she asked.

"It doesn't matter," I said, interrupting Donut. We'd received it after the incident with the goblin babies. "I think it might be a better idea for you to try to get into the other club, Club Vanquisher. I don't know what is required, but we'll find out."

She shrugged. "Okay. You guys go have fun. I have stuff I need to do anyway. Mordecai told me of a type of craft table I should buy. I'm going to pick it up while you're out and try to get some work done. Just don't take too long."

The station-only entrance bar was empty. A jackal-faced gnoll stood behind the counter, drinking directly from a bottle of vodka. He ignored us as we pushed through to the double doors. It was just me and Donut. Mongo was safely ensconced in his carrier. Donut had yet to ride him. He started jumping up and down crazily the moment she even approached the saddle.

The bouncer in the small vestibule was the same as it always was, Clarabelle the Crocodilian.

"Where's your manager?" she asked as we walked up. She was the same type of creature as Florin the guy with the shotgun. She was pretty scary looking close up. Through the door we could hear the *thump, thump, thump* of music. Donut bopped her head.

I gave the bouncer a quick recap of what had happened.

She nodded. "Yep, that'll do it. He only gets one warning, I think. So you better remind him to behave when he gets back. I don't really know the story, but your manager has spent many hours crying into his cup, and he's mentioned a list of a few scores he wants to settle once he gets out of here. That Chaco idiot has come up more than once. That's all I really know."

I nodded. "Is it busy tonight?"

"As busy as it ever gets on the fourth floor, which means not really. Casino is now open. Oh, hey, that reminds me. Management wants me to offer private security for your visit. It's 500 gold for the both of you, but if you spend at least that much at the tables you'll get a coupon for free security next time."

"What sort of security?" I asked.

"Nothing fancy. You'll get two bodyguards who'll accompany you anywhere in the club, including areas where security is a bit more lax. Between you and me, it's a rip-off for most of the people who get it. But I know you two are both on that bounty list. I think it's a pretty good idea. We got one other top-ten in the club right now, and she has a guard."

"It's not Lucia Mar is it?" I asked.

Clarabelle grunted. "No. She's been banned for life. Tried to get in a few times now, but we're prepared for her. She's mighty pissed about it, too. No, it's that Frost Maiden and her butterfly friend."

Mrs. McGibbons. Elle. She was here.

"So what's your best price on the security?" Donut asked.

Clarabelle looked at Donut. "Your charm doesn't work on me, little one. My best price is the only price. It's 300 for one person, and 500 for a team of two."

Donut looked as if she was about to object. Before she could say anything, I said, "We'll take it."

Our two guards were both level-35 rock monsters called cretins. One was named Bomo, and the other was "The Sledge." They seemed about as intelligent as one would expect from someone named Bomo and The Sledge, but the 7-foot-tall, tuxedoed monsters followed us at a respectable distance.

I did the hand wave thing to create a privacy bubble over my head as we entered the large, bouncing room. The dance hall was only moderately busier than it had been the last time we were here. I didn't see any elites this time, but there were plenty of crawlers. We were noticed right away. Several people stopped what they were doing to point and stare. A pair of crawlers looked as if they were going to approach, but after a glance at our security, they went back to the dance floor.

I saw Elle before she noticed us. She had a single guard, yet another rock monster who stood behind her with his arms crossed, looking bored. His name was Clay-ton. He put up his rocky hands as we approached.

"No closer," he grumbled.

"She's expecting us," I said.

When I saw Elle on the recap episode, I hadn't realized how small she'd become. She'd been a diminutive woman before, but she'd shrunk to about four and a half feet tall, and her skin was now a light blue, like the sky on a clear day. Her white, haphazardly-cut hair was almost exactly the same as before, but it fit with her smaller frame, and it no longer looked so sickly. She floated about a foot off the ground, and I noted she still wore the anti-slip socks from Meadow Lark. The privacy bubble around her head was like a nimbus, making her look like one of those haloed figures in a renaissance painting. She was leaning over the bar, waving her hand furiously at the badger-headed bartender, who was serving someone else down the line.

"Look at how beautiful she is," Donut whispered. "She's like a vision of pure elegance."

"Yo," Elle cried at the bartender. "Whose dick do I gotta suck to get another drink? Christ."

"Hey, ice princess," I called out. "This one is on me."

Elle didn't turn. "Look, needle dick, buzz off or when my real bodyguard gets back, she's going to add another skull next to her nametag."

"You mean Imani?" I said. "Where is she anyway?"

She turned around at that, eyes going wide.

"Carl! Donut!" she cried, pushing Clay-ton the bodyguard aside. When she moved, her feet didn't touch the ground at all, but she still moved them. Our own two guards stepped forward, but I put up a hand to stop them. She pulled me into a hug, and it felt as if was being wrapped by a pair of icicles. She reached up to pat Donut on the head.

"You got a new tiara! We saw the last one get destroyed on the show."

"I liked that one," Donut said sadly. "It was purple."

I grinned. "I didn't know if you were going to remember me."

Her eyes were almost twice as large as they'd been before. But I could still see it in her face, a resemblance to the ancient woman she'd been.

"I remember most of it. Kinda like watching a movie while tripping and then trying to remember it later. But how could I forget you saving my life? When Jack pissed on the wall… That's not the sort of thing one forgets, even with a brain that's turned into mush. So, you like my new digs?" She floated back, rising further off the ground and spreading her arms out. She moved her legs like she was backing up an invisible staircase. I wondered how high she could fly. "I'm a Frost Maiden. For now."

"It's pretty cool," I said. "I saw you shooting icicles out of your hand."

Behind her, the bartender approached. "You want another?"

She looked back at the badger. "Fuck, man. There's like five real people in here. Are you fermenting the potatoes yourself? I do want another drink. My friend Carl is paying for it. But then we're going to have another one after that, and I'm paying for that one. And don't give me a shitty pour like last time. Carl is having what I'm having. Donut, what do you want?"

"A dirty Shirley! In a bowl! With extra cherries!"

"And the cat is having a dirty Shirley in a bowl. Extra cherries."

I made a quick check of my inventory to make sure I still had some alcohol cure potions. I did.

"So anyway, Frost Maiden ended up being my only real choice." She lowered her hover and leaned up against the bar, feet still floating. "I had a long list of options that'd put all my marbles back in the bag, but Brandon made me pick this one. This is a tricky race, let me tell you. But we went with it because of you, actually."

"Me?" I asked.

"The manager benefit," she said. "You told Brandon about it, and I hadn't yet gone. It usually comes with classes, not races, but it comes with this one. Mistress Tiatha… that's our game guide. Have you ever met her? She was over the moon. I'd never seen her excited before. Turns out she wasn't allowed to say anything. But the moment I picked it, she actually cried. Not that I noticed since I was in the middle of turning into this thing."

"I heard about Brandon," I said, suddenly somber. "He sent me a message."

The bartender plopped down four shots and a bowl on the counter. I handed him the last of my drink coupons and a couple of gold coins. Donut leaped to the counter and ate a cherry.

"Go easy," I said to Donut. "We're not staying long."

Elle nodded. She downed her drink. "Brandon was a good kid. His brother, too. A shame what happened."

"What did happen?" I asked. "He told me they got into a fight, but not the details."

"Miss Imani knows the story better than I do. She's over on the Silk Road getting supplies for the crew. We're the only two of the whole squad who have access to the club. I only got my tattoo because I accidentally shot an icicle up the keister of an orc bartender on that last floor. We'd had to hightail it out of town after that." She laughed. "That guy will be shitting ice cubes for the next three seasons."

Obviously, going from a dementia-suffering, 99-year-old woman in a wheelchair to this fairy ice mage was going to alter one's personality. But there was more to it, too. She had an edge to her. In

the short time I'd known the woman before, I'd caught hints of that, but I hadn't realized she was so… loud. I wondered how close this personality matched with how she was when she'd been younger.

"How many are you?" I asked. I took the first shot and almost gagged. It tasted like rubbing alcohol. "Oh god, what is this?"

She laughed. "It's called Knockout. It's got a kick. It's the dungeon's version of Everclear. My Barry and I used to get blackout drunk on that shit."

Next to me, Donut ate another cherry out of her bowl. She jumped to The Sledge's shoulder and asked him to take her dancing. They started to lumber toward the floor. I looked up at Bomo. "You go, too. Watch her. Elle's guard can watch the both of us."

The rock monster grumbled but complied.

"Anyway, there's twenty of us left. Imani is the only one remaining from the kids. She still acts like a babysitter. I keep telling her that she doesn't need to wipe our asses anymore, but she doesn't care. She's going to die from an ulcer before the dungeon gets her… Speak of the devil. Here she comes."

I turned.

Crawler #12,329,440. "Imani C."

Level 24.

Race: Obsidian Butterfly.

Class: Fire Spiritualist.

She had transformed into a gaunt, skull-faced vision. Imani had been a skinny woman before, but now she looked as if she weighed half of that. A white skull was painted on her face, reminding me of the Danger Dingos.

But most striking were the translucent, ethereal butterfly wings trailing behind her. The four wings were a striking mix of orange, yellow, red, white, and black. Almost like a monarch butterfly, but more saturated. She had to have a twelve foot wingspan. As she walked, the wings passed through columns and dancing NPCs and Crawlers. They were not physical wings, but I noticed the dancers reacted when the wings touched them. It was a quick thing, but each of them gave off a very subtle glow for a moment after the wings passed through.

"Hello, Carl," Imani said. She folded her wings back. "I see my message found you."

Imani turned and scanned the room, eyes resting on Donut, who was in the middle of the dance floor, bopping on the shoulders of The Sledge. She twirled while the rock bodyguard was doing an approximation of the robot. A crowd had circled around them, and they were chanting, "Go Donut! Go Donut! Go Donut!" Thankfully Bomo appeared to be paying attention. Plus additional guards circled the room, eyes wary.

I don't know why you're being so paranoid. You shouldn't be more afraid of your own people than the monsters.

"Those are some wings," I said. "Can you fly with them?"

"Not yet," she said. "When we get to the sixth floor, I have to choose between two paths. One will let me fly. The other will keep them as they are."

"She's a support race and class," Elle said. She'd managed to get another drink. I realized she'd pinched my second one. That was okay. "She can claw your eyes out, but mostly she sits back and keeps everyone's health topped off."

"A healer," I said. "Just like you and Yolanda were before."

Her eyes clouded over at the mention of Yolanda. "Do you know about Brandon? He said he sent you a message."

I nodded. "What happened with his brother?"

"That's why I wanted to talk to you," she said. She pointed over at Clay-ton the bodyguard. "Chris picked a rock race, like these guys, but a different kind. Called an igneous. He looks like he's made out of lava rocks and is covered in little holes. I don't know if you've seen them. He got very strong, but it changed his personality." She gave a sidelong glance to Elle. "Race changes seem to do that to some people. He was fine the first couple of days, and then all of a sudden he and his brother were fighting a lot. Chris wanted to spend every minute of every day hunting and killing. He wanted to go out and reconnect with you two. He says you're aggressive, and he respected that. He insisted you were just south of us. I don't know why he thought that. But Brandon wanted to stick close to the stairwell and spend the days training close to the exit. They got into

a fight, and several of the men left with Chris. This was right around the time you left the floor."

Elle laughed. "Then Henry got pulled into an alleyway and banged some succubus witch who ended up giving birth to thousands of these little goblin monsters called Shade Gremlins. It started this whole thing. You should've seen it. Those green fuckers were everywhere. They all had Henry's face."

"Henry?" I asked.

Imani shook her head, apparently irritated with Elle. "He was one of the residents. He died, along with Brandon, protecting our escape."

I let a second pass in honor of Brandon. Donut was now wrapped around The Sledge's head, like she was slow dancing, even though the music was the same EDM beat as before. She'd only eaten two or three cherries, and I could see that she was plastered.

"Chris hasn't talked to you?" I asked.

"No," Imani said. "I can see he's alive. He's the only one of those who broke away who still is. He won't answer us. But I know he's looking for you. I thought you should know the story before he finds you."

"I appreciate that," I said. "And it's good to see you. Before you guys go, though, let's get into each other's chat. Plus I want to show you something. I want your thoughts on this." I pulled out the roll of paper Mordecai left on the floor by his alchemy table, the one with all the known train stations mapped out. "Let's find a table where we can look over this together. We need to figure out…"

A loud commotion from the dance floor turned my attention back.

I'd only looked away for a second. Bomo and The Sledge were on their backs. The crowd, both the NPCs and crawlers were screaming and running back. The remaining bouncers rushed toward the center of the club.

In the center of the floor stood Donut, swaying. Her health was in the deep red. Her cockroach skill had activated, the skill that saved her from dying from the first killing blow.

The entire front of her was covered in blood. A human crawler lay dying on the floor, blood geysering from a slash across his neck. A moment passed, and the man went still.

A single skull formed, appearing after Donut's name.

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[9]

I WAS OUT OF MY CHAIR, GAUNTLET FORMING BEFORE I REALIZED WHAT I WAS doing. I was prepared to drop a smoke curtain, or if necessary, *Protective Shell*. But would that work against fellow crawlers? I tried to remember if Frank and Maggie's dots had turned red when they attacked us. *Shit. I don't think they did.* That meant *Protective Shell* would be useless.

The crowd, which had been running, stopped at the edges of the dance floor. The music stopped abruptly. Donut remained there in the middle, looking at the man she had killed.

Multiple bodyguards moved in from all directions, moving slowly. Since I didn't know what had happened, I feared they were coming for her. I quickly assessed the situation.

Both of the cretin bodyguards were alive, but they'd been stunned. They each only had a few seconds left before they'd wake up. A glowing, bloody dagger lay on the floor.

The corpse had been about 25 years old, Asian. His name was Ji-Hoon. He'd been a level 21 **Knife Sharpener**.

"Carl?" Donut asked as I rushed up. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

"Shoulder," I cried, turning to face the guards. "Then heal yourself."

Donut leaped to my shoulder. The guards didn't attack us. One stood over the body of the fallen crawler. The others moved to help Bomo and The Sledge. None of their dots were red. I relaxed, but only slightly.

"You're okay," I said. I pulled the alcohol cure potion and held it up. "Take it."

"I'm sorry," Donut repeated. She'd healed her own health, but it didn't cure her of her inebriation. She'd used a potion instead of the *Heal* spell. She took the alcohol cure potion into her inventory, but it'd be a few minutes until her potion sickness wore off. She started to sob. "Carl, I never wanted to get a skull. I'm sorry. Nobody is going to like me now."

"It's okay," I said, anger rising at the dead guy by the moment. "What happened?"

"The lady, she cast a spell and my guy and the other rock guy fell, and I fell too, because Sledgie was stunned, and the other guy had a knife and…"

"*What lady*?" I snapped before she could finish, my eyes scanning the crowd.

Whoosh.

A woman from the crowd flew forward. She tumbled to a stop at my feet. A two-foot-long icicle erupted from her eye socket. She'd been pierced from behind.

"That lady," said Donut.

Imani and Elle rushed forward, joining us on the dance floor. The bouncers parted to let them pass.

"She was about to blast you two," said Elle, looking about for additional threats. Both of her hands glowed. I watched as a skull appeared after her name. She didn't seem to care. "I get dibs on her gear. Donut, loot the one you killed before we get kicked out of here."

Imani took up a position behind us, wings fully spread. I shuddered as she brought us into an ethereal hug.

You've been Juiced! 10% Temporary buff to Strength!

You've been Shrouded! 10% Temporary damage reduction!

You've been Trolled! 25% Temporary acceleration to healing!

"I didn't want to kill anybody," Donut said once again. "Maybe those stupid dogs. But not a person. Not a real person."

I reached up and rubbed Donut's head. An even larger crowd had formed around us, everybody staring. The bouncers all stood still and didn't move, as if unsure what to do. In the far corner of the club, from the unmarked door that led into the back, a tall, shadowy figure emerged. It paused, taking in the scene. A second figure also came from the back. This was a small fairy, buzzing about the other figure's head.

"You didn't do anything wrong," I whispered to Donut, who continued to quietly sob. "They attacked you, and you defended yourself. There's no need to be upset. If you hadn't killed him, you'd be dead now. And don't worry about people not liking you. Nobody will get mad at you for this. Trust me."

"Are you sure?" she sniffed.

"I am positive," I said.

I took a moment to puzzle over Donut's reaction. She didn't blink at killing a trainload of monsters, or NPCs for that matter. She wasn't human. She'd never been human. But for some reason she was having a really hard time with this. I knew part of it was because she was drunk. Every day she was growing into a more and more complicated creature. She was far removed from the cat who had first emerged in Mordecai's guild all those days ago.

"Anybody else want to try something?" Elle shouted. "You come for Donut or Carl, you come for all of us. I will freeze the blood in your veins and make your genitals shatter like glass!"

"Easy tiger," I said. "I think it's over."

"That's right it's over," she called. She glared at a dwarf crawler. "You giving me the hairy eyeball? Back the fuck up!"

"Me?" the dwarf squeaked. "No, no, sorry." He took several steps back.

"Is she always like this?" I asked Imani, who just shook her head. I was starting to see why Elle was in the top 10 and Imani wasn't.

"Don't you think anything about it," Elle said, speaking to Donut. "Don't you cry. This was inevitable. Once word gets out how you handled it, nobody is going to mess with you again."

The tall figure in the back of the room turned and disappeared into the club's offices. The smaller figure, a hand-sized fairy, buzzed through the air and approached. The figure barked at bouncers who jumped at her command. Bomo, The Sledge, and Clay-ton approached, heads down.

The fairy was clearly female, but she wore a tuxedo like the bouncers. Her raven hair was tied up in a severe bun. Tiny red sparkles followed her as she flew through the air.

Astrid – Bloodlust Sprite. Level 125.

Assistant Manager of the Desperado Club.

The Bloodlust Sprite is one of the rarest, most deadly of the Sprites. They are naturally imbued with Cardiovascular Magic, allowing them a wide range of attacks and abilities over any creature that uses a circulatory system. It is said they have the ability to cause one's heart to beat so quickly, it literally bursts into flames, which is both disgusting and one of the most metal things ever.

WARNING: This is a fairy-class NPC. NPCs of this class inflict 20% more damage against you due to your goblin pass.

Level 125? Holy shit. I also noted the lack of the usual "This is a non-combatant NPC" in her description.

"Princess Donut," Astrid said, coming to hover over us. Her deep, serious voice didn't seem as out of place with her fairy appearance as one might expect. "On behalf of management, I'd like to personally apologize for our security's inexcusable failure. While we guarantee no one's safety within this establishment, that changes the moment someone employs personal security. You have my word that this will be dealt with swiftly." She looked over her shoulder to glare at Bomo and The Sledge, who stood rigidly.

Donut sniffed. She glowed, and I knew she'd finally taken the sober potion. She straightened on my shoulder. "It's quite all right."

"Nevertheless," Astrid said. "We will refund you the 400 gold, and you and Carl will be granted complimentary security from now on."

"We appreciate that," I said, interrupting Donut, who was about to correct the Sprite. We had paid 500 gold for the guards, not 400.

Clarabelle had cheated us. I filed that information away.

"Very well," Astrid said, turning away.

"One more thing," I said. The sprite stiffened and then turned.

"How you run this establishment is none of our business," I said. I gestured at the two guards. "But you can't blame them for what happened. We would consider it a personal favor if you didn't punish these guys too harshly. Donut and I have taken a liking to them. We'd like them each time we're here as our own security. Including for the remainder of this evening."

"You are correct, crawler. It is none of your business." She paused. "But your request is not out of line. Very well. It is done." She turned and buzzed away.

The two rock monsters stared at us curiously. They'd fucked up, but I suspected I'd just saved their rocky asses. I'd trust them much more than someone else. Especially if that someone else knew we were responsible for their friends getting fired, or worse.

Elle clapped her hands together, and shards of snow flew everywhere. "Now that's what I call entertainment."

The four of us sat down at a table and unrolled the paper. I'd made Donut loot the body of the dead human. He had a lot of armor, all giving a few stat point boosts. I figured we'd give most of it to Katia. He also held a dozen daggers, each with a different enchantment. The one he stabbed Donut with had a 100% damage bonus if it was stabbed into someone's back. It would have killed her instantly if it hadn't been for Donut's cockroach ability.

Donut sat quietly at the table. She ordered a regular, nonalcoholic Shirley Temple and sat there munching on cherries.

"We're here," Imani said, looking over our map. She traced a line, intersecting several paths and then pointed at a stop. "If you want to meet up, we can do it there."

"Mordecai found a pattern in all of this, but I think he had outside information," I said. "We need to figure it out."

"Other than the transfer station patterns, I don't really see it," Elle said. She seemed bored. Our three guards surrounded the table, arms crossed. She licked her lips as she watched a large, shirtless NPC elf gyrate on the dance floor.

"What's the transfer station pattern?" I asked.

"All of them are prime numbers," she said. She tapped the numbers of all the checked-off transfer stations. Then she pointed to a note Mordecai had written and circled in the corner that said, "Prime." I hadn't even noticed it. "I thought you already knew that."

"What's a prime number?" Donut asked, speaking for the first time.

"It's a math thing," I said. "You learn about them in fourth or fifth grade, and then you don't need to know about it ever again unless you become a mathematician. Or a math teacher."

Elle grunted. "It sounds to me like you need to know about them right now."

"We don't have enough information," Imani said. "We need to know what happens inside of these every five stations where the mobs all get off. And more importantly, we need to know what happens at the end of the line."

"Agreed," I said. "Let's do this. We keep talking to others to see if they've figured anything out. In the meantime, you take your team and investigate one of these fifth platforms. Donut and I are going to get our hands on one of these engineers."

"Those engine cars are locked up tight, hotshot. How are you going to get one of the engineers out?" Elle asked.

I grinned.

We said our goodbyes to Imani and Elle. We stopped by the Silk Road and sold some items and picked up a few explosives, including an additional case of smoke curtains. I also bought some items from Mordecai's list. The large booth that supposedly sold trap supplies

wasn't open yet, but instead of an empty space, the skeletal outline of a booth was there, indicating it'd likely be open soon.

From there we checked out the newly-opened row of guilds. This was a dark hallway lined with doors, each with a word or two written over them. Most of the skills were rogue-themed, from Lockpicking to Sleight of Hand. There were several rooms not yet opened. But one of the rooms was listed as "Dodge."

We tried to open the door, but it was locked. A note appeared.

This room is only accessible to Crawlers with a Dodge skill of Seven or better.

Donut's skill was only six, but after another session or two in the training room, she'd hit seven.

Bomo and The Sledge followed us diligently, growling at any NPC or crawler who got too close. They didn't speak or acknowledge what had happened earlier, though they did appear more contrite, in their own sort of rocky way. I tried talking to Bomo who just stared back at me blankly. I knew they could talk. Clay-ton had spoken. Once. But they used those words like they had a finite supply.

I remembered Chris had been like that, careful with his words. A rock monster was a perfect choice for him.

Finally, we headed to the casino.

While not as glitzy and loud as a Vegas casino, the room's purpose was clear the moment we entered. There were six card tables, a roulette table, a vertical wheel of fortune type game, and a craps table. These were all earth-based games, and I wondered on that. I knew we shared some cultural markers with the rest of the universe, but I wondered how that worked with the gambling area. Were the games different every season? I suspected they were. There were no slot machines. NPCs huddled over the smoky tables, quietly gambling. I wondered how that worked with the NPCs, if they were automatons like the dancers. I only saw one other crawler, a dragon-headed woman leaning over a card table playing blackjack.

Like with the previous hallways, the moment we entered, the thump of the dance floor disappeared. It was replaced with a sultry, jazz-like song being played over a loudspeaker. The music was a mix

of voice and freeform synth. I wondered if it was Manasa, the murdered naga. The song was unlike anything I'd heard before, almost intoxicating. I suspected there was magic in the music, designed to get us to spend more money.

I counted eight tuxedoed guards in the room. These were not cretins, but more crocodilians. They watched us through beady, suspicious eyes.

This room was about the size of the dance floor, making it smaller than I expected. However, a pair of opulent, spiral staircases were closed, leading down. I suspected there were additional casino games at the lower levels. The stairs were right next to the entrance, and each were guarded. One led down to the Hunting Grounds. The other was labeled **Larracos**. I could hear laughter, shouting, and raucous cheering coming up from this second stairwell.

"What's Larracos?" I asked Bomo, who just stared at me blankly.

"Larracos is the capital city of the disputed lands," one of the nearby guards said. He was a level-45 crocodilian named Igor. "It is the prize over which the factions fight."

"They sound like they're having a good time down there," Donut said. She'd been sitting quietly on my shoulder this whole time, but she was starting to return to her normal self.

"Their fighting is mostly good-natured," Igor said. "The Desperado Club is where they come to unwind. The armies of the factions aren't allowed to start conquering each other until you lot reach the ninth floor. So until then, the serious commanders train their units, and the rest party. The gambling that occurs on that level is done with credits, not gold."

I nodded. The ninth floor was like a distant, looming stop sign. An impending disaster. But at this point, I doubted we'd ever make it down there, and there was nothing we could about it now other than train.

I held up my 100,000 gold comp chip I'd received long ago. "I want to cash this in."

He peered at it. "You got two options. You can turn it in at the Wheel of Fortune game right now, or you can hold on to it and use it

at the High Rollers Roulette Table. That's not the roulette table that's here. You'd have to wait until the sixth floor."

I strongly suspected it would be better to hold onto it, but at this point, I didn't care. It had been one blow after another recently, and we needed to have some fun. "I never liked roulette anyway," I said. That was Bea's game. We walked over to the wheel of fortune game.

On the way there, we passed the roulette table. The guy running the game was human, and the NPCs playing were a mix of elves, human, and orcs. I noted that the symbols on the table were not two different colors and numbers, but a strange mix of four different colors and different symbols, like bones and knives, and a ringed planet.

The wheel of fortune was a vertical, round wheel filled with random prizes. A little more than half of the spaces were red and with labels such as "Nothing!" and "Get stabbed in the stomach by the croupier" and "Get poisoned" and "Vomit blood for ten minutes straight."

Some of the good prizes, however, were *very* good. They were "A new pet" and "50,000 gold" and "A Legendary Weapon box." Others weren't great, but they would still be considered a prize. Like "Unlimited Free Handies over at Bitches or Penis Parade." The others were mostly Platinum and Legendary boxes. Most of the spots were the same size, except the Nothing! spot took up two spaces and one of them, 500,000 gold, was a tiny sliver with "Spin Again" on either side.

"Oh fuck this," I said, looking over the list of items. I wasn't about to risk landing on a red spot. The cost of a single spin was 10,000 gold. "Let's wait until Mordecai comes back and…"

"I see you got a chip," the human running the wheel said, interrupting. The bald man was named Tito, and he was huge. He was taller than me and looked like he came out of central casting for a mob enforcer. He only had one tooth in his mouth. It listed him as **Desperado Club Wheel of Fortune Croupier. Also, the guy who will stab you.** "The comp chips are for a hundred grand, which is the maximum bet. Every bet over the minimum removes one of the red spots and adds a positive one. So if you use the

comp, only two red spots will remain, which leaves 22 positive results. It will be the Nothing! spot and one more.

"Which one?" I asked, my eyes focusing on one that said, "Every hair on your body turns into a snake for five seconds."

The large man pulled out a large, serrated knife and stuck it into the table. "Guess."

"Don't do it, Carl," said Donut. "You're going to get stabbed in the stomach. This game never plays fair."

"Hey," the man said, sounding offended. "This game is 100% on the up-and-up." I looked over at Bomo, who shrugged. One of the good prizes was a "Choose any skill to level-up potion." I'd love to get my hands on that one.

"Is your dagger enchanted?" I asked, peering at it.

"Nope," he said. "Nobody has ever died from me stabbing them. And that's the god's honest truth." He smiled sheepishly. "Nobody playing the game, I mean. I stabbed plenty on me off time."

I calculated the odds in my head. There were 24 spots. It was 25, really, since the Nothing! spot was a double. Assuming the game was fair, which Mordecai said it was, then I had a what? Slightly worse than a 10% chance of not winning a prize? And really, it was only a one in 25 chance of a terrible result. Getting stabbed would suck, but the odds were no worse than anything else we were doing. I plunked the chip on the table. "Let's do this."

Tito slapped his hands together. "Excellent." He looked up at Donut on my shoulder. "You'll have to step back, I'm afraid madam."

Donut grumbled and jumped to The Sledge's shoulder, who showed no reaction. But a moment later, the rock monster reached up and gave her a surprisingly gentle pat.

"All bets are in!" Tito announced. The wheel flashed, rearranging itself. Several spots changed. Two red spots remained on the wheel. **Nothing!** And **Get stabbed in the stomach by the croupier**. He reached up and gave the wheel a mighty spin. It started clicking loudly as it spun.

"Come on! Come on!" Donut cried from The Sledge's shoulder, her voice rising in excitement. "Big money! Big money!"

I relaxed. This was the real reason I'd done this. The wheel spun for an absurdly long time. It eventually started to slow. It passed the "Get stabbed" box, ticking slowly to a spot. It approached the thin spot awarding 500,000 gold.

"Carl, Carl!" Donut cried. "Carl we're gonna win big!"

Click. Click. Click.

"No!" Donut cried.

It'd stopped on **Spin Again**.

"Spin again!" Tito shouted. He reached up and spun it again.

Behind me at the roulette table, an NPC screamed. I turned to see the floor open up underneath him, and he fell, disappearing in the hole. His screams got quieter and quieter as he fell. Additional, ethereal screams emanated from the hole, and a ghostly, clawed arm rose up from the darkness before turning into smoke and dissipating. The trap door slammed shut.

"What the hell was that?" I asked.

Tito shrugged. "They also got a Nothing! spot on the roulette wheel. Works a little different though. You have to bet that you *won't* land on the spot. But if you do, you're fucked. That game is much safer than this one, but I got the better prizes."

"Wait, what?" I said, alarmed. "That's what happens if I land on 'Nothing?'"

Tito grinned. "Yeah, the Nothing sure is something."

I watched in horror as the wheel decelerated, perilously close to **Nothing!** *Click, click*… The little needle hung onto the last spot, and I held my breath. The needle settled on a green spot. Holy fuck. That would have served me right.

"Winner!" Tito shouted. I landed on Scroll of Upgrade.

It appeared on the table in front of me. A twenty-minute countdown timer appeared. I'd received one of these before. I had twenty minutes to read it. It upgraded a random one of my currently-equipped items. Mordecai had warned me last time not remove anything before reading it as the system tended to fuck you over if you did that. The last time I'd done this, it had added to my boxers.

I picked up the scroll, took a breath, and read it.

I felt my foot buzz. I looked down to see my toe ring glowing.

Enchanted Toe Ring of the Splatter Skunk. (Upgraded)

The item has been upgraded once.

Imbues wearer with +10 Strength and gives +5 to the skill Powerful Strike. Also, it's a toe ring. It's probably uncomfortable and it makes you look like one of those hippie assholes who sit around in a field juggling and hula-hooping all day.

The toe ring had gone from +3 in strength to +10, adding 7 points. But more importantly, my Powerful Strike skill went up two additional skill levels. I had a base of seven with the skill, so with the plus five and the one more from my gauntlet, I had a skill of 13, which meant after all my other skill upgrades with punching and kicking, my damage was now multiplied by 13. Just two levels more before I started to see some serious upgrades and benefits. The closer I got it to 20, the more godly my damage became.

"Want another go?" Tito asked.

"Yeah, no," I said. "I think my gambling days are over for now."

Tito appeared disappointed. He looked forlornly at his knife. "Suit yourself."

"What're we doing now?" Donut asked.

"We're going back to base," I said. "We have an hour of training to do, I need to build a few things at the table, and then we're going to crash the shit out of a train."

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[10]

We returned to find Hekla sitting on the couch in our base drinking an Arby's milkshake.

"What do you think?" she asked, jumping up the moment we appeared. She held out her arms. She spilled some of the shake onto the couch.

"No eyeshadow," Donut said. "She doesn't wear makeup. And she's a lot bigger. But you did a really good job."

Only then did I see the name over her head said "Katia."

"Wow," I said after a moment. "That's really good. If I was Hekla I'd be weirded out right now, but that's great. Are you able to change the name over your head?"

"Sort of," she said. "It's an ability called 'Walk in Their Shoes,' and I can only turn it on if my appearance matches their appearance by at least 90%. This Hekla is only 65%. It's the best I can do."

"It looks a lot better than 65% to me," I said. "It had me fooled."

"I'm working on it. I bought a new table that Mordecai told me about. It's called a Makeup Table, and at level three, I can superimpose the face of any monster or crawler or NPC I've met on the glass, which makes sculpting much easier. Plus it doesn't hurt when I sit at the table, and now I can save three designs and call them up on demand. Once I get it to level five, it supposedly comes with a full-sized mirror so I can do the rest of the body just as easily."

"Level three? You used your upgrade coupons?" I asked, trying my best not to sound horrified.

"Yes, I did. It is so much easier now. I think I've perfected my blocking build, too."

Mordecai was going to be pissed. I knew he wanted to talk her into using the two upgrade coupons on his own alchemy table. I supposed they were *her* coupons. Still, using them on upgrading a skill that was only moderately useful seemed like a colossal waste. But now that she had it, we were going to have to get creative with her shapes.

"We have some more armor for you," I said as Donut piled the greaves, shoulder pads, and helmet onto the ground. These were all from the assassin. They gave a combined upgrade to +8 in her strength and +4 to her dexterity. But more importantly, it added to her mass.

"Where did you get this stuff? Oh my god, Donut. What happened?" She'd finally noticed the skull over the cat's head. Her form shifted, and she returned back to her normal self, her real version I'd only seen up in the production trailer. The only difference was she kept her purple mohawk instead of her normal black hair. And the knee-high boots. She was also much taller, thanks to her increased mass.

"Oh, it was but a trifle," Donut said. She licked her paw, as if it truly was nothing. "A poor crawler thought he could keep up with me, and I accidentally had to rip his throat out. Honestly, I barely remember the incident. I did have a cherry or two too many. Now if you'll excuse me, I have training to do."

She flipped her tail and walked into the training room.

Katia raised an eyebrow and looked at me. I shrugged. "I'll tell you about it later. We have a busy day ahead of us."

I used my hour to train my Bare Knuckle skill. I really needed to work on my Powerful Strike, which was a more general, catch-all

fighting skill than the punching-only Bare Knuckle, but since I'd practiced it the day before, I wanted to see if training it two days in a row would level it up. It worked. My skill moved up to level nine just before my hour was up. Donut spent her time practicing her Dodge skill, leveling it up to seven, which meant she now had access to that training guild.

From there I spent another hour working on a few different items at the engineering bench. After, I moved to my sapper table. I utilized my Demolition Workshop tab for the first time, which allowed me to remove bombs from my inventory and examine them, pulling up schematics and information about the bomb's content and yield. It also told me an item's rate of decay under different stress environments, something that would be important to know. It was a lot to take in. I dared going to use the rest room twice, both times to quickly consult the cookbook. I experimented my bomb deconstructing skill by taking apart several fused hob-lobbers. The fuses themselves could be useful. The stability of bombs and explosives did not degrade at all when I stood at the bench, allowing me the freedom to cut sticks of dynamite in half or bundle them together.

While I did that, Donut spent the time attempting to ride Mongo. After about ten minutes of coaxing, she finally managed to leap onto the saddle. The moment she landed on the dinosaur's back, a translucent strap appeared, wrapping around Donut's waist, affixing her to the saddle.

Mongo screeched and bucked like a bronco, causing me and Katia to stop what we were doing and laugh. Donut was magically attached to the saddle, but there appeared to be a limit to the adhesiveness, and she was thrown multiple times. Eventually, he calmed down, but he looked miserable. He didn't move from his spot in the middle of the crafting room. He just stood there, eyes pleading. The dinosaur gave me a look that said, *get this thing off of me*.

"How are you going to control him?" I asked. "There aren't any reins."

"Mongo and I have a psychic bond, Carl. You've never been a mother, so you wouldn't understand."

Mongo suddenly squealed and bucked, tossing Donut halfway across the room. She hissed, poofing out before landing on all fours atop Mordecai's alchemy table, causing vials and supplies to scatter.

"Mongo, bad!" she cried as Katia and I howled.

Mongo grunted in derision and rolled onto his back in an attempt to dislodge the saddle.

"You're gonna need more than a psychic bond," I said.

We spent the next few hours riding the lines, switching from one track to the next, grinding and training. After speaking with Imani and Bautista and coordinating where the best the place to do this was, we ended up at a platform on the ochre line. The four of us stood on the platform, overlooking the track.

"What I really need is a multimeter. One at the end of a long stick," I said. I leaned over to stare at the three rails. "We don't even know if this is really electrified or not. I'm pretty sure it is. That third rail is raised off the ground and uses insulators. There's a possibility they're fucking with us. Or worse, the grounding is jacked to hell, and anything that goes down there will catch an arc."

"So how are we going to figure it out without getting ourselves zapped?" Katia asked, also leaning over to peer out onto the track.

"Do you want me to send a clockwork Mongo down there?" Donut asked.

"No, but that's a really good idea," I said. "I want to test these things first."

I pulled a curved metal rod from my inventory with the wired hob-lobber fuse. I'd made several of these earlier for just this sort of thing. I tossed it out onto the tracks, connecting the two main rails with the third rail. *Pop*! The hob-lobber fuse blew the moment it hit the metal. The metal stick continued to crackle and glow. A moment

later it vibrated itself off the third rail. It finally stopped crackling. I didn't see any arcing.

"Well, something is hot down there. And we know the fuse works." I repeated the experiment, tossing the fuses onto each of the three rails, just to be certain. The only time the fuse blew was when it hit the third rail and something else. That made me reasonably certain that the hot line was the third rail, as it should be. I still wasn't confident we wouldn't get a shock if we touched the main track, but the fact the tracks were physically grounded suggested we would be fine. *Famous last words*, I thought.

Just to be extra certain, I allowed Donut to cast *Clockwork Triplicate* on Mongo. She'd leveled the spell up to five, which now allowed the two duplicates to exist for 10 minutes. The robot dinosaurs both had little saddles on them now. She then ordered the two dinos down onto the tracks. The moment one of them touched the third rail, it exploded, showering the platform with little gears and springs. Both Mongo and the other dino squawked with concern.

A train pulled up, bumping and crunching over the metal on the track. I cringed as it hit and destroyed the second clockwork Mongo. Since this was the ochre line, it was full of mobs we hadn't seen yet. They ranged from lumpy wolf monsters with tentacles to small, fairy-like skunks that clutched onto butcher knives three times bigger than themselves. Donut blasted a pair of the skunks as the door opened. While she did that, I spray-painted a big X on the side of the carriage. We stepped back as it pulled away.

If this worked as intended, both Meadow Lark and Bautista's crew would have a warning that the train with the X would be the last one coming down the line for a while.

"Okay guys, you ready for this?" I asked. I didn't wait for an answer. Katia, Donut, and Mongo retreated to the back of the platform as I pulled the first of the two devices from my inventory.

I gently placed it on the platform and watched it for a few moments to make sure it didn't deteriorate on its own. According to the Demolitions Workshop menu, the device was stable against anything except heavy impact. Still, I watched that status number nervously. It did not lower. I pulled out the fishing pole I'd cobbled

together, hooked the tire-sized device up, and I gently lowered it onto the track, keeping it as far away from the third rail as possible. I moved down to the far end of the platform and placed a second charge a half of a car's length into the tunnel.

For our first derailment, I decided to keep it simple. I originally wanted to build a metal ramp that'd fit snugly on the two rails, something that'd cause the first car to lift away and to the side, derailing it nice and clean. But I didn't have the proper measurements. So instead I went with a classic. Landmines.

The devices resembled tire-shaped cross sections of the spike-covered contact mines that were widely used in naval warfare in the early 20th century. I'd gotten the idea for the plunger from the cookbook. I'd changed it up just enough to make it look like I'd come up with the idea on my own. It hadn't taken long to build. Basically it was an oblong, hob-lobber-stuffed metal tube with a single, hopefully-stable hobgoblin stick of dynamite added for extra measure. The system labeled it a **Jelly Bomb**, presumably after a jelly donut. I did not get credit for inventing it. When the train hit it, one of the spikes would be depressed and would smash an impact-detonated hob-lobber, causing the whole mine to shred and explode. The metal on the top half of the bomb was scored into triangle-shapes for added shrapnel. I'd built the plungers using the Gorgon Marital aid. We hadn't yet been able to test it, and I was nervous about a premature detonation. Especially while I was setting it. I was reasonably certain two of these would be enough to dislodge the train from the track. Hopefully I didn't end up killing the engineer. Or myself.

Once the two landmines were set, I joined the others at the top of the stairs. If anything went wrong—like we accidentally unleashed a horde of flying skunk fairies on the station—we'd either retreat into the safe room or hop onto another line depending on what happened.

I looked over my shoulder and examined the small transit station. The three shops were a pho restaurant, a general store, and a well-kept, church-like building, which was the entrance to Club Vanquisher. The door to the club opened, and a ram-headed cleric in

robes stepped out to regard us. He glared at us for a moment before returning inside.

Elle: Hey stud. We explored through one of those five stations. You wouldn't believe what we found. We had to fight three neighborhood bosses. There's a borough boss, too, but we left her alone. Imani says she's an old friend of yours. A miss Krakaren.

Carl: Oh wow. I hope you guys are okay. Now's not a good time. We'll talk in a bit.

Elle: Okay, big guy. Tell Donut I said hello.

I remembered the description of the first, tentacled Krakaren boss had said there were many of them. If this one was a borough boss, that meant she was probably a lot bigger. The original Krakaren we'd fought had been using her body along with the brindle grubs to produce their Rev-Up moonshine. I wondered what this one was up to.

The ground rumbled, signifying the approach of the next train.

"I'm moderately excited about this, Carl," said Donut.

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[11]

Ka-Blam!

Even from the top of the stairs, the detonation was deafening. The ground shook. Mongo screeched in fear. Dust cascaded from the ceiling. A horrific screeching and crashing noise filled the platform below, and even more smoke and dust billowed up. Katia grasped onto my arm for support, and Donut leaped to my shoulder, digging her claws in. The crashing echoed below our feet, followed a moment later by a second explosion that echoed through the tumult like a shotgun blast.

Level Up! You are now level 29.

Three stat points gained.

New achievement! Locomotive Breath!

While it's not exactly a feat of engineering worthy of a Queen Elizabeth Prize, you finally managed to manufacture a train derailment. Let's hope this doesn't set off some sort of unforeseen domino effect that will ripple throughout the rest of the floor, leading to mass confusion and death amongst you and your fellow crawlers.

***Reward*: You've received a Gold Engineering Box!**

That was ominous.

"Okay," I said as the explosions and crumpling sounds finally ceased. "Let's get moving. Donut, do you see any red dots?"

"No," she said. "There are some corpses on the platform. I think one of the cars broke open."

"Let's go down there. Katia, keep a timer going. Eight minutes."

If the next train down the line didn't stop, we needed to be out of there for the next crash. And the one after that. I didn't know how this was going to play, but first we needed to look at what we'd done.

"Wow," Donut said as we went down the stairs into the smoke-filled room. The engine car was on its side, the top almost reaching the inside wall of the platform. I couldn't see the bottom of the train at this angle, but smoke billowed from underneath, most of it venting into the ceiling. The engine was still attached to part of car number two, which had been twisted and peeled away like a tin can. Dead tentacle wolves and skunk fairies lay scattered about the passenger car, some of them having rolled onto the platform. This second car was half on the track, back raised, half twisted forward and on its side, leaving a massive rent where the roof once was. I didn't know if the crash had killed the mobs or if they automatically died once they were exposed to the air of this platform.

"There are still some mobs alive in the back cars of the train," Donut said. "I can see the white dot of the conductor. I don't see the engineer, but I never did before."

"Good," I said. I felt relief that we hadn't killed the conductor.

"The train jumped the track, but the engine car doesn't look hurt," Katia said. "It's on its side, but it's all in one piece. It ripped that other car in half when it flipped over."

"It must be made out of stronger stuff," I said, picking my way down the bottom of the stairs. The train had bowled over the magical sign in the center of the platform. Hunks of metal were everywhere. Dozens of small fires burned. If they didn't have the vent system, this place would be completely full of black, choking smoke.

We moved to the peeled half of the second car, approaching the gangway, which had been flayed open, creating a window to the tracks below. Debris littered the ground, sparks flying as the metal

came in contact with the rail. I could see part of the main train track was a mangled mess. This track wouldn't be used any time soon.

We could now see the still-closed doorway leading into train number one.

"The door is still intact," Katia said. "If he doesn't come out, what're we going to do?"

Before I could answer, the door slid open, and an enormous figure emerged, half pulling himself, half falling from the sideways door and onto the ripped and tattered wall of the gangway. He grumbled something and pulled himself up.

"All righty then," I muttered as the… man… came to his feet. He stood about eight feet tall, towering over us.

Vernon the conductor had suggested that the engineers might be human based on their voices, but he really wasn't certain. He'd never seen one. He'd only been half correct.

From the shoulders down, this was a normal man. He was built large and strong. But where a normal person's neck would be was another torso, leading to the top half of—another?—man. This top half wasn't as large as the lower half. The creature had a pair of legs and arms on the bottom half and another pair of arms on the top half. The gap-toothed man had greasy, black hair that hung out from his engineer's hat. His top torso wore a filthy, once-white tank top that read "Welcome to the Gun Show." The bottom, larger half was naked except for a loincloth made of fur.

The man's face and naked lower half was covered in lined streaks of blue paint, like he was cosplaying Mel Gibson's character in *Braveheart*.

Gore-Gore. ManTauR. Level 40.

Ochre Line Train Engineer.

Of all the 'taurs out there, from Centaurs to Bisontaurs to Rhinotaurs, the ManTauR is one of the weirdest. Half human, and, uh, half human, the ManTauR has been genetically engineered for both strength and dexterity, making them perfect for the often-grueling and thankless job of Tangle Train Engineer.

Unfortunately, the act of making these magnificent, large-footed beasts oftentimes results in creatures with double amounts of testosterone and whatever else makes humans so prone to overt masculinity and hyper, overenthusiastic piety toward their god of choice.

"That's the weirdest thing I've ever seen in my life," Katia muttered.

"Hail, brother and sister," Gore-Gore shouted. "And Princess. Fine Princess! Hail! You have survived the train wreck. We must flee this wretched place. But behold! Luck is on our side in this dark time, for we are at a transit station where we may find sustenance and mead!" The mantaur fell forward, so he ran on his legs and lower set of arms, which was absurdly disturbing. He bounded from the train, rushed past us, and onto the platform.

He thinks we were passengers. He doesn't know we're the ones who crashed the train. "What about the conductor?" I called, turning to look at the back of the train. Cars numbers three and four were smushed up against one another, the conjunction between the two cars starting to reach up toward the ceiling of the chamber. Car five was still half in the tunnel.

"Time is scarce!" The creature shouted, even though it wasn't necessary to shout. "The next train will be upon us soon. And the one after that! All will crash. It will take time for the home base to learn there is a problem and to send an interdiction team. We must flee this forsaken place! Run and we will live to battle another day!" He turned and charged for the stairs.

"Should we help the conductor?" Katia asked.

"Ah, he'll probably be fine," I said. "Come on. We need to talk to this guy before he gallops away."

The second train careened into the back of the first, causing yet another earthquake and a giant, screeching crash. It sounded as if

more cars were pushed into the platform below. More dust and smoke billowed up from below.

All of us stood at the top of the stairwell. Gore-Gore didn't seem to know what to do with himself now that he was out of the train. This had already gone differently than I was expecting. I sent some instructions to Donut over chat.

"Hail my fallen brothers!" Gore-Gore suddenly shouted for no apparent reason. He beat his top chest, leaving a splotch of blue body paint on filthy shirt.

"Hey," Donut said "Can Carl here ask you some questions?"

"Of course!" he shouted. "It is my sacred duty to help the customers of the Tangle! That goes double for princesses and their manservants!"

"Can you please stop shouting," Donut said. "It upsets Mongo."

Mongo squawked in agreement.

Carl: Now you know how I feel when you type in all caps.

Donut: THAT'S NOT THE SAME THING, CARL.

"I will do my best, Princess Donut," the man shouted. "I do not wish to upset your royal steed. How may I serve you!"

"We have some questions about the end of the line," I said.

"You mean stop number 435?" he said, his manner changing instantly. It was like I'd flipped a switch. He lowered his voice. "We recommend all passengers disembark at stop 433. That is the last transit station. After that it is not safe. Even for fine warriors such as yourselves."

"Safe?" Katia scoffed. "The stops before that are safe?"

"What's at stop 434? And 435?" I asked.

"Stop 434 is barren," he said. "Stop 435 is where my fellow employees exit the train and take the portal back to the depot."

"What about you?" I probed. "We talked to a conductor, and he said he never sees your kind get off the train. And they don't remember what happens at 435."

Gore-Gore paused, an odd expression on his paint-covered face. He seemed scared and something else. Ashamed? It didn't make sense. I knew we'd never be getting this information if we didn't have Donut and her Charisma greasing the wheels for us. "The

Tangle employees, having completed their sacred duty, disembark at 435 and proceed into the tunnel which transports them back to base. The Kravyad are in charge of employee return. They use their dark magic to prepare the employees before they enter the portal. The portal has a side effect regarding memory. Human resources says they're looking into it."

"What about you?" I repeated. "What do *you* do?"

"I, uh, gate the train. Like any true engineer would."

"What does that mean?"

"There's a gate just after stop 435, and I drive into it. It is an enormous portal that the train just pushes through. I enter, and I am back at the depot, pulling into a parking spot. Alas, it's just my engine car. The nineteen other cars are gone."

"Gone?" I asked.

He snapped a finger on one of his lower hands. "Just like that. One moment I'm approaching the abyss gate, and then I'm at the depot. It's magic, and I do not know how it works." He looked back and forth and then leaned in, whispering as if afraid he'd be overheard. "My kind do not believe magic is honorable or true. I do not like utilizing the gate. But I am a good employee, and I do what I am told. There's no memory loss like the dwarves and grapples experience. There's a flash of vile light, and I and the car teleport. I sleep for eight hours in my cabin, eat an epic meal, get up and do the checks, and wait for them to hook the cars back up for my next run."

"You sleep?" I asked. "The conductor said when he gets to the end of the line, he blinks and he's getting on the train again right away. He didn't say there was a enough time for anyone to go to sleep."

Gore-Gore's top half shrugged. The streak of blue face paint glinted in the light. "They lose some time when they go through the portal. It's nine or ten hours until the next shift."

"And what about the other cars? They say they loop back in time, resetting themselves."

He nodded. "I do not know the details. The passenger cars go through a deep cleaning upon transport. Any damage is repaired.

Foreign objects are removed. Mostly."

That wasn't exactly how Vernon put it. "But what about *your* car? It doesn't get, uh, deep-cleaned?"

"No. It does not."

Excellent. I asked the important question. "So if we are with you when you go through the gate, we'd be okay, too?"

He paused. "I have heard of passengers riding through the gate. The deep-cleaning process isn't good for them. Sometimes there are bones."

I shook my head. "I don't mean if we were in the passenger cars. I mean if we were in the engine car. With you."

Gore-Gore frowned. "I always wish to ride with fellow warriors, especially into the unknown. But, alas! Nobody rides in the first car except engineers. It is the rule of the Tangle! Not even other employees are allowed within. No exceptions!"

"But if we *were* in that first car, we'd be fine?"

"You would not be killed by the abyss gate." He abruptly lifted all four arms into the air, and metal blades erupted from the flesh over his top two wrists with a *shing*, like he was some sort of fucked up Wolverine. "But I would be honor-bound to slay you! No exceptions, my fellow warrior!"

"Okay then," I said, taking a step back. This guy was crazy. *They're all crazy. Every last one of them*. "One last question. You came out because the train crashed. Is there any other reason why you'd come out of the car? Like if we ever wanted to talk to one of your fellow engineers, how would we do that?"

He lowered his arms, blades retracting back into his skin. Blood dribbled down his hands where the blades appeared. "We do not leave the engine car if the train is intact. This is a rule. Now my fellow warriors. I see a place of respite. I shall drink my fill of mead and wait for the crash interdiction team to arrive to extract me back to base. Hail!"

We watched as Gore-Gore turned and walked toward Club Vanquisher. He ducked into the entrance, disappearing.

"It figures he'd be a member of that place," I said. I turned to Katia and Donut. Below, we heard another, distant squeal as yet

another train crashed. “What did we just learn?”

“It sounds like we can get back to the start if we can get into the engine car,” Katia said.

“That’s right,” I said. “But if the only way to get into the car is by crashing a train, then that won’t do us any good.”

“We need an engineer’s key. He probably has it in his inventory,” Katia said. “That way we can break into the first car while the train is still moving.”

I nodded. “That’s what I’m thinking. But we know the keys are also color coded. So his key will only work on other ochre line trains. I don’t think we can hop over to the yellow line and use it there. And if we have to crash a train to get the key, that stops the rest of the trains on the line. We don’t know for how long. If the trains are stopped, then the key is useless.”

“Wait, Carl,” Donut said. “Doesn’t it only stop the trains behind it? What if we get the key, jump onto the *Nightmare Express* or one of those other super-fast loop trains and jump ahead on the line and catch one of the trains that were already ahead?”

“That’s brilliant,” I said to Donut, scratching her on the head. She beamed. I’d also come up with that idea, but I wasn’t about to say that now. “I think he actually revealed two different ways to get to the stairwells. We can also use the employee portal. Maybe. It sounds like people who take that path lose time and suffer memory issues. And they have to fight the Kravyad, whatever that is. Probably a boss guarding the portal.”

“It seems so complicated,” Katia said. “How many of the 300,000 crawlers are going to find out about this?”

“Hopefully all of them,” I said. “With all of our contacts, we’ll start spreading the word. I doubt there’s only one or two ways to get out of this. There’s a lot we’re missing. Like what’s at stop number 436, the one we can only get to with the *Nightmare Express*? And I still need to talk to Elle and Imani about…”

“Vile traitors! Saboteurs!” Gore-Gore shouted as he burst out of Club Vanquisher. “Posers! And I thought you were true! In the name of the exalted Grull I will slay thee! Hail and kill!” He raised his arms

and once again produced the metallic claws. His face was a mask of rage. His dot was now red.

The ram-headed cleric peeked out of the door and waved before disappearing back inside.

Music started to play. *Ah fuck.*

"Grull?" Donut said. "Isn't that…?"

"Yep," I said just before the world froze.

B-b-b-b Boss Battle!

Our avatars appeared floating in the air.

You've enraged an NPC. But not just any NPC! It's a neighborhood boss! It's...

VERSUS! Clanged onto the floating text, with simulated blood splattering everywhere. Gore-Gore's screaming portrait splatted onto the virtual screen.

GORE-GORE THE MANTAUR! TRAIN ENGINEER! ADHERENT OF GRULL THE WAR GOD! BERSERKER EXTREME! LEVEL 40!

The world unstuck, and Gore-Gore galloped directly at us, screaming and frothing at the mouth.

"Oh, this should be fun," I said.

"Position three," I called. I formed a fist, causing my gauntlet to appear. In this formation Katia remained close, but Mongo moved far to my left. Donut remained on the ground, falling back and to my left in the space between me and Mongo.

"Carl, I think that cleric guy told him we crashed the train! What a jerk!"

"Ya think?" I said. "Fire!"

Donut launched two magic missiles at him. They bounced harmlessly off the charging man's chest.

"It says magic missiles are ineffective!" Donut screamed.

"Okay, we're doing this the hard way," I said. "Doozy!"

I dropped a smoke curtain as Katia and I moved three steps to my right. Donut cast *Hole* on the ground in front of the charging mantaur. At the same time, I cast *Fear*.

The hole was only an inch deep, and the creature barely stumbled. My fear spell seemed to only have a small effect. One of these days that was going to be a great move. I cast *Bang Bro* on my gauntlet, which now glowed with electrical fire. I downed a mana refill.

"Further treachery," Gore-Gore squealed. "Magic and wizardry. Die in Grull's name!" He leapt and blindly swung his blades at the space I was just standing. He turned and swiped again, this time at Donut's location, which I hadn't been expecting. She backflipped out of the way. Mongo screeched in anger. Katia and I rushed forward. I pulled back and punched him as hard as I could, smashing him in the kidney of his lower torso. He grunted. His body felt solid and strong, like a sack stuffed with gravel. He howled in rage as a health bar appeared, down maybe five percent.

1.5

The notification appeared out of nowhere and hung persistent on my interface.

I recognized what it meant, though I was puzzled why it remained on the screen. I had to be careful with my punches. Because of my magic gauntlet's special ability, each successful punch had a 1.5% chance to summon Grull the war god, which would probably be a juiced-up, almost immortal version of Prince Stalwart of the Skull Empire. That was the last thing we needed.

Mongo shrieked as he leapt through the air, claws out. Gore-Gore reacted with lightning speed, backhanding the dinosaur and knocking him aside with the top, dull part of his blades. Mongo squealed in pain and hit the ground hard, his health alarmingly low despite the glancing blow.

"Mongo!" Donut cried, jumping toward her injured pet as Gore-Gore whirled again, leaping toward me.

I could tell the smoke curtain was doing a good job of keeping him blind. But he was a smart fighter with whirlwind reflexes. Before I could jump back, he sliced viciously down at me.

Katia leaped forward, blocking the blow with her arm. She tumbled, crying out in pain. I looked down in horror to see part of her arm spin away. It hit the ground with a clang.

It's just metal. Not flesh.

I leaped forward, getting close to his chest and punched four quick times.

3.0

4.5

6.0

7.5

Oh shit. The description never said it was a cumulative chance. But what choice did I have? I was in tight and too close to kick. I kneed at him with my spiked kneepad, but I could tell the power just wasn't there. *I have to get back.* I had to punch again two more times to get away. With the last blow, I felt something deep within the creature's chest crack. He howled in outrage and pain.

9.0

10.5

He swiped again as I reared back. The tips of the blades scraped across my face. I screamed as the three razors tore flesh. Gore-Gore grunted in surprise as my damage reflection hit him. A hand from his lower torso wrapped around my throat, catching me before I could get away. Then they were both around my throat, squeezing. I looked up to see him raising his upper right hand in the air to pierce down.

I mentally slammed on *Protective Shell*.

He cried out as he was ejected from the area, flying to my right, pushed away toward the stairwell, down into the smoky, flaming wreckage of the ochre station platform.

Unfortunately, the static nature of the spell that worked so well for me before worked against me this time. While Gore-Gore was tossed away, he still had a firm, double-handed grip around my throat. So when he shot away, I was pulled with him like a dog on a leash.

I gurgled as I felt myself flying and spinning through the air. Somewhere in there, his grip on my throat went slack.

We bounced off the stairs once, his body cushioning my own, but when we hit the floor, he landed on me, knocking the breath out of my chest. I felt an ominous *crunch* within myself. He continued his forward, tumbling momentum as I slammed onto a healing potion, even before I stopped moving, coming to rest against a red-hot, burning hunk of metal. I cried out, scrambling away. I screamed again as my broken ribs and arm healed themselves. *Holy shit that hurts.*

I turned in time to see him fall off the edge of the platform, his body plummeting into the space between the third and fourth cars, which had been smushed further together by the subsequent crashes, causing the two cars to form a massive teepee shape, with the junction between the two touching the ceiling.

I clambered to my feet as Gore-Gore, dazed, stood all the way up to his full height on the track between the cars, as if he was standing underneath an awning. The top of his head brushed the mangled wheels of the train cars. He'd lost his engineer's hat somewhere along the way, revealing a massive bald spot atop his head. His health was down to about 20%. *Christ this dude is tough.*

"I feel it in my chest," Gore-Gore said, his voice odd. "I have been blessed by the gods."

That's when I saw that 10.5 was now blinking, and Gore-Gore had a timer over his head.

Ten seconds and counting.

Holy shit I summoned the god. I had seconds to finish this or we'd all be dead.

"Carl! Carl! We're coming!" Donut cried from the top of the stairs.

This is a terrible idea, I thought as I rushed forward. I activated my Talon Strike skill as I ran, leaping over debris. I bounded one more time, and I executed a drop kick right at the solar plexus of the lower chest of Gore-Gore.

He rocketed back on the tracks as I dropped into the channel like a sack of hammers.

Zzzzzt.

It wasn't a loud sound. I barely heard it over the sound of the music. But I felt it. Anyone who has ever been close to high-voltage

lines knows the feeling. You can sense it. Death, right there rushing by.

As the electrified corpse of Gore-Gore crumpled and hit the main tracks, I more than sensed the current rushing through the third rail. My entire body ripped in pain as the tracks were electrified by the short circuit caused by Gore-Gore's body. Thankfully, the grounding was enough that the shock was dispersed. I hopped backward, stumbling and hitting the back of my head on the platform's edge. I felt jaws bite onto the back of my jacket and cloak as Donut pulled me from the channel. She cast a heal scroll on me as she shouted my name.

The world froze again as the **Winner!** notification appeared.

"That wasn't very fun," I said up at Donut a minute later. I groaned, sitting up. "Let's try to loot his corpse without getting electrocuted and then go get some pho. I need to rest before I can handle any more excitement."

Admin Notice. Congratulations, Crawler. You have been sponsored!

Viewers watching your feed will now occasionally see advertisements produced by your sponsor.

Sponsor's Name: The Valtay Corporation.

Additional details available in the Sponsorship Tab of your interface.

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[12]

Ochre Line. Station 149.

"Carl, Carl, I hit level 28 *and* I got a sponsor!" Donut said as I pulled myself to my feet. She gasped. "Carl, guess what? It's Princess D'nadia of the Prism Kingdom! I love her!"

I shook my head. I still felt disoriented. Below, a clockwork Mongo was gingerly pulling on Gore-Gore's loincloth in an attempt to get him away from the electrified rail. We needed to hurry this up. Once the next train came and smashed into the back of the line, it was possible these two cars could come crashing down. Plus every one of these other trains presumably had more Gore-Gores driving them. The last thing I needed was to have to fight another one of these guys. "D'nadia? Who was that again?"

Donut glowered at me. "Carl, she's probably watching right now. Tell her you're sorry!"

"I'm sorry Princess D'nadia of the Prism Kingdom," I said. "Now who is she?"

Donut sighed. "You sat right next to her when we were on Ripper Wonton's show. She's a Saccathian. A Sac. Really, Carl."

I remembered, then. It'd only been a few days. She was a tentacle-faced creature. Her country, planet, solar system, whatever, the Prism, was supposedly small but powerful. Princess D'nadia was very outspoken and seemed to spend most of her time traveling

from talk show to talk show. I remembered she'd kept trying to grab my virtual hand. When the Skull Empire had accidentally killed Manasa—who had really been controlled by a brain parasite from the Valtay Corporation—in their attempt to assassinate us, D'nadia had been very upset. *Huh*, I thought. Two parties that were there during that incident had sponsored us.

"Who'd you get?" Donut asked.

"The Valtay Corporation," I said.

Carl: Not a word about them out loud. Borant hates them. They're the ones who are trying to invade the Borant system. They're the reason why the show started when it did.

Donut: IF BORANT HATES THEM, THEN WHY DID THEY LET THEM SPONSOR YOU?

Carl: Borant probably doesn't have a choice.

Donut: DOES THAT MEAN YOU'RE GOING TO GET REALLY GOOD STUFF?

Carl: I don't know. I hope so. But it might mean the opposite. It might mean Borant is going to try to get me killed much faster. The good thing is we make them a lot of money right now. We need to make sure we are worth more alive than dead.

The last thing I wanted was to be a pawn in some intergalactic pissing match. I had enough to worry about already.

"Did you see the thing that said people watching our feed get commercials from our sponsors?" Donut said. "I hope Princess D'nadia has lots of different commercials. There's nothing worse than the same ad showing over and over and over. When you left the TV on the old person channel, and I got stuck watching *Matlock* all day, it was the same help-I've-fallen-and-I-can't-get-up ad every commercial break."

"We get another sponsor when we hit the fifth floor. And another on the sixth. So let's make sure we get through this floor, and your fans will have a bit of variety."

"I think my fans should have a name, wouldn't that be great? Like the Princess Patrol or something."

I grunted. “How about the Donut Holes?”

“Don’t be crude, Carl.”

Below, one of the Mongos exploded as he accidentally touched a hunk of metal attached to the third rail. The second automaton grunted and pulled the Gore-Gore corpse harder, bringing the large body up against the wall of the channel. I reached down and looted him, receiving 498 gold and three items. An **Ochre Line Engineer’s Key**, a bottle of **Rev-Up Magic Hair Restoration**, and the neighborhood map. The moment I accepted the map, it populated my interface, not with the immediate area like it usually did, but with a map of the complete Ochre line, including all the stops and the current location of all the trains.

“Oh, wow,” I said, zooming in and scrolling up and down the map. The info started at station 11 and went all the way up to 435. “Make sure you grab the neighborhood map. This is way more than we usually get.” This particular train line was shaped like a squiggle. Up the line, the trains continued to move. I could see all the dots on the trains, including the white dots of the conductor and engineers and grapples, along with the red dots of the Jikininki janitor ghouls and other monsters. I didn’t see any blue dots of fellow crawlers. The last train to get through station 149—the one I’d spray-painted with an X—appeared to be continuing its way up the tracks unhindered. It was just about to hit station 160. A traffic jam of trains appeared behind the one we’d crashed. If there was an “interdiction team” coming like Gore-Gore stated, I didn’t see any sign of them.

I did see a few oddities on the tracks. Since 151 was another transit station, the next station after this one that would have monsters was station 152. The tracks outside that station, along with 153 and 154, had monsters on them. Monsters on the actual tracks. I watched as one mob—something called a **Drake Bitch**—hit the electrified line and turn itself into an X. More monsters appeared by the minute.

The monsters are jumping on the track and walking up to station 155. The trains had stopped coming, and the creatures weren’t waiting any longer. It was going to take them a long time. There

were miles between each station. That would soon start happening behind us, too. In fact, I could see the red dots of monsters moving between the crashed train cars behind us, though it didn't appear they could get past the tangled wreckage. The ones ahead of us would have a long walk. The stations were pretty far apart, especially further up the line.

The early stations were much closer, easily walkable. In fact, stations 11 through 72 were each about a city block or two apart from one another. We could walk that distance unhindered in a few hours. That was good to know. By comparison, stations 300 and 301 looked to be about 40 or 50 miles apart.

We went up the stairs to find Katia sitting on the ground, crying silently. She'd returned to her normal shape. She cradled her right hand in her left. I noted she'd gone up a level to 24. I was still at 29.

"Are you okay?" I asked, rushing up.

She chinned at the hunk of metal on the ground. It was the chunk of armor that Gore-Gore had sliced off when she'd been protecting me. Only then did I see the splash of blood.

She held up her right hand, which looked like a normal, unharmed hand. But as I watched, her palm reshaped and her four fingers disappeared. "He chopped my fingers off. When I healed, they didn't come back."

"Oh no," I said, sitting down next to her. "I'm sorry. I thought it was just part of your armor. We would've come back up sooner if we'd known you'd been injured."

She sniffed. "It's stupid. I can build fingers from other parts of me. He didn't *really* chop off my fingers. I'm like clay. All I lost was a bit of flesh. I had to take a ring off of my severed finger and put it on my new fingers. But part of me is gone. I'm losing myself."

"That's not true." I gently tapped her forehead. "Look. The real Katia is still there. They can cut everything else off, but you're still you. Don't let them break you. No matter what they do. Okay?"

"Okay," she said, getting to her feet. She did not sound convinced. She kept opening and flexing her hand. She swallowed and seemed to take a moment to steady herself.

We needed to get her more armor. Much more armor. Her class and race was a perfect combination for the ultimate tank, but we weren't taking advantage of it. I was worried how she'd react to the idea, but we needed to figure out a way to completely sheathe her in metal. She needed to be 90% metal, 10% flesh, not the other way around.

"Have you ever had pho before?" I asked, pointing at the saferoom. Now that I had access to the map, I could keep a lookout for more of the boss monsters, but it didn't appear any were headed this way. "Let's take a minute to refresh ourselves, and then we'll hit the purple line and spend the rest of the day grinding."

"Hey, did you get a sponsor?" Donut asked as we walked. "I am sponsored by the beautiful and awesome Princess D'nadia of the Prism and Carl got the Valtay Corporation."

"I did," Katia said as we entered the pho shop. "Mine is a princess too. It just says Princess Formidable of the Skull Empire."

"I wonder who this princess is," Katia said as we ate our soup. She had Mordecai's map out and was filling it in with the new Ochre line information along with new intelligence from the daughters. Donut was in the base taking a shower. Mongo remained with us, staring at me until I tossed a hunk of meat at him. "I haven't gotten anything yet from her. Have you gotten anything?"

"Not yet," I said. I knew exactly who this princess was. Zev had mentioned her once, though not by name. King Rust was the orc leader of the Skull Empire. Prince Stalwart was the crown prince. Prince Maestro had been the second in the line of succession until he'd been disowned and then killed by the Valtay in retaliation for the botched assassination attempt that had killed Manasa instead of me. Zev had said that if Stalwart was disowned for his failed attempt, the sister would be next in line. I assumed it was this Princess Formidable. But was she now the first in line? *Had* Prince Stalwart been disowned?

"Hekla says she got sponsored by some interstellar ranch or something. They're probably showing her viewers commercials for space hamburgers."

I sighed. This pho tasted like ass. The bopca running this joint had tried his best, but it was clear he didn't know what he was doing. I pushed the bowl to the edge of the table, and Mongo gleefully dunked his head in.

"Look, I figured something out," Katia said, pushing the giant paper forward. "Our next goal is to see what's at the end of the line as quickly as possible, no? If we go here," she pointed, "and then jump lines here, we can get on something called the *Dismemberment Limited*. According to your friend Bautista, the *Dismemberment Limited* also stops here. The *Nightmare Express* stops two stations down on the Mauve line. And since the Nightmare goes all the way up to 436, which is one higher than the supposed end of the line, we can get on that and see what's at the very end. If we take this path, we can get there in a few hours instead of days."

I just looked at her. "I don't understand what the hell you just said, but I believe you."

She shrugged. "You should try riding the Tokyo subway when you only know Icelandic, German, Russian, and English," she said. "I only went once when I was a kid, and it was a nightmare. This is much more straightforward once you have the map."

I looked over her map. The whole mess of lines gave me a headache. I'd looked at DIY wiring diagrams that made more sense. "The problem is we don't yet know if the named trains, like the *Nightmare Express* or the *Dismemberment Limited*, are safe."

"Of course they're not safe," Katia said. She finally noticed that Mongo was inching his way toward her own bowl of forgotten pho. She pushed it toward him. He made a joyful peeping noise and started slurping noisily.

"You got that right," I said as Donut emerged from the base. She was washed and shining.

"The boss box was a bust," Donut said. "All I got was a bunch of healing scrolls and a poison dart trap kit."

"That sounds awesome," I said.
"So what's the plan?" asked Donut.
I looked to Katia. "Lead the way."

According to the sign outside of the *Dismemberment Limited*, the train came every 48 minutes. We didn't know when it'd last been through, so we sat down to wait. It was a short loop, and we needed to get off on the very next stop. Since the whole loop was 48 minutes, I figured we'd be at our next transfer in probably only fifteen or twenty minutes. That seemed like it was too fast, but then I saw the tracks, and I understood.

The station for the *Nightmare Express* had been twice as long as the regular platforms. The tunnel was bigger, too. That wasn't the case with this train. The platform was actually smaller than usual. The tunnel appeared to be the same circumference as the colored lines.

The track itself was a wide, flat platform with two metal beams running on either side. This was a monorail system. A maglev train. We'd had something similar in Seattle, though this looked much more futuristic.

Donut practiced with her *Hole* spell while we waited. I'd finally talked her into grasping it wasn't useless. She managed to get it up to level two, which made a hole two inches deep. (The hole was really six centimeters deep, or three centimeters a level, which came out to 2.3 something inches. The dungeon used metric measurements for everything, but I still couldn't get the imperial system out of my head. It was something I had to constantly deal with at work, and I'd gotten used to guess-converting. I had a unit conversion chart taped to the side of my toolbox.) Anyway, a level two *Hole* was deep enough for most non-reinforced doors. She could snap the spell on and off at will. For now she could only make a manhole-cover sized hole that'd last about five minutes if she didn't turn it off early.

I watched her as she placed a hole in the platform's information sign. She made Mongo stick his head through it and snap, practicing a move we'd discussed. We called it Surprise One. When we were done, she turned the hole off, and the sign returned to its previous form, undamaged.

"This is the greatest spell in the world, Carl. I need to train this up."

"Keep working on it."

While she practiced, I messaged Elle and Imani.

Carl: Hey. You guys free?

Elle: There you are. I was starting to get worried. Naughty boy.

I spent some time explaining what we'd figured out.

Imani: Carl, we should refrain from stopping any more trains until we have a solid plan of how to get out of here. If you stop a train and there are other crawlers behind you on the line, you might end up trapping them. And that's a really bad idea. Worse than you think.

Carl: So what was the deal with that stop you guys investigated?

Elle: Drugs. This octopus lady has them all addicted to opiates. Painkillers. They're called Rev-up Vitamin Shots. They're called shots, but you drink them.

Imani went on to explain what they'd discovered.

Every five stops, all the ones ending in a five or a zero, there was a set of tunnels. Each monster from the previous stops in that section would get off the train, and they'd line up by race, entering the tunnels. At the end of each passageway was a door with a slot on it. Behind the door was a monster called a Pooka. Imani described them as fuzzy, goblin-like creatures. They were neighborhood bosses. Each Pooka had a pile of potion vials, and it would hand out one to each monster through the door slot, who'd then take the vial and go through a swirling, one-way portal that'd return them to their station.

The potions appeared to be a powerful, addictive, race-specific sedative. That explained why the monsters who missed their stops

would panic. The monsters were only allowed one vial at a time, and each high would only last so long. Imani said it appeared the drug didn't activate until they took it through the portal. So the monsters would get their vial, go through the portal to take it, and once the high started to wear off, they'd return to the train station to go get another.

Imani: The description of the vials says if the mobs don't get their fix in time, something happens to them. They change physically. It's like with the brindle grubs all over again, but this time it's all the mobs on the floor. So every time we interrupt the trains, it sets off a chain reaction up and down the line for the monsters who can't get their vial.

Carl: And Krakaren?

Imani: She's the one making the individual drugs. I'm guessing since each vial is race-specific, there's a different Krakaren borough boss at each one of those stops. I wasn't confident in our ability to face her, so I had the team back off.

Elle: We could've taken her. Imani is too timid. I could've iced the whole lot.

Imani: The pooka monsters turn into giant goats when you attack them. So be careful if you face one. They're tough.

We agreed to meet up again soon at the Desperado Club so they could copy the map. It'd gotten too cumbersome to relay over chat. They wished us luck on the *Dismemberment Limited*.

"I don't understand. What's the point of all this?" Katia asked after I relayed what the others had discovered.

"I have a theory," I said. "Mordecai told us that the NPCs and monsters are released into the game, and they have new memories each time. Right? But in the end, they're still independent creatures. They're not brainless mobs like one might find in a real video game. Getting one or two mobs to do something is probably easy. But controlling an entire group is probably harder than it sounds. They have emotions and motivations and their own lives. In order to get them to do something, they have to *want* to do it. The showrunners

came up with this level with the trains, but they wanted the monsters to come and go every five stops, making it an engineering challenge. They had to come up with a universal way to make that happen. Why not have them all addicted to drugs? Now the monsters are more compliant, and they are looping and patrolling in a predictable pattern."

"So they took a whole floor's worth of mobs and strung them out?" Katia asked. "That seems… overly complicated."

I grunted. "The whole thing is nuts. It's set up to be this perfect, self-contained ecosystem. At least for a little while. I don't know when these guys eat or sleep or whatever else. But the floor is designed to break the moment people start messing with the system. Imani says they change if they don't get their drugs. I suspect we're going to find out soon what that means. Train is coming. Get ready."

The train was almost silent as it pulled into the station. The sleek, white train's first car was at a steep angle, an aerodynamic shape, followed by only two additional cars. The entire front cockpit was glass like the cockpit of a B-17 chin turret. Through the glass window, we could see the train's operator.

He was an odd-looking creature. My first thought was *grim reaper wearing a poncho and mask*. He noticed us on the platform the moment we saw him. And even though he had no physical eyes, I could feel his gaze upon us as we waited for the train to stop.

Unlike the colored lines, we could enter this first car. In fact, I realized, there was only one pair of doors on the entire train, and they were near the driver. It appeared the engineer was the only creature on board, at least in this first car. He was not in a separate room, but simply in a lowered, glass section up front with a dashboard of controls in front of him, like a regular bus driver. He sat on a little, bouncy seat. The glass, front section of the train was designed so when the train was moving, the engineer could look straight down and see the track rushing by.

"No, please. Please don't get on," he said as the door hissed open. "Please. Find another way. We're not open to crawlers."

"Oh we're not going to hurt you," Donut said as she jumped on board. Mongo followed, with Katia and I taking up the rear. "Not as long as you don't try to hurt us."

"What the hell is this?" I muttered, taking in the carriage.

The train car wasn't as broad as a regular coach, but there were no seats here. It was an open room, almost like a freight car. At the end of the car was a closed, sliding door leading to the next car.

Every square inch of the car's interior was covered in dried blood and gore. It smelled of rotting death.

"This is disgusting," Donut said. She jumped to my shoulder and started rapidly licking her paw. "I just took a shower."

"Please. It's not too late," the engineer said. "Get off now."

I turned to regard him. The sickly, pale creature sat in the chair, naked except for his engineer's hat. What I'd taken for a poncho was actually just flesh that didn't properly fit his form. He had no muscles or definition to his body. The green-tinted flesh hung off of him like a fitted sheet placed on a too-small bed. The right side of his face hung loosely. When he spoke, the hole for his mouth hung below the bottom of his jawline, and the words came from the nose holes. The nose itself appeared like it was supposed to be hooked, but it hung to the side, dangling like a used condom on the side of the creature's face. The eye holes drooped, revealing yellow bone. Clumps of black hair clung to the head.

Levi the Seventh – Troll Flesher and Hobgoblin Skellie Symbiote. Level 7.

This is actually two creatures. Only when combined do they have intelligence and the ability to speak. The Skellie is your typical, run-of-the-mill reanimated skeleton. In this case, it's the skeleton of a hobgoblin, one of the few monsters who are much more palatable in skeleton form.

Of all the War Mage spells soldiers encounter during the brutal, mass combat that will occur on the ninth floor, the *You're Not Done Yet* spell is one of the most terrifying. Fallen soldiers—in this example a Basher Troll—are cast with the spell, and their flesh is ripped from the body. This loose skin becomes a sentient minion called a Flesher. Fleshers

are oftentimes tossed across the battlefield, landing in and around the trenches of the enemy. Fleshers have one goal. To find a new set of bones.

Once they have found a victim, the skin unfurls and pounces, covering the body, smothering and melting it. Once dead, the rest of the victim burns away, and the Flesher casts the only spell it knows. *Boned,* which animates the remaining skeleton.

The creature that eventually forms is no longer a minion to the original mage. Nor is it undead. It is new to the world, oftentimes confused and afraid. And weak. The Symbiote is very easy to kill. After a few hours have passed and the new Symbiote is complete, the combined creature becomes a target for other Fleshers, who are said to be drawn to their former companion's new bones. If a Flesher kills a Symbiote, this second iteration is more intelligent and powerful than the last.

There are rumors about oft-resleeved Symbiotes. After enough repetitions, it's whispered they can become quite powerful.

Here's a neat tidbit of trivia. This is Levi the 7th. This quest has triggered six times now since the floor has opened.

"Please," Levi the 7th said as the door closed. It was already too late. "The back doors only open when crawlers are on board. It hurts so bad when they get to me."

The train started to move. I steadied myself as it picked up speed. A timer appeared in my interface.

Time to next stop 19 minutes.

"What's on the other side of that door?" I asked Levi, even though I knew perfectly well what it was going to be.

New Quest. Levi is On the Menu!

This is a pass or fail quest. Failure has consequences.

Do not allow Levi the 7th to be devoured by the Fleshers. This quest is active as long as you remain on the train.

***Reward*: You will receive a Silver Quest Box.**

***Failure*: Every crawler on the train will be turned into a Flesher.**

I understood then why we hadn't received any information from people who'd ridden the named lines. People died when they rode the named lines.

I jumped into action. "Help me block out the door! Hurry!" I rushed for the back of the train as I pulled the gangway chock from my inventory. I now had several different versions of the blocking device, and the first one I pulled was too big. The thin but heavy chunk of metal caught on the ceiling when I pulled it, and I stumbled. I jumped back and let it fall to the floor. It crashed with a tremendous clatter. I pulled the next size down. It was just a large, flat chunk of metal, rounded at the top. This one was about a half of an inch thick and had to weigh 800 pounds. It was designed to be placed in the gangways, but this train didn't appear to have spaces between the cars.

"Oh god, they're coming. I can feel them. Not again. They want my bones," Levi called from the front of the train as I struggled with the second chunk of metal. *I need to put handles on these*.

"He'll take your skin and my bones," Levi cried. "All is lost! I have been forsaken by the gods!"

Katia rushed up and helped me push the flat metal plate against the doorway. It slammed heavily against the wall. I could hear the doorway screech as it slid open on the other side of the block.

"We need to hold this in place," I said, pushing myself up against it. Katia also leaned in. She flattened out her shoulder and added thickness to her legs, turning herself into a brace.

"Carl, there's hundreds of them," Donut said, running up. "They just appeared on the map. The entire car is filled with them."

"They're going to get in. They always get in," Levi cried. "It's the end. Oh gods, it's the end!"

"Shut the hell up," I snapped back.

Thump. Thump thump.

It sounded like dishrags slapping against the inside of the metal. They didn't feel strong. Not yet.

"The third car door opened!" Donut said. "Carl, it's something else. It's bigger."

Thwap!

That one I felt. Something powerful and magical had just slammed against the barrier. I prepared my *Mist Armor* spell.

"What else is back there?" I yelled at Levi.

"It's the war mage!" he cried. "Oh gods, he's coming."

Whap! Another spell hit the barrier, tossing us back an inch. Katia and I slammed the metal back into place, but not before at least a dozen flaps of pink and green and brown flesh started to reach around the edges of the metal. We slammed hard against the metal plate, pinning the manta ray-like flaps of skin against the wall.

The dots finally appeared on my minimap, hundreds of them all bunched up against the door.

I looked up at the closest fragment of flesh, just above my head. The exposed skin was only about three square inches wide, brown and covered in hair, flapping up and down furiously.

Minion of War Mage Dismember – Swamp Orc Flesher – Level 10.

Ahh, isn't it cute? It wants to give you a hug.

As I pressed my shoulder against the metal, I reached up with my right hand and grasped onto the flesh. I yanked, easily ripping the flesh away like I was tearing at plastic wrap. It made no sound. Blood seeped from the wound before the rest of it pulled away. I had no idea if this hurt the main part or not. My fingers burned, and I dropped the wadded hunk of flesh. I stomped it down. The back side of the plastic-like skin was caustic.

The metal plate rocked again, but we were ready this time. Still, a few additional tendrils of flesh appeared along the edges. I was starting to feel pressure. I set my legs.

"Donut and Mongo, get the flesh on the edges. Only touch the skin side!"

I didn't have to ask twice. Donut leaped to my shoulder and leaped again, scratching down the edge of the barrier where the metal met the wall, ripping at the flesh. Her claws dug so deep she left scars on the wall itself. The moment she ripped through the

flesh, it retracted as if in pain, leaving a smear of blood. On the other side, Mongo scrabbled at the wall with his feet. Jumping and pushing off, ripping at large sheets of skin. The pressure at the door eased.

I heard a deep squeal of rage from the other side. One by one, the red dots started to fall back. A new figure approached. It walked so it was right up against the other side of the metal. I felt it lean up against the barrier. It gave it a quick shove, as if to test our strength. The creature was strong, but we were stronger, especially combined.

Twelve minutes and counting.

"Do you really think I won't have your skin?" a voice rasped through the makeshift barrier. I pictured him there, whatever he was, head up against the metal. "Your friends were already on this train. Six other times. One group was much larger than your group now. They tried blocking the door too. Such beautiful leather. Come now. Open it up. Join us. It will only hurt for but a moment."

I really wished I hadn't been forced to use my *Protective Shell* earlier. If we got past this, we sure as hell weren't going onto that Nightmare train until it was ready.

The metal plate rocked. It wasn't a spell, but the creature slamming it with his arms.

Donut: SURPRISE ONE? SURPRISE TWO?

"What kind of creature is this mage?" I yelled down to Levi, who continued to whimper.

"He's a war mage!"

"No shit he's a war mage. What's his race?"

From the other side of the metal, Dismember the War Mage started to laugh.

"War mages are war mages. That one looks like an elf," Levi called.

I felt two hands slap against the barrier. "I am not an elf, you fool. I just need eight more iterations, and you'll know, Levi. You'll know exactly what we are! Eight more trips. Seven after I get past these interlopers!"

"Stay the hell away from me, Dismember! You don't control me anymore!" Levi cried.

There was an odd crackling noise coming from the other side of the wall. *He's building up a spell. A big one. We need to hurry.*

Donut: CARL?

Surprise Two involved opening a hole and me dropping a bomb through. I still wasn't too keen on the idea of blowing shit up inside of a moving train, especially after watching that last train wreck. With Surprise One, I wasn't certain if a chomp from Mongo would be enough.

Carl: Let's do Surprise Three.

Katia: We haven't practiced that one yet.

Carl: It's not exactly something we can practice anyway.

"On three," I whispered, pointing to a spot on the metal.

"Hey Dismember," I said, speaking louder. "I want to tell you a secret."

"Oh we don't have time for your secrets, you filthy crawler. Let me tell *you* a secret."

"Okay," I said, holding up one finger.

"After I knock this metal barrier down, I am going to send my minions in, and one of them is going to re-sleeve Levi. But they won't bother you. I'll have them leave you be."

"Go on," I said, holding up a second finger.

"And then I'm going to cast a spell that will peel the skin off of you and your friends. But I'm not going to kill you. I have another spell to keep you alive even after you've been flayed. It will be a journey of pain unlike anything that has ever been experienced in this world. I'm going to..."

I held up a third finger.

A hole appeared in the metal plate. Fast as I could, I reached through, grasped the surprised elf-like creature by his long, silver hair, and pulled. The moment I pulled his head through the hole, Donut snapped off the spell.

I let go, and the severed head dropped to the ground, mouth still open wide.

"What was that, bitch? I didn't quite get that last part," I said.

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[13]

Time to Level Collapse: 7 days, 12 hours

Mauve Line - Station 281

The moment Dismember died, the Fleshers—now "Bereft Minions"—swarmed. We continued to press the metal up against the door, and they were unable to break through. I could see the X of Dismember's body for a few moments. It soon disappeared, presumably encompassed by one of his former minions. I didn't know if the process required a skull to successfully convert the Flesher into a Symbiote, but at least one of the monsters was making the effort.

Levi screamed for most of the remaining trip. "You did it! By the gods, you killed him! You son of bitches did it!"

"He shouldn't get too excited," Donut muttered. "I can see a dozen other shapes in that third car who might be more war mages."

"It's former crawlers, I think. I think he was building an army. He takes our skin and then uses our bones to become stock for his budding army. It's probably some bullshit storyline we don't have time to get involved in," I said.

We pulled up to the stop, and I felt the door to car number two slide closed on its own. I picked up the war mage head and tossed it into my inventory. I retrieved the two metal chocks, and we got the hell off the train before the door closed.

We watched as the train left the station. Levi waved as it disappeared.

Zev: Hi guys!

Donut: HI ZEV! DID YOU SEE WHAT WE DID? WE POPPED HIS HEAD OFF!

Zev: Yeah, that was a good one. The fans liked that line you did at the end, Carl. People want you to say your trademark line more often, though. Not too much, or it gets weird. But it's been a few days.

I sighed.

Carl: What can we do for you, Zev?

Zev: I wanted to let you know that I booked you two for a show in two days.

Donut: JUST US TWO? WHAT ABOUT MONGO AND KATIA?

Zev: Katia stays in the dungeon. Mongo goes in the cage.

Carl: What sort of show?

Zev: It's a little drier than what you're used to, but I'm confident you two can spice it up. It's a program called *Planet Beautiful*. It's especially popular this season. It's not so much an interview as a narration. You'll be going to a sound booth and reading prepared lines. It's a news program about the current season's planet. People are obsessed with Earth culture, and you two will be narrating a segment.

Carl: How can we "spice it up" if we're reading prepared lines? Also, I'm not going to read some anti-Earth propaganda bullshit. No way.

Donut: WHAT WILL WE BE TALKING ABOUT?

Zev: Uh, I'm not sure. I'll have to get back to you on that.

Carl: Zev. You are a terrible liar. What is the segment going to be?

Zev: It's about beauty pageants. And pet shows.

Donut audibly gasped.

Donut: WE WILL DO IT. I CAN'T WAIT.

I was about to object, but then I realized that this would be a goddamned vacation compared to what usually happened when we went on a show. What could possibly go wrong inside of a sound booth?

Carl: All right. We'll do it. But I won't read the lines if they're bullshit.

Donut: YAY!

Zev: Yay!

We decided that we'd wait until my *Protective Shell* reset before we hit the Nightmare. It was a long, large train, and it would be best to just clear it of mobs using my shell method and not risk whatever was waiting for us.

We stayed at station 281, two stations before the transfer station where we'd catch the Nightmare, which meant we'd be able to hit the Desperado Club after the recap episode. Then we'd sleep, train, and head back out into the world.

After a quick trip to the restroom, I returned to the saferoom, which was nestled inside of an all-glass storefront called J.CO Donuts and Coffee. The bopca here was a younger-than-usual guy named Nodd.

"Hey," I said to Nodd. "Can I get a black coffee, and I'd like to see the crafting table menu."

"Sure," the bopca said, pulling it up.

It was a long list of tables, and most of them seemed useless. Most cost about 25,000 gold each. There was everything from the generic **Tinker's Table** to the ultra-specific **Beekeeper Beesuit Mending Station**. I scrolled until I found what I was looking for.

I slid one of my two free table coupons forward. "I'll take that one." And then I presented my two upgrade coupons. I hesitated.

Was this the right move? "And I'd like to upgrade my Sapper's table to level three."

My book confirmed something that I'd already suspected. While I could use an engineering table to shape just about any type of armor, it didn't become a true wearable—something that could be "equipped." I could shape something into a helmet, and I could plop it onto my head, but the system didn't acknowledge it as a helmet. For most people, that was no big deal. That was different when it came to Katia and her race. If she couldn't equip it, she couldn't add it to her mass.

If I created and shaped an item using the engineering table and then stepped over to my new armorer's table, however, the item's description changed. All I had to do was pull up my new **Armorer's Workshop** tab, select the item, and then pick its intention from a list. For the sample helmet I made, my only choice on the list was **Shitty Helmet**. It didn't look any different. But it was now titled as a helmet, and it re-sized itself—slightly—to fit either my or Katia's head. But most importantly, she could now equip it, which added to her mass.

I couldn't add enchantments or build with most types of metal yet, but that was okay. I could craft simple items from scrap metal and leather that we would be able to sell.

While reading through my book, a certain passage in the bomb-making chapter caught my eye.

> *<Note added by Crawler Rosetta. Ninth Edition>*
>
> *Comrades, you know the high-level madness satchels, the bronze tier ones with the big yield? They are not as useless as they look. Because they randomly fall into rapid de-stability and explode, they are most dangerous unless they are in your inventory, of course. But with the 15-second waiting period after removing it, it makes them almost impossible to use*

because they can (and do) explode during those fifteen seconds. I have discovered a solution. If you can find or build an equippable backpack, they will not lose stability as long as they are in the backpack and the backpack is equipped. This also works for other party members if you wish to give them explosives to utilize. Use with caution.

<Note added by Crawler Allister. 13th Edition>

There is no longer a 15-second waiting period for removing items from inventory, so this advice is mostly moot. I can confirm that backpacks do still maintain stability. They weigh you down, however, and don't work as well as inventory.

<Note added by Crawler Forkith. 20th Edition>

Backpacks only slow destabilization now, not negate it. Found that out the hard way. Rest well, little sister. I pray those who read this kill an enemy in her honor today. That is all we can do, no? Her name was Barkith, and she was all I had left. I feel lost, but I will persevere.

All of that was good information, but for now what I mostly took away was that backpacks were a thing. I had an idea. I set out making one.

While I worked, I thought about Crawler Forkith and his sister. He wrote the 20th edition, and from what I could gather, he made it to at least the 11th floor. He left extensive notes throughout the book, confirming or adding information to multiple passages. He even left instructions on how to append notes to passages, something I couldn't figure out how to do with the scratchpad system.

Forkith was originally a race called an Urgyle, which I gathered was a small, winged, demon-like creature. He'd kept his race upon selection. His class was Sapper. I hadn't yet had time to read his notes at the end of the book, but it struck me how someone so different, so alien, could still be so similar to me. Some things were just universal, I guessed.

The only one who wrote more notes was Drakea from the 22nd edition, the crawler who experienced the final Naga-run season.

Drakea was both emotional and verbose throughout the book. Still, despite all of his or her notes, which dripped with absolute hatred for the Naga and the Syndicate, the crawler spoke little of themselves. Their notes section in the back of the book was only a short paragraph.

> *Once lit, a fire is easier to stoke than it is to extinguish. Remember that. Fuck the snakes. Fuck the rats. Fuck them all. One day they will all burn, and while I'm certain I will be long dead, I will laugh. I will laugh long and hard, and I will be waiting for them on the other side of the veil where not even the vast expanse of stars or time will withhold my wrath. If you are reading this, friend, I pray you will join me. Side by side we will exact our revenge.*

The words, while borderline unhinged, offered comfort. Comfort I didn't realize how much I needed.

"What is it?" Katia asked as I placed the large, metal box in the main room. I placed it on the stand I'd especially built for it.

I pointed to the reinforced, dingo-hide straps. "I was going through the menu of the armorer workshop tab, and I saw backpack listed." This was true. I'd searched until I found a feasible way to make it look like I'd just stumbled on this information.

"A backpack? It looks like an oversized laundry hamper," she said. "Or a giant quiver. It doesn't seal at the top."

"Nope," I agreed. "Strap yourself in, but don't remove it from the stand. That will make it so it doesn't disappear yet into your mass."

She examined it and frowned deeper. I couldn't help but laugh. The system labeled it as **Ugly Ass Backpack With a Completely Useless Design that Only an Idiot Would Wear**.

I didn't care as long as the word "Backpack" was in there. Katia hesitantly backed into it, sticking one arm through a strap. There

was an additional set of waist straps. She tied those together and then pulled her arm through the other strap.

"This is really cumbersome," she said.

"I can make it bigger, a lot bigger, but we don't know what sort of environment we'll be fighting in. This is about as wide as I can make it and still be able to equip it in the tight aisle of a train car," I said. "If we ever get to a wide open area, like the streets of the last floor, I have an idea for something a lot bigger." I pulled the long, reed-like metal pole from my inventory. This one was about six feet long, but I'd made dozens of these in multiple sizes. I dropped it into the basket.

I talked while I loaded the backpack. "So, a while ago I found a filing cabinet in a boss room filled with stuff. I learned something interesting about the way inventory worked." The metal poles clanked loudly as I added them to the backpack. "If you put something into a container, and then add that container into your inventory, you can pull the container out of your inventory with or without the original contents. You can even pick and choose."

"Carl…" Katia began as I continued to put the heavy, metal poles into the backpack. I worriedly eyed the stand, but it held. The straps would never hold even a fourth of the weight, but if this worked as intended, that wouldn't matter. They were only there so the system called it a backpack. Still, I was worried about them and Katia's ability to not collapse once I removed the stand. She'd been placing most of her points into strength on Mordecai's advice, and she was now at 49 after all her enhancements. Mordecai's plan for her was to build up her strength as quickly as possible, and once it hit 50, put the rest into constitution until her non-enhanced base was over 100. I noted with a small amount of dismay that she'd also been tossing points into charisma. That was likely a result of Donut and Zev telling her she needed to be more interesting. I'd need to talk to her about that, but not right now.

I took an armful of shorter reeds and stuffed them in. And then I poured a bunch of round balls, tiny versions of the ones I'd been making for my xistera, into the free space of the Ugly-Ass Backpack. When I was done, I stepped back to view my work. Katia stared at

me helplessly. She stood there with the basket-shaped backpack over her shoulders, a dozen metal poles of various lengths sticking out of it like she was an overloaded donkey.

"If you remove that thing holding the backpack, I'm going to tumble and fall," she said. "I'm strong now, but I'm not *that* strong. And if I equip it, it's just going to give me the mass of the backpack, not the stuff in it."

"Are you certain about that?" I said. "Because I'm pretty sure you're wrong there." It'd taken some experimenting, but I'd finally managed to make an open-top backpack that listed the items as "contents" when I pulled it into my own inventory. I had to give the backpack a slight lip and something like 3/5's of the mass had to be within the pack and not sticking out.

Her eyes went wide. "Okay, but I can't equip it until you move that stand. When you do, it's going to break the straps or break my shoulders."

"You're stronger than you think. And we're not going to rest the weight on the straps. This is how we're going to do it. Keeping the backpack on, reform yourself so you have four legs, and build a shelf on your lower back, pushing the holder thing rearward, easing it away," I said. I held up a crude drawing I'd made on the back of a gym membership form.

Katia went pale, but she started the transformation without another word.

Donut entered the room. She'd been in the training room practicing riding Mongo. She stopped dead at the sight of us.

"Carl, what are you doing to Katia?"

"The stand is too tall now," Katia grunted as her backside grew. She shortened as she grew two extra legs.

I nodded. "I'll fix it. Keep going. Keep your back flat. Think of it as a shelf. It doesn't need to be that long. Push your hind legs further back and make sure they're made of metal. Yeah like that."

"Oh god," she said. I watched as her body transformed. Her arms disappeared, and a third pair of legs appeared, giving her six. Her clothes melted into her mass as her back grew in thickness, creating

a shelf for the backpack. The straps strained against her shoulders as the stand pushed away.

"Legs aren't going to work," she grunted. The six legs melded together, lowering her body further. She was starting to look like a slug with an armless human torso. I pulled my tape measure and noted the height from her shelf to the floor.

"It's not as much weight as it looks," I lied. "As soon as that table pushes away, it should automatically equip itself to you."

The stand clattered backward. I cringed as the heavy backpack tumbled down, landing on her shelf. Katia cried out in pain. And then the backpack disappeared, turning the same color as her flesh. The whole, dense blob formed into a rounded shell-like shape. *Holy shit it worked*. She yelped as she tumbled over onto her back, like an overturned turtle. She started to cry out.

"Carl!" Donut yelled. "You hurt Katia!"

I ignored her. "You have a lot of mass now. Take a deep breath and reshape yourself. Use the new metal to keep yourself balanced."

Katia stopped struggling and closed her eyes. Her torso and head melted into the mass, making her nothing but a rounded lump. Six legs sprouted from the bottom. The torso returned, growing up out of the center of what had been her underside. Her top half retained its normal shape, but her arms were twice as long as normal. The elephant-like legs reshaped into wide spikes. The entire form rose off the ground, turning her into a horrific, bug-like monstrosity.

"I'm going to throw up," Katia said. "It's going to take a lot of getting used to."

"Yeah," I said. "You're carrying around more than a ton of extra armor now."

"A ton?" she said, lifting her arm. "A literal ton? 1,000 kilos?"

I grinned. "Closer to a ton and a quarter. Give or take. That metal from the dwarf robots came in two different type. One is a lot heavier than normal iron. How do you feel? Can you move okay?"

She reformed, turning back to the Hekla shape she'd made earlier, but now she was about 11 feet tall. She stood to her full height, towering over us. She swung her arm. She formed a fist and punched at the air. I could feel the rush of wind.

Mongo cried out in fear and scurried to hide behind Donut.

"It says I have a strength bonus when I carry this much mass," Katia said. Her voice was deeper. "It also says my dexterity goes down, but I don't feel much slower. If I keep a normal body's density, I can probably make myself twenty feet tall. Do you think they're going to let me keep this? Isn't this some sort of exploit?"

"I don't think so," I said. "I think this is what you're supposed to be doing with this class."

"This is ridiculous," Donut said. "She's not going to fit into a train at this size."

"No, she's not," I agreed. My mind was already working on ways to make her even bigger. That dexterity debuff was going to be a problem. *Maybe if I build a foundation for her. Something with wheels she can slide into*. "But that's why the backpack method works. Unequipping is easy. She can just mentally pull the backpack into her inventory, and she'll shrink back down. She'll keep the backpack in her inventory, and she can now choose how much of that metal is in there when she puts it on, which will make her mass variable. We'll need to work on getting her able to equip it fast. And we need to upgrade her makeup table so she can store more shapes. I'll work on the stand to make equipping faster. Also, I need to be on the lookout for denser metal. Maybe we can fashion something that isn't so cumbersome. Those metal poles might be a problem if the ceiling is low."

Katia shrunk further down, her face taking many forms. She stopped at about seven feet, but her torso was three times thicker than it should be. Her arms reached to the ground, making her look like a gorilla.

I reached up and banged on her arm. It clanged like metal. Good. "Make sure you keep your flesh core deep on the inside."

"I'll have to work on it," she said, flexing her arm. "I can't replace my eyes and mouth with metal parts. I'll have to build a cage around my head."

"Good, good," I said. "I want to try with different materials in your backpack. And you need to practice with choosing the amount of metal that remains in the bag."

"Can you put weapons and other enchanted items in the backpack?" Donut asked. Mongo tentatively approached and started sniffing at her.

"I don't think so," I said. "Weapons don't become a part of her mass, and magic items like rings and stuff don't impart their enchantments unless they're equipped as intended. I can't make shoulder pads out of two enchanted helmets and expect it to work. I asked Mordecai that a while ago."

Katia continued to experiment. Her hand turned into a curved, metal shield the size of the gangway chock. She pulled her rarely-used axe and extended her arm. I noted she was getting a lot better at changing her form quickly. I knew it still hurt her. "When the daughters hear about this, they're going to flip out. If only Fannar could see me. I'd like to see him call me useless now."

"I wish Mordecai was here," said Donut. "I bet he'd have something to say about this."

"I bet he would," I agreed.

The first part of the recap episode was a montage of people getting killed on the trains. I watched as a group entered what appeared to be a modern diesel train, one of the named lines, and were almost immediately overrun by little crab-like monsters that had drills instead of claws. In the midst of the battle, I spied a form standing at the back of the train car, watching and laughing. A war mage. This one looked like an orc, but he had the same, long silver hair as Dismember.

Katia had returned to her normal size. She'd spent the last hour working with her new form, practicing with different masses. She could remove the backpack using her inventory system, which was a bit inelegant, causing her body to fall and splotch onto the floor in a round, quivering, unshaped mass. It turned out if she suddenly unequipped more than 50% of her mass all at once, her body reset itself. That was okay, though it was a little gross. She only remained

in the blob form for a couple of seconds before she reverted to her regular, human form. To equip the extra mass, she first had to pull the newly redesigned stand, set it up, and then pull the backpack so it was set perfectly on the stand. She'd then back into it, set the straps, and then transform to her slug shape. From there she could form whatever she wanted based on the amount of "transformation mass" she kept in the backpack. Putting it on took her about thirty seconds, which was still too long. We were working on it.

I pointed out the creature on the screen. "I think all the named trains will have war mages on them."

"If so, each one attacks in a different way," Katia said. On the screen, yet another war mage was ripping apart a pair of crawlers. I couldn't tell what the attack was, but the crawlers were choking as if they couldn't breathe.

The show moved to feature several crawlers it didn't normally show, including Quan Ch, the one crawler who'd received a Celestial Quest box at the end of the last floor. Donut grumbled as she watched him fly down a train tunnel on his ethereal wings, shooting blue lightning out of his left hand. He blasted the front of a train, which crumpled and stopped dead on the track. A mantaur corpse fell out the front of the destroyed cockpit.

"That jacket he got lets him fly and shoot lightning," I said. "That's pretty cool. But if he's flying around blasting trains, that's going to cause all sorts of problems. I wonder what line that is."

"I don't know, but that's our jacket," said Donut. "He didn't even do anything to get it. It's not fair!"

"Nothing is fair," I said.

We watched Elle pick up a clurichaun, freeze his head, rip it off, and throw it to another party member. This guy, some sort of muscle man class, twisted in the air and hurled the ice ball at a giant goat boss. It slammed into the goat's head, staggering it. A menagerie of other creatures, the former residents of Meadow Lark, rushed the goat monster and tore it to pieces.

They showed a short clip of us using the *Hole* spell to decapitate the war mage. They spliced in a shot of me laughing, a scene from some other time, before showing me picking up the mage's head

and sticking it in my bag. *Those assholes. They're making me look crazy.*

"Why did you take the head, Carl? That's gross," Donut said.

"We loot everything, Donut. You never know what might be useful. We should've been taking all the corpses this whole time. We'll do that from now on if we have time."

We'd received a silver quest box for that fight, but it had been nothing but healing scrolls and trap kits. I'd received another two of those alarm traps along with some random trap supplies.

The show ended with Lucia Mar fighting a group of zombie-like creatures in a large room. The monsters just kept coming and coming, and she eventually fell back. The room, I realized, held a set of five stairwells all situated in a circle.

How the hell did that little shit find the stairwells so quickly?

The show ended, and before the nightly message could come, two things happened. The leaderboard changed, and I received a notification.

You have received a Bronze Benefactor Box from the Valtay Corporation.

I paused, waiting to see if either Donut or Katia received anything. Neither said anything, and I assumed that meant they hadn't. I knew this season, the more they paid for us, the cheaper the benefactor boxes were to the sponsors. But Mordecai had said even Bronze boxes would be prohibitively expensive. He'd also said the contents of a Bronze Benefactor box were generally better than even regular platinum boxes.

Donut was gazing up at the leaderboard. The top five hadn't changed. Elle moved up to spot eight, and Li Jun the street monk had fallen off, replaced by Quan Ch, who was a level 31 half-elf Imperial Security Trooper. I wasn't surprised. With that magic jacket of his, he was likely going to rocket his way up the list.

"He's a cheating poser," Donut grumbled.

Good Evening, Crawlers.

I wanted to remind you of our earlier announcement, that for this floor *only*, the stairwells will remain closed until six hours prior to collapse. A handful of you have managed

to find your way to stairwell locations. Good job, but we are still several days out before you'll be able to do anything with them.

Due to some unforeseen technical difficulties with our Hobgoblin Mechanic Interdiction teams, trains that are breaking down on the tracks are taking much longer than anticipated to be cleared and put back into service. This is resulting in some premature chaos along several routes. We're sure you can handle it.

And finally, you should all have your sponsors now. Every single crawler in the dungeon has received a sponsor, a first for *Dungeon Crawler World*. We are currently processing benefactor box requests, and there will be a slight delay in loot box fulfillment. We are distributing them as quickly as we can. We apologize for the delay and thank you for your patience. We are giving priority to emergency boxes where the benefactor has paid the emergency delivery fee.

Now get out there and kill, kill, kill!

"They're holding onto our boxes, Carl!" Donut said. "I just know Princess D'nadia got me something good."

"Actually," I said. "I just got a bronze benefactor box. Hopefully you guys will get yours soon."

"And you haven't opened it yet? Open it! Open it now! And make sure you send a note that says thank you."

"Oh, all right," I said, pulling the box. I wondered if they had paid the "emergency delivery fee" for this.

The box appeared, a glowing, bronze-colored box. Sparks flew off it as it magically opened. A symbol I'd never seen before decorated the top. It was a circle with a squiggle through it. Words in Syndicate Standard were etched underneath the circle. It read **The Valtay Corporation, Keeping the Best of You Alive.**

I shivered, remembering the brain parasites these guys really were.

The box contained a pill. It was a regular sized, blue and yellow capsule.

For a terrifying moment, I thought maybe this was an actual brain worm. I remembered seeing a video once about how people used to give themselves tapeworms to lose weight, and they came in the form of capsules like this. *They want to take over my body*. I shivered again. The idea was absolutely terrifying. I read the description, which was in a slightly different voice and font than usual.

Valtay Corporation Neural Enhancer #544. Variant 32.c

This item is compatible with your Morphology and Interface.

Warning: This pill will cause a permanent change to your brain. This item cannot be unequipped or undone once installed.

Warning: You do not have a Valtay Corporation Neural Interface installed. While your current wetware system is compatible with this Neural Enhancer, it is recommended you visit a Valtay Corporate Outreach Center to discuss upgrade options. Payment and Legacy plans available. Keeping the Best of You alive.

Current wetware: Syndicate Crawl Version 47.002.Human.

Taking this pill will install the following upgrade to your interface:

Identify and Analyze Subspace Portals.

"What the hell," I muttered, turning the pill over in my hand. Why had they given this to me? What was a subspace portal? And if they had paid the extra fee to get it to me more quickly, was it just because they were rich assholes who could afford it, or was there urgency?

Also, since the description was in a different format than regular items, did that mean I could actually trust what it said?

Just to be double sure, I put the item in my inventory and noted both its rarity and value. Its value was just below the Kimaris figure. Its rarity, however, was listed as common. I pulled it back out of my inventory, now reasonably certain it didn't contain any sort of hidden parasite. If it had, it wouldn't have let me stick it in there. I hoped.

"Whatever," I said. I popped the pill into my mouth and drank it down using my cold cup of coffee.

A moment passed before anything happened.

A new tab is available in your interface.

The tab was labeled **Third-Party Upgrades**. I clicked on it.

Warning: All communication-based upgrades will be disabled while you are within the dungeon. Any attempts to circumvent dungeon security will result in immediate disqualification.

The neural enhancer was the only item listed. I clicked on it, and a note popped up. **This upgrade is working properly.** There was no other information or menus.

I popped up the Sponsorship tab and found the notes section. I could send them messages, but they couldn't send them to me. I knew Donut had been composing and sending thank you notes to Princess D'nadia all day.

Thank you for the upgrade. I don't know what it's for or what it does, but I appreciate the support.

I felt nothing but revulsion for anything and anybody who had anything to do with this shitshow, but if they were going to be sending me beneficial items, I had to appear grateful.

"So what was that thing?" Katia asked. She'd bulked up and was on her way to the training room, where she was going to work on her Catcher skill. I was going to follow her and work on my Powerful Strike. I was going to work on it every day until it hit 15.

"I'm not sure," I said, trailing off. My eyes caught the doorway to the exit out into the coffee shop. It now glowed purple. A tooltip popped up over the doorway.

Standard Subspace Portal.

Analyze? Yes/No.

I clicked on **Yes**, and a series of numbers appeared. I had no idea what I was looking at. However, at the bottom of the list was a few lines that seemed important.

Type: Two-way portal. Gated to user.

Can you pass this portal? Yes.

Environment on other side of portal: Compatible.

Visual Analysis? Yes/No.

I clicked **Yes**, and a still photo of the coffee shop popped up. It was empty of customers, but Nodd the Bopca stood behind the counter, picking his nose.

I can see through doorways now.

"Oh hell yeah," I said.

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[14]

Time to Level Collapse: 6 days, 23 hours
Views: 123.8 Quadrillion
Followers: 1.5 Quadrillion
Favorites: 372.4 Trillion

Leaderboard rank: 6
Bounty: 100,000 gold

The Nightmare Express Landing - Station 283

I watched Donut train with the hole spell while we waited for the *Nightmare Express* to come for the second time. She'd gotten the spell up to level three. She was practicing with making the hole a smaller diameter. She'd figured out how to cast the spell, and with Mongo standing right there, she could cast *Clockwork Triplicate*, and the two extra Mongos would appear on the other side of the hole. We'd be able to clear rooms without having to open doors.

I spent the time trying to read the last Louis L'Amour book, but I couldn't concentrate. I kept thinking of everything that had

happened over the past several hours, plus Donut's loud exclamations kept distracting me.

I checked my timer. The train would return in a half hour. I still had ten minutes before we needed to get ready.

We'd kept our visit to the Desperado Club short. Imani and Elle sent a note that they couldn't make it. Neither could Bautista, who was nearing the end of the line on his train. So we decided to make it a quick visit.

While we walked through the club, The Sledge cast a magic protection spell on us, something he hadn't done the last time. Our entire party glowed blue as we walked through the dancers.

"He buy spell with own money," Bomo said, the longest sentence I'd ever heard a cretin utter. "He buy for Princess protect."

"Ahh, thank you Sledgie," Donut said, patting the rock monster on the head. She now rode on his shoulder when we entered the club. The Sledge made a grumbling, satisfied noise.

The Dodge guild wouldn't let me in, but they did allow The Sledge to accompany Donut inside. She went in and then sent me a message that she'd be in there for an hour.

Donut: IT'S THE SAME THING AS OUR TRAINING ROOM, BUT IT'S EXPENSIVE. THE FIRST SESSION IS FREE, AND IT'LL RAISE IT A FULL LEVEL. IF I WANT TO RAISE IT UP TO NINE, IT'LL COST 20,000 GOLD. TEN IS 250,000! THAT'S OUTRAGEOUS!

Carl: Okay, I'll be at the bar.

I'd learned that my new-found ability to see through thresholds didn't work on all doors. It only worked on portals, magical doorways that were really designed to teleport people from one place to the next, like the one in and out of our personal space. It didn't work on the front entrance of the Desperado Club, but it did work on the doorway into the backroom vestibule, the one from the local bar to the little area where Clarabelle sat.

The snap-a-photo feature, unfortunately, didn't work if I wasn't allowed access to the area, which was a major bummer. I still didn't know how the hell this worked. It wasn't magic. It wasn't a skill. It was some sort of technology thing, a software upgrade that

interacted with the dungeon. There was so much about this world and how it worked that I still didn't understand.

I'd sat at the bar for the hour, staring glumly at my drink. I was approached a half of a dozen times, but Bomo dutifully kept people back. When the hour was almost over, I had a thought, and I approached the dance floor.

I waved at the crowd, motioning for everybody to form speech bubbles over their heads. There was about 20 other crawlers in the room, most of them human, most of them hovering around level 20.

"Hey guys," I said when I had everyone's attention. "I want to get into everybody's chat. I think we should all make a habit of getting the chat details of everybody we meet. If we do it enough, we can create a network where we can all pass information much more easily. It doesn't let you make a chatroom unless everybody is connected with everybody else, which isn't really feasible, but we need to start an information exchange so we can all trade intelligence. We think we have an idea on how to get off this floor, but I know there's probably lots of different paths to success, and it's important we all know how to do it."

Most of the people shrugged and then started fist bumping everybody else. I thought Bomo was going to have a heart attack, but I eventually fist bumped everyone in the room, adding an additional 22 names to my roster. When Donut appeared, I made her do the same.

Now, as we waited for the *Nightmare Express*, I sat there distracted from my book, shuffling through messages. One guy, a human warrior from Japan named Koki, had discovered a way to mass-send messages to everyone on your list at once, and now my messages were a mess of people asking for help and looking to trade items. It was too much, and I created a special folder that would keep them from popping up on my interface.

Still, people kept messaging me directly. I was spending a lot of time explaining what little we knew about the trains. It was important people had all the information, and I wanted to help, but I was shocked at how little some people had managed to figure out after three full days of this.

Carl: No, no. If it's a colored line, it'll always be subway train. Those are the ones that go up and never go back down. If it's a named train, it can be something else. Like the monorails and the diesel trains and the steam engines. Those always go in loops. The named trains are the only ones you can use to get down to earlier stations. We just haven't seen any that go back down to lower than 83.

Donita Grace: I just don't get it. The Fulvous line is a subway and it just goes up and it doesn't circle back.

Carl: Then Fulvous is a color. They're using some weird colors.

Donita Grace: Well I've never heard of it.

I stopped responding after that. There was only so much I could say.

I was nervous about this plan. *That's because it's a stupid fucking plan. But it's all you got.*

The *Nightmare Express* had a loop of an hour and a half. It hit that first station 83—the very first station we'd traveled to with the guy with the books, then 283 where we stood now, then 436, then back to a different 283, a different 83, and then back to that original 83. We'd been ready to jump on it during its previous pass, but I'd pulled us back at the last minute after I saw what we were required to do. If we'd gotten on, we'd have been screwed.

The ground had rumbled as the *Nightmare Express* eased into the long station. The train hissed as brakes squealed. This was an old-school steam engine, painted jet black. This train ran on coal, or maybe magic, but that explained the lack of a third rail. A wedge-shaped cowcatcher sat low on the front of the train. It pulled about forty cars, most of them freight cars designed to haul livestock. As it pulled up, I could hear and see movement from some of the slatted cars, one after another. These were massive creatures, all scrabbling against the walls of their containers to get out. A pair of tentacles

rose from one of the cages, and I realized with horror that these cars didn't have tops.

There was about four feet from the top of the cars to the ceiling, though each car had what appeared to be a chain-linked cage on top of the car which rose all the way to the ceiling. It was, I realized, to prevent people from jumping from the platforms to the top of the cars. Claws and fire burst from one cage. The next was a solid container, filled with water, with spikes sloshing out of the car, like it was filled with pissed-off narwhals. Water sploshed from the car and cascaded onto the platform. It smelled like seawater.

Not all of the train cars appeared to be filled with giant monsters. I quickly counted. Fourteen of the cars appeared to have monstrosities within. The majority of the other cars were rickety, empty freight cars. None of the freight cars had doors, at least not facing the platform.

There were only two cars on the train where we could get on: a caboose at the very back and a passenger car at the front, right behind the engine car, which had pulled into the forward tunnel the same way the colored lined trains did. There was no other way to get on the train. We'd positioned ourselves near the front, and I moved to enter the front passenger car. I grasped onto the door, and a message popped up.

This door is exit only. Enter at rear of train.

"Goddamnit," I grumbled, looking upon the train. My eyes caught the thin gangway above the open-top freight cars. It was immediately clear what we had to do. My *Protective Shell* wasn't going to help. We had to get on the caboose, where the back balcony had a ladder to the roof of the car. From there we'd have to proceed up the train on hands and knees on the goddamned roof of the cars while the ceiling whipped by at a hundred plus miles per hour, all the while traversing 38 open-top cars randomly filled with jumping, snarling monsters. And if there was a war mage in there somewhere, he was probably hiding in one of those cars, ready to ambush our asses when we least expected.

Since it was from the back of the train to the front, my *Protective Shell* wasn't going to work. The chain-link fence along the roofs of

the cars prevented us from jumping up there. And I wouldn't trust Donut's *Puddle Jumper* spell, either, not when the target gangway was so thin. It didn't let us move through walls, and I wasn't certain it'd work anyway if the target was moving.

"Yeah, fuck this," I said, backing away.

A minute later, and the train hissed, gathering speed.

"That was our plan," Donut said, watching the train leave. "What are we going to do now?"

I started counting in my head how long it took the train to leave the station. It'd taken a full minute and a half. My *Protective Shell* only lasted 20 seconds. *Shit. Too long.*

I looked at Donut and Katia and laughed nervously. "So, I have an idea."

"You know," Katia said as I prepared to jump onto the track, "Hekla warned me that you were crazy. She told me to be careful because you'd likely get me killed."

I grinned up at her and jumped down into the gravel between the railroad ties. "First off, you've told me this already. And this time the only one taking the risk is me. And Donut."

"I don't like this, Carl," Donut said. She jumped down and landed on my shoulder. Mongo was left in his carrier, leaving Katia alone on the landing.

"It'll be fine," I said with much more bravado than I felt. I met eyes with Katia. "Be ready. But stay back in case we accidentally crash it." I turned and started jogging my way up the track toward the oncoming train. It'd be in the station in about fifteen minutes. It'd take us five minutes of light running to reach the spot I'd mapped out.

The tunnel was cold and dark. My bare feet crunched on the gravel. Donut hummed nervously as I ran. I told her not to put the *Torch* spell on. I didn't want her warning the engineer, which might cause him to slow down.

"I should have left Mongo on the platform with Katia so she doesn't get lonely," Donut said. We reached the spot. The station was now a distant speck of light. I could feel the vibration of the approaching train on the track. It was a small rumble, but growing.

"She's a big girl. She can take care of herself."

"If she is, then why do you keep telling her what to do? You didn't even ask her if she wanted to get giant. You just shoved the backpack at her and told her to do it."

"She likes it," I said.

"But what if she didn't?"

"Look who's talking," I said. "You with your boots and purple mohawk nonsense."

"That's different. Fashion is different than making someone change. You keep telling her to be herself, but you're the one making her change the most of all."

"I…" I paused. Donut was right. But in the words of the AI, this wasn't Dr. Phil. We didn't have the luxury of spending all day making sure we weren't stepping on each other's feelings. I didn't want to be a jerk, but I also wanted to keep her alive. "You know what, you're right, Donut. Next time I'll ask her."

Donut patted me on the head. "Good boy, Carl."

The trembling of the track grew. I glanced at my clock. Right on schedule. "Okay, it's time. Go ahead and set up your spell now, and let me know when it's ready."

"Uh, I think we went too far," Donut said a moment later. "The closest I can get is about three or four hundred feet before the platform."

"*What*?" I said, horror rising. "You said it was line of sight."

"That's what it says, Carl. It's not my fault if the description is wrong."

We had trekked too far into the tunnel. It was too late. She couldn't cast her spell if we were running. "Okay, okay. We'll be fine. Get ready to run your ass off after we teleport." *That motorcycle would be pretty useful right about now.*

The tunnel lightened. I could hear the train, barreling down the track. It was still moving quickly, though the engineer was starting to

apply the brakes. The distinctive squeal echoed through the tight tunnel.

A piercing whistle blasted. The distant light became an angry, round eye as the train barreled toward us. Even though it was slowing down, it still came at us at a terrifying speed.

Donut's *Puddle Jumper* had a three-second delay after it was cast, so we had to time this perfectly. The train loomed, the cow catcher approaching like a spear. *Shit, it's moving faster than I thought*. "Cast! Cast now!"

I pressed down on *Protective Shell*. A moment passed, and we blinked.

Holy crap. I'd timed that a little *too* close.

We jumped a quarter of a mile down the track. Notifications started pouring in. The train roared through my *Protective Shell*. All the red-tagged monsters within were slamming against the wall of the spell and then getting pushed backward, hopefully splattering against the back of the train. The train continued to barrel at us. The back of the train screamed. Sparks showered. *It's not slowing down. It's speeding up. Why is it speeding up?*

"Fuck! Run! Run!" We turned toward the station, only three hundred and fifty feet away. So close.

Donut bolted, running faster than me. "Hurry up, Carl," she cried without looking back.

It was like one of those dreams where you tried to run, but you were caught in something sticky. I knew I was running faster than any human had naturally run before, but I'd wasted a precious few seconds being disoriented and staring at the oncoming train. And then I'd spent another full second lamenting what a stupid idea this had been. The train seemed to have closed the quarter of a mile distance between us in mere seconds. How fast was this thing going? It's a damn steam engine, not a bullet train. *It's out of control. It's going to derail the moment it hits a curve.* We must have killed the engineer.

Ahead, Donut leaped, vaulting onto the platform. She'd been running so fast, she rolled the moment she hit the landing. I saw Katia standing there, eyes huge as I approached the station.

I felt the train behind me. The ground rumbled as if in an earthquake.

I'm not going to make it.

I jumped.

I didn't make it.

I crashed, I tumbled, and I broke.

Part of me registered that if my body wasn't enhanced by my supernatural constitution, I would've exploded like a blood-and-guts filled water balloon the moment the cow catcher smacked me. The wedge was designed to throw whatever it caught aside, though in the tight tunnel, there was no aside except at the landings.

Being tossed onto the landing would've been preferable to what actually happened. I'd jumped just as the train caught me. I felt things break and snap within. I was flying, and then I wasn't. I slammed against hot metal. I'd instinctively bashed onto my *Heal* spell while I was still in midair, but my health continued to plummet, so I hit a heal potion. I looked up in time to see Donut and Katia's horrified faces looking at me as we rocketed past the station and back into the tunnel, still picking up speed.

I'd hit the cow catcher and flipped in midair, getting slammed by the front of the train. My constitution, forward momentum, that *Heal* spell, and the fact my invulnerable foot was what actually caught the front of the train all conspired together to make sure I clung to life.

I lay prone on a small, flat section above the cow catcher, just before the train's boiler. The light sat on a platform just above my head, shining into the featureless tunnel. The front of the train burned. The *chug chug chug* of the train was furious, louder and faster than it should be. In the shadow I could see **666** was emblazoned in red letters on the front of the black boiler.

I took a second healing potion.

A terrible screeching noise rose from the back of the train. Whatever it was, it wasn't slowing the damn thing down.

Donut: CARL! CARL!

Carl: I'm okay. I need to stop the train. Stay there.

Donut: THE TRAIN IS ALL BROKEN IN THE BACK. YOU GOTTA HURRY.

A short ladder led to a thin gangplank that ran along the exterior port side of the engine. The plank did not run along the starboard side, which was the side facing the station platforms. The rocky, uneven wall of the tunnel was right there, whipping by at breakneck speed. My whole body ached. I could see points where the train had sheared the wall off on earlier passes. If I reached out, it'd probably rip my arm off.

I gingerly moved to the ladder, and I pulled myself up, careful not to touch the massive boiler, which was getting hotter by the moment. A handrail ran the length of the boiler, leading to a square window where the driver could look out onto the track. A red light glowed inside the cab, but I didn't see movement within.

Below, pistons spun and automatic steam-release valves along the wheels opened at random intervals, screaming hot gas into the passageway. With nowhere to go, the steam swirled in the tunnel, giving the already-dark channel a humid, hazy appearance. Everything was wet and hot, like the interior of a sauna.

I slid my way toward the cab, the wall occasionally catching the back of my cloak, causing it to whip up, threatening to pull me over. I slid down the boiler, reaching the window, which was about as wide as the platform, and only about three feet tall.

I peered inside, swallowing hard at the mess of valves, levers, and gauges. My eyes caught a splatter of gore against the back of the interior. The driver must have been red-tagged. Whatever he was, he was very, very dead now.

The train trembled as it started to curve. *Shit. Shit.*

I formed a fist, summoning my gauntlet. I punched the window. It was like punching through paper. I had to punch several times to clear the glass away. The train bumped ominously, the tracks stuttering. I squeezed myself into the narrow window, falling hard into the cab.

Entering the Nightmare Express.

Gore filled the chamber. It stank of oil and fire and blood. There was a second dead engineer against the wall on the other side. *Great*, I thought. Two drivers meant this shit was twice as complicated.

I turned to the controls. There were even more spigots and gauges and handles now I could see the control panel full on. Pipes ran everywhere. At the bottom was a door like on a wood-burning stove. It had a little glass window showing fire raging within. This was where they tossed the coal in to heat the boiler. My eyes caught a row of pressure gauges along the top of the controls. There were five of them, and all of them were almost in the red. The train bucked as it rumbled over track.

On the right side of the controls was a large, red lever that I assumed was the throttle. I squeezed the handle and eased it down. I felt the train slow. I relaxed, but then I saw the pressure gauges start to rise. One of them shot all the way up to the top.

To my horror, a new tooltip popped up over the control station.

Shattering Train Bomb

Type: A steam boiler made with a shocking disregard for safety. It's almost like they want this thing to explode.

Effect: It's a train-sized grenade that is going to detonate from extreme pressure. What do you think the effect will be?

Status: Deteriorating. 75/1000

If you don't figure this shit out in about two minutes, it's going to be pretty damn spectacular.

A chain hung from the ceiling. I pulled, and the whistle blew. I held it down to see if that alleviated the pressure. One of the gauges lowered. The others did not. I pulled another lever, easing it. The brakes. They only worked for a moment. I had to pump them back and forth, but it came with diminishing returns. There was another identical lever below it. I had no idea what the hell I was doing, and I feared I was doing more harm than good. It was already too late for me to run to the back of the train and jump off.

I was about to message Imani and Elle to ask them if any of the Meadow Lark team knew how to drive a train when I saw the face

staring back at me through the little fireplace window. Startled, I jumped back. Then I saw the dot appear on my minimap. A white dot. An NPC. *Inside* the fire.

I didn't allow myself enough time to think about it. I grasped onto the burning handle and turned, opening the door. Heat blasted into the chamber. A demonic, female head popped out of the hole.

The red-skinned, black-haired woman was a 1950's pinup vision of a red devil woman, at least from the neck up. Only her head fit through the little hole. She had her hair up in a rockabilly-style up-do, tied with a red bandana. Two black horns rose through her hair. Steam rose off of her, and her eyes were swirling, black orbs. The demon woman had heavy rings under her black eyes, making her look exhausted.

Fire Brandy – Lesser Demon MILF. Level 75.

Fire(wo)man of the Nightmare Express.

This is a non-combatant NPC.

A single mother's gotta eat!

Where one finds big ovens that need stoking, one will regularly find a Lesser Demon in control. But if it's a fire that needs to be *extra* hot, the much-rarer Sheol MILFs are often employed to keep those fires sizzling.

Once a pregnant Lesser Demon falls into labor, her delivery usually lasts about sixty days. During these two months, she has a litter of 15-18,000 babies, delivering one approximately every five minutes, non-stop.

Only one in 10,000 Lesser Demon babies are viable. The rest rarely live more than a few seconds. Their corpses shrivel and harden, becoming a valuable resource called Sheol Bricks. The 15th floor will be lousy with them. If exposed to fire, Sheol Bricks burn long and hot. Lesser Demon MILFs who also learn water magic can find lucrative work as steam boiler fire stokers. Once they seal themselves within the boiler, they create an almost self-sufficient system that keeps most larger boilers humming. Plus it's a convenient method of disposing of their failed young.

This train is running on dead babies. Holy crap that's fucked up.

"Child, you are just in time," Fire Brandy said. She spoke loudly, over the roar of the train. She had an odd accent, almost German. It was a peculiar juxtaposition with her appearance. "Something happened to the engineer and that *kotzbrocken* war mage. They go splat. See that valve there on the top left? Will you turn it for me? The idiot didn't release that valve, and I can't control it from here."

"Uh, this one?" I said.

"That's right. Turn it left. Turn it all the way. Yes. Very gut." One of the five gauges moved into the green. The train shuddered as if in pleasure.

New Achievement! Kept A Rollin'

You're driving a train! Holy shit!

***Reward*: I'm pretty sure the act of driving a train is a badass-enough award.**

From there, Fire Brandy taught me how to take control of the train using crisp, matter-of-fact language. After I turned one valve one way for ten seconds, and then the other for another five, the "This is a bomb" tooltip disappeared. I relaxed.

I managed to stop the train completely while we went over the controls. Then I got it moving again at a slow clip, about thirty miles per hour. That was a fraction of its normal speed. She taught me the throttle and the two-control braking system. One was for the brakes on the engine itself, another was for the train cars. I'd nearly wrecked us when I'd been jacking with it earlier, and I hadn't even realized. Three times she gave birth while we talked. She scrunched up her face, and I heard a quick scream that was almost immediately cut away.

"Now you know how to run train," she eventually said. "Do not go fast. Do not overpressurize, and we will have no problems, no? Now close my door and leave me be." She pointed to a small box at the back of the chamber. "But if something happens to me, you have that box. You can't use for long because you have no source of water or oil. So only use it to get back to the station and vent as much as you can. Now close the door." She started to pull her head back in.

"Wait," I said. "How do I get to the station from here? Uh, station 10 I mean. The trainyard."

"Hit the switch. It is on the tracks just before the next stop. You have a few options. Choose 'Station Repair' and you'll get to the station, and the train will be fixed." She waved toward the starboard side of the train, the side I hadn't entered through.

She pulled her head back in. Over the roar of the fire and train, I heard the cry of another baby, and then a second.

She has two babies in there. Two viable babies already.

I closed and sealed the door using the heavy rag she'd pointed out. Hit the switch? How would I do that? I examined the driver's station on the right side. There was a handle there, leading to a pole attached to the side of the boiler. I realized it was like a lance. Using the handle I could swing the pole to the side, presumably to hit the switches on the tracks. If I tried it now, all I'd do was hit the wall and break it. I'd have to be moving very slow before I dared try it.

I looked down at the small box she'd indicated. It sat in the back of the cab, near the exit. The box was covered in gore where the driver or the war mage had been pushed against it. I lifted the lid and pulled a black chunk out of it.

Sheol Brick

If Santa gives coal to the regular naughty kids, he'd probably give this stuff to history's greatest villains, like Hans Gruber and the guy who invented those shoes with the individual toes built in. It burns a lot hotter and a lot longer than regular coal. And when I say "a lot longer," I mean until the end of your lifetime. So like a week or more.

To save you distress, I'm not going to tell you where this came from.

That was a lie! It's a baby corpse!

I dropped it in revulsion, wiping my hand on my cloak. There were about fifty bricks in the chest. I took a deep breath and then I picked up the entire box, adding them all to my inventory. I shuddered.

In the mess of gore I found two items. A small satchel containing 350 gold and a large, bronze key. I picked it up.

Steam Engineer's Key. I quickly examined it.

Allows access to Iron Tangle employee-only areas and actions on all 400 steam-type trains of the Tangle.

I was finally able to relax and look about my surroundings. I was alive. Not only was I alive, but I'd stolen a train. I had stolen a goddamned train.

Only then did I notice my stats. "Holy fuckballs," I said out loud.

I had risen three whole levels. I was now level 32. I had three new neighborhood boss boxes.

Apparently, I'd killed every monster on the train. And three of them were neighborhood bosses. I looked at the map, and I didn't see any X's on the train at all. The last time I'd done this, I hadn't even gone up a level. This time I'd hit the jackpot. It looked as if I'd also gotten a bunch of experience for taking control of the train. Despite all that, I only had one additional achievement I hadn't yet opened. I pulled it up now.

New achievement! Three Cheers for Slaughter!

You killed three boss monsters with the same attack! I'm starting to think your survival so far isn't just a fluke. You're either scary good at this, or you're just one lucky mo-fo. Either way, holy shit. Good job.

***Reward*: You've received a Platinum Big Daddy Box!**

There was a small door out the back of the engine car. Stepping over the gore, I opened the hatch to gaze out over the back of the train as it chugged slowly down the track.

I laughed at the sheer amount of destruction I'd wrought with my shield spell. The passenger car just behind the engine appeared to be fully intact, though I spied blood inside. That was the only other car on the train that remained unscathed. The remaining cars, the ones that had been filled with the giant monsters, were still on the tracks and pulling behind the train, but the walls had all been peeled away and broken, turning the cars into a bunch of flatbeds. Several of the wall pieces still hung, attached to the cars. They sparked as they came into contact with the tunnel wall. A chunk of wood ripped off as I watched, bouncing and falling back onto the

track behind the train. The caboose was still there, but the entire top of the structure was sheared off.

I couldn't believe we hadn't wrecked the whole thing. That other train had been pretty easy to derail. I wondered if there was magic keeping this particular train on the tracks. *Then again, I just almost blew the whole thing up.* Maybe the cars themselves were built to break like this. Maybe they hoped we'd accidentally unleash the giant monsters onto the tracks, and they deliberately made the walls weak.

Carl: Hey Donut, can you go back out on the tracks and see if any of the corpses out there are neighborhood bosses? I have no idea where the hell I am, and it'd be pretty useful if you could snag the route map off a boss corpse and then let me know when I'm approaching the stops. Make sure they're dead before you approach.

Donut: OKAY, BUT DON'T RUN ME OVER.

It had only been about forty minutes, and I was now moving at a snail's pace compared to its regular speed. If I'd even come to the next station, I'd missed it. I suspected I still had a bit before I got there.

Carl: You have plenty of time. I'm going to try to eyeball what's at station 436, and then I'll loop around to pick you guys up.

Hopefully the debris on the track wasn't enough to stop the train. I'd find out when I got there. I had a thought, and I pulled up chat again.

Carl: But if you're worried, this might be a good time to field test riding Mongo. You can race down the track to see how fast you two go.

Donut: CARL YOU ARE A GENIUS.

Carl: You know it.

Donut: CARL?

Carl: Yeah?

Donut: DON'T EVER DO THIS TO ME AGAIN. I THOUGHT YOU'D BEEN SQUISHED.

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The Nightmare Express

Less than five minutes later, the train rolled through the switching station. The tunnel widened, leading to a large, well-lit cavern. Several other tracks ran through here, but I didn't see any other trains. There were dozens of entrances and exits.

The first switch was a large, round target, painted red. It was a well-worn metal plate on a pole, sticking up from the ground like a stop sign. I was supposed to use the lance thing to hit the switch if I wanted the train to change tracks. This first one was labeled "Auxiliary Tracks. Warning." The next was "Station Repair," and after that was a third entitled "Recycle."

There were so many tracks on the ground, it was difficult to tell what led where. I followed the Recycle track with my eyes, which led to a massive archway at the far side of the cavern.

A colossal, glowing portal dominated the center of the room. I tried to examine it using my new subspace portal skill, but it said I needed to be closer for it to work. This was the "Station Repair" portal.

I tried to follow the course of the Auxiliary Track, but it got lost in the tangle of other tracks. I wasn't certain, but it appeared to lead to another switching area with dozens of additional choices. If my brain

was parsing it correctly, it looked as if I could possibly switch the *Nightmare Express* to one of several other train lines.

A large train steamed through the room, belching smoke and chugging merrily away. This one came from the opposite direction. It didn't slow as it passed. This was also a steam locomotive, but it had a more modern design, with a smaller cowcatcher. It pulled ten cars. I caught a quick glance of the final car. It was a caboose similar to what this train once had. Two spears stuck up from the back balcony, and a pair of human heads were impaled on the sticks. The engineer tooted twice in greeting before disappearing into the tunnel.

A minute later, I re-entered the tunnel.

Donut: I GOT THE MAP AND A LOT OF GOLD. YOU ARE ABOUT TO COME TO STATION 436. THERE ARE A LOT OF DEAD BODY PARTS AND WOOD AND METAL ON THE TRACKS. ALSO MONGO CAN RUN REALLY, REALLY FAST.

Carl: Okay, thanks. I'll loop around to pick you up. Hopefully the train can push through all the stuff on the tracks. But in case it won't be able to, I'm going to stop and check out this station 436 now while I still can.

Ahead, I could see the light of the platform. I slowed the train as I approached. It looked like any other platform from this angle. The sign above it read **Abyss Station - 436**. I eased the engine to a stop, set the brake, stuck the boiler to standby, and I stepped out of the cab. After a moment's hesitation, I decided to close the door to the engine car just in case. Someone could still climb in through the broken front window, but this would dissuade all but the most determined train-jackers.

Entering Abyss Station.

I searched the map for signs of life. I saw nothing. I felt the ground rumble, and I could hear a train rush by. It sounded as if it was directly above me. There was a distant whine of a different train and a muffled crash. A minute later came another crash. And then another. Another train whipped by. This one sounded below me. It reminded me of being in line for a roller coaster at an amusement park, with things whipping by from all directions.

The station was bare. No sign. No bench. There was only a single set of metal, industrial-style stairs in the center of the platform. The stairs here were especially steep, like those on a fire escape. The stairs led upward and disappeared through a dark hatch in the ceiling. I hesitated, and then I pulled a torch from my inventory and ascended. *I'm just going to look*.

It took almost an hour to ascend the stairs. The entire time, the sounds of trains coming and going and crashing surrounded me. The walls continually shook. Donut and Katia both demanded I keep them constantly updated. Finally, just as Donut was regaling Katia with a story about how she pulled a last-minute win at some best-in-show cat pageant because her biggest competitor, a Singapura, was disqualified over some paperwork dispute, I saw a red light at the top of the stairs. Ten minutes later, I pulled myself up onto a circular, iron cat walk, overlooking a massive, flaming pit. The long walkway circled the interior of the hole. Hot air blasted up at me.

Entering the Abyss.

"Oh wow," I muttered.

Below me, above me, and all around the interior of the massive, burning pit was hundreds and hundreds, if not thousands, of giant, glowing portals. Catwalks like the one I was standing upon dotted the interior at non-regular intervals. Monstrous shapes haunted the walkways, but none were near me.

I had a memory, of standing on the precipice of the Grand Canyon. It was just my mom and me standing on the edge, looking off into the chasm. This had been on the way back from Texas. My father was there in the car, waiting. His presence, patiently waiting behind us was even bigger than that of the canyon spread before us. I remembered that moment at the barrier, my mom clutching tightly onto my wrist. For a moment, she clasped so much it hurt.

Do you remember the circus? That was fun, wasn't it?

You're hurting me.

I know, honey. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.

This wasn't really as big as the Grand Canyon, but I was surprised at how shaken I was by the sudden memory. This hole was

almost perfectly round, at least a mile across. It had to be thousands of feet deep.

As I watched, a train burst through a portal. The cars shot into the air and then tumbled into the pit. They twisted and turned as they fell and fell, landing in a heap at the bottom with a distant crash.

I strained to peer at the base of the pit. The giant hole was filled with thousands of crashed train cars. Hundreds of fires burned. The tiny dots of figures crawled over the debris. I recognized their gait. Jikininki janitor ghouls. They swarmed like ants over the wreckage. Another train came from a different portal. Then another.

There's no engine cars. I remembered what the mantaur guy had told us. He would go through the portal, and it was just his engine car on the other side. These were all the colored trains reaching the end of the line. The trains were driven through the portals. Only the engine car was teleported back to base. The rest of the cars were just thrown into this pit, like garbage. The conductors and the porters got off the train at the last stop. And when they returned, the train had been reformed. The train wasn't looping through time. They were building new trains. All except the engine cars.

"Holy shit!" I cried as a train burst from a portal directly over my head. I ducked as the catwalk shuddered. The train roared as it plummeted into the hole. The wheels spun uselessly as the driverless train nosedived.

I looked up at the portal.

Ultima Corp DungeonWerx Industrial Subspace Portal.

Analyze? Yes/No.

I clicked **Yes**, and the page of numbers that appeared was much longer than the last one. I scrolled down to the bottom.

Warning: You are facing the incorrect side of this portal. Entering through this side will have no effect. You may pass safely through this side, but use caution not to backtrack while entering.

Type: One-way portal. Gated by conveyance type and to key holders.

Can you pass this portal? Yes*

Warning: You must be on a gated conveyance and/or a key must be equipped or held outside of inventory, depending on type. Compatible keys have been marked in your inventory.

Environment on other side of portal: Compatible.

Visual Analysis? Yes/No.

I clicked **Yes**.

I was greeted with a screenshot of a massive trainyard. Thousands of trains spread out in all directions. It was only the engine cars. They were all in a high-fenced yard. In the fenced-in area of the yard were what looked like thousands of ghoul-like creatures milling about. They looked like zombies, but from several different races and mobs.

I moved to another portal down the gangway and took another screenshot. It was the same, but from a different angle. From this direction I could see just past the fence and saw what appeared to be a line of dwarves waiting for the train. The zombies were only in the trainyard. I couldn't see how the trains were leaving the fenced-in area or how they were keeping the zombies within.

My eyes did catch something interesting. There was a swirling portal in the corner of the trainyard, much too small for a train. I could only see half of it from this shot. But in that shot I could see the distinctive form of one of those rolling cages like the one I'd looted from the room with the robots.

A distant roar made me look up. A large, lizard-like monster had spied me and was crawling up the wall to my gangway. Several other of the mobs also started to move in this direction. I still had several minutes before they'd get here.

I wanted to stay and fight, but I was worried that they'd do something to the walkway, causing me to lose access to the stairwell back to the *Nightmare Express*. I dropped a goblin smoke bomb, so they couldn't see which direction I went, and I returned to the stairwell and started to quickly descend.

Several minutes passed, but it didn't look like they were following. As I descended, I moved to my inventory. I found a new sort-by option. I could sort out items that have been "marked." I had

three keys that would allow me passage through the portal: The Ochre Key, the Steam Train Key, and that stupid souvenir hat we'd received the moment this floor started.

Holy shit. That was it? All we needed to do was equip the stupid fucking train conductor hat?

Carl: I'm sending this message out to everybody on my chat list. You guys aren't going to believe this shit.

Carl: In case you haven't heard, the stairwells are all at stations 12, 24, 36, 48, and 72. The problem is we all started higher than station 80, and it doesn't look like there's a way to backtrack. Here's what we have gathered. So far we know for sure of two ways to get to the early stations, and we're pretty certain about two more. Spread the word.

One. If you equip that stupid hat and just ride a train to the end of the line, you'll get through. Problem. The train car you're riding in *won't* get through, which means you'll be teleported into a train station filled with literally thousands of zombies.

Two. You can kill an engineer and get an engineer's key. You will be transported to the same trainyard, but you'll be inside of a train car. Problem. You'll have to manage to do that without crashing the train. You can possibly jump ahead using one of the named lines. But let me tell you, those named lines are a bitch. Also, we don't know what you can do after you get to the station. If you have control of the train you can possibly drive it out of there, but we're not sure.

Possible Solution Three. Station 435 is where the employees get off. There's supposedly a portal there that takes you to the headquarters. I believe the headquarters is on the other side of the zombie fence. Problem. It sounds like there's a boss monster at these stops called The

Kravyad. Also, it appears if you go through this portal you lose time and memories. Plus we're not certain you *can* get through these portals. If someone tries this, let us know your experience.

Possible Solution Four. If you get on a named line that has a stop at station 436, and you get control of the train, you can use the switching station to get back to the base. I'm not certain how that works yet, but we're going to try to figure it out.

I know there are other solutions. If you find them, please let me know. Stay safe out there everybody.

Porter T: Thanks, mate. You're not nearly as crazy as they make you look on the show.

Mei W: We sold our hats. Everybody in the party sold them! They were offering 5,000 gold each for them.

I continued down the stairs, answering a wave of messages. There were rumors of a hidden train that moved backward, down the line and not up it. But you had to break through a wall to get to it. I was half expecting to find my train gone, but it remained on the track, boiler chugging in standby mode. I got in, knocked on the fire door so Fire Brandy knew I was back, and I pulled out of the station. I slowly increased the train's speed, getting it up to about 50 miles per hour. Behind, the cars still sparked and rumbled ominously, but they remained on the tracks. I should have unhooked them, but I didn't have anywhere to put them. If we could figure out the switching station, maybe there'd be a way to ditch the extra cars.

Donut: CARL, HURRY UP AND GET BACK. I GOT MY FIRST BENEFACTOR BOX AND IT'S THE GREATEST PRIZE IN THE HISTORY OF PRIZES. PRINCESS D'NADIA HAD IT MADE ESPECIALLY FOR ME. I WANT YOU TO SEE IT. IT'S A SURPRISE!

Katia: It's a surprise all right.

Donut: DON'T RUIN IT, KATIA.

Carl: I can't wait.

Donut: ALSO I FORGOT TO TELL YOU I WENT UP TWO LEVELS TO LEVEL 30. MY CHARISMA HIT 100, AND I HAVE A

NEW SPECIAL ABILITY!

Carl: That *is* good news. You can tell me all about it when I get back.

Donut: IT'S CALLED LOVE VAMPIRE. IT'S AWESOME!

Carl: I'm going to make one more very quick stop before I get back. The train is moving a bit slower than usual, so it'll still be a couple of hours.

Donut: WHAT KIND OF STOP?

Carl: I'm going to try to make a trade over at station 83. Let me know when I'm getting close. In the meantime, you should head over to the other platforms at the station and and grind on the monsters riding in from station 282.

Katia: That's what we've been doing, but the trains stopped coming on the Purple line. The Mauve line is still moving. Also, I spent some time clearing the track of debris. In my larger form, it's a lot easier to pick up the big stuff. There's still stuff strewn across the track, but I don't think it'll be a problem now.

About two hours later, the *Nightmare Express* returned to station 283. Katia had cleaned the track pretty well. Most of the remaining debris I hit was caught by the cowcatcher, and it eventually flew to the side of the narrow path or broke into thin chunks. The train occasionally bucked, but we remained on the tracks.

I stopped the engine about halfway down the platform. Katia stood there, leaning against a ceiling support. She was about half-full of transformation mass. She looked like a pink-skinned She Hulk, but with spikes on her back. She'd given herself a leather outfit and black boots. The purple mohawk had returned.

Donut was also there, sitting upon the back of Mongo. I noticed the new addition to her outfit right away.

"Sunglasses, huh?" I said as I stepped off the train.

"Aren't they just to die for!" Donut exclaimed, hopping off the back of Mongo, who was jumping up and down wildly at my return. I patted the dinosaur on the head as Donut leaped to my shoulder. "They're not just couture. They're *super* sunglasses."

They were large and round, making her look like a bug. They were similar to the movie star-style sunglasses Bea was wearing on her head in that picture Donut had received. These seemed to be magically affixed to Donut's face. The frames had no arms, and her nose was too squished to properly hold them up, yet they remained firmly plastered to her face. She removed them and let me examine their properties:

Prism Industries Capacitating and Focusing Goggles. Special High-Fashion Edition. "The Princess Donut."

This is a Unique Item.

This one-of-a-kind item was a gift from Princess D'Nadia of the Prism Kingdom to Princess Donut of the Blood Sultanate. It was personally signed by Princess D'Nadia.

Protects the eyes from a variety of environmental hazards, including magic-based attacks that render the user blind. Enhances all dark vision effects. Allows for heat vision and other visible-light viewing options.

In addition, any energy-based spell that originates from the ocular region is caught and focused by these goggles, which allows for multiple combat and targeting options.

"Holy shit," I said, reading it a second time.

"It turns my *Magic Missile* into a laser!" she said. "I can shoot four at the same time! I've been standing on the back of the Mauve Platform, and when the doors open, I can shoot inside four doors at once. It can even hold onto the energy of one shot and add it to the next. Plus they're beautiful. I look like Miss Beatrice. Don't you just love them?"

"Those are pretty good," I agreed. I wondered how much it cost D'nadia to get the box to Donut. I glanced up to Katia. "Did you get anything?"

"No," she said. "None of the daughters have gotten anything yet, either."

I still didn't know what Katia's sponsor's angle was. I wouldn't be surprised if Katia never got a prize at all. "I am absolutely starving," I said, trying to change the subject. "Let's eat and take a nap and reset our buffs because I don't know how long before we'll find another safe room after this."

"We're going through the portal?" Katia asked.

"I just want to see if we can get through and then come back using the Nightmare Express train. If not, it'll give us time to figure out what our next move will be. If we can set up near a stairwell and just grind for the remaining time, that'll be ideal."

"And if we can come back?" Katia said. "We'll return?"

I held up my hand as I read the new message that just popped up.

Elle: Hey Carl. We have found ourselves in a bit of a pickle. I wanted to give you a head's up.

Carl: What's wrong?

Elle: We just cleared out stop 275 on the Camel Line. Killed one of those Krakaren bitches. It was easier than Imani thought it would be. Anyway, we cleared the area, and we went back to the station to catch the next train to 277, which is a transit station. But the train never came. We're stuck here. We're going to have to walk.

Imani: I think it was that Quan Ch guy. There's chatter in my inbox that people keep seeing him blowing up trains. He's farming the train drivers, but he's making it so everybody is getting stuck. If he keeps it up, all of the train lines will be stopped.

Carl: How far is it to station 277?

Imani: Far. 276 is probably twenty or thirty miles, and by the time we get there, the monsters at that station will be starting to transform and will be on the tracks. It's another thirty after that to 277.

Elle: Yeah, so instead we'll be taking the druggie portal back to station 272 and then we'll hike down to 271. It's still far, but not nearly as much. We'll still have to walk on the tracks. That's why I'm letting you know. We'll be out of

commission for a day at least. There's a named train at 271, and if the Cobalt line is also out of commission, we'll have to take that one. It's called The Eviscerator.

I'd seen that one listed a few times. I cursed that Quan asshole. He had to know what he was doing. What a selfish prick.

Carl: What kind of monsters are at stop 272?

Imani: Gross Atomizers. Floating bags of gas. They're easy to kill, but they have a poison cloud area attack. We can handle them. It'll also give us a chance to look at these robots you've been talking about.

Carl: Okay. Good luck. See if you can find a secret way out of that robot room. We're going to try to take the Nightmare through the portal. I'll let you know what happens. Keep me updated. Stay away from the third rail.

Elle: Oh you know it. Kill, kill, kill!

I laughed.

"So tell me about your new vampire skill," I asked as I ate a corndog. The saferoom was bigger than usual. It was a self-enclosed mall food court. Only one of the many restaurants was open. A Hotdog on a Stick. The bopca even wore the absurd hat the workers had to wear. Katia was scandalized by the restaurant's normal menu. She'd instead talked the bopca into some sort of fish recipe from Iceland.

Donut had also ordered the fish. She currently had a piece of broken mirror propped up on the table and was practicing her voguing. She looked up at me. The sour look was ridiculously enhanced by the sunglasses.

"It's not vampire, it's *Love* Vampire. I had three choices, and I picked that one."

"Did you actually read the descriptions first?"

"Of course I read them, Carl. Besides, it's the one Mordecai told me to get when we talked about this before."

I relaxed. “That’s good. What does it do?”

“It makes one enemy my level or lower give me his heart. That’s what it says. So if I get stabbed, they take the damage instead of me.”

“Wait, really?” I said, intrigued. “How often can you do it? How long does it last?”

“It lasts until they’re dead. I can do it every couple of hours. Now let me do this, Carl. We’re going on the show later and I need to perfect my look.”

I sighed. Zev had said we’d only be doing voiceover stuff on the show, but I wasn’t going to point that out now.

I moved to my loot boxes. The boss boxes were typical Neighborhood Boss items. The best prize was a Scroll of Upgrade, which had been good to me so far, but when I applied it, all it did was add +3 dexterity to my Trollskin Shirt. That was a decent upgrade, especially since I’d been planning on throwing a couple of points into dexterity, but it wasn’t a great one.

The Platinum Big Daddy Box contained a regular, unenchanted toothbrush, plus a tiny, travel-sized tube of toothpaste. The tube was red with a black skull on it. It had “Carpe Diem” written on it in what appeared to be Comic Sans font.

Seize the Day Toothpaste – Five Applications.

You know that feeling you get when you walk out into the world with minty-fresh breath? It’s like you can take on any challenge that is thrown your way. It gives you confidence. It boosts your self-esteem. It makes you feel like you’re on top of the damn world.

Well, this stuff does none of that. However, if you brush your teeth using this enchanted, cherry-flavored toothpaste, you are imbued with the following buffs for 30 hours:

+Three Times Damage to all Boss Monsters.

or

+Four Times Damage to all Boss Monsters if the Boss is a Province, Country, or Floor Boss.

This buff may only be applied in a safe room.

That was a fantastic prize, but it would only be useful if I knew I was going to face a boss that day. With only five applications, I'd need to be stingy with it. I added it to my stash.

From there, I assigned my stat points, adding six to my strength and three to my constitution.

I needed to sleep, but I found myself spending too much time using the chat feature. I'd traded away all of my Louis L'Amour books, and I'd suddenly realized how much I'd gotten used to reading, even if it was only for a few minutes before I slept. So instead I moved to the chat feature. I was starting to see a reoccurring theme in my small chat group. The trains were going out of commission at an alarming rate. People were getting stranded. We still had almost six days left, but that wasn't nearly enough time if people were going to have to hike dozens of miles a day.

Mordecai's long-ago advice echoed in my head. *Look, kid. I want this to sink deep into your thick skull. You can't save them all.*

Taking that train through the portal seemed like I was abandoning them. I knew that was stupid. Everyone was spread out to the wind. I didn't even know these people. I told them how to get free. That was all I could do. It had to be enough.

But what if it wasn't? I'd read something earlier that had stuck with me. It was from the back of the cookbook. It was written by a crawler named York, who'd written the 10th edition. He'd written pages and pages of rambling philosophical essays I could barely understand. But I couldn't stop thinking about one passage in particular. I wasn't certain I fully understood exactly what he was trying to say, but it stuck with me. It appeared to be his last entry before he died or lost the book:

> *Reading the words of those who have come before me, I know them. You, reading this. I know you, too. You are me. That is who this book finds.*
>
> *I have been alone my whole life. I have been surrounded by my hive, yet I have been alone. That is okay, I now know. It is acceptable to have your own thoughts, your own mind,*

despite what they say. But it is also acceptable to be alone and want the strength of the hive. There is no shame in that. No contradiction. That is what this book attempts. To make a hive of those who will never cross paths, except in these pages.

Yet sometimes this book is not enough. You sometimes want more. You want to belong. Again, there is no shame. There is no shame in wanting to be alone yet also wanting the comfort and the strength of your brethren. But more importantly, there is no shame in wanting to protect those who are your hive, even if you never knew them. For they are yours, and they are being taken. It is us or it is them. There is consolation in dying in the pursuit of justice, no matter how small or big that death is.

I wasn't sure I agreed with that last part, but by the time I closed my eyes, I felt resigned to the idea that there was something more to be done for those trapped on the tracks.

But what was it? I had no fucking clue.

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[16]

I AWAKENED TO FIND A MESSAGE FROM ELLE AND IMANI.

Elle: Hey Hotshot. Your instincts were right. There is a secret way out of the robot rooms. It's a long tunnel, leading downward at an angle. It doesn't look like it opens up until after the robots wake. And the robots don't wake until the monsters start their withdrawal symptoms. Luckily we don't have to fight the metal bastards. I can't believe you blew two of them up. We're following the tunnel right now to see where it goes. It sounds like there's another train track down there. It's far. Will update later.

Imani: Beware of the monsters once they transform. They're much more powerful.

That had only come in about ten minutes earlier, so I wasn't expecting an answer for a while. I was hopeful for what they'd find. If that secret, down-the-line train existed, people stuck on the tracks could flee to the nearest robot rooms and hitch a ride.

"Carl! Carl! I realized something," Donut said excitedly as I sat up. I yawned. I still couldn't get over how perfectly rested I felt after sleeping only two hours.

"What is it," I said.

"Remember that spell book I got a long time ago? That tome of *Minion Army*? It wouldn't let me read it because it costs 50 spell points to cast."

"I remember," I said. She'd gotten the spellbook from a "Beguiler Box" way back on the first floor. I started to do the math in my head. Donut's base intelligence was 40, giving her 40 spell points. But she added one intelligence with her butterfly charm and another three with her new tiara, bringing it up to 44. However, with the Good Rest buff plus the buff from the shower, our stats rose another 20%. The stat increase was calculated before any of our equipment buffs, and it didn't actually show on the list, either. Mordecai had said it was a persistent bug that had been around for a few seasons now. Nevertheless, we knew the buffs were active because while our intelligence stat said one thing, our spell points reflected the actual number. Mordecai had said he put in a ticket, but we shouldn't hold our breath on it getting fixed.

Anyway, with the 20% buff, Donut's 44 in intelligence was now actually 52, giving her a total of 52 spell points.

"I take it it'll let you read the tome now?"

"Yes! I didn't think it would because of that bug thing, but I thought of it before we took our nap, and I remembered when I woke up. And I looked."

"And you read it already, didn't you? Mordecai said we needed to talk about the spell once you got enough points to use it."

"Of course I read it, Carl. That's why I'm telling you this. Mordecai isn't here, so we're talking about it now."

I sighed. "Okay, just don't go casting it unless you know what you're doing. Remember what Mordecai said? It takes five minutes to cast, and you get stuck in place while it's casting."

The *Minion Army* spell was simple on the surface, but the spell's specifics were convoluted. You cast it on a group of enemies, and some of them would turn and fight on your side. Mordecai had said it was a powerful spell, but only in certain circumstances. It was almost impossible to train up because the conditions in which one used it were rare. The mass-charm spell had a casting time of *five* minutes, which was outrageous. At level one, it also had a cooldown of five hours. Its base area of effect was a thirty-meter diameter circle, though that went up—a lot—based on her Charisma.

It only worked on intelligent mobs. That plus its five-minute casting time made the spell almost useless. At level one, once cast, every mob in the area of effect had a two percent chance to turn and fight against their friends.

All of that for only a two percent chance to turn someone? It didn't seem right to me. But Mordecai had insisted that it could be a great spell. I took his word for it.

"I can't wait to try it out," Donut said.

"Goddamnit, Donut," I said. "Don't cast it unless I tell you to. You'll get frozen in place for five minutes. If we're in a situation where a two percent chance to turn someone on our side is our only hope, we'll be running, not waiting five minutes."

"Don't be so pessimistic, Carl."

Our training cooldown hadn't reset yet, so we decided to head out right away. We left our personal space and entered the food court. I grabbed another corndog before we proceeded outside.

"Stop," Donut said just before I opened the door to the transit station. "There are mobs out there. Lots of them."

"What?" I said. My portal skill didn't work on this door. I didn't see anything on my map. Monsters weren't supposed to be in the transit stations. "How big?"

"Human sized," Donut said. "Maybe a little smaller. There's dozens of them. They're bouncing all over the place. I think they're really fast."

"That's new," I said. We couldn't use Donut's *Hole* spell on saferoom doors. But we were safe while we were inside. "Step back. Let's see what we're dealing with."

I opened the door, but I stayed inside the room.

"What the hell, man," I said, examining the screeching, frothing bedlam in the small transit station.

The squealing chaos abruptly stopped. About forty pairs of eyes turned to look at me.

"Howdy fellas," I called. These were baboons with wide, disconcertingly-human faces. The actual features, like the eyes, nose, and mouth were much too small for the broad, fleshy faces. The rest of their bodies were completely simian. I focused on the

closest of the creatures. It was wearing a ripped t-shirt with a cobra on it. It had a backwards baseball cap on its head. Another had an equally-ripped shirt with the actor Nicolas Cage's screaming face on it. A third wore a shirt that read, "It's not going to suck itself" with an arrow pointing down. The mobs all had red exclamation marks over their heads, something I hadn't seen before. It was some sort of buff indicator.

Babababoon. Level 17.

Warning: This mob is suffering from the DTs. It is in stage two of three.

In stage two, this mob's strength is doubled. Intelligent mobs lose the ability to speak and reason. They will attack anything that is not also suffering from the same condition.

(I should note that with this particular mob, you probably won't see much of a difference between a normal one and one suffering the DTs. These guys are something else, even when they're not suffering from withdrawal.)

The Babababoon is the king of idiotic chaos. This exclusive mob was created by taking a standard earth baboon and crossing it with the population from a Florida jail drunk tank. Not gonna lie. I'm pretty proud of this one. These guys ruin just about anything we put them in.

"If this is stage two, I wonder what stage one is," I said.

"By god, they look like living Botero paintings," Katia said.

Some of the mobs were attempting to break into the small general store. I could see the face of the mole man proprietor through the barred window, looking out worriedly. The monsters had vomited and shit all over the place. One of them appeared to be passed out on his back. Another was scratching at his own face while he teabagged his unconscious companion. Half walked on two legs, and the others rushed about on all fours. Their bright-red asses flashed in the light as they jumped about.

They screeched at my appearance at the door. The first one with the cobra shirt lunged at me, barreling into the saferoom. It roared, swinging. *Crack*. The monster teleported away. A second, then a third rushed into the room, also teleporting away the moment they

attacked. They didn't seem to notice or care that their fellows weren't able to do any damage.

"Where did they come from?" Katia asked.

"They must be from the purple line," I said. "You said the train on that one has stopped coming. But I don't know why they're allowed into the transit station. Maybe the ones suffering from withdrawal aren't blocked the same way the regular mobs are. Or maybe since they walked here, it's different."

Another three rushed into the room, screaming and disappearing. From the back, the bopca with the stupid hotdog hat started yelling for us to close the door.

"Come on," I said, forming a fist. "We need to get them before they all teleport away. And we need to keep them from fucking with the Nightmare." I'd locked the door on the train, but they could still climb on the engine and get into the cab through the broken window. I punched one in the head just as he lunged at the door. He grunted and barreled back. My stun effect activated, but only for a moment. The mob was dead before he hit the ground. *Hell yeah*, I thought. My upgraded Powerful Strike absolutely destroyed these things.

Katia returned to her spiked She-Hulk form. It was about as big as she dared go and still be able to—barely—fit through most doors. Donut jumped onto the back of Mongo.

"Ready guys?" I said. I cracked my neck. I cast *Bang Bro* onto my gauntlet. It hissed with energy. "Let's do this."

Donut cast *Second Chance* on a dead babababoon. The thing was wearing a top hat for some inexplicable reason. The zombified creature roared to life and started tearing at his companions climbing up the side of the *Nightmare*.

It didn't appear as if any had gotten into the train, but they were crawling all over the outside. A few bounded off down the track, disappearing into the darkness.

At the top of the stairs, the one remaining Clockwork Mongo chomped down on a screeching mob. Donut glowed as she drank a mana potion, and then she fired a three-way laser at a group of mobs at the end of the platform. They all cried out and fell onto their backs. Their health went down, but only about a third. The power just wasn't there when she split her *Magic Missile* into three or more beams.

I released my gauntlet and formed my xistera. I hadn't gotten to use it much this floor because of the close-combat nature of the trains. I called one of my new "Banger Spheres" into my hand, loading it into the curved device. I spun, and the metal ball rocketed away, blasting down the long platform. It hit one of the three recovering babababoons in the neck with an audible *splack*. It fell, dead.

"Damnit," I muttered. I'd been aiming for between the eyes.

The ammo was nothing more than spheres made of dwarven robot scrap metal, but I'd spent some time at my engineering table making a few hundred of them. I'd made a few different sizes before settling on the baseball-sized ones. The system automatically labeled them **Banger Spheres**, but only the ones I made at that specific size. I had an idea for a few additional designs, including spiked balls, but I hadn't had the chance to implement them yet.

Mongo, with Donut still on his back, leaped onto the train engine and lunged at another mob. Donut hissed and jumped off, bounding once before landing on my shoulder. Katia meanwhile had another in a bear hug and was smashing him between her arms as the baboon pummeled at her. Her eyes were clenched tight. I could tell she was terrified, but at least she was actively fighting.

These monsters were exceptionally strong, and they moved fast, but their speed didn't translate well into precise movement. This buff, or debuff depending on how you looked at it, was similar to being hopped up on PCP. I paused to watch Katia grapple with her opponent. For a moment, it looked as if the mob was about to power his way out of her arms, but her body jerked to the side, twisting at an unnatural angle, taking the babababoon's top half with her. It cracked and stopped moving. A blood-soaked baseball cap fell

to the floor. Satisfied, I returned my attention to the two mobs on the other side of the platform. I tossed two more Banger Spheres, killing them both.

After another minute, the fight was done. Mongo returned, squawking happily.

"I think you need more practice before we battle while you're mounted," I said to Donut. If she'd been a human-sized rider, she'd have been brained on the ceiling of the tunnel when Mongo had leaped atop the train.

Katia stood there, looking at her blood-covered hands, breathing heavily. She had an odd expression on her face I couldn't read.

"You good?" I asked.

"He was hitting me really hard," she said. "I mean like really hard. But I think I figured out how to move the metal around inside of me. It's slow still, but I think it hurt him more than it hurt me. I think… I think I can make traveling spikes, so monsters using their hands will impale themselves on me. I just need to keep practicing. When I do it really fast, it feels like I'm breaking my own bones. It's hard to explain the sensation."

"There's more up in the main area," Donut said. I started jogging toward the three at the end of the platform, so I could loot their bodies. So far, none had anything of interest except a few handfuls of gold. "They keep coming. There are some on the tracks too. The *Nightmare* tracks. I don't know where they think they're going."

"Let's get out of here," I said when I was finished. I took all of their hats, but not their shirts, which I'd have to physically remove. I took several of the actual corpses, too. "Something tells me we're going to be seeing more mobs like this from now on."

"There's another one," I muttered as we barreled down the rails. "He got far." A moment later, the train gave a barely-perceptible stutter as the cowcatcher crashed into the babababoon on the track. The creature was thrown sideways and was sucked between the train

and the wall of the tunnel like he was being eaten by a paper shredder.

As I suspected, my message system was filled with people reporting encounters with mobs suffering from the DTs. All second stage. For whatever reason, once they got sick, the terminals were no longer safe.

Elle and Imani still hadn't reported back. Bautista would soon arrive at 433, which was the last transit station. It was called "Terminus Station."

It took less than twenty minutes to reach the switching station now that I was more familiar with the train's controls. Katia had to remove all of her mass to fit into the cab, and we ended up storing Mongo. I had the key to the passenger car directly behind the engine, but it was filled with the gore of some unknown mob from when I'd blasted the train. We all decided to crowd into the engine cab instead.

Fire Brandy remained in her boiler, not coming out at all. I figured that was a good thing. The less the others knew about the nature of her presence, the better.

I pulled the train to a stop just before the "Station Repair" switch. I wanted to make sure the massive portal was what it claimed. I exited the train and walked right up to the portal so I could examine it. The description was virtually identical to the portals that led off into the abyss, with one difference.

Type: Pass-Through two-way portal. Gated by conveyance type and to key holders.

Can you pass this portal? Yes*

Warning: You must be on a gated conveyance and/or a key must be equipped or held outside of inventory, depending on type. Compatible keys have been marked in your inventory.

Environment on other side of portal: Compatible.

Visual Analysis? Yes/No.

The previous description said they were "One-way" portals. As I stood there examining it, trying to puzzle out the exact definition of "Pass-Through two-way portal" a loud *clank, clank, clank* noise

emanated from the other side of the gateway. I stepped sideways to get a better view of the threshold's flip side, and I realized that the track actually ran *through* the swirling portal. The track on the far side looked like a root system with dozens of tracks diverging off of the main. That sound I'd heard was track switches activating down the line. They were being controlled from the other side of the portal. And if they were switching now, that meant…

I took a step back as a steam engine rolled out of the portal, screaming loud and faster than I expected. It was a steam engine almost identical to the *Nightmare*, but painted red. It only towed six cars behind it plus a caboose. The train clunked loudly as it switched off the main track and then onto another, then another, before disappearing into a random tunnel.

I backtracked, looking at the "Auxiliary Tracks. Warning" switch. It led to a long track that entered the root system. That basically meant I could jump onto a different track without going through the gateway if I wanted, though with the switch controls on the other side of the portal, we'd be stuck with whatever track the last train had utilized. In other words, we'd be on the same track as that red-colored train.

The "Recycle" switch clearly led off to the abyss. So our only real choice was station repair.

I took a screenshot of the portal, and it was the same massive train yard as before, still filled with zombies. This one appeared to be on a different side of the yard as where the subways entered. I looked worriedly at the closest zombie creature. I couldn't examine its properties using the picture, but I recognized the monster as a zombiefied cornet, one of the sound-attack rabbit monsters. The skinless monster was covered in sores that exposed bones, as if worms had erupted from the inside. It reminded me of the parasitic worm things that had infested Grimaldi's circus crew. I shuddered.

I returned to the train to find Fire Brandy sticking her head out of the door, chatting away with Donut and Katia.

"I'm a mother, too," Donut was saying as I entered the train. "My boy is named Mongo."

"That's a good name," Brandy said. "I have two children so far. We don't name our young until they're presented at the altar. What about you?" she asked Katia, who'd retreated to the back of the cab to escape the heat.

"No kids," she said. "I was about to adopt, but aliens destroyed my planet."

"Ah, that's too bad, honey," Brandy said, sounding genuinely sincere. She looked at me. Her face scrunched up, as if in pain. Another child was born. "We heading out?"

"Returning to the station," I said. "I don't suppose you know if they'll let us just drive the train out of the yard?"

"Don't know. We usually just go in circles all day long. Try not to blow the train up, okay? I have two little ones to look after."

"I'll do my best," I said.

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When we entered the portal, every car on the train made it through. The world flashed, the train bucked, and we entered a massive train yard. A notification appeared.

Entering Station and Repair Hub E

"Station *E*?" Katia said. "Does that mean there are more of these giant things?"

"Probably," I said, looking over the massive yard. It just went on and on. "Remember there are nine thousand-something stairwells out there. When we saw that clip with Lucia Mar, there were several bunched up in that one area, but that still means there has to be hundreds of instances of each one of those stairwell stations. There's no way they can fit all of those trains into a single trainyard. This station is big, but it's not *that* big. I bet there's at least twenty of these yards. There might even be more than one of those Abyss places I saw earlier."

"Do you think they all have zombies in them?" Donut asked.

"Maybe. Who knows?" I said.

We were still in an underground area, but the ceiling was very high, higher even than the fake sky of the Over City. The place was lit with random spotlights, giving the whole area a surreal, washed-out look. The train clunked as it moved over several switching tracks, and we angled forward, pushing into a long track section, straightening out the cars behind us.

I marveled at the sheer size of the fenced-in area. It had to be at least a full mile from the portal to the fence. The stone wall of the chamber blocked the area behind us, and I couldn't even see how far the yard went from left to right. Thousands of zombie creatures milled about. They gave no heed to our sudden appearance. Most were congregated in the far distance, up against the high wall that led out of the yard.

The entire fence was shaking, I realized. They were pushing it back and forth. It would collapse at any moment.

Dozens of freestanding towers dotted the railyard at regular intervals, like watchtowers at a prison. At this distance, I couldn't see the creatures inside of the fortifications, but there was definitely movement in the closest one, about a quarter of a mile away.

"Ah, crap," I said as we were automatically routed into another track, one with a dead end. The sign above the track read **Service Bay 32**. A shadow fell over the cab as we went under a corrugated metal awning. I had to slow and stop. I knew the train could go backward, but I was hoping to find a way to unhook the broken cars behind us and steam out of the yard and onto one of the other tracks. "It looks like the road ends here."

"Maybe not," Katia said, peering out the other, broken window. "It stops here, but there's a roundabout system." She pointed forward, and I saw what she was indicating, a vast, baseball-field-sized section of ground that appeared as if it could spin like a turntable. Track sections on the circular platform were designed to line up with these service bays, allowing trains to proceed forward. You could pull the engine onto the platform, and it would spin, lining up with another track. One of the odd watchtowers was situated at the edge of the disc. I assumed the controls for the turntable were up there.

"Hey, those aren't zombies," Donut said. She had her face smushed up against the glass, looking out into the yard.

I followed her gaze out the side window to the pair of monsters shuffling by. She was right. One of them was speaking with the other. *Zombies don't talk*. They hadn't noticed us yet. These were a pair of moss-covered, bark-skinned creatures. They were covered

with the same sores as everyone else, though with their wooden skin, it looked like gunshot wounds.

Festering Ghoul – Level 18

One of the unfortunate side effects of the Rev-Up Amazing Cure-All Vitamin Immunity Shot is the possibility of addiction. If a customer becomes addicted to the vitamin shot, and they do not get their dosage in time, they oftentimes start suffering from withdrawal. The effects of withdrawal ravage the addict's body, and if they are not treated in time, they begin to suffer from a dreaded condition known as the DTs.

Once the DTs start, there is no cure. All die. Or worse.

At stage one, sufferers are overcome with violent tremors. They are barely able to think, or to move. Their mind starts to rot out from within. Only fifty percent of sufferers survive this stage. Half move onto stage two, which allows for increased mobility. The other half drop dead.

They don't stay dead long, however. They soon transform into what you see before you now. A Festering Ghoul.

Important note. A Festering Ghoul is not a true Ghoul. It is *not* undead. It is simply a new lifeform reborn in the shell of the old. As such, anti-undead attacks will not work on them. Still, a double-tap on these guys is not a bad idea.

A Festering Ghoul has two purposes. One, to devour as much organic material as possible, and two, to find more of its kind. These particular ghouls have been born with the knowledge on how to get to this area. All they need now is enough of their kind to arrive before their purpose becomes clear.

"That sounds vaguely threatening," I said. "So I guess all those babababoons we fought had survived stage one and got to skip the ghoul stage."

"Unless they turn into something worse if they die at the end of stage two," Donut said.

"How are they getting here?" Katia asked. Even though the mobs appeared to be able to talk, everything else about them screamed *mindless zombie*. There were hundreds of different types, but they all moved in that same, plodding, aimless manner.

I thought of those robots and that secret tunnel. "I think I know what's happening, but Imani and Elle are about to discover for sure. The real question is, what happens when enough of them get together?"

"It's obviously something awful, Carl," Donut said. "We need to get out of here."

We heard the echo of a detonation. It sounded like a cannon blast. A moment later, a second crash echoed directly over our heads. Whatever it was, it had hit the corrugated awning covering the train. Then came a *click, click, click* sound of something being ratcheted tight.

"I think someone's shooting at us," I said.

"Look," Katia said. "There's a chain. It's coming from that tower."

She was right. The closest watchtower, the same one at the edge of the turntable, had shot some sort of chain at the roof over our heads. Whatever it was, it connected with the roof, and it was now ratcheting itself tight.

"Do you think they're going to pull the roof off the awning?" Katia asked.

"No," I said. "Look. There's a little dude up there. In the tower. He's going to use the chain to get to us."

Sure enough, once the chain was tight, the small creature attached a little basket to the length. The basket hung off the chain by a pair of straps. It looked like and was the size of a woman's purse. The little, furry man jumped in. The basket bounced wildly as it slid down the length of chain toward us.

His white dot appeared on my map. The creature eventually disappeared over our heads as it landed on the awning. A moment later, the tiny, furry man swung off the edge of the corrugated roof and landed deftly on the front of the engine. He had something large and metallic attached to his belt, and it clanged loudly when he

landed. He scrambled up the walkway and approached the broken, port-side window. We all moved to look.

He was goblin-shaped and proportioned, though instead of clothes, he was covered in black, bristly hair. He was much smaller than a regular goblin, about the same height as Zev. He wore a little railroad cap and a toolbelt that dragged a wrench three times his length. It clanged and dragged against the metal of the train as he approached. When he jumped, the wrench didn't appear to impede him at all.

Widget – Grease Gremlin – Level 19

Iron Tangle Steam Engine Train Technician.

Not all gremlins are bad or evil. Not all of them glory in the tearing of flesh and the rending of bone. Some prefer more quiet activities, such as boiler repair and heavy engineering. Then there are Grease Gremlins, who could go either way. The only thing keeping this guy from attacking you is that "Sensitivity Training" class human resources made him take in order to secure this job. As long as you don't abuse him or his beloved trains, you'll probably be fine.

"I told ye last time dis here station is closed," the creature ranted. "First the *Raven Blade Unlimited* and now the *Nightmare*? I don't care if you lost the beasties on your backside. Don't you see we're suffering from a ghoul infestation? They about to reach critical mass. Now I gotta risk me life just to get your stupid butts out of here. We're not giving ye a resupply, that's fer sure."

I could barely understand what he was saying. His inflection was like a Creole guy poorly attempting a cockney accent. His head appeared in the broken window opposite Katia. He remained frozen like that for a long moment.

"Oh for fig's sake," he eventually said. "Yer crawlers? Ye took the train? Where's CrackJack? Didja kill em? Don't care about the warmage cunt. I hope for yer sake ye didn't hurt Brandy."

I saw no point in lying to the little creature. "If CrackJack was the engineer, then yes, we killed him. Brandy is fine. We're just trying to get to one of the stairwells."

Below, a pair of ghouls finally noticed us. One of them screeched and pointed. All around the trainyard, the mass of ghouls turned in our direction.

"Stairwells?" Widget said, either oblivious or uncaring by the sudden ghoul attention. He laughed. "Then why d'hell you come all this way? Why not take the *Escape Velocity* train? It goes to all the stairwells. He rapped on the metal on the window. 'Ell, this train stops at 83 Tangerine and Plum. You take the Tangerine up to 89 and hop right on the *Escape Velocity*. It'll take you straight to a gaggle of stairwell stations." He laughed. "Silly crawlers. Always making it difficult. Well I reckon no real harm done if'n Brandy's okay. She's to be a mum, ye know. CrackJack was a cock. CockJack." He laughed at his own stupid joke. "And nobody has no love for the warmage kind, either. Out with ye. We about to abandon the yard. Gon all move over to yard A. Ain't no ghouls at yard A. Ye can catch any numma' of lines up to 12, I reckon. Or 24 might be better for you lot. Twelve got them janitor ghouls. But all the trains from this yard is done. They ain't opening the gate for nobody. We gotta use the chains to get out."

A ghoul, this one some kind of multi-limbed monstrosity, scrabbled up the side of the train like a spider.

"Get ye filthy paws off 'er!" Widget cried, turning to face the ghoul. He pulled the gigantic wrench off his belt and waved it threateningly, using two hands to hold the massive, oversized wrench like a halberd.

Thwap!

Through the broken window, Donut fired a *Magic Missile* directly into the ghoul. It didn't die right away, but it was blasted onto its back. Its legs curled up. **Unconscious** appeared over it. A moment later, the notification went away, and it turned into an X.

"Oi, nice shot lassie," Widget said. He licked his lips and looked a Donut appraisingly. "I like a lassie within' meat on 'er bones. Especially 'em with fight in 'em."

"*Excuse* me?" Donut said. "Did you just call me fat?"

"Why are the ghouls here?" I asked.

"Some cunt done buggered up the system. Cheaped out. Tryin to combine systems and that there why it broke down. Never worked right. The ghouls are supposing to get all caged up, hop on the service conveyor back to the yard. And then get wheeled onto one of dem Terminus direct lines. Shoulda just build a second conveyor system right into the abyss if ye ask me. But nobody ever asks Widget what he done thinks. Too many came at once. Sometimes them Wrath Ghouls are in the cages, so the cages are broke when they get here. Or they spill out. The system broke down. Ain't no stopping it." He pointed to another ghoul. "Lassie?" Donut obliged by firing another missile. This ghoul rocketed off the train.

"That's m'girl. What's a fine lass like yerself doing with this lot? I get off shift in a couple of hours. Got a place up at 60. M'wife will cook us a nice stew."

"Your wife?" Donut asked, incredulous.

"She no mind one bit. She'd liken a smack of you too, I reckon. Plus she cook. We got a drop of fresh fish in our food boxes, we did."

"Wait, what kind of fish?" Donut asked.

"Yo. Focus. How are we supposed to get out of here?" I asked.

"You gotta abandon ship. Up me chain. Into tower. Then we do a bit 'o hopscotch. We got a system. One that works." He grinned. "As long as yer climbin' skills is up to snuff."

I eyed the chain dubiously. Below, another group of ghouls were attempting to climb up the side of the train. A single ghoul had discovered the ladder behind the cab, and it was now scratching at the door.

Widget leaned in through the broken window and pointed at a red spigot with his wrench. Katia had to jump back from the unwieldly thing. "Turn that one right quick, will ya? Then turn it back."

Brandy had told me never to touch that one. I turned the spigot, and the train hissed. Steam spilled from the side and rose all around us. Below, the ghouls screamed. I quickly tightened it back up. "It'll teach ye right!" Widget yelled down at the monsters. Several scrambled away from the side of the train, but they soon returned.

"I reckon I better open a hole in the ceiling before ye get overwhelmed. It'll take me a good…"

He didn't finish. In the distance, a mighty crash reverberated throughout the trainyard. A section of the colossal wall that separated the yard from the conductor staging area collapsed in a mighty heap. The crowd of ghouls surged out of the enclosure. Below, the ghouls who'd been advancing on us turned to regard the new exit. A few shuffled off toward it, but most remained at the base of the train.

"Oi. That no good," Widget said. "Plan change. Now the wall is gone I reckon it don't matter if we use the gate. I'll unhook ye, then I'll get into me tower. Get on the turntable, and I'll get ye onto the employee line. There's only a station over at 60, and it loops back after, so no 72, not that ye'd want that one anyway, but there's a service entrance at every station between 'ere and back. Go slow and ye'll see 'em. They come quick. The distances are much shorter here. The *Homeward Bound* is locked up tighter than an octoid's cunt, so you'll have the track all to yerself."

He disappeared, scrambling over the top of the cab. He dropped into the space behind the cab and the next car. That one ghoul remained at the door, but Widget dropped him with a bonk to the head with his wrench. Less than ten seconds later, there was a mighty clang that shook the whole train. A few moments after that, and he returned to the window. Behind, three additional ghouls discovered the small ladder that led to the back of the cab. They stood at the closed door, banging on it.

"Oi, you did a mighty nummer on them cargos. No matter now. They's unhooked. Now I'm going to climb up the chain and get into me tower. Imma turn the table to yer bay. You get on. Make sure you get all the way on. I'n spin it up right and stop at the right track but don't be leaving yet. Imma come down and we ride out together. Sounding good?"

"That sounds great," I said. I wondered if he was genuinely this accommodating, or if this was a result of our charisma. Either way, I wasn't going to complain. "Better than I hoped for. I appreciate your help."

"Oi. You a good lot." He winked at Donut. "I'll be back and we talk some more about that fish, okay, luv?" He turned and ran to the edge of the engine. He paused to wave.

And that was when the spider ghoul, the one Donut had killed, turned from an X back to a red dot. It lunged forward and grasped the small, furry gremlin. It ripped the mechanic's head off in one, smooth motion and started to devour his body. The whole thing happened in less than a second.

"Well that's going to be a problem," I said.

"We have a few choices," I said as Donut shot the re-reanimated spider ghoul off the engine. "We can abandon the train. If we do that, we either fight through the ghouls and make our way up one of the tracks on foot, or we can try to go back through that same portal and return to the switching station, also on foot."

"Neither are very appealing," Katia said.

I gazed out the window at the length of chain attaching the top of the awning to the tower. "I can try climbing that chain up into the tower. I can figure out the turntable controls."

"That's not going to work, Carl," Donut said. "You're the only one who knows how to drive the train. *I'll* go up the chain and see if I can figure it out."

I exchanged a look with Katia. "I don't know, Donut. I don't like the idea of you doing that alone. You might need hands to control it."

"If that little pervert can work the controls, then I can figure it out," Donut said. "Besides, do you really think you can climb that chain? It's quite long. Mongo will be ready to graduate college by the time you get up there. I can do it quick. I can *Puddle Jump* if I have to, but I'd rather save it for coming back."

"Okay," I said after a moment. "Just be careful."

"I'm always careful, Carl," Donut said, shooting another missile. "I'm going out there."

"Wait," I said. I pulled a hobgoblin smoke curtain from my inventory and tossed it through the window. It ricocheted off the side of the engine and landed on the ground between two ghouls. Thick smoke started to billow around the train.

Donut leaped through the window, traversed down the walkway to the very front of the engine. She turned and leaped up to the top of the awning, flying easily into the air. A moment passed, and then I watched as she nimbly rushed up the chain. Twenty seconds later, she disappeared into the tower.

Donut: WOW. I CAN SEE REALLY FAR. THERE ARE A BUNCH OF SUBWAY CARS AT THE OTHER END. I CAN SEE THE GATE WHERE THE TRAINS ARE SUPPOSED TO GO THROUGH. THE BUILDING THERE IS ON FIRE. THE GHOULS THAT WENT THROUGH THE FENCE ARE CHASING THE DWARVES AND THE TALL GUYS WHO GIVE OUT THE PRIZE SUITCASES. CARL, WE NEVER GOT KATIA A SUITCASE. I CAN'T BELIEVE WE FORGOT!

Carl: We didn't forget. We decided the prizes weren't worth the risk. Are you good? Do you see what to do?

Donut: HONESTLY, CARL. GIVE ME A MINUTE. THERE ARE MULTIPLE CONTROL PANELS. IT ALSO SMELLS AWFUL IN HERE. JUST AWFUL. WIDGET WAS A VERY MESSY CREATURE. HOW MANY LOTION CONTAINERS DOES ONE GREMLIN NEED? I CAN'T IMAGINE HIS WIFE WAS A VERY GOOD COOK CONSIDERING HOW MUCH TIME HE OBVIOUSLY SPENT UP HERE.

Carl: Make sure you loot everything. You never know what might come in handy.

Donut: WAS THAT SUPPOSED TO BE A PUN?

Carl: Just hurry up.

Donut: DON'T PRESSURE ME, CARL.

A loud clanking filled the trainyard. In the distance, a freight car sitting by itself on a track toppled over on to its side.

Donut: WHOOPS. WRONG PANEL.

Carl: How in the hell…

Ahead, the massive turntable rumbled. It started to rotate. Multiple ghouls standing on it tumbled off their feet. The track spun, stopping in front of us. I peered through the window at the track. It didn't match up.

Carl: Great job, Donut! But move one more slot over. That track isn't the right gauge.

It moved again, clanking into place. This time, the rails matched up. I pulled the brake, knocked on the window to let Brandy know we were moving, and I eased the train forward. We had almost a dozen ghouls climbing the exterior. If they got near the window, Katia speared them with her hand. They stumbled as the train lurched. A few fell off.

The train detached from the other cars as it moved. Thank goodness. I pulled as far forward as I dared, making certain we were fully on the platform.

Donut: NOTHING IS LABELED. I DON'T KNOW WHAT THE RIGHT ONE TO TURN TO IS.

I searched the line of trains sitting under the awnings. There weren't too many actual steam engines here. Most of the trains and train parts were random cars. I did catch sight of one engine sitting on a track adjacent to the awnings. It was attached to a single passenger car, and the train was facing the wrong way. It was also painted blue. I followed the line of tracks, and it curved toward the distant exit. Most of the tracks sized for steam engines curved back toward the portal.

Carl: I think I know which one. I'll tell you when to stop. Now see if there's a control up there that will open the gate.

Donut: I ALREADY OPENED IT BY ACCIDENT AND MORE GHOULS STARTED WALKING OUT. I DIDN'T TELL YOU BECAUSE I THOUGHT YOU MIGHT GET MAD.

Donut used *Puddle Jumper* to return to the *Nightmare*. I opened up the back door and pummeled down the ghouls on the small landing,

clearing the area for her return. These guys weren't nearly as quick or strong as the ones suffering from stage-two DTs. Like with zombies, their danger was in the swarm. Luckily only a few dozen remained interested in us. Donut leaped down, getting gore on her paw. She grumbled as we returned to the cab, locking the door.

From there, we steamed our way toward the massive, double doors that led out of the trainyard. Dozens of tracks converged side-by-side as they pushed through the exit. The archway reminded me of that giant entrance in the *Jurassic Park* movies.

We moved slowly. The ghouls mostly got out of the way, but the cowcatcher sometimes caught one of the monsters, causing it to spin away. Sometimes they died, but I suspected if we didn't get them in the heads, they'd just get right back up again in a few minutes.

Just outside of the gates stood a hulking, concrete building that was now fully engulfed in flames. The sign above the three-story building read **The Iron Tangle Substation E**. The thing reminded me of a Soviet-era government building in its simple, efficient brutality. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if this was a repurposed structure from that era. Dozens of dead dwarves and grapples lay on the ground where they'd been congregating. Since the trains had stopped coming, the conductors and porters were lining up, waiting for trains that would never appear. As I watched, a dwarf and a pair of porters materialized, popping right out of the brick wall. They looked dazed. A moment later, they were set upon by ghouls.

Almost all of the tracks led to the front of the substation, running along the loading area for the workers. Our track, however, led along the backside of the building. We eased our way around the wide turn. There was another, smaller landing here at the back of the building. The track eventually led to a cave entrance against a distant wall.

As we moved, a single figure popped out from the back of the flaming building and ran directly for us. A human! She waved her arms frantically as I eased the brakes. She had a white dot, meaning she was an NPC, not a crawler. She screamed as a flaming wolf ghoul lurched from the building.

The woman wore a white, business dress that was now covered in soot. She only had one shoe on, a black heel. She shuffled as she ran toward us, shrieking. She was in her mid-forties, and she looked like any typical, suburban soccer mom. She was absurdly out of place here.

"I'm going to let her on," I said.

"You sure that's a good idea?" asked Katia. "This has got to be some sort of trap. Or something. I mean, *look at her*."

"I don't think so," I said. "Check out her description."

Madison – Human. Level 10.

Iron Tangle Human Resources Associate

This is a Non-Combatant NPC.

Madison's real name was probably something like Jennifer or Ruth, but she had it legally changed to something more trendy right around the same time as her divorce. After multiple rounds of breast augmentation, Pilates, and labiaplasty, Madison has emerged as a new woman. She don't need no man. While only a human resources associate—after all, she started her career late—she still walks the world with new confidence. She won't tell this to any of her friends at her book club, but she relishes the power she has over the other Iron Tangle employees. She feels an almost sexual surge of gratification when she tells those dwarves that overtime is mandatory.

"Why do they keep calling it *human* resources?" Donut asked. "It's racist!"

Madison cried out as the wolf ghoul leaped and caught the back of her hair in its ravening mouth. She tumbled backward.

"Donut," I said. She jumped through the broken window, jumped to the top of the cab, and shot two quick *Magic Missiles* at the ghoul. The former wolf monster hissed and dropped. The woman scrambled to her feet and ran to the train, pulling herself up the ladder. I eased off the brakes, touched the throttle, and we steamed away just as more flaming ghouls emerged from the back of the building. They gave chase, but we quickly outpaced them.

"Thank you, thank you," the woman said when Katia opened the door for her. We entered the tunnel. Just a few moments later, I caught sight of a glowing sign. There was a ladder against the wall, leading up to a trap door in the ceiling of the tunnel. The sign read **Transit Station 11**. I wondered if there'd be a Desperado Club at this one. The glowing sign for station 12 was only a few hundred meters further down. I remembered what Widget had said, that station 12 was where the janitor ghouls congregated. Sure enough, the little sign read **Jikininki Peak Station 12**. *Let's skip that one for now*.

"Wait, I don't recognize you," the woman said. "How did you get in here? What're your employee numbers?"

"Hardly. Do I look like someone who would work for a trainyard?" Donut asked.

The woman was a mess. It appeared as if she'd spent a lot of time getting her hair perfectly placed this morning, piled atop her head in bun. Now it hung in frizzy tatters where the festering wolf ghoul had lunged at it. That giant bun of hair had saved her life.

The woman looked scandalized. The look instantly reminded me of Bea's mom. The woman even had the same my-facelift-is-a-bit-too-tight catwoman glare. "Customers are not allowed in the train engines! I'm going to have to alert the transit authority. This is most irregular."

Station 13 whipped by. It was also a transit station. I laughed. "Lady, we just saved your ass. If you don't like it, I can stop and let you off right here. I'm sure those ghouls will take fine care of you."

"Where are we taking her?" Katia asked.

"You're taking me to Yard A," the woman said. "It's the headquarters. There you can turn yourself in."

"Yeah?" I asked. "How do we get there from here?"

"I don't know," she said. "I'm not an engineer. Isn't there a map or something in here?"

Station 14 and 15 whipped by. "We're going to stop at the service entrance for 24 to check it out and see if it needs to be cleared," I said. "After, we can take her up to 60 and set her free. Widget said

there's a loop after that, and the train can turn around. If that's true, then we can stay in the area until it's time to go down."

"Set me free?" Madison said, incredulous. "Are you suggesting I'm a prisoner? And station 60 is where the lower employees stay."

Yep, I thought. *Bea's mom*. "Where do you live, then?"

"I have an apartment in the executive quarters outside of Yard A."

"And you don't know how to get there?"

Station 17 was another transit station. Eighteen was called **Barren Station**. I wondered if these had monsters similar to the higher stations, and if there was a Krakaren boss at 20.

The woman didn't answer. I looked back over my shoulder to regard her. She was staring off out the window, a strange look of confusion on her face. "I've been putting in a lot of hours. Mandatory overtime."

I was starting to suspect there was no Yard A. I was also suddenly curious about what we'd find over at Station 60, these supposed dorms for the employees. Before, when Vernon the dwarf conductor had told us about his wife, I'd assumed his wife had been a made-up phantom. Widget had a similar story, but it was clear he'd actually been living in that tower. "You've never been to your apartment, have you?"

"Of course I've been to my apartment. It's just been… It's been a few days."

I nodded. When they'd programed this floor in, they'd given all these NPCs a bunch of false memories, but they hadn't set up a proper foundation. All the stories were paper thin, like the background of an NPC in an actual game. This was probably the first time since the floor started that Madison had left her office. I thought of Brandy and her two new babies. When this floor was done, would she be able to keep the children?

A crawler named Herot had written the 16th edition of the cookbook, and she had a long essay in the back about the nature of the NPCs. She had a theory she called, "The Worn Path Method," which suggested success in quests and puzzles was much easier

when you deliberately broke through the fourth wall. She believed the NPCs were the weakest link in this world because they were biological and not autonomous. I'd only read the first few paragraphs so far. She claimed that breaking them out of their reverie was cruel, but also necessary if one wanted to survive. *Ask them questions, and then challenge them when they don't know something they should. Be kind but firm*. There was so much in the cookbook I still needed to study, and my reading time was at a premium. I made a mental note to go back and finish through the essay.

"You've either been to your apartment or you've never seen Yard A. It can't be both. Which is it?" I demanded.

"I… I don't know," she finally said. "That ghoul must have given me a concussion."

I saw the sign for station 24, and I slowed the train. We stopped, and I set the brake. I turned to Madison. "Look," I said. "I have several questions. Answer them for me, and we'll take you to station 60. If someone there knows how to get to Yard A from there, we'll take you."

"Okay," she said after a moment. She leaned up against a bulkhead. She looked exhausted. "What do you want to know? If it's about the trains, I don't really know much. I'm in charge of telling employees that overtime is mandatory. They come out to get on the *Homeward Bound*, and I tell them to get back to work. Oh, and I am the benefits manager for all the Kravyad and the six Station Mimics."

"The *what*?"

"Terminus. The Station Mimics. There are six of them, and boy do they get cranky if we don't send enough passengers into them. Those things are ravenous. We tell the workers to always tell the customers to get off on 433, but you'd be surprised at how awful dwarves are at following instructions. And don't get me started on the mantaurs. They can't keep their paws to themselves."

Carl: Bautista. Do *not* get off at the Terminus Station. It's a goddamned trap.

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Bautista: Yeah, you're a little late there, buddy. Can't talk. The whole damn station is a city boss. We gathered about 400 people on the train, and when they went up the stairs, it swallowed the first twenty of them like it was eating Cheese Rings. We're on the platform now fighting off its tongue and its minions. It belches and these walking mouth things pour out of it. They're too strong. Waiting on the next train to escape. Don't know what we're going to do. Half of these guys sold their hats.

Carl: Holy shit. Be careful. You're going to have to fight the Kravyad boss two stations down at 435 and try the employee portal exit. I'll try to find out about them now. Keep me updated.

Bautista: Talk soon.

Geez, 400 people? That seemed like too many at one place at one time. A disaster waiting to happen.

I turned to Madison. "The Kravyad. Tell me about it. Now. Quickly."

"Which one? We have a few dozen on shift right now."

"Does it matter? Are they different?"

"Of course they're different," she said. "One of them is always whining he wants to go home to visit his girlfriend. Another is demanding hazard pay after getting stabbed by a crawler. She was

highly offended as she's not designated as a combatant. They're just as different as you and your little hairy friend."

"Not a combatant? So they're not bosses?"

"Bosses? Hardly. They're actually part of the human resources department." Madison straightened, standing proudly. "They work directly under me. Part of management's initiative to increase productivity."

"Holy shit, lady. Start with the basics. What is a Kravyad? And do they attack people? Like the station mimics attack people?"

"Like I said, they're part of a money-saving initiative. A very successful one, I might add. The conductors and porters are less likely to demand time off if they don't remember their between-shift breaks. They end their shift, go into what we call a pre-production stupor, and they awaken ready for their next shift. They're still quite dazed until the moment they get on the trains. And by then it's too late to request time off. It has increased productivity by 35%. The Kravyad are responsible for maintaining this program."

I refrained the urge to choke the woman out. All of this information about how they abused their workers was infuriating, terrifying, and painfully familiar, but it was also irrelevant. "But *what* are they? Are they wizards? Giant owls? Elves? Tell me what they look like and what sort of powers they have."

She gave me an *are-you-really-that-stupid?* look. "Do you know what a naga is? They're kinda like that. But blue and with six arms. They take their payment by getting to eat one or two dwarves a shift. It saves the company a lot of gold."

"What kind of magic do they cast?"

"They hypnotize the dwarves and grapples getting off the train. They keep them around for eight to twelve hours depending on the lines attached to their station, and they send them through the portal when it's almost time for their shift to start again. It saves me from having to tell them that overtime is mandatory. Though sometimes they gather enough wits about them to ask for time off before they get on the train. Then they get a trip to my office, and I give them the gold armband."

"Armband?" I asked. I couldn't help it.

She beamed. “It was my idea. We tell them that if they wear the armband during one more run, the Kravyad will know to teleport them straight home at the end of the shift. But really it lets the Kravyad know they’re troublemakers who are okay to eat. It added another 5% to our productivity in Q2. Even Rod was impressed.”

Donut: I DON’T LIKE THIS LADY. SHE’S ONE OF THOSE PEOPLE WHO IS REALLY MEAN BUT DOESN’T THINK THEY’RE MEAN.

Carl: No kidding.

I took a deep breath. “Tell me about the employee portal. If the workers go through it, it just takes them to the platform? Can anybody pass through it?”

“That’s right,” Madison said. “Straight to the platform. I suppose others could go through. We’ve already had a few of you lot sneaking through. Of course it’s lifebound to the Kravyad. So if something happens to them, then it snaps closed. They insisted on that when we wrote out their contract. It was a big point of contention.”

“So the creature has to remain alive for the portal to work?”

“That’s what I said. Now are you going to take me back?”

That station number 435 was another sort of trap. You could only get through if you kept the Kravyad, boss or not, alive. I paused to send all this information to Bautista. He and the survivors had retreated from the mimic back onto the train, which was thankfully still running.

You can’t save them all. This was something Bautista and his group would have to figure out on their own. I’d done all I could from here.

“I have a few more questions,” I said to Madison. “Tell me about the ghouls that almost killed you.”

She frowned. “Those filthy things are *not* my job. Doris over at substation B is in charge of that. This is her fuck-up. That husband-stealing whore couldn’t even get that right. I told Rod that she’d be the death of him, but of course he didn’t listen. She’s in charge of keeping the Krakaren happy, which meant she was also in charge of excess citizen disposal. But she wanted to impress Rod, of course,

with her money-saving concept. An extra train on an existing line was much cheaper than a dedicated conveyor line. And look what happened. The good news is Substation B fell before E did. I hope the ghouls ate that fat bitch and popped her oversized implants."

I was about to ask her another question when Elle pinged me. I held up a hand. As I talked to them, Brandy knocked on the furnace door. I opened it. She started grilling Madison about her paycheck while I stepped outside to escape the heat.

Carl: Hey guys. What's the news?

Elle: It's not a train like we thought but a roller coaster with no cars. You know those rolling carts they have in the robot rooms? The robots fill them with these ghoul things and roll them down to the coaster. It's a pretty far hike. At least it was for us. The robots push the roly things and the bottom of the cart catches on the roller coaster, and off they go. It's like the thing they have at the hospital that takes your trays away. But a hell of a lot faster.

Carl: Yeah, the carts end up back at the trainyards. The ghouls are then supposed to be moved to a train that takes them all the way to the Abyss to get rid of them.

Elle: Why would they send them all the way back to the start just to turn them around and send them back? What sort of inefficient bullshit is that?

Carl: You were never in the military, were you?

Imani: It's designed to break down, I think. Or maybe they're just terrible at design. Maybe both. At least we're free of monsters in this tunnel. Only the ghouls can enter the robot rooms. The other monsters aren't allowed in for some reason. But the ghouls actually get into the cages themselves. And then the robots lock them in and roll them down into the tunnel and put them onto the conveyor.

Carl: Something is going to happen when enough of them get to the same place. I don't know what.

I quickly went over everything I had discovered, and I gave them an update on what was happening with Bautista. I'd already sent out a mass warning about the station mimics at station 433.

Imani: We've been camping and killing the ghouls as they rush by, but they give shit experience. Carl, there's a lot of them coming now. A whole lot. Also, there's another type of ghoul sometimes in the mix called a wrath ghoul. I think it might be what happens at the end of stage 2. They are very strong. Be careful. We were just debating on whether or not to hijack a few carts and get onto the carousel ourselves or going back to the main track and hiking to the transit station.

Shit. That was a scary proposition.

Carl: If it was me, I'd take the conveyor. But it's super risky. I don't know how gentle it is, plus when you land, you'll end up at the service station. If you end up at Stations B or E, the gate is down, and there'll be less ghouls. But if the fence isn't down yet wherever you end up, you'll be surrounded by literally thousands of the monsters. It's a huge gamble.

Elle: But it also sounds really fun. By the time all those best roller coasters were popping up around the country, I was too old to do it. My Barry used to puke cotton candy after just the tilt-a-whirl, and I never got to do the real rides. Now's our chance.

Imani: I'll let you know what we decide to do. Take care, Carl.

Donut: CARL, YOU BETTER GET BACK IN HERE. THEY'RE FIGHTING!

I grumbled as I returned to the cab.

"Well we just don't need your services anymore," Madison was saying to Brandy as I returned to the cab. The entire room was sweltering. The cry of a baby emanated from the furnace.

"You can't fire me," Brandy said. "I only deal with Portia."

"Portia!" Madison scoffed. "I have two weeks more on the job than Portia, which makes me her senior. I will not have my employees mouthing off to me like this."

"*Your* employees? Why is it everyone in human resources always thinks they're the boss? You're not, you *einzeller*. You may be the

one who does hiring and firing, but it's not your decision. You are ze boot, not ze foot. Besides, I have contract. We demons take our contracts very seriously. You can't make decisions like that without running it past an exec, and we both know it." The demon's black orbs glowed, and I feared she was about to blast the human with a fireball, which would probably be bad for everybody in the room. Brandy was level 75, and Madison was only level 10.

"Ladies," I said, interrupting. "You guys can discuss this later, preferably *after* the ghoul outbreak. Nobody is getting fired right now." I grasped onto the towel and gently pushed at the furnace door. Brandy made a face like she was going to protest, but then another baby came, and I took the opportunity to slam the hot door while her face was scrunched up in pain.

Madison cross her arms and pouted. She was literally quivering with anger.

Donut: CARL, SHE REMINDS ME OF SOMEBODY BUT I DON'T KNOW WHO.

I laughed out loud.

Carl: Do you think you can guard her while I go up that ladder and peek into station 24? Maybe you can use that charm of yours and get more info out of her.

Donut: OKAY, I'LL DO IT.

Carl: Cool. Don't let Brandy out again.

"I'll be right back," I said out loud.

"Can I come?" Katia asked.

I'd been planning on going up the ladder and sticking my head through the trapdoor to look and see what was up there. If there were mobs, we'd come back to clear them later. That quick shot we'd seen of Lucia Mar had showed her fighting waves of ghouls before she had to retreat, and I wanted to see if this station was the same. But it was rare for Katia to want to do something dangerous, and I didn't want to shoot her down.

"Okay," I said. "But we'll just be a minute."

"I'll go first," I said, climbing up the ladder. The ladder led to a trapdoor about 25 feet up. Unfortunately it was a regular door, not a subspace portal, so I couldn't use my skill to see through it.

Katia got on the ladder behind me. She was in her normal, human-sized, non-enhanced body. We ascended quickly. I grasped onto the door and pushed it up. Dust cascaded down over me as I pressed. I emerged into a large, well-lit room with rocky walls and ceiling, the size of a big warehouse. Five stairwells sat in a circle in the middle of the room, light shining directly up over them like blazing spotlights. The moment I saw them, they marked themselves on my map. I didn't see any mobs or any other features in the room except the exits. Ten of the exits circled the room, leading down to regular train platforms. Each one had a sign over them. All were colored lines except one, which was ***Escape Velocity III***.

That gremlin mechanic had been right. There *was* a named train that looped back. I already had one person on my chat who said he'd seen the *Escape Velocity* Train, but he hadn't tried it. Also, the name didn't have a number after it, which suggested all of the trains that looped back might be called *Escape Velocity*.

Then again, the Iron Tangle employees were also trying to talk people into the mouth of a station mimic, so who knew what was safe and what wasn't.

The trap door I'd pushed through was disguised as a rock outcropping. It made me wonder how many hidden and secret doorways we'd walked right past. My Escape Plan skill supposedly had the ability to find hidden doorways, but it didn't seem to work very well. I needed to talk to Mordecai about that once he got out of jail.

I hesitantly pulled myself up into the room, looking about. Katia popped up beside me.

"There's nothing here," I whispered. Whispering felt appropriate. The stairways all emitted a gentle, pulsing hum. I knew they wouldn't open up until there was six hours left, which was ominous. There had to be a reason for that.

"Maybe the ghouls are on the train platforms," Katia said, pointing at the exits. "I don't have anything on my map."

"Weird. It feels like a trap. Let's leave it be for now. Maybe we'll look at stops 36 and 48 and see if they're the same."

"Hey," Katia said as I turned back to the trapdoor. "I wanted to talk to you alone for a second."

"Sure," I said, pausing. "You know you can always private message me, too."

"I know," she said. "But the messaging always feels so impersonal. This is really important."

"Okay," I said, starting to feel a little apprehensive. "What is it?"

She was clearly nervous, which made *me* nervous. "Remember when I said some of my parts, like my eyes and mouth need to be flesh? What it *really* says is at least *two* of my eyes need to be flesh. Which made me wonder, does that mean I can have more than two eyes? So I've been practicing, and it turns out I *can* make as many eyes as I want. The problem is, it makes me want to vomit if I have more than two. And the acuity is not right. I'm very near-sighted with them. I've gotten it to where I can have a third eye, and as long as the field of vision doesn't overlap with my other two, my brain can handle it. You'd think it'd be the other way around, that it'd need to overlap for it to work better, and maybe that's so and I'm doing it wrong, but for now I'm training myself to see directly behind me while I walk. It's like watching two shows at the same time, and it's hard to remember which one is which even though it's obvious. I keep it closed most of the time, but I can open it a minute or two at a time before I get a really bad headache. Hopefully soon I can train my mind to understand a full array of vision all around without going insane. That would be very useful. It's just, I feel less, I don't know, human when I do it. I know I'm *not* human anymore. I need to get over it. I know that. But it's hard."

"That… that's wild," I said, "And it will be really helpful. But why is this a secret?"

"That's not the secret." She wrung her hands worriedly. It was something she did often, no matter what size she was. "Donut did something when she didn't think anybody was looking. I talked to Hekla about this, and she thinks it was a setup. That you had her do it on purpose to test me. But I think I know you better than she

does, and that's not the sort of thing you'd do. Besides, you didn't know about my third eye, so how would that be a setup anyway? Donut did it so nobody would see."

"What the hell are you talking about, Katia?"

She pulled a little slip of paper out of her inventory and handed it to me.

"The other day when you got hit by the *Nightmare* and were gone, Donut and I went back out on the tracks to clean it. I saw Donut pull this from her inventory and then stuff it under the track so nobody would find it. But I was practicing with my third eye, and I saw her do it. When she wasn't looking, I grew a new arm, slid it along the track, and I grabbed it."

I examined the paper. It was a black ticket with a familiar, gold leaf skull embossed on it. I felt a chill rush through me as the description appeared.

PVP Coupon.

Ah, betrayal. Sweet, delicious betrayal.

If you have this coupon in your inventory, and you kill the crawler whose name appears on the backside of this coupon, you will receive the following rewards:

Gold Savage Box

Gold Weapons Box

Gold Apparel Box

Platinum Adventurer Box (This benefit may only be redeemed a max of 3 times)

+1 Player Level (This benefit may only be redeemed a max of 3 times)

I flipped the paper over. The slip read:

Crawler #4,122. Carl.

"What the hell?" I said. The sight of my name on the paper gave me a second chill. "Where did she get this?"

"PVP means player versus player," Katia said. "I didn't know that. Hekla says when someone gets one of those skulls next to their name for killing a crawler, and if they're in a party, they get a Savage box, and it contains the coupons."

"That means she got this after she killed that guy in the club, and she didn't want to tell us about it." I felt myself relax. This wasn't a big deal. Was it? She had gotten rid of it. The system gave out the coupon to be a dick. I imagined in a less tight-knit party, the existence of such coupons could cause a lot of paranoia and damage. But the idea of Donut wanting to hurt me was ridiculous. It was a waste of a prize, and she'd gotten rid of it so she didn't have to deal with having it. End of story.

Katia continued to wring her hands. "There's more. I thought this was a good thing at first. But later, I told Hekla about it, and she said they don't just get one coupon. They get one for every member of the party." She paused. "This was the only coupon Donut got rid of."

Shit, I thought. I could now see why Katia was freaking out. She thought Donut still had one of these coupons with her name on it.

"Maybe she got rid of your coupon at another time," I said. "And how does Hekla know this anyway?"

"My friend Eva. I told you about her already. She was with me before. We went into the dungeon together. She has a skull. There was a man. We didn't know him, but we met right when we got in. When we joined the daughters, Hekla didn't want him coming with us. But he insisted. We told him to go away, but he wouldn't. He grabbed me by the arm, and Eva stabbed him with her trident. I thought he'd be okay. She'd just stabbed him in the back of the leg. But he died, and she got the skull. She got the coupon book, though she never told me about it. She only told Hekla."

"I'm sure Donut got rid of the other coupon," I said. "Look, I'm glad you told me. But the last thing we need is to worry about each other. I'll talk to her to make sure. I won't tell her you found the one with my name on it."

"Okay," she said, her voice small. "Thank you, Carl."

I pulled the coupon back into my own inventory. My mind raced. I'd have to ask Donut about it. I didn't have a choice. But first I needed to confirm some of this info with one of the two other people I knew with a player killer tag.

Carl: Imani. I have a question for you.

She had been forced to kill several of the Meadow Lark residents when they'd first arrived at the dungeon, to save them from an agonizing death. I knew it haunted her.

Imani: Hello, Carl. We're collecting carts so the team can ride the conveyor. It's hard to get them off the track without breaking them. What can I do for you?

Carl: When you received your skulls, did you get a PVP coupon? I'm sorry. I wouldn't ask if it wasn't important.

There was a long pause. I thought maybe she wasn't going to answer.

Imani: I did. I received something called a Savage box, and all it contained was the coupon book.

Carl: How many coupons were in it?

Imani: It had a coupon in it for every member of the party. I tried to burn them, but they didn't catch on fire. I left them behind on the first floor. Brandon wanted me to keep them in case I had to, you know, do it again. But I could feel them sitting in my inventory, and I didn't want them there. So I got rid of them. You should know Elle did *not* get them when she got her skull. I used to think people only got them on the first floor, but after Donut told me about the two she received, I now think only the first member of a party to get the player-killer skull gets the coupon book.

Carl: You talked to Donut about her coupons?

Imani: We talked about them when she received the box. She wasn't too happy about them, and she was having a really hard time coping with getting that skull. I told her to get rid of them. She's like a child, Carl. She doesn't process things the way a person does. Talk to her about it. I gotta go. We'll message you later.

I had no idea Donut and Imani had ever said two words to each other. I wasn't sure how I felt about that. It made sense. Donut had done the same thing I just did, which was immediately turn to the person with the most experience in the matter. The coupons were designed to instill a wedge in a group, whether they were used or

not, and Donut recognized that. It was a smart, mature decision. Still, it suddenly felt as if something had changed in the dynamic between us.

Carl: Okay. Thanks. Be safe.

"Hey," I said to Katia. "So why didn't Hekla want that guy in the party with you and your friend? Was it because he was a man?"

"No," Katia said. "He was a creep. I don't think Hekla would care if a guy joined the group."

"So it's just a coincidence the daughters are all women? What if Donut and I wanted to join up, do you think she'd let us? Do you really think she'd let *me* join?"

Katia paused. I saw the tell-tale flash in her eyes. *She's talking to her right now.*

"*Do* you want to join up with the daughters?"

"Maybe," I lied.

"I think she'd want to talk to you first. Hekla thinks you're a bit reckless. But she really likes Donut."

"Okay," I said. "We better get back before…" I paused as I saw the red dot on the map. It was on one of the colored line landings. The Puce line. "Hang on. Stay here. Get ready to run."

I jogged over to the stairwell that led down to the landing. *Shit*. More red dots appeared. I peered down the stairs. As I suspected, it was the festering ghouls from the trainyard. It was just a few for now, but there would be more soon. I saw additional dots on the adjacent platform. They'd traveled from the trainyard all the way up to station 24. Station 12, I knew, was already filled with Jikininki janitor ghouls.

As I watched, however, it was clear they weren't sticking around. Some of them clambered up onto the landing, but only for a few moments before jumping back onto the passageway. They continued on their way up the track.

I also noted that none of them appeared to be getting shocked by the third rail. From this angle I couldn't really see what was going on. Either they knew about the rail and were avoiding it, they were immune to electricity, or the power was off. There was no way to know which of those three scenarios it was.

I tossed a pair of hob lobbers down the stairs just to kill a few, then I turned and fled for the trap door. We quickly descended the stairs and went on our way.

Stations 36 and 48 were identical to station 24. It was too soon for the ghouls to have walked this far. We'd check on them again after we ditched Madison. Zev sent us a message that we needed to find a saferoom soon because we were supposed to go onto that show in a few hours. I told her we were too busy, and she said she'd have us teleported away no matter what we were doing. I told her to go fuck herself, and she laughed as if I was joking.

I didn't yet say anything to Donut about the coupons. I wanted to wait until we were up in the production trailer. I just knew that since Katia had voiced her suspicions out loud that they were going to make this a thing. I wanted to cut it off at the knees while nobody else was watching.

There was more to the story, too. Katia was having a hard time. It wasn't just the coupons. She was struggling with something. I suspected maybe it was because I didn't quite treat her like a member of the team. Yes, I'd spent money and resources on getting her bulked up. But I'd done that for myself and Donut just as much as I'd done it for her, and she knew that. We all knew she was eventually going to go back to Hekla. It was clear that was what she wanted.

The thing was, I liked Katia. I liked her a whole lot. She was painfully quiet. Even when she was bulked up, it was easy to forget she was there. But she was just so damn earnest. She was afraid and hesitant, but she never once ran. If she said she was going to do something, she did it. And she usually did it well. That was a rare quality. With just a bit more training and mastery of her race, she would be the ultimate tank. Still, with Odette's warning about Hekla, I couldn't stop from thinking maybe it would be better if we just cut her loose sooner rather than later. I didn't want to do that, but

maybe it was the safer bet in the long run. If we did go that route, I'd need to really up my own defenses first. Or we'd have to find another tank. Maybe we could hire Bomo and The Sledge from the Desperado Club. Mordecai had hinted that it might be possible to hire NPCs.

I hated this. *Why does everything need to be so complicated? Can't people just be loyal?* I'd said that not too long ago as Bea and I were fighting about her decision to get rid of Donut. We'd been in the car, on our way to a Christmas party, and she'd casually mentioned one of her mom's Persians—Sugar Bun, who was Donut's aunt or cousin or something—was pregnant and was due soon. Once weaned, Bea would be taking two of the kittens and Donut would be returned to her parents who would try to sell her as a show-quality breeder.

You don't even like her, Carl. Why do you care?

She's your cat. She's a living thing, and you took responsibility for her. I don't understand how you can just give her up. I don't care if you get another cat, but why do you have to give Donut away?

Do you know how much money she's going to sell for, Carl? She's a former international grand champion. She's past her prime. I don't understand what you're not getting about this.

Goddamn bullshit. All of this.

In addition to the stops with the stairwells, we paused to examine stations 50, 58, and 59. With 50, I wanted to see if it was one of the Krakaren drug dens. It was not. The trap door lifted revealing a tiny room the size of a small house. A single ramp sectioned down, leading to nine different platforms. The small station had no mobs. It looked as it had never been visited by anything or anybody.

Next, we stopped at the ladder outside of station 58, which should've been a regular stop with a random nest of regular mobs, and it was equally empty and small. The next station after that was number 59, a prime number, and therefore supposedly a real transfer station. This one was as it should be. The place was set up just like any other transfer station we'd visited at the higher stops. There was a restaurant, a general store, and a small church leading

to Club Vanquisher. The trap door popped up behind an alcove in the wall next to the general store. The only difference was it appeared there were a whopping 27 different platforms attached to this one station. It was usually only three.

After discussing it some with Madison, we learned stop number 60 was supposed to be a sprawling station filled with dozens of dormitories and apartments, along with restaurants and stores for the employees and their families to shop and eat. All colored trains would stop there, along with the *Homeward Bound*, the employee-only train that was supposed to be on this track. There would be a portal at the station platform which would work like the backroom entrance to the Desperado Club. It didn't matter what train one used to get to station 60 nor what substation they started at. Once they stepped through the portal, they'd end up in the same place.

However, when we arrived at the employee-only platform for station 60, it was clear something was wrong. The platform—the only platform on this entire line—was old and decrepit, covered in cobwebs. We stopped to investigate. The stairwell led up into a tiny room just like with station 50. A single, additional stairwell led down to a confusing mess of stairs and platforms where one could catch multiple trains.

"Nice," I said after we saw there was no settlement here.

"It's a mistake," Madison said, spinning in circles, as if that'd make the buildings magically appear. "I don't understand. This is where our employees live. This is where their families live. What did you do?"

"Now you know why they made you give everyone mandatory overtime," I said.

My suspicions had been correct. They never turned this into a real place. There were no families. No wives or children. No food boxes with a touch of fish. It was all made up. All false memories. That *Homeward Bound* train probably never even rode once. It would've been nice to have a large settlement here with saferooms and NPCs. Instead they were playing up the evil corporation angle, which I thought was pretty meta considering the source of all this bullshit.

"Come on," I said. "Let's see if there really is a turnabout for the train. If not, we'll have to drive backwards. We'll go to station 41 and hit the saferoom there." That was the closest place with a Desperado Club. I wanted to go in there and add more people to my chat list. We'd have to risk leaving the train on the tracks. It appeared the ghouls were avoiding this tunnel because it didn't lead to regular platforms other than this one. Hopefully it remained that way.

"No. I'm staying here," Madison said. She sat down firmly on the rocky ground and crossed her arms. She looked up at us defiantly. "Someone will come investigate what's going on. I don't know what you did, but transit security will sort it out. People are scattered, and they will come here. Even if here isn't a real place, this is where they'll go."

"Is there really a transit security department?" I asked. "We've been up and down the line, and I haven't seen any sign of them."

She huffed. The woman did have a point. The workers who escaped the ghouls probably would be coming here. But I didn't give a shit if she lived or not. If she couldn't help us anymore, there was no point in keeping the murderous NPC with us. Part of me knew it wasn't really her fault. That her personality and memories were programmed into her. I still didn't care. She wasn't from earth. She wasn't a crawler, nor a former crawler as far as I could tell.

"If not security, then Rod will come," she added out of nowhere. "Rod always comes."

"Who the hell is Rod?"

"He's her ex-husband, Carl. Haven't you been paying attention? He's also the CFO of the Iron Tangle and works at Station A," Donut said. "Madison, are you sure?"

"Rod will come."

"Bye, Madison," I said, turning away. "Go fuck yourself, okay?"

"Right back at you, boxer boy."

"I remember who she reminds me of!" Donut exclaimed as we returned to the *Nightmare*. "Miss Beatrice's mom! She's just like her. She was really mean. I never liked visiting. None of the cats there

were very happy. I could tell she didn't treat them as well as Miss Beatrice treated me."

"Come on," I said. The comparison didn't seem so funny anymore. "Let's get the hell out of here."

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[19]

Time to level collapse: 4 days, 20 hours.

It took me longer than I'd like to admit to figure out how to turn the train around. There was a section of track designed for the purpose. The track was shaped like a T on its side, and I had to steam past it, get out and hit the switch, back into the base of the T, hit the switch again two times, and it turned the *Nightmare* around.

I managed to talk Zev into delaying our obligation to go on the show about pet and beauty pageants for six hours. She'd huffed and puffed, but since it wasn't a live show, it turned out to not be a big deal. It would give us time to sleep, eat, get our training room time in, and shower. Plus I wanted to stick my head into the Desperado Club. Then we'd go on the stupid show, which would eat two or three hours. This close to the end, that seemed like a ridiculous waste of time.

We went down to station 41 and parked the train. I told Brandy our plans, and she seemed content to just sit there and idle. Donut leaped to my shoulder as I ascended the ladder. This station was exactly as I expected. One restaurant, one store, and the Desperado Club. There were multiple exits.

A line of red-tagged ghouls appeared on the map from all of the colored station landings, but they weren't stopping. They remained on the tracks, shuffling higher.

Once we were up there, Donut finally released Mongo, and we headed for the saferoom, which was a Greek café called Everest. We skipped past the bopca and went straight to our personal space. We'd missed the last recap episode, and the announcement hadn't been anything special. The leaderboard hadn't moved.

As we entered the room, I received updates from both Meadow Lark and Bautista.

Imani and crew had safely ridden the conveyor system all the way down to Trainyard D, which also had a breached gate. Still, they'd arrived in a yard full of ghouls. They'd had a harrowing running and fighting battle. They'd taken shelter in the Iron Tangle administrative building outside of the yard. Elle had floated above the ghouls and frozen them by the hundreds, eventually killing all the ones surrounding the building. I got to listen to her bitch for five minutes straight about how little experience she'd received for it. Once they killed all the ones in the immediate area, all the newcomers ignored the building and walked straight back into the tunnels. The former Meadow Lark residents were currently holed up in the building planning their next move.

I suggested they take the employee train tunnel on foot up to the nearest transfer station.

Meanwhile, Bautista said the Kravyad wasn't a boss monster at all, but instead was a multi-armed snake woman NPC, just like Madison had reported. The NPC had attempted to hypnotize the crawlers, but Bautista had somehow neutralized her ability to cast the spell. He said, "I used my last Voca Nye. The purple variant." I had no idea what that meant.

But a new wrinkle had developed. Defenseless, the Kravyad was now threatening to kill herself if the crawlers got any closer. The crawlers remained on the platform while one of them, apparently a former police negotiator, was talking to her through the doorway. If she did kill herself, and that portal closed, it was going to get ugly. Less than half of them still had their hats which would allow them

passage through the only other portals in the area, the portals above the abyss. That was their last practical chance to get to the stairwells after the employee portal. With less than five days left and the vast majority of the subway trains now stopped, those in the group without their souvenir hats were in very real danger of finding themselves stranded.

I trained my Powerful Strike, which did not advance, and then I collapsed into bed, sleeping the full two hours.

Afterward, Donut and I headed to the Desperado Club to talk to any remaining crawlers while Katia spent some time at her makeup table. We only had about an hour of free time before we'd get teleported away, and I didn't want to waste it.

"Sledgie!" Donut cried when we entered the club. She jumped to the rock monster's shoulder.

The cretin grumbled in greeting. A blue magic protection spell appeared around us, followed by a new one, this time a translucent shield spell, a real shield spell, that would also protect us from physical attacks. Between the two spells, we were now practically invulnerable while we were in the club.

"I bought shield spell," Bomo said proudly. "The Sledge cast magic protect. I cast smack protect."

"That's really awesome," I said. "We appreciate it."

We moved to the dance floor, which was sparsely populated with actual crawlers. After explaining why I wanted to exchange everyone's chat info, I ended up collecting an additional 10 names to my list.

"We should go into the Bitches and Penis Parade strip clubs to see if anybody is in there," Donut said. "Plus I've always wanted to see a naked man dance around. One with better moves than that one weird guy who always came over when you were gone. He used to dance in the mirror and stare at himself and call himself a king. He'd put your socks on his wang and twirl them around in the mirror."

I barely heard her. Instead, I was staring at the man sitting at the bar. "Holy shit," I said. Donut hadn't yet noticed the purple-

skinned elf creature. I tapped her on the back and pointed. She turned and hissed, all of her hair poofing out.

"Did that guy come in alone?" I asked Bomo.

"He alone," Bomo rumbled. "He always alone. He here a lot. Usually in Bitches room."

"What are we going to do?" Donut asked. "Should we get him?"

"No," I said. "You go ahead and look in Bitches and Penis Parade. But be careful."

The man at the counter appeared to be drunk. He was missing his right hand. He should have chosen a race like Katia's, something that would've allowed him to regrow a limb. He clutched a drink with his left.

I leaned in and said to The Sledge, "Watch Donut carefully. There might be a woman in here who wants to hurt her. She'll fill you in on the details." I turned to Bomo. "Stay with me. This guy is much more dangerous than he looks. Even with only one hand."

I approached and sat down next to the man, keeping him more than an arm's length away.

"Hello, Frank," I said. "It's been a while. You look like shit."

Frank was drunk. Very drunk. He looked as if he was sprouting from the bar. I examined his properties.

Crawler #324,119. "Frank Q."
Level 17.
Race: Night Elf.
Class: Blood Assassin.

Only level 17? He was seriously lagging behind.

I didn't know what a blood assassin was, but a night elf was much like a dark elf or a drow from so many games and stories. His rough face was still recognizable in elf form. His skin glowed dark purple in the lights of the club, reminding me of an eggplant. He'd lost his spiked shoulder pads and battle axe. He now wore a flowing, black jacket. He still sported the Seahawks beanie on his head,

though now he had long, black hair. It looked out of place above his dark elf countenance. Fanged incisors peeked out from his lips.

The man's eyes were heavy with deep rings underneath them. It didn't appear as if he'd slept in ages. He smelled, too, of an odd mix of perfume and stale alcohol.

"Carl?" he said, looking up. He didn't have a speech bubble over his head. He tried to draw it using his stump, and the spell failed. The badger-headed bartender, with practiced ease, drew it for him. "Carl, is that really you? What the hell is a primal? You still look human. Where's your cat?"

"She's here," I said. "Where's your wife?"

"Dunno," he said. "I haven't seen her since the end of the second floor. She's around, though. I can see her on my interface. Don't talk so much. I think she blocked me. Bitch. But I'm glad you're here. They say you come here sometimes. Now I can get my revenge."

I tensed. This was either an elaborate trap, or the man had completely self-destructed and was now just talking shit. Based on his low level, I assumed the latter, but I prepared myself.

"You haven't seen her since the second floor? So right after our appearance on the Maestro's show?"

He nodded. "And I know you haven't seen her either, because you're both still alive. We got into a fight. About you and your cat. My plan after that was to sit at a bar just like this and wait for the end. But I got kicked out of the saferoom an hour before the second floor collapsed, and I wandered into the stairwell. When I got to race selection, that tentacled asshole told me Maggie had already chosen her race and class and left."

"What did she pick?" I asked.

He shrugged. "Dunno. Is soul-sucking bitch a class?" He grunted at his own joke. "It probably is. I don't even remember picking this body. I was so drunk. I think he picked it for me."

This conversation was not going the way I had expected. "But you made it through the third floor, obviously."

"Yup. Met up with some folks. Maggie used to tell me I was the William Shakespeare of lies. A damn virtuoso. That's why we got a divorce. But you know what?" He raised his stump, like he was

pointing a finger. Bomo lifted his arm, lightning quick, but I waved him away. “Sometimes the truth is worse. I told them the truth, and they ditched me at the end of the floor. I didn’t want to go down. But I’m a coward, and I did what cowards do. I followed the easiest path, and I descended. Stupid. I landed on a train with a bunch of new folks. But they didn’t want anything to do with me, either. These skulls make it hard for people to trust you. Got off at station 101, saw the Desperado Club, and I haven’t left the station since. Gonna be brave this time. And more drunk.”

He pulled out what I first thought was a cigarette, but then I recognized it as one of the highly-addictive blitz sticks. It smelled like patchouli. I still had one in my own inventory. When smoked, the drugs could permanently increase your intelligence, but there were unspecified side effects.

“And,” he added after taking a long drag. “I’m going to do what Maggie hasn’t. I’m going to avenge Yvette.”

Yvette was his teenaged daughter. The one who Maggie had inexplicably choked to death after they’d tripped my dynamite trap.

“How are you going to do that?” I asked. I tensed, ready to jump into action. I had no idea where he was going, and that made me nervous.

“I’m going to give you a present,” he said. “That is how I will avenge my daughter.”

He pulled an item from his inventory. Since he didn’t have a right hand, the small, metal item clattered onto the bar. Bomo leaped between us, pushing me back. Several cretin bodyguards I hadn’t even noticed were suddenly surrounding us, arms raised.

Frank cackled with drunken amusement. “You guys sure are jumpy tonight. Are you really this much of a pussy, Carl? I’m not going to hurt you. Not physically. My fightin’ days are over. My revenge will be via a different means.”

He sat back, leaving the object on the bar. It was a magical ring. Green glass with a red jewel. It glowed with enchantment. I kept my eyes on Frank.

“You see, Maggie, she’s more hot-headed than I am. She wants to fucking kill you and your cat. It’s not your fault. I know that. You

defended yourself. You did the same thing I would've done if the situations were reversed. But Mags, she don't see it that way. She's more biblical with her thirst for vengeance."

"What is that?" I asked, indicating the ring.

He pushed it forward with his stump. "It's yours, now. Got it in a legendary box right after we got in the dungeon. It ruined us. Now I'm giving it to you. That's my revenge. You're going to take it, because you'd be stupid not to. A jeweler in one of those big towns on the last floor offered me 300,000 gold for it." He laughed. "It's like winning the lottery. Of course you take the money if you win. But it ends up ruining you. That's what this did to us, and that's what this will do to you. That's my revenge. It's all I have left to offer. And it's all I want. Knowing what happened isn't enough. You need to understand. You need to feel it. You look down on me. I can see it. But you don't understand. Fuck you, Carl. Take the ring."

The dude wasn't making sense. I looked closely at the ring, examining its properties.

Enchanted Night Wyrm's Ring of Divine Suffering.

Oooh, that's scary sounding.

For the discerning Crawler Killer, this magical ring can be one of the most formidable items in the dungeon. If utilized properly, this ring's wielder can grow exponentially in strength, especially on the deeper floors. But beware. If poorly wielded, this ring will kill you quicker than an exploding rage elemental. Either way, this ring imparts one of the dungeon's most highly sought-after skills.

The wearer of this ring receives the following benefits:

+5% to all stats.

The Marked for Death Skill

I reached over and picked up the ring. I had to hold it in my hand before I could read the description of the Marked for Death skill.

Marked for Death.

It's not just Steven Seagal's magnum opus. It's also one of the dungeon's greatest, most infamous skills!

Once activated, you will be presented with a list of all crawlers within your map's range. Only crawlers with 100% health will be selectable. Once a crawler is chosen, they will be marked. It takes 30 seconds for the mark to fully set and become active. When a crawler with an active mark dies, no matter the cause, you will receive a permanent +1 stat point to whatever that crawler's current highest stat is.

The +1 stat benefit increases by one for every three marks you kill.

Warning. Once a mark is set, you may no longer heal. If you are injured, or poisoned, or if you get a hangnail, you will suffer the ill effects and pain of that injury until the moment your prey is killed. So choose your marks carefully. Don't let them get away.

You may only mark those designated as crawlers, except on the Scolopendra Lair levels (3, 6, 9, 12, 15, and 18) where you may also mark any non-dungeon-generated combatants. You may only mark one crawler at a time except on the ninth floor. This skill has a five-hour cooldown on floors 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, and 8. It has no cooldown on the sixth floor. Also on the sixth floor, marks will form instantly. There is a 15-minute cooldown on the ninth floor, but there is no limit to the number of simultaneous marks. All remaining floors have no cooldowns or delay to mark formation.

Confused yet? Here's a cheat sheet:

Current Marks killed: 0

Current Mark benefit: +1 Stat Point.

Current floor cooldown: 5 hours.

Marks take 30 seconds to form on this floor.

Happy hunting.

That was an insidious skill. The risk/reward didn't seem worth it, even if I was a murderous asshole. I didn't see why it was that big of a deal unless I became a full-on murderhobo which wasn't going to happen. Plus it was super dangerous to use. If you marked

someone, and they got away, you couldn't heal. You'd be fucked. Still, that 5% to stats was no joke.

"You got this in a box?"

"Yes," he said. "And now it is yours. Got it for fighting a family member while I entered the dungeon. A legendary 'That's the Spirit' box or some shit like that."

"Fighting a family member?"

"My ex-brother in law. Not even a real family member, but the dungeon didn't see it that way. I choked him out, and then we got attacked by rat-kins, these rat monsters that walk on two legs, and they killed him while he was still unconscious. Jesus. Do you remember that day, when it first started? One minute we were outside the annex, fighting, and then the buildings were just gone. What a mindfuck."

"Of course I remember…" And then it hit me. I trailed off. *Holy shit*. I remembered the video from the Maestro's show. Yvette had been injured by the dynamite. She'd been screaming in pain. I looked at the ring in my hand, horror dawning on me.

I waved the bartender over and ordered a drink. "Whiskey," I said, voice hoarse. He poured, and I drank.

"You let your daughter use the ring before you attacked us?"

"Not 'let,'" he said. "Made. I *made* my daughter use it. She refused to fight. She wasn't going up levels. This was the compromise. She wore the ring. Mags told her which mark to choose. We'd picked you. I figured the cat might get away. Never imagined you would. It was the only way we could make her stronger. She marked you, we waited thirty seconds for the mark to settle, and we attacked. Would've had you, too, if you hadn't been saved by the saferoom."

That was why Maggie had killed her own daughter. She was in pain from the explosion. She wasn't going to heal. The pain wasn't going to stop. Not as long as I was alive.

"She was beautiful, you know. On the inside, I mean. She didn't have that anger in her. Not like her mother. Or her dad. When she ran away, it wasn't because she was a bad kid. It was self-defense. Kids aren't always a product of their parents. But sometimes that

doesn’t matter. Sometimes parents can cast a shadow so thick, you can drown in it.”

That poor girl. Jesus, she must’ve been so scared. I felt no sympathy for the man next to me. He deserved all the pain he was feeling right at that moment. But I understood him a little better now.

It was as if he read my mind. He suddenly erupted in anger. “You don’t understand what it means to be responsible for somebody. You don’t have a kid in here with you. You don’t understand what that responsibility means, what a weight that is on your shoulders. And when you fail, it’s like being crushed, constantly crushed, only you don’t die. And the pain never stops. It just keeps coming and coming.”

A silence hung between us for a long time.

“Were you really a cop?” I finally asked.

“Yup,” he said. “Customs Enforcement. Maggie was a detective at Seattle PD.” The bartender refilled my glass without asking and pushed it toward me. “Cheers,” Frank said. “To the end of the world.”

“But you were divorced?” I didn’t know why I was asking this stuff. It didn’t matter, not really. This man didn’t deserve for his story to be told, not after what he did. In a way, people like him were worse than the Syndicate and the aliens who’d destroyed us. He was one of us, and he’d turned against his own.

But we all have that in us, the curiosity. The need to know the truth. And I really wanted to know why someone like him could exist. I understood, philosophically at least, that he was killing people in part to strengthen his child. But that was a choice, not the only path. I felt nothing but revulsion for him.

“Mags and I separated five years ago.”

“But you were together the night it happened. You went into the dungeon together. With your daughter.”

“Yvette ran away. Again. Got picked up by the Pierce County Sheriff. My brother in law was a deputy. He was Maggie’s little brother. Always protective of her. Blamed me for all of Yvette’s issues. He called us to come get her. It pulled me off a surveillance.

Two in the goddamn morning on the coldest night of the year, and the four of us were in the parking lot, all screaming at each other when it happened. Yvette ran into the tunnel. Maggie tried to run in after her, and I pushed her, which made her brother mad. He didn't understand what was happening. He tried to put cuffs on me. We went in fighting."

"Come on, Carl," Donut said. "It's time for us to leave."

I turned to see her standing there on The Sledge's shoulder, glaring at Frank. Both her and The Sledge now had pink feather boas around their necks. The Sledge now also wore a cowboy hat. Hanging from the boa on the Sledge's neck was a giant pinback button that read, "I like my sausages extra-large. Penis Parade. Desperado Club Floor One."

"Did Maggie ever take that potion?" I asked, standing from my chair. The Maestro had given them a legendary skill potion that would max out the "Find Crawler" skill.

"That's what we were fighting about. I wanted to sell the potion and the ring. Use the money to buy gear and to train properly, but all she wanted was revenge. She has the potion, but I don't know if she's taken it or not. Our guide suggested that she wait until she picked a class to take it. Something that would let the skill rise up to 20, not 15. But I don't know if she did that or not."

I suddenly thought of those PVP coupons. I wondered if Maggie had one. I wondered if she'd received extra rewards for killing her own daughter. I shuddered.

"Okay," I said. "I'm sorry your daughter had to die. She didn't deserve that. Goodbye, Frank."

I met eyes with the man one last time. He was no longer a threat. His wife—*ex*-wife—was dangerous, possibly even more dangerous than I realized, but Frank was done. I had no doubts he wouldn't be getting off this floor. Maybe not even up from this bar.

The man drunkenly watched me take the ring and slip it onto my left index finger.

"Vengeance is mine," he said.

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The production trailer was a submarine, not a boat. We ended up being late for our appointment, but this time it was because Zev had delayed it. She said my conversation with Frank and my "stunningly controversial decision" to wear the ring along with "Donut's amazing lap dance" at the male bordello were the top two feeds in the world during that hour. I didn't want to know what had happened in the strip club.

I couldn't stop thinking about Yvette, and of her mother choking her until she died. The ring hung heavy on my finger. I was never going to use it, but Frank was right. I'd be an idiot not to take it. A five percent bonus to my stats was too good to pass up. I just wouldn't ever use the Marked for Death skill. I'd taken it off just to make double sure it wasn't cursed, though Mordecai had once told us that we couldn't get cursed items in loot boxes. I put it back on, though I wasn't fully certain it was a good idea to keep it on my hand. I kept going back and forth on whether I should keep it on there. I'd pulled it off a half of a dozen times until I decided I was being a wuss. I knew some people would probably think I was an idiot for putting it on, and maybe they were right. But I needed every advantage I could get, and if people didn't like it, they could suck it.

I'd ask Mordecai's advice once he returned, but for now, it stayed on my finger.

"You weren't worried about what Frank might've done to me?" I asked Donut just before we were teleported away.

"No," she said. "One look at him, and I could tell he wasn't going to hurt you. And Sledgie said his wife left him, so I wasn't worried about her, either. He's still there at the bar. Hasn't moved since we left. There's another crawler talking to him right now, but it's not a woman."

"Wait, how do you know that?"

"I have Sledgie in my chat. I showed him how to do it."

"Huh," I said. It never even occurred to me to even attempt something like that.

"Anyway," Donut said, "sometimes you can just look at someone and see that they've given up. I've been seeing a lot of it lately, even in people who are pretending to hide it. It's quite scary. But it's worse in some, and with him it was the worst I've ever seen."

"Those are the ones we need to worry about the most, Donut."

"Why do you say that?"

"When someone has given up, they no longer care about the consequences of their actions. That can be dangerous."

Zev pinged us, and we zapped away. The moment we reappeared I could tell we weren't on a regular boat. I took a few steps in the lavish, velvet-covered room, and the floors felt odd. Then my eyes caught the massive picture window at the end of the room, revealing nothing but a sea of dark blue, punctuated by a blinking light that revealed we were under the surface.

I realized with a start that my interface didn't disappear like it usually did. My health bar still appeared, and I had access to my inventory. I walked to the counter and pulled the entire bowl filled with Snickers bars into my inventory to test it. It let me.

Donut rushed to the round window which extended from the floor to the ceiling. She put her two paws up on the glass, gazing out. A floating menu appeared in Syndicate Standard. **Lights On?**

"Yes, yes!" she said. An exterior floodlight snapped on, revealing a vast, sandy ocean floor. Squat, round plants dotted the ground as far as we could see. It reminded me of the desert. Furtive movements disturbed the silt-covered floor, and a wide, flat fish

darted away, causing dirt to swirl. Donut's mouth hung open in amazement as she swished her tail.

I looked about the room. It reminded me of the lavish production trailer we'd borrowed from Manasa the day she was murdered. There was a bathroom, a kitchen with a row of shelves that kept items cool, as if it was a refrigerator without walls. Multiple, expensive-looking chairs filled the room, along with a makeup table with a light-up mirror. This was a real makeup table, not the thing Katia had in the crafting room. This was obviously one of those trailers meant for off-planet celebrities and not crawlers.

A now-familiar, robot-like frisbee descended from the ceiling. The soothing, female voice was similar, but not quite identical to the robot voice of the last one of these things we'd seen, which had been in the standard production trailer that had been rented for the Maestro's show.

"My name is Mexx-6000. You are in a deluxe rental trailer owned and operated by Senegal Production Systems, Unlimited. Since this is a security trailer, your location is not being disclosed. The producers of *Planet Beautiful* are not privy to your exact location, and the only entities on board are you and myself. We will be ready for you to enter through the door in approximately five minutes. Please make yourself comfortable. I see you've already discovered the refreshments."

"Mexx?" I asked as I moved to the couch. I pulled one of the full-sized candy bars out of inventory and unwrapped it. Donut remained at the window, looking out.

"Yes, Carl?" she asked.

"Do you know why my interface hasn't gone away? Usually I can't access my inventory or other systems. But here, it works."

The blue light on the floating robot blinked. "A normal crawl consists of multiple, tightly-focused system zones networked under a single system AI. Under traditional circumstances, each floor has its own, individual core and boundary zone. In such cases, once removed from the zone, you would lose access to all system upgrades and non-internal enhancements. Think of it like wi-fi. However, in this iteration of *Dungeon Crawler World*, the Borant

Corporation has opted to use a dual-layer planetary zone system instead. The main zone extends from the planet's core to sea-level. The secondary zone extends an additional five kilometers above the surface. So while you are in a surface trailer, you will not have access to your primary interface, and you will only have limited access to certain personal upgrades and systems. This trailer is still in the main zone, as it is below the planet's sea level. Traditionally, in such circumstances it is customary to create an administrator bubble around the trailer, limiting your access to certain features. This season, Borant has elected not to implement this feature. Therefore you have full access to your regular systems. You should note, however, being in the main zone you are still subject to the system AI's purview and its rules and regulations."

"I don't understand a word of what the fuck you just said."

The robot sighed. "I apologize, Carl. Let me translate it to earth monkey speak. The mudskippers are cheap bastards who have built this entire crawl with spit and duct tape and items they have purchased at the equivalent of an interstellar swap meet. Everything is built with very little regard for system security and is done as cheaply as possible. The fact it hasn't yet broken down or bitten them in the ass is a testament to the very real existence of the concept of 'dumb luck.' Do you understand now?"

I gave the robot a thumbs up. "Got it."

"Carl, do you think there's ever been a cat under the ocean before?" Donut asked. She was making an odd, chirping noise as she watched the occasional fish dart by.

"Lots of them," I said. "I don't know if any have had this sort of view, but navies have a long history of keeping cats on board. Remind me sometime, and I'll tell you the story of Unsinkable Sam. He was a famous cat from World War II who survived multiple ship sinkings."

"I didn't know about this," Donut said. "So he was a hero cat?"

"Every boat he served on ended up at the bottom of the ocean. I don't know if that makes him a hero."

"But he survived?"

"Yep," I said. "Ended up dying of old age."

"Sounds like a hero to me," Donut said.

"I am not reading this bullshit," I said. "Where did you even get this? It's like you used Reddit and Youtube for research, and that's it."

The teleprompter froze. I could see Donut through the glass of the booth next to me. This room was different than the holo studios we were used to. This was an actual studio with physical soundbooths. My chair was made for a creature much too small, and I asked if they had a different one. The chair in the booth disappeared, and a new one appeared in its place. It was like the room itself had an inventory system.

Donut was currently narrating her portion on pet shows with gusto. I couldn't hear her, but she was waving her paws in the air and narrating with obvious enthusiasm.

My section was on human beauty pageants. The paragraph I was supposed to read hung in midair. The first part of the program had been okay. I'd read about the history of beauty pageants throughout the ages. I had no idea if any of it was true, but the information was both believable and harmless. I talked about an ancient Greek ritual called "Kallisteia," which I had no idea how to pronounce. Their description of the event seemed a little too children's book-y to be accurate. Especially since the script included video inserts from several bizarre and random sources, like *Fraggle Rock* and *WKRP in Cincinnati*. It was like the Unsinkable Sam cat tale I'd just told Donut. It was probably exaggerated and filled with half-truths, but it was an interesting story passed down through the ages.

Once we got into the specific details of the modern beauty pageant, the tone of the script changed. I couldn't stomach reading any more.

"Why do you even need me to do this?" I asked. "If they can make a realistic video of me banging an orc, then surely you can have a robot Carl recite fake, made-up facts."

I looked over the script hanging before me.

The swimsuit portion of this human mating ritual is designed to entice the Chad-class males. The evening gown is to demonstrate their ability to mix with society, and the question and answer portion is to prove mental fitness. The goal of each pageant contestant is to attract the highest-quality male and have him inject them with his superior sperm in order to create the most viable offspring. After they receive the gift from a genetically superior male, they oftentimes find a lower-quality male, a "Beta," to help raise the child.

Judges for these pageants are usually a mix of ultra-alpha males and former contestants who are well past their prime.

These women are oftentimes referred to as "roasties." A roastie is common human parlance due to their genitals being irrevocably damaged by multiple sexual partners. These roasties are honored and desired only by the male beta members of society, as evidenced by my recent trip to an Arby's-themed saferoom.

Multiple images and videos accompanied the script, including a photo of the actors Lorenzo Lamas and Fabio as examples of an ultra-alpha male. The "roasties" were an Asian woman I didn't recognize and Judge Judy. They also had a video of me eating a roast beef sandwich.

"Seriously. What the fuck?" I said.

The screen lowered, and Bin the producer appeared. He was one of those stereotypical gray aliens. He looked tired and irritated.

"Carl, we can't artificially create your voice. It's against the law to do so without a disclaimer. People will watch this because they know it's really crawlers telling them about their world. Don't you want the universe to know about your culture?"

"I do, actually, which is why I'm not reading this bullshit. Where do you even get this stuff?"

"We hired a consultant."

"Christ. Was it some 15-year-old kid?"

"No. We can't use surface human consultants. We can't approach the natives until the crawl is over. We used an AI consultant who has consumed all of your media."

"Well then you got ripped off."

"We got a discount because Borant started the season early, before the AI could complete its scan. It insists its knowledge is adequate and accurate."

"You guys can't be this stupid," I said. "Do you really believe this is the truth?"

The gray shrugged. "Do you know how much we paid for this? The cost for you and Donut was more than the entire budget of the last two seasons combined. People have an unexpected thirst for your world's culture, and this little show has suddenly found itself as a ratings powerhouse. The least you can do is help us out. Hekla had no problem reading her script on Nordic mythology. Prepotente and Miriam Dom were happy to discuss earth hip hop culture. Your partner may be off script, but she is also embracing the subject. Why can't you?"

I looked over, and Donut was still gesticulating, talking animatedly.

"How off script is she?"

"She is telling the universe about a breed of dog called a cocker spaniel, about the real reason why they are the winningest champion of the Crufts dog show. It is fascinating. We have never heard such a tale of evil and intrigue."

"Goddamnit, Donut," I said. She saw me through the booth window and waved.

Carl: Don't make shit up.

Donut: I AM TELLING THE TRUTH THAT NEEDS TO BE TOLD, CARL.

I sighed. "You're either going to have to get another script or ask Borant for a refund because I'm not reading this. I don't care what happens."

The alien looked as if he wanted to jump through the screen and strangle me. We stared at each other for several moments before he seemed to deflate. He looked back and forth nervously and leaned in.

"Look, Carl. I know the scripts are crap. When I started this program years ago, it was just me. I wanted to tell the real story of the cultures that were getting erased. But suddenly this show is

bigger than I ever expected, and Titan, who was happy to leave me alone and let me make this show with little to no interference, is up my ass. They are making me use crawlers to narrate, we have to use shit intelligence to make the scripts, and the show *I* created is about to get yanked out from underneath me unless I make it even more 'interesting.' It's a kick in the chest cavity is what it is. I was happier when I wasn't noticed, and now that I am, I am being punished for being successful. So the last fucking thing I need is somebody giving me shit about something neither of us have control over."

"Oh, I'm sorry," I said, anger rising. "Your rented slave labor isn't participating like how you wanted? Well, let me look for some sympathy." I patted myself on the chest. "Nope, all out."

The alien looked as if he was about to cry. "Okay, okay. We have a few other scripts. Which one do you think will resonate with your audience better? We have the history of mechanized military conflict. One on video arcades. Oh, and this one is about the history of milk pasteurization."

I almost told him to give me the milk one just because it would be so boring maybe this idiotic show would get canceled. But then I took a deep breath and thought about it for a minute. If I took him at his word, he genuinely seemed interested in presenting the truth about our planet to the universe. That wasn't so bad, was it?

"Just give me the damn videogame one."

After we were done, we returned to the green room.

"Carl, Carl!" Donut said as we entered the room. "Sledgie just messaged me. He said Frank is dead! You know that crawler who was talking to him? They got into a fight, and the crawler killed him! I can't believe it!"

"Huh," I said. "I'm not surprised though."

"It was Chris. *Chris* killed him. Sledgie said he did it and walked right out. Now he's banned from the club. Sledgie said he's a rock monster like him, but a different kind."

"Holy shit, really?" Chris? Imani's crew hadn't had any interactions with Frank and Maggie as far as I knew. I'd told them the story, of course. Especially after everything that had happened on the Maestro's show. Was that why? That didn't seem like the Chris I'd known. But Imani and Elle had said he'd changed. I remembered Brandon's last words about his brother. I had the message pasted into my scratchpad, and I found myself reading that last message, especially the part about Chris over and over.

…Tell him I love him. That's the most important part. It's always been the most important part, but I didn't realize it until it was too late.

I sent a quick note to Imani and Elle, telling them what happened and asking her if they'd managed to get Chris to talk. They didn't answer right away. They were likely asleep. I knew they'd been heading for a saferoom.

"If I may interrupt your drama," Mexx the robot said. We both looked up at the floating frisbee. "Your time with me is drawing to a close. You may freshen up a bit before you return to your crawl, but do not take too long. When you're ready to go, you may exit through the doorway to the studio. On behalf of Senegal Production Systems, I'd like to thank you for using our services. Have a great day."

That door, which had been a normal door only moments before, transformed itself to a one-way subspace portal. I took a screenshot, and it showed the main room of our personal space. It was empty. Katia was likely in the crafting room.

Donut returned to the picture window and looked out. "I wonder why Chris did that. But I'm glad he's okay, even if he liked stupid tv shows. Anyway, that was fun. I like the interviews better, but I think it's good for the Princess Posse to get some culture in with their daily Donut fix. Plus they had a video of me and Miss Beatrice winning a show, so that'll be a bonus for the fans."

"Princess Posse?" I asked.

"Zev says that one seems to be winning out, no thanks to you. Some are going with the Donut Holes, which I do *not* approve of."

"Whatever," I said. "Look, I want to talk to you about something real quick before we leave."

"Is it about the PVP coupons?"

I froze. "How did you know?"

"Imani is a big gossip," Donut said. "She doesn't look like someone who'd be one, but she is. She felt bad about telling you about the coupons when you asked her, and she messaged me to apologize. She said you'd probably ask me about them. How did you find out?"

"I heard someone talking about them." That technically wasn't a lie.

"You don't need to worry, Carl. I got rid of them. I didn't like having them, so I buried yours under a train track, and I threw Katia's out in the garbage at that Hotdog on a Stick place. And quite frankly, it's a subject I'd rather not talk about."

I relaxed. That went much easier than I thought it would.

I moved to the kitchen to see if the refrigerating cabinets could be removed from the walls. They pulled off easily, like they were magnetized. I wanted to see what the electrical connections, if any, looked like. There were none. The shelves appeared to be self-powered, like I hoped. There were four shelves, and I took them and pulled them into my inventory. I looked up at the ceiling to see if the robot would object, but it didn't move. *Well, if we're doing this*… I went and picked up the entire makeup table and pulled it into my inventory as well.

"What are you doing?" Donut asked.

"You know how the ice machines sometimes don't work in the saferooms? I figured we could make our own. I'm sick of drinking warm soda."

Donut cocked her head to the side, but then shrugged. I wasn't normally a steal-stuff sort of guy, and she knew it. Plus that excuse was dumb as the ice usually did work. But I couldn't exactly tell her the real reason why I wanted the shelves. I didn't have a specific use for them yet, but there were multiple trap, potion, and bomb recipes in my book that required items to be frozen or cold before they were utilized. And the makeup table would fit well in the main room of the space. I thought about taking the rest of the chairs, but I didn't want to piss Zev off *too* much.

Still, I thought. Why the hell not? I went to pick up the couch, but I paused when a message came in.

Bautista: Hey Carl. Want to give you an update. We tried to paralyze the Kravyad, and she ended up dying. The portal closed. Over 150 of us don't have our souvenir hats. We're not sure what we're going to do. The trains have stopped coming on all the tracks. We're going to head up to that abyss portal on foot. It's about 50 kilometers.

Carl: Shit. Do *you* have a hat?

Bautista: Nope. A guy at the bar was bragging about how much they were buying them for. A bunch of us sold them. Dumb.

Carl: Get to the abyss. Send those who have hats through on foot. See if maybe you can find a way to station 436, which is where the named lines go.

I went on to explain the catwalk that surrounded the interior of the abyss. I warned him of the lizard mobs I'd seen there. If they could maybe find one of those small trapdoors, they could get to the station and onto a named train like the *Nightmare*, take it over, and steam it into the yard. That was really their only hope.

"Let's get going," I said to Donut. I picked up the couch and stole it. I pulled the bowl filled with cat treats off the counter and added it to my inventory for good measure.

"Have you ever noticed how shit always happens while we're doing these shows?" I asked Donut. I told her about Bautista.

"At least we get snacks," she said.

"Yeah. Let's get out of here before something else happens."

I paused before the portal. Out of habit, I pulled one more screenshot. I froze.

Our personal space, which had been empty just minutes before, was now full of people. There were at least thirty of them. All women, as far as I could tell, of various races, from humans to fairies to a four-armed lizard. I saw Hekla there in the back, peering inside the training room while Katia pointed at something.

"Motherfucker," I said.

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[21]

Time to Level Collapse: 4 Days, 9 Hours.

Entering The Royal Palace of Princess Donut.

"Hi, Hekla! Hi, Hekla's friends!" Donut said. She jumped to my shoulder. "Look, Carl. It's Brynhild's Daughters!"

"Yeah, I can see Donut."

Thirty pairs of eyes turned toward us. I quickly looked over the group. Hekla had risen to level 33, one higher than my 32. The rest of her crew averaged around 25, which was respectable, but a little lagging. That was the problem with staying in a big group. I'd discussed this with Mordecai a while back. He firmly believed small groups were the best for that very reason. Experience was shared, but due to the nature of the earlier floors, there was only a finite amount of experience to be had. So while the bigger groups offered a certain amount of protection, it came with diminishing returns regarding experience.

But looking over the diverse group of crawlers and classes, I could see the advantage of having such a large team. The pool of spells and skills amongst them had to be impressive.

At level 24, Katia was no longer the odd one out. She'd fit right in. I sighed.

Hekla and Katia pushed through the crawlers. Hekla held out her hand. She was even taller than I realized. She was about nine inches taller than me. Her muscles bulged. She kept her automatic crossbow slung over her shoulder, and the thing was huge. I hesitantly shook her hand. It practically swallowed my own. Her hand felt as if it was made of iron. I wondered what the woman's strength stat was.

"Carl," she said. "Thank you. I asked you to take care of my girl, and you did. But you did more than take care of her. You helped her level and taught her how to protect herself. I am in your debt."

"How did you find us?" I asked. "And how are you even here?" I looked at Katia. "I didn't realize others could come into our space."

Katia smiled sheepishly. "Since I have a personal space attached to the whole, I have the ability to allow groups in. I whitelisted all the daughters."

Hekla nodded. "We came through the employee portal thanks to your information, Carl. Sadie cast her *Glass Prison* spell on the Kravyad, and we all made it through. We were at substation H. We hiked up to station 60. The station was barren. Well, mostly barren. A few NPCs had gathered, looking for their families. There's a switch there that allows you to choose which of the 12 Homeward Bound platforms to get upon. Katia said you'd come in at trainyard E, so it was easy to find you from there."

"Wait, really?" I said, this new information momentarily causing me to forget the potential danger of this situation. *We can use Station 60 to get onto any track*. I held up my hand as I sent a mass message out informing everybody of this information. And then I sent a quick, additional note to Imani and Elle, telling them what was going on with Hekla and her team.

I caught sight of a daughter with a familiar name. Eva. Katia's friend. She stood slightly back, just behind Hekla's right side. The green, opalescent woman was a four-armed cobra-headed creature, similar to Manasa the singer, though the coloring was different, and she did not have a naga body. Also, unlike Manasa, this woman was

small, only about five-feet tall. She stood on two, regular legs, though she was covered in scales. She had a pair of wide sabers over her back, placed in an X formation, and she wore green, shiny leather armor that almost looked like a tracksuit. The woman glared at me, crossing both pairs of arms. I quickly examined her properties.

Crawler #9,077,240. "Eva Sigrid."

Level 27.

Race: Half Nagini, Half-Orc

Class: Nimblefoot Enforcer.

The woman had one large skull and three smaller skulls over her head, indicating she had killed thirteen people. Katia had said she'd only killed one, which suggested those additional 12 skulls were a recent addition. Looking about, I didn't see any other skulls over the crew, including over Hekla. *This is the one who does her dirty work.*

"This is a very impressive space," Hekla said. "We combined two personal spaces, but we don't have any of these upgrades." She looked at Donut. "We can't even whitelist visitors until we buy one more space. Your manager has proved to be very helpful. It's too bad you lost him. When is he coming back?"

"Two days and 18 hours," Donut said. "Carl, maybe we can combine safe rooms with Hekla's team! Do we have to all be in the same party for it to work?"

Goddamnit, Donut. "Uh, I think maybe we do," I said. "But I'm not certain."

Carl: Donut. Don't say stuff like that. Let's wait to see what Hekla wants before we all jump into bed together.

Donut: OMG YOU SHOULD DATE HEKLA. THE AUDIENCE WOULD LOVE THAT. THINK OF THE VIEWS.

At that moment, I had to confront something that had been at the back of my mind since the moment Odette had cautioned me about Hekla. *Why hadn't you warned Donut about what Hekla really wants? Why hadn't you told Mordecai?*

I knew the answer, I always knew the answer, but I hadn't admitted it to myself.

You think she would be better off with Hekla's team. You think Mordecai would think so, too. That's why you never told them. It had been nagging me for a while, but I'd kept pushing it to the back of my mind. Stupid. Self-destructive. It was also par for the course. I thought of what the late Frank had said to me, about being responsible for someone else.

You don't understand what that responsibility means, what a weight that is on your shoulders. And when you fail, it's like being crushed, constantly crushed, only you don't die. And the pain never stops. It just keeps coming and coming.

But seeing that woman, Eva, with all the skulls over her head, any thoughts I had of Donut being better off fled. For all I knew, each and every one of those skulls was someone who had deserved it. Or maybe it had been a mercy kill like with Imani. But my instincts told me, *no*. *No, no, no*.

I could see both Hekla's and Eva's eyes flash, and I knew they were talking, plotting.

Carl: Don't let Mongo out. These guys are looking a little jumpy, and I don't want any accidents.

Donut: WE ARE IN A SAFE ROOM. AND EVERYBODY LOVES MONGO. THESE ARE OUR FRIENDS, CARL.

Carl: Just keep him locked up for now. If there's a scuffle, we don't yet know if he'll freeze or teleport away, and this is not the place to find out.

Hekla smiled. "Now is not the time for such discussions, little Donut. But we wanted to come by and pick up our lost little lamb, and we wanted to see what a wonderful job you and your Carl have done for her. But we are also in a hurry."

Donut beamed. Katia appeared to be wavering, like she wanted to say something. If Katia left and disengaged her personal space, it would severely alter the nature of the room. Mordecai would lose access to his space. We'd lose the training room. We'd spent so much time working together, it seemed like such a waste.

"I'm afraid there is little time to chat," Hekla said. "We have an issue, and it involves some people I believe you know."

Here it comes, I thought. *The cheese on the trap*.

"Katia is but one of our lost lambs. We have a small cluster of friends who have collected with a larger group. They are gathered at station 101 on the Vermillion line. It is a significant group of people. A thousand at least. The trains are stopped on all three lines that service the station. They are stuck. Mobs are swarming all around them, and they are fighting them off. They need our help. We are going to rescue them, and I am asking the Royal Court of Princess Donut to help us do that."

On my shoulder, Donut started to tremble with excitement. She worshipped Hekla, and I knew the thought of fighting alongside the shieldmaiden was a dream of hers.

"Tell them to hike to station 102," I said. "Go into the robot room and ride the conveyor back." But even as I said it, I knew that wouldn't be feasible. Not when there were a thousand people. It had taken Imani's crew a few hours to gather enough of the rolling cages to get her team down to the trainyard. She'd said it was difficult to extract them from the conveyor tracks without breaking them.

"They're boxed in," Hekla said. "There's plenty of fighters in the group to keep the monsters back, but they keep coming. The Vermillion line is clear, for now, but they're being inundated with mobs from the other two platforms at the station. I have the boss map from the Vermillion line, and the track is swarmed. A massive herd is making their way up the line and will be upon them soon. So the crawlers can't just hike down the line. It's at least 150 kilometers from 101 down to the closest stairwell at 72, and if they have to fight the whole time, they will never make it. There is a ghoul generator at stop 72, similar to the one at 12. Even Lucia could not hold the line against them. There's also something going on at 75. And that's all in addition to the regular mobs suffering from the DTs that are coming from the other two platforms. Any hour now we'll be seeing whatever stage three looks like."

What a goddamned clusterfuck. "You said it involves people we may know," I said. "Who?"

"From what I understand, it's a crew you met on a show. A man named Li Jun along with his group. Also, a few others you have in your current chat circle."

For fuck's sake, how much did Hekla know about me? Was Katia just feeding her everything I did and said? How could she know who my friends were otherwise? It made me wonder if Hekla had spies strategically placed everywhere. Jesus, was that possible? Or was I being overly paranoid? I was in over my head, and I knew it.

And even worse, I had enough wits about myself to recognize that asking me to help her was a masterful move by Hekla. How could we not help? I'd look like a cowardly idiot if I didn't.

Plus I *wanted* to. A thousand people? And Li Jun and possibly his sister Li Na and friend Zhang? I'd last seen them when they'd unwittingly been dragged onto the Maestro's show for the Death Watch segment. But they'd managed to save themselves. I didn't really owe them anything, but if they were truly trapped, how *couldn't* I help?

But what about Bautista, all the way at the end of the line?

You can't save them all.

I couldn't save anybody if I ended up dead.

So what should I do? I had no idea how to help Bautista. I could try going back through the portal with the *Nightmare*, but then what? I didn't even know if there was more than one abyss station. No, it simply didn't make sense.

I had to look at this logically. If Hekla's plan was to kill or otherwise discredit me and get Donut to join up with them, so they in turn had access to Mordecai, they had to do it without Donut knowing that's what they did. Or Mordecai. And the only way to do it would be to make it look like an accident. But how could they possibly do that when literally the entire universe was watching them at all times? It'd be easy to hide something from Donut at first, but Hekla had to know by now that people like Odette existed. Information entered the dungeon like drops through a leaky roof.

Whatever it was, it wouldn't happen right away. Donut worshipped Hekla, and once Donut latched onto someone, it was hard to get her to unlatch. But she didn't know any of the other newcomers. I'd made a serious mistake by not talking about this earlier. I would have to start fixing it now.

I glanced over at the cobra-headed Eva and met her eyes. A very slight smile curved her mouth. A smile that did not reach her eyes.

Carl: Donut. Be careful, okay? I am getting a bad vibe from that Eva woman. Don't trust her.

Donut: RIGHT? SHE'S SCARY. SHE KEEPS LOOKING AT YOU LIKE YOU'RE A CAN OF FANCY FEAST.

Carl: If anything happens to me, question everything.

Donut: WHAT DO YOU MEAN?

Carl: Just watch that one, okay? And keep an eye on Hekla, too. I know you like her, and so do I, but I don't think she likes me too much. She might let me get hurt if it will help her team.

I quickly rummaged through my inventory and rearranged some items on my hotlist. I added that invisibility potion I'd gotten from the suitcase into one of my slots. Then I added Mordecai's Special Brew, which would give me almost-invulnerability for about thirty seconds. I had to be careful with that one since it made it so I couldn't take another potion for ten hours afterward.

"Okay," I said out loud. "We'll help. Just don't get me killed so you can have Donut all to yourself."

Eva's mouth tightened. Hekla laughed. And at that moment, I saw it. It was just a glimmer in the normally stoic woman's facade, but it was there. *She's having fun. She* likes *this*. *She's as crazy as the rest of us*.

"We were just looking at the map," Katia said, indicating the large paper on the counter. "Vermillion is a colored line, but it's different than the others. I think it's one of the ones that Widget the gremlin was talking about when he mentioned the Terminus Direct. It looks like it runs the whole line in about a day."

"Okay," I said. "So what are you proposing?"

Hekla crossed her arms, suddenly all business. "We're taking a Vermillion subway train down to 101, picking everybody up, and we're taking them back by going reverse, using a second engine attached to the back. We tested it, and it works well. We'll come back to a stairwell station where we can make a stand. We'll hold out until the stairwells open."

"So you have a train? What about the wreckage on the track?"

"There is no wreckage on the Vermillion line. And it's one of the few with the power still turned on. We discovered the train just sitting there, ready to go when we teleported to that building near the trainyard. The engineer was out of the train, inspecting it when we showed up. I shot him, took the route map, and we took the train. It doesn't look like this train ever ran. It has three passenger cars, but the rest are cargo containers. They are supposed to roll the ghouls onto the train and transport them to the abyss. But it never ran. And since it never ran, it never crashed. Eva stole a second engine and backed it into the train. We drove it down to stop sixty and left it on the tracks to come here."

I nodded appreciatively. "Is there a cowcatcher on it?"

Hekla grimaced. "That, Carl, is the problem. It's a subway car, and it is not designed to withstand such abuse. There are hordes of ghouls on the tracks further up the lines. There is a small device at the front, but it does not work well. When we hit the few ghouls that were on the track, it was okay, but I can tell it will be a problem when we push through the heavier hordes. The track is about to get very dense, and I fear pushing through so many is going to derail it. If we go slow, we will be overwhelmed. We have to move fast, but the faster we move increases the chances of a wreck. That's why we came here first."

I started mentally working on the problem. I had plenty of metal in my inventory. I'd have to go up there and measure the front of the train, as each one was a little different. "So you want me to build you a cowcatcher, or some other device to put on the front of the train?"

"Well, yes, but you've already built what we need." Hekla turned to Katia, who appeared as if she was going to vomit.

I felt the blood drain from my face.

Donut was the first to object.

"You want to stick Katia to the front of the train?" she said, sounding outraged. "Are you kidding? That sounds like a Carl plan."

"Yes," Hekla said.

<u>Carl</u>: Katia. You don't have to do this. I can build a metal one.

<u>Katia</u>: It's okay, Carl. This is what I'm for. You said it yourself. I need to learn to use my race properly. We don't have time to build anything.

<u>Donut</u>: CARL IS RIGHT. YOU ARE GOING TO GET HURT.

It was actually a brilliant idea, and I was impressed at the sheer insanity of it. But I would never let her do it if it was up to me. It was simply too dangerous.

<u>Carl</u>: You're not disposable, Katia. Hekla is treating you as if you are. I'm sorry if I didn't make you feel welcome. You can say no. You can stay with me and Donut.

<u>Katia</u>: This was my idea. I'm the one who came up with it. It's why they're here now.

<u>Carl</u>: *Your* idea?

I was so flabbergasted I didn't know what to say.

<u>Katia</u>: I altered the backpack and made it wider using your engineering table while you were gone. I have more metal in there now. I can make myself even bigger. I've also added rubber to the mix. If I layer it between the metal and flesh, it absorbs the impacts. I just need help with the design for the front of the train. I need to be careful of that third rail.

<u>Carl</u>: I don't like it, no matter what the design is.

<u>Katia</u>: This is just like when Donut wanted to climb up the chain and turn the roundabout. You're a… a backseat dungeon driver. You only don't like the idea because you didn't come up with it.

Ouch.

<u>Carl</u>: I don't like it because you're going to fucking die, Katia. I don't understand. You used to be scared of fighting just regular mobs.

Katia: You're right. You don't understand, Carl. They came back for me. She brought the entire team to pick me up. That is more than anyone has ever done for me.

An awkward silence hung in the room. It was clear to everyone that we were having a private conversation. Katia rubbed tears from her eyes.

Zev: Goddamnit, Carl. You need to be having these moments out loud.

"Go fuck yourself, Zev," I said up to the ceiling. "How's that for talking out loud?"

Hekla barked with laughter. "Zev sounds like our Loita."

Zev: I'm serious, Carl. You're one of the most popular feeds, and half of your conversations are inaccessible to the viewers. What do you think is going to happen?

I ignored the question. The tension in the room had eased with my outburst. "Okay, okay. If we do this, Donut and I will ride in the engineer's car. And I would like Katia to stay in our team until we're done. All this transferring around will take too long." I turned to look at Katia. "As long as that's cool with you."

To my surprise, she walked up to me and hugged me, long and tight. "Thank you," she whispered in my ear. I had no idea for what.

"That's fine," Hekla said after a moment, though she seemed irritated. "You can ride with me and Eva. She knows how to drive the subway cars."

When we left the personal space, I paused, confused. Before, the door led straight into the attached restaurant, but now there was a vestibule similar to the one at the Desperado Club. A second door was attached to a wall next to ours. It was a subspace portal that I couldn't enter or screenshot. After a moment, I realized it was the entrance to Hekla's team's headquarters. That was how the system dealt with multiple, non-attached personal spaces being accessible when crawlers had the ability to enter into more than one. *I know*

what this is. This is a temporary, situationally generated space. I remembered there was a note about them in my book.

I half-expected Eva to turn and attempt to saber me in the face the moment we left the saferoom. She didn't. We went through the trap door down onto the dark, employee line. It appeared the ghouls were leaving this track free. That was good. The *Nightmare* remained where we left it, happily idling. I briefly wondered what Fire Brandy did to pass the time. But then I remembered her babies, and the fact she was constantly giving birth. She probably had no time to get bored.

"If you want to ride, your team will need to hang onto the outside of the train. There's not enough room in the cab. There's room on the back platform, though."

"We will ride," Hekla said. Me, Donut, and Katia climbed into the cab while Hekla, Eva, and a few more daughters stood on the back platform by the door. The rest moved to the front and clutched awkwardly onto the railings, standing on either side of the *Nightmare*'s boiler. A few of the smaller, fairy-like daughters alighted onto the platform out front, just above the cowcatcher. I imagined we looked like a parade float with so many colorful women attached to the outside.

"It's too bad we can't move this train to the Vermillion line," I said as I flushed the brake line. This train would be perfect for clearing the track of ghouls. I stuck my head out the window. "Ladies, watch out. The boiler gets really, really hot. Only hold onto the rails. And watch the walls. We'll go slow, but if the walls hit you, it's game over."

I eased the train forward.

"I just realized you're the only boy here," Donut said. "All these people, and there's only one penis. You could start a harem. Like the guy on that *Sister Wives* television show."

I laughed. "Nobody is starting a harem."

"No, I suppose not," Donut said. "You couldn't even keep one woman interested."

The train hissed, and we started to pick up speed. We'd be at Station 60 in just a few minutes.

“Why does your friend have so many skulls?” Donut asked Katia as we lurched forward.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I knew she had gained a few on the third floor, but I hadn’t realized it was that many. She says she doesn’t want to talk about it.”

I bet.

“How do you know her anyway?” I asked.

“Eva? She’s an economics professor at the university. We eat lunch together sometimes. We were friends before, but not great friends. She actually knows Hekla, too. From before, I mean. Hekla has known her longer than I have. Reykjavik is a small town.”

“Was Hekla a professor, too?”

“No,” Katia said. “She was Eva’s psychiatrist.”

Like Madison from human resources had predicted, A small colony of NPCs had gathered at station 60.

We didn’t stay long at the station, which was too small already to house the group of NPCs gathered there, but as we passed through, I noted Madison sitting in the corner glaring at us sullenly. She was being berated and threatened by an angry mob of dwarves and gremlins. Rod, her ex-husband, was nowhere in sight. I wondered if he was even real.

As we left and entered into the long, twisting hallway that led to a confusing series of portals which in turn led to additional platforms, we had to step past a dwarf huddled on the ground, his head hanging low.

According to the tag, the creature’s name was Tizquick. A conductor for the Mango line. A puddle of tears had formed underneath him. Hekla stepped over him as if he wasn’t there. Donut and I paused. I kneeled. I knew there was nothing I could do for him, but I felt compelled to acknowledge him, if just for a moment.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I don't know what you're going through, but it has to be hard. It'll be over in four days when the level collapses." *Only to start all over again for you*, I didn't add.

The dwarf looked at me, and it struck me, as it always did, at the life there in his eyes.

"She was never real, was she?" the dwarf asked, tears streaming down his dirt-colored face. They left rivulets of clean skin through the grime. "My little girl was never real. I just don't understand."

I put my hand on his shoulder, and I leaned in. "No, I suppose you don't. And that really sucks." I thought of Frank Q killing people so his daughter could have a chance. I thought of my own mother, and what she did. *This is my birthday present to you. I am giving you a chance at life. I'm sorry it took me so long.*

Both of them had failed miserably. But this guy had it even worse. He'd been tricked into believing something that just wasn't real. He never even had the opportunity to screw it up.

Before this was done, people like him would kill people like me by the thousands. And people like me would cleave through his kind, wreaking even more damage. All the while the real culprits sat back and watched and laughed.

"One day, this pain you're feeling right now will matter," I said. The conductor looked up at me, eyes sparkling with confusion.

I straightened, and I left the man on the floor.

Hekla remained there at the edge of the portal. She'd watched the exchange.

"You are going to give yourself an ulcer," she said. "Focus on what you can accomplish, not that which is beyond your control."

I grinned. "How much do people normally have to pay for that advice?"

She just looked at me. "We need to hurry. The main horde of ghouls will be upon them soon, and they're starting to see mobs suffering from the third stage."

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[22]

"For a while, the horde of ghouls seemed to be stopped at station 75," Hekla said as we watched Katia form in front of the subway car. I nervously kept an eye on the third rail, just nine inches from the lower left of her plow shape. She'd consulted with me and one of the daughters, an architect, on the design. I'd had her place her new rubber layer between herself and the front of the train, along with a coating all along the left and bottom side of the scoop. That way if she did touch the rail, she wouldn't—in theory—complete the circuit. But the last thing we wanted was to test it.

"But they just kept coming and coming," Hekla continued, "and they broke through whatever barrier there is, and now they're moving quickly up the track. There are hundreds of corpses on the tracks already. They mostly avoid the electrified line, but there are so many of them. Every once in a while one of them hits it, and the ghoul kills all the ones around him. There are just piles of dead bodies up there."

The engine car of the Vermillion line was like most of the subway cars. It had a flat, window-covered front section. The controls were simple, especially compared to the *Nightmare*. It was a lone throttle switch and an emergency brake, along with a few lights indicating electrical connection status and an indicator telling the driver that all the cars were still attached. I briefly inspected the second engine car, attached backward at the end of the train. It had a slave mode where it added power to the train, even though it was facing the

wrong direction. It would be more efficient if it was right behind the first engine, but this worked, too.

As long as we didn't get into an accident.

The stock "cowcatcher" attached to the front of the subway car was just a metal shield welded underneath the front, designed to push debris away. It looked like a forward-facing trailer hitch. It'd work fine for a few bodies here and there, but it was clear we needed something much more robust.

After some discussion, we decided a traditional, wedge cowcatcher design wouldn't be enough. Katia had to make something that combined the low, forward comb with a bulldozer-like scoop.

"A plow is an easy design," I said. "The problem is the train fits so tightly in the tunnel that there's nowhere for the debris to go. It's not like the Nightmare line where there's a thin channel between the train and the ceiling and the sidewalls. These trains are packed in tight, otherwise we'd go with a wedge design. Even with just the scoop, the tunnel will get clogged like a drain."

"That is a concern," Hekla said.

"That's why we came up with the kebab plan."

"Katia," I said as I watched her form. I couldn't even see where her head was. "Extend the lower scoop a little further. Yeah. Damn, I wish I'd had time to make train wheels to stabilize it. You'll need to be careful not to clip the ground. If you do, don't let it pull you off the train. They're going to be heavy."

Katia: I know, Carl. I'm anchored to the top.

We'd broken out the windows in the engine car so Katia could reach inside. This is where most of her biological flesh would remain, though I worried that this was the wrong design. Nobody in the group was an engineer, and that was a problem. She'd built herself almost like a toggle bolt, affixing herself to the flat front of the subway car, reaching in through the window and then making a small, vertical hunk of Katia that was bigger than the window hole and pulled flush against the wall. It'd work well, I hoped, but if she gathered too much weight onto her scoop, I feared she'd rip the front of the train off. I cushioned the top and bottom of the metal

parts where she attached with a pair of yoga mats to make it more comfortable and to help with insulation—both for herself and those of us in the cab. None of that would matter if she gathered too much weight. If the bolt pulled free, she'd get dragged down, hit the track, be ripped off the front of the train, and then run over. She'd be splattered all over the tunnel along with everyone in the engine car.

After the scoop was formed came the spikes. Multiple, thick, sharp, and metal spikes protruded out from the scoop, like a sea anemone, or one of the street urchin mobs from the third floor. We kept these mostly at about chest level and above. This was a gamble. We expected the spikes to break if they hit armor or ghoul mobs with tough skin. But the faster we went, the higher Katia's constitution, so it was crucial if we wanted to maintain speed. The moment a mob was impaled on the spike, or caught in the scoop, Katia would start the process of sticking the body into her inventory. That would only work if the monster was truly dead, however, so Donut and Hekla would stand at the windows and would—carefully—shoot anything caught in the spikes or scoop.

With the spikes, we hoped they'd die more quickly, especially if the train moved as fast as Eva said it could go.

Katia finally finished forming. I marveled at how much area her body took. But that also worried me, as I knew the larger she was, the thinner the metal, the weaker the joints. She was literally stretched thin. A pair of eyes and mouth sat in a little divot, looking out near the top of the scoop. I'd wanted her to face inside the cab, but she still didn't trust her ability to grow new eyes.

"Last chance to back out," I called as we climbed onto the train.

She didn't answer.

The engine car was much roomier than the *Nightmare* engine. This was an entire train car with an apartment attached to it. It was meant to house a mantaur engineer. Eva stood on the right side at the controls. Hekla stood next to her, crossbow ready to fire through the missing windshield. Donut and I stood on the port side. Katia's body snaked in through both of the two windows, and she'd formed a thick, metal plate there, bolting herself to the front of the cab. If it

wasn't flesh colored, she'd look like a feature of the train. I put my hand against it before I realized what I was doing, and I could feel her heartbeat, fast as a jackrabbit. Until that moment I hadn't realized she even had a heart. I quickly pulled my hand away.

Katia: That tickled.

One more of the daughters rode up front with us. A level-25 **Wisteria Fairy** named Silfa. She was a "Holistic Healer." I hoped her healing abilities were more effective here in the dungeon than the holistic, snake-oil stuff from the real world. The plump woman appeared to be about fifty years old and was half the size of Donut. She quietly hung back.

"Speeding up," Eva said, pushing the throttle.

This was the first time I'd heard the cobra-headed woman speak. I was a little taken aback at how normal she sounded. A little tongue flicked out.

"I wish you'd let me take Mongo out," Donut said. "He'd love this."

"It's too dangerous for him right now," I said. "I'm pretty sure we'll need him soon. Besides, he'd eat that fairy lady right out of the air."

"That's not true, Carl. It only takes him a minute to get used to people. And then he'll love them for life."

That was the problem. I wanted to keep Mongo away from them as much as possible in case something happened. If we had to fight, I didn't want Mongo stopping to roll over for a belly rub from Hekla.

I eyed Silfa the healer nervously. Since I'd never fought with her before, I didn't trust her. I had eight scrolls of healing ready to go, and Donut had another six.

My stomach dropped as the train picked up speed, barreling down the tunnel. The sickly headlamp wasn't nearly as bright as the light on the *Nightmare*.

"Donut."

"On it," she said, reading my mind. She cast *Torch*, setting it to travel ahead of us. It lit the tunnel brightly, revealing the uneven, rocky walls.

A group of red dots appeared on the map. It was just three of them. I barely had time to bark a warning before we mowed them over.

There wasn't even a thump or an audible *splat*. Only a small spray of blood over Hekla and Eva's faces. I tried not to laugh. There wasn't even a body. It was like we'd hit a bug with the windshield. We'd completely liquified the mobs, and the train was still accelerating.

Katia: Hey, I got experience for that.

Carl: Did it hurt?

Katia: It was like a little bee sting. No big deal. There was a head on my spike, but I pulled it into my inventory. Also blood. It lets me add liquid to my inventory if it's in my scoop. There's a new tab called "Gross shit."

My mind started to race with the implications and possibilities of that.

"Coming up on 72," Eva called.

This was the station where the ghouls were all coming from.

"Faster," Hekla said. "Speed it up." She had to shout the words now. The wind whistled through the two open windows of the subway car.

Katia: Whoa. I just got a fan box! It's for having the most new followers in a 30-hour period. I can't believe it.

Donut: CONGRATULATIONS.

That wasn't necessarily a good thing, but I wasn't about to say that now. I swallowed, seeing the wall of the red dots rushing toward us like missiles descending on a target.

There was a constant stream of ghouls coming off the platform. Most were traveling up the line, but a handful were turned toward us. Most of the mobs were now sticking to the right side of the tunnel. They were running, too, running fast. Terrifyingly fast. There was a pile of X's along the track where the ghouls had barbequed themselves on the third rail. I was worried that the pile of electrified bodies would still be intact enough to give Katia a shock as we plowed through. Hopefully her self-insulation would be enough.

"Here we go," I said, bracing myself.

"Jesus fuck," I cried, raising an arm to block the shower of blood. Gore and bits of bone and hair blasted into the engine like it was being sprayed at us through a firehose. A hundred mini, fleeting shocks rocked me, giving me a small amount of damage. The train shuddered, but it didn't slow as we plowed through the screaming mass of ghouls. We cut through the bodies like a goddamned wheat thresher.

"Katia," I cried, getting a mouthful of guts.

She'd been fine, but she was suddenly unconscious, and her health was at about 50% and dropping. I put my hand against her flesh and felt a tingle of electricity. She was getting shocked by something. Probably a body part wedged between her and the line.

"Faster," I yelled at Eva, who was choking on a splatter of guts. Where the hell was that healer? I cast my heal scroll on Katia, and her health returned to the top, though she remained unconscious, and it continued to drop.

Something in the cab hissed, and I turned in time to see a monster head on the floor, growling. It was an almost-human head with green, rotting skin, pulled tight over the skull. I stomped it down with my foot.

There was another, a torso with a head attached. It growled as it reached for Silfa, who had buzzed to the top of the cab, screaming for Hekla to help her. These were different than the festering ghouls. These were the monsters being generated at stop number 72. I quickly examined the creature before I crushed its head with my foot.

Blister Ghoul – Level 20

The thing with the Blister Ghoul is that it is so damn tenacious. This undead creature is created and unleashed into the dungeon using a device called a Ghoul Generator. There are multiple types of ghouls and generators out there,

but the bad boy that spits these suckers out is top of the line.

For every non-undead mob that dies within this floor, one of the soul crystal-powered ghoul generators will birth a single Blister Ghoul.

It's rather unfortunate, then, that every mob on the entire floor is suffering from something that will eventually kill them.

Soul crystals. Goddamn soul crystals. That's what they'd used to power the swordsmen guards on the third floor, and it's what Miss Quill had been using to cast her spell. The soul crystal had become overwhelmed and turned itself into a massive bomb. That bomb—now dubbed Carl's Doomsday Scenario—still sat in my inventory. I hadn't even dared take it out at my sapper's table yet. These things were always bad news.

The chaos of this entire floor was starting to form into something a little more cohesive than I'd originally suspected. This wasn't just a maze. It was an almost-perpetual engine. In the next day, these things were going to be everywhere.

"That group was small compared to the main horde approaching stop 101 where everyone is trapped," Hekla said. "It has many times more ghouls."

The mobs had thinned out, but we were still hitting a handful every few seconds. Katia had a dozen heads and other body parts attached to the spikes. Some of the body pieces were still alive. The gore was starting to fill up her scoop. Donut was carefully shooting them through the window while Hekla did the same. Donut was soaked in dripping, steaming guts. Absolutely soaked. Her massive sunglasses protected her eyes, but she had to keep washing the blood away.

Katia's health continued to move downward. She hadn't once been healed by the so-called healer.

"Heals, goddamnit!" I yelled at the fairy, who remained at the ceiling, looking down at the blister ghoul's corpse. I kicked it. "It's dead. Come on!"

"I'm supposed to wait until she's at 25%."

"You will heal her now. And can you wake her up?"

The fairy looked at Hekla, who nodded. The fairy had over two dozen boss kills by her name, but she acted as if this was her first foray into action.

Katia glowed, and the unconscious debuff faded just as she hit another group of ghouls. More blood splattered into the train, soaking Silfa, who shrieked.

Katia: Ow. That hurt. It's okay now, but I was shocked really bad.

Carl: Be careful of things getting wedged under there.

Katia: Not much I can do about them now.

I watched as the massive pile of body parts lowered, zipping away into her inventory. She did it again. And again. All that was left was a pile of chattering heads. Donut and Hekla went to work.

Eva sputtered as more gore splattered across her face. "Coming up on 75," she cried out.

Corpses dotted the tracks here, including a pile of bodies on the platform. As we rushed past, I caught sight of several dead hobgoblins and jackal-faced gnolls. Multiple tracks spread out from the main line here, too, with a long line of small cars sitting idle, ready to hop onto the main track. These were tiny platforms, each about the size of a Mini Cooper. A long group of portals and switches remained here, too.

But the station passed quickly, and I'd only gotten a quick glance. Hobgoblins meant this was where the crash interdiction teams were stationed. They'd been overrun by the ghouls. I knew that gnolls were often used as security. I wondered if they were the transit security forces Madison had been babbling about.

After that, the stations were much further apart. Ghouls remained on the tracks, always jogging forward. We also started seeing other mobs, but only in ones and twos. They shouldn't be on this track at all since this line only stopped at transit stations. But nevertheless, they were here, all mobs suffering from the DTs. They came and died so quickly I never got a chance to examine them.

But some of these single mobs were bigger and armored, and Katia started losing spikes. We passed through a pair of rhino-sized,

metal-clad troll creatures, and her spikes were left all broken and bent. The train bucked, and I thought for certain we'd derail. But we remained on the tracks. Katia fixed her spikes the best she could, but she needed the metal to maintain the scoop's integrity. Thankfully the monsters died instantly upon impact.

A moment later we hit a small group of ghouls mixed in with some fist-sized fairies who exploded. When we hit the flying creatures, they detonated in a mix of sparkles that covered the front of the scoop with rainbow-colored luminescence.

Hekla leaned back from the window, rubbing the blood and gore from her face. She suddenly grinned big and said, "There are many wonders in a cow's head."

"Indeed," Eva said.

I had no idea what the hell that meant.

For the next hour and a half we zoomed up the tunnel, moving toward station 101. Hekla tried talking to Donut, but I kept myself between them. I tried to strike up a conversation with Eva, but she just grunted at me. I could tell everybody in the room was talking to one another via chat. Just a few minutes before we got there, I received a message from Elle.

Elle: Hey, good news.

Donut: HI ELLE. HI IMANI!

Carl: Oh yeah, what's that?

Elle: We now know what happens when too many of the festering ghouls get together.

Carl: You're being sarcastic, aren't you?

Imani: She is. It looks like this type of ghoul's goal is to get to stop 48. We used that stop 60 to move to your line. It took us a minute to find the right portal, but we found your train sitting there. We ranged downward to the stairwell at 48 and found it full of the festering ghouls. We watched them transform. These worm things come out of them, and

then they pull themselves tightly together, making a giant frankenmonster. It's too big to leave the room, but it fills it completely. It's a province boss, Carl. We all got achievements just for discovering it. Thankfully it let us get the hell out of there.

Elle: It's really gross, too. It makes a slurping noise when it moves, and it's covered with mouths that are always screaming.

Holy shit.

Carl: That sounds like the shambling berserkers from the last floor. But bigger.

Donut: THOSE GUYS WERE REALLY SCARY.

Imani: I didn't see those, but the monster has *completely* filled stop 48. And the wrath ghouls are stopping at station 36. Who knows what they're going to do. All the ghouls coming from the trainyards are that kind now. They're going to do the same thing. Or worse.

Carl: Okay, we have jikininki ghouls at stop 12, nothing yet at 24, the wrath ghouls at 36, the province bosses at 48, and these blister ghouls at 72. It sounds like we need to pick one. Assuming whatever ends up happening at 24 is going to be awful, The jikininki and the blisters are probably the easiest to kill, but they both have generators, which means they continuously spawn.

Elle: Can't you just pull a Carl and blow the shit out of the room? That was one of Mistress Tiatha's suggestions.

Carl: I keep forgetting you guys have a manager, too. I think that's what they want me to do. The generators are run by soul crystals, and they don't take too kindly to being blown up. Station 12 still might be our best bet, but we'll have to do it the old-fashioned way.

Elle: Miss T isn't all that helpful. She spends most of her day drinking and smoking blitz sticks. Then she cries about her space pony or whatever it was when she was in the dungeon. She was really excited to be our manager, but she's treating it like it's a spring break. She'll throw a

suggestion out every once in a while, but mostly she steals gold from me to buy more booze.

Imani: We're going to post up at 36 and kill the wrath ghouls as they come in. If we kill enough, maybe we can stop them from doing whatever they're going to do. There are no soul crystals in that room. We could really use some of your boom jugs.

Carl: That's a great idea. Once we rescue these folks, we'll have a lot more people to hold the line. I'll meet you there as soon as I can.

Elle: Okay. Stay frosty.

Donut: IS THAT YOUR NEW CATCHPHRASE? I LOVE IT.

Elle: Yeah, I'm throwing a few out there to see what sticks.

"Coming up on the main horde," Eva said. "Look at all of them."

"Speed up," both Hekla and I said at the same time.

I turned to the healer. "Heal her about five seconds after we hit the crowd. I don't care what her health is. Just do it. How many times can you cast before you run out of mana?"

"Five times. But I got mana potions."

"What's your potion cooldown?"

"Twenty seconds."

We rocketed down the tunnel. The line of dots appeared at the edge of my map, closing fast.

"Okay, good," I said. "I want you to heal Katia, count to five and heal her again. Keep doing it until we say stop. Keep an eye on her for any other conditions. Do you understand?"

Silfa looked at Hekla, who nodded.

"Okay," she said.

"We're just in time," Eva said. "The horde is going to hit 101 in a few minutes."

"How does the track look behind us?" I asked Hekla. I knew since she had the route map, she could see down the entire line.

She frowned. "Not bad yet. Hopefully it'll stay clear for our ride home."

"Here they come!" Eva called.

Smack. Smack, smack, smack. We plowed through the first few ghouls. The train shuddered. And then we were in it. The train bucked and lurched. The tight tunnel was actually keeping us on the track, I realized, as ghoul pieces showered into the cab. I went to work killing everything that continued to move. I smashed at a gnashing head with my fist, and it exploded. More came, one of them chomping painfully onto my leg. I pushed it down. My kneepads activated, the spikes killing it.

The train whined ominously as we plowed through. We noticeably slowed. A few notifications appeared. Donut was screaming and slicing with her claws as more and more living ghoul bits showered into the cab. In moments, we were waist-deep in body parts, more than should be possible, and a lot of it was still alive. Something bit me. Then something else. I had to step back from the window. The pile of gore reminded me of the piles of chum dumped by boats by the docks. It angled down from the window, reaching halfway through the car and growing by the moment. The actual liquid was up to my knees. *Holy shit, this was a bad idea*. Donut was suddenly on my shoulder. She had a severed hand clutched tight on her tail.

Katia: Help!

I looked up to see Katia's health at about 10% even as my own health started to plummet. Where was the fucking fairy? My damage reflect was doing a good job at hurting the monsters when they attacked, but there were so many. I slammed my *Heal* scroll, topping off Katia, and then I had to heal myself with a spell.

I activated Talon Strike and cast *Bang Bro* and waded back toward the window. I started smashing the heads all around us. It was like trying to fight while buried in oatmeal. The gore continued to shower into the train. Hekla had a physical shield spell around herself. Eva had one of her four hands on the throttle while she sliced down with her sabers. She was up to her chest.

Body parts just kept coming and coming. The parts were getting bigger and bigger as we slowed, including full, living ghouls who weren't quite dead. I ducked as a fully intact ghoul flew into the car.

The green-skinned monstrosity got up and charged at me. Donut blasted it with a missile.

The exterior of the train was completely covered with crawling and moaning and scrabbling monsters. The whole, front cab groaned ominously. Katia was spiking them mercilessly, clearing the gore by pulling the bodies into her inventory. But there was just so many, and she wasn't moving fast enough.

"Station coming up!" Eva cried. "I'm going to slow down!"

"Not until Katia is healed again," I yelled. "Where the fuck is Silfa? Is she down?"

"She ran," Donut said, breathless. She'd raised a pair of clockwork ghouls to fight for us, but Hekla killed them both in the confusion. "She ran away into the apartment!"

Katia: Carl. Where am I? Why isn't Eva answering me?

I whirled back to Katia. *Fucking hell*. How was her health so low?

We'd almost pushed through the horde, and only a few ghouls remained on the exterior. I dodged and swung, punching over and over, killing monsters while keeping an eye on Katia's constantly dwindling health. Was she getting shocked again? There was so much gore and bodies out there, surely she was getting blasted. But it was going down even faster than before, and I didn't feel anything. It was like she'd been hit with a debuff, but it didn't show on her status. I read another heal scroll, then another. I'd soon be out.

Donut: CARL! CARL! HEKLA SHOT KATIA WITH AN INVISIBLE ARROW! I SAW IT WITH MY SUNGLASSES! SHE DID IT EARLIER, AND I THOUGHT IT WAS A MISTAKE BUT SHE DID IT AGAIN. IT WAS MIXED IN WITH HER REGULAR ARROWS. IT WENT INTO HER SCOOP. THE ARROWS ARE STILL STUCK IN HER! I THINK SHE DID IT ON PURPOSE!

Carl: Katia! Disengage! Lose your mass! Now! Now!

The train continued to slow, the brakes screaming. We were free of the crowd. Eva was also screaming. She'd been injured, blood spewing from one of her four hands. Hekla continued to kill the ghouls in the cab. She'd fallen back from the window, standing, thankfully out of reach. She'd slung her crossbow and had a short,

curved blade in each hand and was twirling about, slicing and killing. Her shield was gone, and she now had **Enraged** flashing over her head. The tall woman screamed as she fought. While this subway car was a little wider than usual, it wasn't *that* big, and I had to duck several times to avoid her frenzied slashes. I stayed back the best I could.

The scoop at the front of the train vanished. Blood and guts showered onto the track. A lump of flesh plopped onto the floor of the cab, disappearing into the gore. A moment passed, and Katia reappeared, her health still plummeting. She popped up gasping. She started to collapse again, and I grasped her with my arm, pulling her up. **Unconscious** reappeared over her.

"The arrows are still there! They're sticking out of her shoulder!" Donut cried. "Pull them out!"

There was no visible wound on Katia's shoulder. She appeared to be wearing her regular, red leather outfit. I unsummoned my gauntlet and reached over, scrabbling until my hand grabbed onto something invisible.

"That's it! Pull it! Pull it!"

I yanked, and Katia screamed in her sleep. Only then did the hole in her leather appear. Donut healed her. I pulled the invisible bolt into my inventory and grasped until I found the second one. I could feel that the shaft was splintered. I yanked. I quickly examined it.

Dirty Little Phased Bolt.

This item is broken. It must be repaired before you may use it.

This is a Phased item. It is invisible. It will hide its entry point and will only be discovered if it is physically touched.

The perfect ammunition for the discerning crossbow assassin. This item will cast both *Temporary Amnesia* and *Suffering Bleed* onto its victim, draining them of health until they are at 10%. A second bolt will lower the victim's health to 1%. Victims who subsequently perish will be listed as dying from an alternate source. You will not get credit or experience for the kill. Nor will you get one of those nasty

skulls by your name if you happen to kill a fellow Crawler. *Wink, wink, nudge, nudge.*

What the actual fuck? Why was she trying to kill Katia?

Out on the platform, a mass of crawlers surged toward the now-stopped train. On the periphery of my map, I saw what had to be 500 red dots pushing the mass of blue dots back.

Hekla finally looked up from the gore. The **Enraged** buff blinked a few times and disappeared. She had a wild look to her eyes. She focused on the still-unconscious Katia hanging on my arm. She frowned. It was as if she hadn't even noticed that we'd saved her until that moment. Eva had healed herself, but she had lost a hand. She stared at it stupidly, as if she was surprised it hadn't grown back.

I stomped down on one last ghoul head.

Everyone just looked at each other, not sure what to do next.

Carl: Donut, be cool. This doesn't have to turn into a fight. She was trying something, and whatever it was, it didn't work. We don't want to fight her.

"You tried to kill Katia you fucking bitch!" Donut cried. She blasted a full-strength *Magic Missile* right into Hekla's face.

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Hekla flew back, eyes registering shock as she slammed into the sidewall of the car. At the same moment, Eva flew at me—or Donut, who was perched on my shoulder—swords swirling in the air. The back of the cab opened, and two more daughters rushed in, hands glowing. Silfa rushed from the apartment, eyes wide as she took in the scene.

I dropped Katia and dodged back as I re-formed my gauntlet. My feet scrambled through the slippery muck, and my back slammed against the train wall. I caught a vicious slice of the saber with my armored hand. *I need more fucking armor*. I kicked up into Eva's stomach, and she rocketed back. I cast *Wisp Armor* on myself just as a magic missile and an electrical bolt slammed into me, one each from the two newcomers.

"Hold!" Hekla cried, pulling herself to her feet. She'd been fully healed by Silfa. "Everybody hold! Cease!"

I'd dropped Katia, but her health had stabilized. Her head remained above the line of body parts and gore, like she was treading water. She remained unconscious. She'd awaken on her own in thirty seconds. Eva stood and hissed and lunged at me and Donut. Hekla held her back. Then she grabbed Eva's wrist and pulled it up, eyes going wide at the injury.

"Did I do that?" Hekla asked.

"Yes, you did," Eva growled. "I have three more hands. That little bitch shot you. Let me kill her."

"You tried to kill Katia," Donut yelled. "I saw it! You used invisible arrows! I thought she was your friend! We don't shoot our friends!"

"Bolts," Hekla said. "They're called bolts when they're from a crossbow, Donut."

Donut spit and growled. Her claws dug into my shoulder. I was painfully aware of how small this train really was.

"What're we doing?" I called. "I don't know what the hell is going on, but everyone needs to calm the fuck down. This is bullshit. We're all on the same goddamn side."

Hekla turned to the two mages. "Out. You too, Silfa."

They started to protest. "Out!" she yelled. The three crawlers reluctantly fled. They remained right outside the door. It was me, Donut, Katia, Hekla, and Eva.

Outside, the crawlers continued to swarm onto the train. They didn't all fit into the passenger cars, so they were moving to the cargo containers. A group of crawlers were at the top of the stairs to the platform, making a stand, protecting everybody else's escape. We didn't have much time. An ungodly roar filled the platform. A group of five blue dots at the top of the stairs turned to Xs.

"I made a mistake," Hekla said once the others were gone. She shrugged, as if it was nothing. "I can't take it back, but there's no reason for it to snowball. We need a pause and a reset. We can discuss this after we get out of here. We need to work together."

"Never!" Donut cried. She was shaking with rage. "I'll never team up with you! Traitor!"

"Donut," Hekla said, calm as can be. "We need to be practical. There's no time for this. You need to breathe."

But Donut would not stop shaking. "I used to think you were awesome, Hekla. But you're just like all the rest! You pretend to be good, but you're not! It was a lie, all a lie. Why? Why can't we trust anyone? You told Katia you wanted her. You made her feel special and loved, but you just wanted to use her and trade her in."

Katia finally awakened. She sat up, eyes wide. She took in the room. "Carl? Eva? What's happening?"

"Hekla tried to murder you, that's what's happening!" Donut yelled. "We don't even know why. You didn't do anything wrong."

"Control your fucking animal, or I will shut her up," Eva growled.

I put my hand on the side of Donut's head in an attempt to calm her. It was starting to dawn on me why Donut was having such a visceral reaction to this. The monumental revelation hit me like a goddamned truck, but we didn't have time to deal with it now. "We need to stay calm, okay?"

"She didn't do anything wrong, Carl. She did her best. It's not fair."

"I know, Donut."

"Guys, please," Katia said. She stood on wobbly legs. "What is going on? I can't remember…" She trailed off. "Everything hurts."

Hekla sighed and leaned up against the wall of the train. Her knives disappeared into her inventory. She pulled a pack of cigarettes, popped one into her mouth, and lit it. "Well this backfired. God, I need a shower. Anybody want a cigarette?"

At that exact second, that exact moment, I wanted nothing more in the universe than to take her up on that. But Donut remained on my shoulder, and I didn't dare move closer.

"Look, we're all adults here," Hekla said. "We need to get to the other engine. The track is clear. So you three can hang back, if you want. Or just take this engine and go the other way. I don't care. It's over. What is the American phrase? No harm, no foul? But you're right, Carl, we don't need this. It was a stupid risk."

"I don't know what 'this' is," I said. "I thought for sure you were going to try to kill me. But Katia? Why?"

Katia, eyes still huge, was looking back and forth between us. "Eva?" she asked.

"It's nothing. Go outside, Katia. The others are waiting for you."

"Don't do it," Donut said. "They tried to hurt you, Katia. You can stay with us. We'll get out of here. Okay? We won't ever abandon you. And we won't be filthy liars, either."

"Can we just take this down a notch," Katia said. "For god's sake. I don't know what's happening. Why don't I remember?"

"Because Hekla shot you with a scary arrow that was going to kill you."

Hekla laughed, and it sounded unhinged. "Bolt, Donut. It was a bolt."

"No," Katia said. "You were both shooting. *You* hit me with a magic missile, Donut. You were aiming at the ghouls. I remember. It was an accident. That's okay."

"We don't have time for this," Hekla said. She flicked her cigarette away and pushed herself from the wall. "Come on, Eva. We need to hurry."

"No, wait," Katia said. "Please. We can't…"

"Damnit, Katia," Eva said. "Quit being stupid. Come with us. You're always fucking like this. Just do what I say."

"I'm just trying to figure this out. Hekla, you hurt me on purpose? Why? Did I do something?"

Eva growled. "You were always saying you felt useless, Katia. You were being useful. We weren't *really* going to kill you. We just wanted Carl's famous temper to flare. Now shut the hell up and come."

"I… *what*?" Katia asked. "You used me? For what?"

"Oh, Katia," Eva said, voice dripping with mock concern. She impersonated Katia's voice. "For what? For what?"

"Eva," Hekla said. "Drop it. Remember your anger. Let's go. It's done."

Eva did not drop it. She continued to mock Katia. "What? Fannar left me for one of his students? What? They're not going to let me adopt. Why me? Boo hoo. For fuck's sake, Katia. Open your goddamn eyes. Quit being so naïve. Look where we are. Look at what we need to do to survive. This is why I left you behind on the third floor. This is why you're such a damn fuck up. This is why nobody likes you. Because you're so damn confused all the fucking time. Now for once in your pitiful life do the right thing and get away from those two."

Katia had a special ability she didn't like to use very often.

Rush, it was called. It turned her body into a battering ram. When activated, she blasted forward, shattering everything in her path. She could only use it once a day, and when she did use it, it knocked all the wind out of her, even if she didn't actually hit

anything. As a result, I knew she abhorred the skill, despite Mordecai's insistence that she use it as often as possible.

Also, the skill wasn't predictable. Sometimes when she used Rush, her body flew forward five feet. Sometimes it flew forward twenty, and there didn't seem to be any sort of rhyme or reason to the discrepancy.

In addition, the angle in which she rushed forward wasn't always perfectly straight. Mostly her body dashed straight forward in the direction she was facing, but sometimes, every once in a while, she flew slightly off-center.

And that's what happened this time. Katia screamed something incomprehensible, and she activated Rush. She was aiming at her former friend Eva. She missed her by inches.

Instead, she inadvertently became the first crawler on this season of *Dungeon Crawler World* to kill one of the top 10 and claim a bounty.

In this case it was Hekla the Amazonian Shieldmaiden, the current number two in the game, whom she splattered against the interior wall of the train, thus earning herself a bounty of 500,000 gold.

And in that moment, just before all hell broke loose all over again, I finally noticed Katia's level. She'd been level 24 when she'd formed herself into a cowcatcher at the front of the train. When she fell back from the wall, skull forming over her head—a special, golden skull—I saw that she was now level 37.

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Hekla's body peeled off the wall and collapsed into a heap.

System Message. A champion has fallen. A bounty has been claimed.

The door to the train flew open, and the two mages and healer burst in. More of the daughters crowded in behind them, screaming and crying.

"Katia, what did you do? What did you do?" Eva cried.

Carl: Mic Drop. Platform. Get ready. Wait for my signal. Katia, grab her crossbow!

Donut: WON'T WORK. TRAIN WALL IN THE WAY. WE NEED TO GET OUTSIDE FIRST!

A magic missile blasted me in the chest, and I fell back against the open window. I almost tumbled outside. It felt as if I'd been hit with a sledgehammer. My *Wisp Armor* spell was still active. Still, the spell had taken almost a quarter of my health away.

At the same moment, Eva lunged at Katia, swords flashing. Hekla reached up and caught one saber in her hand. The sword sunk into the soft flesh, splitting her palm in two. The other sword bounced off the Amazonian's breastplate as she pulled herself to her feet, ghoul gore showering off her. Eva was so shocked that she recoiled back in surprise, dropping that first sword, which splashed onto the train's floor. A second Hekla appeared and picked up the cowering snake woman by the neck and tossed her through the window just as a

third Hekla rose to her feet. Eva cried out as she disappeared. I heard her crash onto the track below.

The other daughters scattered back, confused and crying out.

"Holy shit, Donut," I said, scrambling forward. She'd cast *Second Chance* on Hekla's corpse, and then she'd cast *Clockwork Triplicate* on the minion, creating three Heklas. It was brilliant. It was fucked up, but it was brilliant.

"Don't, don't hurt them," Katia cried, finally recovering. "Not the other daughters. They don't know what's going on."

"Push them back," Donut yelled at the three Heklas. The daughters started to recover from their shock, howling in outrage at Donut's desecration of Hekla's corpse.

"Clockworks first!" I yelled at Donut. "Keep the real Hekla back. We need to loot her damn corpse!"

One of the clockwork Hekla's heads exploded. Sparks and little electronic pieces showered as it was hit with a second electrical bolt, cast by one of the daughters. The other two Heklas continued to push the others back and out the door into the gangway and then to the next car. In addition to the remaining daughters, at least a hundred other crawlers filled the car, which was packed to the brim. They yelled as one, confused and afraid at the sight of one of the dungeon's most famous crawlers lurching toward them. I chased after the minion. I tried to pull the crossbow off Hekla's back, but it wouldn't come. As I pulled, I looked down and saw the square access panel in the gangway's floor.

"Katia, we need to get the Vermillion key from Hekla's corpse. It has to be you since you killed her. Get the key first. And then everything else you can grab. Hurry."

"Why?" Donut asked. She shot a magic missile past undead Hekla's legs. One of the daughters fell back, crying, grasping her knee. "Why do we need the key?"

Katia, to her credit, recovered quickly. She rushed forward. "Where's Eva?" she cried as she reached for the undead Hekla.

We'd placed blocks so the doors to the two engine cars could close, but not lock, so we didn't need the keys. If I wanted to disengage this car, however, I still needed it. My first instinct was to

take this engine and get the fuck out of here. Hopefully somebody else would have presence of mind to get to that other engine and pull it out of the station.

A part of me screamed, *this is a douche move. You're abandoning 1,000 people*. They needed to know how to disengage the slave mode to pull the train. Surely someone would figure it out. It was just one button. *Still*, I thought. *What if they didn't*?

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

"It doesn't let me loot from her while she's a minion," Katia shouted.

The second clockwork Hekla exploded after it was speared in the chest. Donut leaped to my shoulder.

Out on the platform, the last of the crawlers retreated into the train. A trio of monstrosities leaped down the stairs. Holy shit, what were those things? They had blinking, red exclamation marks over their heads. *Those are stage three monsters*. We needed to go.

"Katia, the very moment that minion dies, get the key. Then get her crossbow. Then loot the shit out of everything you can."

One of the monsters jumped at the train, bouncing off the wall of the passenger car. It looked like it'd once been a skull-faced, bear-sized monster. The DTs had transformed it. Tentacles erupted from its back, reminding me of the mold lions from Grimaldi's circus. But those tentacles had been thinner, parasitic. This was different. The tentacles were a part of the creature. Very… Krakaren-like.

Fuck. *We don't have time for this.*

The original plan was to disengage the drive on this first engine car, walk all the way to the back of the train and re-engage that second engine, turning it into the primary one. In theory, however, with that second engine still in slave mode, we didn't need to do that. The train would work fine from this cab no matter which direction we went, though we'd be driving blind.

I didn't have a choice, not with a thousand people suddenly on the train and in imminent danger. We needed to stay here and drive the train backwards. That'd be difficult if we were dead.

"We need to close the door!" I cried.

At that moment, the Hekla minion collapsed, having been hit with a spell. She tumbled in the gangway, blocking the door. Donut fired another missile at a woman, who rocketed back, health halfway down.

I jumped forward and grabbed the Hekla corpse by the legs and pulled it back into the cab. "Close the door! Close the door!" Katia grabbed the sliding door, kicked away the block, and slid it closed, locking it, just as it rocked with a pair of spells. I knew from experience nobody would get in without a key, not in an engine car. Hopefully none of the other daughters actually had keys.

I looked down with horror to realize Hekla's body had been ripped in half. All we'd dragged into the car was her legs and half of her torso. Her glowing breastplate, and more importantly, the crossbow that'd been slung over her back, was on the other side of the wall.

The train rocked again as one of the monsters slammed against it. The creatures' tentacles grasped at the doors to the passenger cars. I jumped up and to the controls. I pushed the train into reverse mode, and I added power to the throttle. The train vibrated ominously, and I feared it wouldn't go, or the back cars would smash together like they had during that last crash, but the train started to move. Slowly at first, but then it gathered speed. We left the station, moving back down the track. Behind me, the door banged and crashed as the daughters desperately tried to break it down.

By the time we cleared the platform, it was filled with tentacle-covered creatures. I took a deep breath. I kept my eyes on the receding platform. One of the monsters jumped into the channel. Then another. The platform quickly moved away from view. I slowed the train, but only a little. Hopefully these things weren't that fast.

"Where did Eva go?" Katia asked again. She had an odd, distant quality to her voice. *She's in shock.*

Behind us, the door continued to bang.

"She went out the window. I don't know if she died or not. I didn't see her when we pulled away."

"She's alive," Katia said. "She's still in my chat."

I nodded. Holy shit. It had all happened so fast. Hekla was dead. Hekla was fucking dead. Katia had killed her. She'd gone from level 24 to 37, which was insane.

"Have you seen your level yet?" I asked Katia.

"Have you seen yours?"

Surprised, I checked. I'd gone up two levels to 34. Donut had gone up two to 32.

I suspected while Katia had gotten a lot of experience for being a living battering ram, the lion's share of that experience that had rocketed her up the ranks actually came from killing Hekla. I still wasn't clear on how sharing worked, but we probably hadn't gotten a share of that. But two levels at once was a big deal. Now all we needed to do was get out of this.

"You know, you're probably the highest-level crawler in the dungeon now," I said after a moment. "Last I saw, Lucia Mar was 35, and that was just a few hours ago."

Katia said nothing. The train rumbled over the tracks, riding much more roughly than our trip up here. We were all still covered in gore. The room was filled with it. I looked at my hands, marveling at all of the blood.

Katia turned to look at Hekla's legs. She put her hand to her mouth and just stood there for a moment. "I didn't mean to kill her."

Donut leaped from my shoulder to hers. "When I killed that guy, I didn't mean to do it either. But he had it coming, and Hekla had it coming even worse. She was going to kill you."

The door banged again. They weren't letting up. If anything, their bangs against the door were getting more frantic. I looked nervously down at Hekla's half-body. The loot dialog did not pop up.

"Hey, did you get the key?"

"I got it," Katia said. "Not that it matters now."

I relaxed. They would never get in here. At least not through that door. "True. But we don't want them having it, either." I paused, seeing the look in Katia's eyes. I recognized it for what it was. That moment before the collapse. I reached out and grabbed her arm to steady her.

"Katia, are you okay?" Donut asked.

"No," she said. "I'm not even a little okay. Nothing about this is okay." She rubbed her eyes, looking about the gore-filled room. "Goddamn it, there's nowhere to sit down and have a breakdown in here."

We all just looked at each other and started to laugh. There was no reason to laugh. None of this was funny. But we laughed. We laughed long and hard. It didn't make sense. None of this made sense, but we were alive, for now at least, and we had each other, and that was something.

The moment ended as quickly as it started.

"Carl," Donut suddenly hissed. "There's someone in there. In the mantaur apartment. They're trying to hide, like they have a spell or a skill, but I just saw a blink on my map. It's a blue dot. It's someone small."

Fucking hell. I suddenly felt so very tired.

"Silfa, is that you?" I called. "Come out. We're all done fighting. We're done hurting each other."

The door to the apartment flew open, and the small fairy burst from the room. She rocketed toward the exit door and tried to unlock it.

Donut leaped from Katia's shoulder, bounced once off the wall and landed atop the screaming fairy, pinning her to the floor. The fairy gurgled as her head went below the line of liquid gore. The blood in the car was slowly draining away, but there was just so much of it.

"Don't you fucking hurt her," someone cried from the other side of the door. "I swear to god if you hurt her I will kill you all."

"Let her go!" another woman screamed, frantic, banging on the door. "You let her go right now!"

I reached down and grasped the healer. She was bigger than most fairies, bigger than the ones from the second floor and that manager from the Desperado Club, but I could still hold onto her

with a single hand. She screamed and struggled. A weak ice spell shot from her hand and blasted down, hitting me in the leg. With my ice resistance, I didn't even feel it.

"Calm down," I said. "Silfa. Jesus. Calm the fuck down. Quit wiggling. I'm not going to hurt you."

"Traitor," she yelled at Katia. "She saved your life. She saved all of us, and you killed her. What are we going to do now?"

"Silfa," I said. "I am going to let you go, and we are going to talk. We don't want to fight. We are just going to talk. Okay?"

The fairy stopped struggling, but she glowered at me.

Donut returned to my shoulder. She hissed at the fairy. "If you try something, I will rip you from the air and eat off your wings. I've done it before."

"Okay, everyone chill," I said again. I let her go, and she flitted into the air, buzzing up to the ceiling and against the wall. She crossed her arms. Blood dripped off her body. The train bumped as we hit something on the tracks, and the healer hit her head and winced. I stepped back, grasped the throttle, and slowed us further. I did not like driving blind. As long as the monsters on the tracks were only in ones and twos, we'd be okay, especially since the train was much heavier now. But still, we needed to keep it slow.

"You're a murderer," Silfa said to Katia.

"Katia didn't want to kill Hekla," I said. "But Hekla *did* intend on killing Katia, and I believe she was planning on sacrificing you, too. I'm pretty sure I know why. I'm not mad at you guys. She gambled and lost. It's done. It is pointless for us to fight now. We're all on the same side."

"No, you're wrong," Silfa said. "Hekla would never sacrifice me. She was protecting us."

"Hekla *was* protecting you. You as a group. She told you to stop healing Katia, didn't she? And she told you to hide in the apartment. Not leave the car, but to go into that room. She told you to hide in the room if anything went down. Didn't she?"

The fairy didn't answer. She just glared. I took that as an affirmative.

"Look, I didn't know her very well, but someone once told me that she was a very practical person. She was playing this like a game of chess, and she was willing to sacrifice others for what she thought was the greater good."

"Hekla would never hurt me," Silfa said. "My girls wouldn't allow it."

"But she told you to stop healing Katia, didn't she? Probably waited until the end to make sure we got through that last horde first, right?"

She paused. "Eva told me to do it. Not Hekla."

I nodded. That made sense. Eva was Hekla's fixer. Her lieutenant. Like I thought, the one who did the dirty work. "And she told you to wait in the train car. Not leave."

"What's it to you?"

"Don't you see? You were the bait. Why do you think she wanted you nearby? She wanted Katia to die, and she wanted me to get angry. I wouldn't have gotten mad at her or Eva. I would've been mad at *you*. She thought I would've attacked you. Maybe even hurt or killed you. She thought I was unhinged."

"You *are* unhinged. You're crazy, and everybody knows it. We've seen the videos. You get mad for no reason. You laugh when you pick up body parts. Hekla would never have let you hurt me."

"Just like she wouldn't deliberately shoot Katia with two of those invisible bolts from her crossbow?" I pulled the broken bolt from my inventory. It remained invisible in my hand. I dipped it in blood and held it up. Its shape appeared for a moment before everything flowed off it. I stepped forward and handed it up to her. She didn't move. "Oh, just take it. I'm not going to hurt you."

She hesitantly reached forward and grasped the broken crossbow bolt. Her eyes went big as she examined its properties. I took it back. "This means nothing. This could be yours." She didn't sound so sure anymore.

I continued. "She would've been forced to kill me if I attacked you. There was probably a whole plan in place, something to distract Donut. It would've been quick."

"Why? Why would she do this?"

I sighed and thumbed at Donut, who remained on my shoulder. "With me and Katia dead, Donut would've been all alone. She would have been forced to join you guys. And so would Mordecai, our manager. That's what Hekla wanted. How many healers do you have in your party? It's a lot, isn't it? I saw all the fairies. It was an acceptable trade off. One healer plus Katia, who hasn't been in the party since the end of the second floor, in exchange for one of the dungeon's best assets? If it had worked, the party would've been better for it. No offense."

"I would never have joined with Hekla if she'd killed you, Carl," Donut said.

I thought about that. "Maybe she would have sent Eva to kill me. Or those two mages she had posted right outside. And once that was done, she would've had them killed, too. Or banished just to keep you happy, Donut. Who knows? She was a shrink. She probably had some big plan worked out. I don't know the details, but I think I'm right."

"I still wouldn't have joined her," Donut grumbled, though not as loud.

"Is Eva still alive?" I asked Katia.

"Yes," Katia said. "I don't know where she is. I think maybe she got back on the train. I sent her a message, but she's not answering."

"Why don't you ask her?" I said to Silfa. "Ask Eva if she was supposed to protect you from me. I bet she was. Maybe Hekla was planning on sacrificing her, too."

"It wasn't Eva," Silfa eventually said. "My daughters, my real daughters, were standing guard right outside. Hekla told them if anything went wrong to kill you first. Damnit. I shouldn't be here. I own a bakery. I just want my girls to be safe. I just want to go home. I shouldn't be here."

"Your daughters are the two right outside?" I asked. They were the two mages who'd jumped into action once the shit hit the fan.

She nodded.

"Go to them," I said. "Tell them what I told you. Tell them I said we're sorry about what happened, but this is on Hekla."

"She was protecting us," Silfa said. "When she died, it automatically made Eva the party leader. People don't like her. They're leaving the party. Brynhild's Daughters is no more. We're nothing without Hekla. We have hardly any equipment. We don't have a personal space anymore. We all have sponsors, but most of us have the same one as Hekla, the crab ranch, and they've never sent us anything. We have nothing. What are we going to do?"

I shook my head. "I don't know. There's a whole train of people out there. I'm sure someone would love to join up with a healer and two mages. It won't be us, though. We'll never trust each other, and that sucks. It really does. It's exactly what they want to happen, and it breaks my fucking heart."

I opened the door just enough for the dejected fairy to slip out. I snapped it closed and locked it. On the other side of the door, I heard the three women start to sob.

I leaned my back against the door. The train shook violently as we hit something, but it soon settled. Christ, what a day. The more I thought about what Hekla had attempted, the more it angered me. Is this what we've become? Is this who we really are? I refused to believe it.

I thought of Bautista, who was still walking toward the abyss with a group of people who wouldn't be able to get to a stairwell.

You can't save them all.

Fuck you, Mordecai, I thought.

"How did you know?" Katia asked. "About Hekla?"

I shrugged. "I've gotten pretty good at spotting that sort of thing." That wasn't true at all. If Odette hadn't warned me, I'd likely be dead right now. I sighed, looking at Hekla's half corpse.

"It's too bad about that crossbow," I said.

"Oh, you mean this?" Katia asked, and the massive, repeating crossbow formed in her hands.

Holy shit. She'd done it. She'd looted one of the most powerful weapons in the game. My anger fled.

"Katia, I am going to kiss you."

She laughed. She sounded just as exhausted as I felt. "Not without taking a shower first you're not."

"Can I see it?" I reverently took the weapon from Katia's hands. When fired at full auto, I remembered thinking this thing was like a ranged chainsaw. It was lighter than I expected. It appeared to be made of gold, but it felt almost like plastic. It was inlaid with carvings of a vulture creature.

I received a nasty notification the moment I touched it.

Warning: You have a dick.

"Thank you for the information," I said to the ceiling as I examined the weapon's properties.

Enchanted Repeating Crossbow of the Scavenger Mother of Mothers

This is a unique item.

This is a repeating, ranged weapon. It has the buffet enchantment, meaning it will not run out of basic ammunition. You may load and fire additional ammunition types to use with this weapon, though any special bonuses will only apply to the stock ammunition.

It is said that the long-forgotten goddess Nekhebit is both jealous and terrible. When the elf mothers chose to abandon Nekhebit and instead worship Apito, the Oak Goddess, it is written Nekhebit grew enraged. The mighty vulture goddess blamed the male-dominated high elf court for causing her worshippers to stray. As a result, she cursed their seed, thus creating what is today known as the Fae Diaspora. There are dozens of elf and fairy breeds, all of whom may trace their lineage back to the early high elf court, whose cursed offspring sowed the universe.

This crossbow is rumored to have been given to Nekhebit's last warrior guardian as a gift for remaining true to her faith.

This item may only be wielded by a female.

For every female in your party, up to thirty, this item's damage and firing speed is increased by 25 percent.

Your strength+level increases base damage 1.5X more than a standard crossbow.

+15 Dexterity when wielded

+10 Strength when wielded

Casts *Birth Defect* on monster types who generate or birth additional monsters.

"Wow," I said. It wouldn't be as powerful or fast in Katia's hands as it was in Hekla's, but I was already thinking of ways to maximize the unique weapon's strength. *No wonder she had surrounded herself with women.*

"It's good to see you," I said to Li Jun. The Street Monk clapped me on the shoulder.

He looked distastefully at his hand, which was now covered in blood. "You too, Carl and Donut. You're a little, uh, dirty," he said.

I laughed.

After we'd freed Silfa, we'd decided it was best to keep the door closed just to head off any further misunderstandings. I moved Katia to the small Engineer's apartment so she could rest for about a half hour. The room had a bed, a table, and a long, thin toilet designed to be used by a mantaur. Heavy metal posters from earth covered the walls. I went through and looted everything not bolted down before I returned to the main room of the engine car.

A few minutes later came a knock, and Li Jun's familiar, halting voice wafted through the door. I quickly let him in, though he stopped dead at the sight of the gore in the train car. Most of the liquid had drained away, leaving piles of body parts and bones throughout. Donut had let Mongo out for about thirty seconds before I made her put him away again. The dinosaur had gone crazy, like that fat kid in the Willy Wonka book who started eating the walls and shit.

Li Jun looked sick to his stomach as he took in the room, but he quickly recovered and grinned widely up at me.

I examined the man. The last time I'd spoken to him was on the Maestro's show. He remained human. He was a level 28 Street Monk, which I assumed was some sort of melee class. He didn't carry any weapons. He didn't look much different than before. The Chinese man had deep acne scars on his cheeks that hadn't gone away with the transformation, but when he smiled, it lit up the room, despite the gory surroundings. He'd been on the top 10 list, but he'd fallen off. I was glad to see he was still alive.

"Your sister? Zhang?" I asked, suddenly concerned that he was here alone.

"They are fine," he said. "They are in the cargo near the front, and we can't get to each other until the train stops. We have a group of twelve people now. We have been saved, again, by you. I have come to pay my respects."

I nodded. We fist bumped so I'd have him in my chat.

"Now that you're here, I need to show you how to drive this train," I said. "We're going to stop at station 75 and detach this car from the rest. From there, you can drive the train back to station 36. Get the people off there. I already have a few friends waiting. That's where we're going to make the stand. Station 36."

Imani and crew were already dealing with an increasing wave of these wrath ghouls—which I hadn't seen yet. The station, unfortunately, had multiple platforms attached to it. The ghouls were coming from almost every one, making it difficult to defend. But with these reinforcements, Imani's plan of keeping the ghouls from transforming further might just work. Especially since we had several nearby stations with saferooms where people could rest and recharge in shifts. There were no ghouls in the "hidden" railway where we had the *Nightmare* parked, so people had easy access to the rest areas.

I told all of this to Li Jun, who nodded thoughtfully.

"The monsters will likely come at us from all sides just before the stairs open, even if we do prevent the wrath ghouls from forming a boss monster," he said.

“Probably,” I agreed. “The whole thing is designed to push the monsters toward the stairwells. We all have to work together to survive.”

“Why do we not go to station 24?” he asked. “That station also has stairs but no ghouls.”

“We don’t yet know what sort of monsters form once the creatures suffering from stage three die. But it looks like they’ll head to 24, and it’ll probably be something terrible. At least with station 36, we know what we’re facing.”

He nodded. “Okay. What will you be doing?”

“We have some more friends who are trapped all the way at the end of the line. We’re going to save them. Each and every one.”

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[25]

Time to Level Collapse: 3 days, 3 hours
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"We're saving those guys, too? Really?" Donut said after Li Jun left.

Katia emerged from the small apartment. "We need to slow down. I think I see station 75 coming up on my map."

"Seriously, Carl," Donut continued. "We just helped to save *these* guys. How are we going to help everyone at the end of the line?"

"I have no idea," I said as I moved back to the train's controls. "But I won't try if you guys don't think we should."

Donut sighed. She whispered something to Katia. They both started laughing.

"What?" I asked. "What's so funny?"

"You're going to get us killed one way or the other, Carl. It might as well be for a good cause," Donut said.

I grunted. "Well they do say I'm crazy."

The ghouls streaming out of station 72 appeared to home in on the closest large gathering of crawlers. Before, they'd moved up toward the crawlers trapped at station 101, but after Li Jun led the 1,000 plus survivors to the stairwell platform at station 36, meeting up with the exhausted team Meadow Lark, the ghouls started flowing in that direction instead. That, added with the wrath ghouls traveling up from the trainyards, made it so they were besieged the moment they got off the train.

That was okay for now. The way the platforms funneled passengers to the stairwell stations created multiple, defensible chokepoints. It'd be tough, but the group should be able to keep the station clear. Since we'd discovered the secret escape hatch that led to the employee line, the defenders could keep themselves supplied and refreshed. We sent out mass messages to everyone who would listen of the plan. Last we heard, there were multiple groups set up in other instances of station 36 doing the same, plus another group that was going to try their luck at holding a station 24 and a few more teams who were going to attempt to kill the ghoul generators at 12 and 72. Everyone was avoiding the boss at station 48. I wished them all luck.

In addition to the people who'd managed to make it to the stairwells, there was a rising chorus of crawlers who found themselves trapped at the abyss. If they had those hats, they could just step through one of the thousand plus portals and teleport to a trainyard. But an increasing number were finding themselves at the edge of the pit with no way to escape.

Despite my earlier thoughts, I now suspected there was only a single abyss. I was starting to get a sense of how the entire railway looked. The whole thing was shaped like one of those spirograph drawings. The trainyards dotted the exterior edges of the pattern, spaced at regular intervals. The colored lines looped around, over, and under each other, but all led to a single point in the center, which was the pit.

Katia, who studied the map more than anyone, continued to insist there was something that we were missing. I didn't care as long as we knew how to get from point A to point B.

There were currently about 500-600 people trapped there at the end of the line, with more appearing by the moment. Word was starting to spread that you needed the hat to utilize that escape, so those without were mostly braving the "ghoul coaster," as Elle had dubbed it, back to the trainyards.

The crawlers had been desperately searching the interior walkways of the pit for the elusive, camouflaged exits that would lead to stop 436 where they could in turn get to the named-train switching stations. However, the lizard monsters appeared to be constantly generated, just like the ghouls, and that was making it difficult for them to search. A few battles later, and the interior gangways had started to collapse. That nixed my idea of going back to the trainyard and using the *Nightmare* to return to the abyss.

That left us with only one option. We had to take the battered and half-destroyed Vermillion car all the way to the end of the line and distribute as many of the hats as possible. The trip would take about a full day and would be fraught with danger. If the train broke down or the line was blocked or the power went out, we'd be fucked. Surely there would be monsters crawling all over the line, and we'd have to plow through them all. It was a terrible idea, and I knew Mordecai would have a coronary if he knew we were even thinking about this. Still, what else could we do? We all agreed that was the plan for now unless someone came up with something better.

We had about a day to find an alternative before it would be too late.

We used station 75 to quickly disengage the front engine and send Li Jun up to the other engine. A few ghouls were out on the lines, but we sent a group ahead of us to deal with it while we worked. I saw no sign of Eva. The remaining daughters held back, disappearing into the crowd. Brynhild's Daughters truly was no more.

I couldn't help but think that was for the best. Hekla had built the entire party around herself and that crossbow. They had too many healers and mages and not enough damage dealers and not a tank amongst them. The system had worked great early on, but I

suspected the entire team would've fallen apart eventually. Maybe now they'd all find groups where they would be better utilized.

We decided to keep Katia hidden while we unhooked the train, lest someone's emotions get the best of them. I traded fist bumps as I loudly exclaimed that I needed people's hats and any keys they'd gathered along the way.

My fellow crawlers were standoffish at first considering what had happened with Hekla, plus Donut and I looked like extras from a *Hellraiser* movie. But once people learned about why I was collecting the hats, a chorus went out. I'd been expecting people to selfishly hold onto them just in case there was one last trick, or so they could sell them later, but that's not what happened at all. People worked together. They coordinated. They spread the word. In twenty minutes, I had over 700 of the hats piled in front of me plus another fifteen colored-line keys that would also work for the portals. It was enough, for now. Hopefully it'd remain that way.

Yes, I thought. *There is hope for us. Not a lot. But it's there.*

"Carl, we could sell these for over three million gold," Donut whispered as I started pulling them into my inventory. Her eyes got huge. "Three and a half million! I bet I could sell them for even more. Carl, we'll be rich!"

"Yeah, that'd play great on the show. We'd be like Bea's cousin who pretended she had cancer and got all that money on Gofundme."

"What if we figure out how to save the people without using the hats? Can I sell them, then?"

I laughed. "Absolutely," I said.

After the train left, leaving the three of us alone with the battered subway car, we spent some time exploring the strange station 75. This was one of the last major parts of the railway we hadn't yet investigated. I hoped we'd find something to help us. We set Mongo free, and the dinosaur squawked angrily at us for being cooped up

for so long. He quickly got over it, instead getting distracted by the blood and gore covering our bodies. I had to smack his beak several times to keep him from licking me.

It was clear right away that this station was different from the others. Multiple tracks led off to a small-scale yard, consisting of a few dozen flatbed train cars designed to be occupied by no more than a handful of riders at a time. There were a few different kinds of the small cars. I assumed these were for the hobgoblins to get to the crashed trains in order to fix them. We would investigate once we cleared the station.

We walked through a tunnel that led to a large, sprawling cavern filled with squat buildings, mostly warehouses with no doors and open-area workshops. The entire chamber had been turned to a graveyard. It had been overrun. Hundreds of ghoul corpses littered the ground. But there were also gnoll and hobgoblin bodies sprinkled throughout. There'd been explosions, too, as evidenced by scorch marks throughout the industrial-style station. Most of the gnoll bodies had been devoured, leaving nothing but broken pieces of spears and armor. I took it all, though little was useful.

"I think someone was here already," I said. "All of them look as if they've already been looted. I haven't found a single gold piece."

Upon examination, the system indicated all the ghouls were killed by gnolls and hobgoblins, and the gnolls and hobgoblins were mostly kills by the ghouls. Though a lot of the gnolls were also killed by hobgoblins. That didn't surprise me. Hobgoblins equaled explosives. And explosives equaled collateral damage.

Right in the middle of the cavern were three intact buildings sitting next to one another. A gnoll armory. Something called a hobgoblin repair shop. And a saferoom. A glorious, beautiful saferoom. I saw with dismay that the armory's door was open. Whomever had come before us had already gotten inside. I wondered if they'd also raided the hobgoblins' stash. Probably, which was too bad.

We needed to figure out this station's secrets as quickly as possible, but we also needed a shower and to sleep and to reset our buffs. Plus, the recap would be on soon.

We made a line toward the bar, which was called "The Downward Dog." A handwritten sign attached to the front door read, "Oi! No hobgoblins!" I pushed the door open to find the place was similar to most of the tavern-style bars on the third floor. It was not a converted earth restaurant. That was kind of odd.

I realized what the difference was. There was still a screen over the bar, but there were no rooms for rent here. There was still an entrance to our personal space, but this was more like the local bars they had at the entrance to the Desperado Club, meaning this wasn't a true saferoom. We couldn't open boxes inside the bar, nor were we protected from mobs.

The stench of beer-soaked wood assaulted my senses as we stepped deeper into the dark room. The tavern was empty except for a single gnoll bartender who was asleep on top of the bar, surrounded by empty bottles. He snored loudly. Mongo walked up and started sniffing the creature. I noted he was a **Shade Gnoll**, which was something we hadn't seen before. He looked more like a hyena than a jackal.

"There's gotta be a story attached to this," I said. "We'll get it out of him after we shower." I turned toward the doorway that led to our saferoom. We entered.

"Don't track blood on the floors," Katia called as we all tracked blood on the floor. "God, I can just hear my mother now. *Katia, take off your shoes. You're going to grow up and have a filthy home*. It turns out she was right." She laughed as she tiptoed through the room and toward her space. She still left dirty, red prints on the floor.

At that moment, it hit me. Katia was now and forever a part of the team. Nobody needed to say it out loud. We all knew. While this would never be "home," this space was just for us and only us. The three of us.

I grinned. "My dad once made me sleep in a tent in the yard because I had a nosebleed that wouldn't stop."

"Miss Beatrice once used scissors to get poop off my butt," Donut said.

"Uh huh," I said. "Once?"

"We're having a moment here, Carl. Don't ruin it."

Despite all of that insane craziness of the past day, neither Donut nor I received anything except a handful of standard adventurer boxes. And one of my achievements didn't have anything to do with the battle with Hekla or for killing all those ghouls.

New achievement! Mentally Unstable Clothing Hoarder!

You have over 500 of the exact same, stackable clothing item in your inventory.

What the hell is wrong with you? You planning on opening a thrift store? You might want to see a shrink. One that your group doesn't immediately kill.

***Reward*: We don't reward this sort of behavior. It's weird.**

Katia, on the other hand, received 10 loot boxes. We all showered first before coming out to watch her open her loot. We came out to find Mongo "cleaning" the floors.

"Gross, Mongo," I said.

The dinosaur squawked at me.

Katia opened her first box and looked at me, grinning. "Sorry, Carl," she said as the dagger tattoo formed on her neck. "I know you wanted to get me into Club Vanquisher."

"Oh my god, yay!" Donut exclaimed as she realized what had just happened. The cat had gone from a red, matted nightmare to poofed out and washed, ready for the stage. She smelled of lilacs. "We can go dancing now!" She gasped. "You can meet Sledgie! This is great!"

"I can't wait," she said. I laughed.

Katia sobered somewhat after opening her next box. A gold savage box, which she'd received for being a player killer. Instead of coupons, it contained a skill potion that gave her the Find Crawler skill. It was the same skill that Maggie My potentially had, though this was only level three. She downed it immediately. It put the

name of all nearby crawlers on her map, and she could sort and find them using the list. It wouldn't be until a higher level that she'd be able to actually hunt down and find those not currently on the map, plus I wasn't so certain it'd find crawlers using stealth. Not yet. But it was a great skill to have.

She received an achievement for collecting the bounty, and a legendary bounty box which was that 500,000 gold. She also received an achievement for being the *first* to collect a bounty, but it didn't come with anything. Donut complained loudly about that one.

However, she did snag one more awesome item. She got something called a Platinum Slam Master box. She'd gotten it for killing a certain amount of mobs using her momentum. I watched as the item appeared. It was a gold wrestling belt, like any regular heavyweight champion belt they'd give to a WWE star.

"Who is Christopher Pallies?" she asked as she examined it.

"I don't know," I said, taking the belt from her so I could look.

Enchanted Wrestling Belt of the Great Gorgo

While you'll never be as amazing as the greatest, most beautiful wrestler of all time—Christopher Alan Pallies—you will look pretty snazzy when you wrap this bad boy around your waist.

This enchanted belt offers the following benefits:

+5% Strength

+5% Constitution

+The Avalanche benefit.

The added stats alone made this a really good item. The Avalanche benefit was pretty badass.

Avalanche.

This benefit is straightforward. If you hit a living creature with your body while you are moving, the force exerted upon that body will be as if they were hit by twice the mass.

Your entire body must be moving for this benefit to activate. This benefit's power will not translate to weapons.

You might want to take this off if you plan on getting busy with someone. Especially if you're the top.

"Man, we need to stick you to the front of another train," I said, handing the belt back to her. Her rush ability would also be even more powerful, but I didn't say that part out loud. She still didn't want to talk about the Hekla incident.

She was, however, mostly back to her regular self. She was laughing and joking with us. I couldn't tell if she'd truly recovered from the trauma of the day, or if she was just good at covering it up. I suspected the latter. Either way, she'd grown into one of the most powerful crawlers in the dungeon, and I didn't think that'd quite sunk in yet.

"That leaves everything except the platinum fan box. I guess they're voting on it now," she said. "Do you think we'll see that Chaco guy again?"

"I hope not," I said. She would get to open the fan box about 15 hours before Mordecai's time-out expired. I actually *did* hope she'd get the prize carousel, so she could pick instead of being at the mercy of the fans. But I wouldn't say that out loud.

"What should we do with all of this gold?" she asked.

Donut gasped. "Are we going shopping? Do you think if we buy a lot of stuff, they'll have a shopping montage scene on the show, like in *Pretty Woman*?"

"Hopefully we'll have time to ask Mordecai when he gets back," I said. "We still have two environmental upgrades. I'm thinking maybe a kitchen upgrade to get food buffs and one more buffing item. Some of those cost more than the coupon's value, and we'll need the money for that. There's just so much on that list, I don't know what the best choice is."

We also had four free tables to purchase between the three of us, and we needed to buy them quickly since they leveled up on their own when a floor collapsed. That was also something I wanted to consult with Mordecai. When he returned, there would be one day and 15 hours left. Hopefully that was enough time, but just in case, I collected everybody's free table coupons and left them on his

alchemy table. That way he'd be able to buy them for us if we were otherwise occupied.

The recap show came on, and the entire program was a special on the death of Hekla. It was set up like a tribute to the crawler, starting with a scene of her entering the dungeon. She was a much different woman then, and it seemed odd seeing her in street clothes. She'd been fighting with her husband as they came in, a tall, good-looking man who looked like he was twenty years older than her. He'd gotten poisoned by a walking cactus mob, and she left him while he was on the floor, crying for her to come back.

She returned later to find him dead, being devoured by rats. She screamed as she kicked the rats away. One turned and attacked Hekla. She picked up a broken bone—one of her now-dead husband's exposed rib bones—and she used it to stab the rat in the eye. By some miracle, the jab killed the mob.

That had garnered her a Legendary Grrl Power box for being the first woman in the dungeon to use the corpse of a human male to kill a mob. I assumed that was where she got the crossbow.

We watched a much-abridged summary of Hekla's rise in power and how she gathered crawlers to her.

During that segment, the show started to also focus on Katia. We got to see her enter the dungeon, clutching tightly to Eva's arm. They went on to portray how mousy, terrified Katia depended on her friend, how she hid behind her during early battles. It showed Eva killing the man who'd grabbed Katia when Hekla demanded he leave the group.

Eva's features oddly matched the cobra face of the nagini/orc hybrid she'd become. And Katia's before-face was also strange to look upon. It was the face she had now in the saferoom, almost, but it was just slightly off from that terrified, bewildered woman who entered the dungeon almost a month ago. She was a different

species now, of course, but those human eyes had a deeper quality to them. The thousand yard stare.

The next scene surprised me. Katia wasn't alone when she got to the third floor.

I should have realized. Everyone who entered the third floor met up with their original game guide. Katia and Eva had the same one, and the two of them entered character creation together. But Eva went first, and she left the saferoom as Katia's body transformed. By the time Katia was ready to leave, Eva was long gone. It wasn't clear what happened next, but the next time they showed Hekla, Eva was there with her.

"What happened?" I asked Katia. "How did she find Hekla and not you?"

Katia shrugged. "We were in a small settlement. Eva said she'd accidentally made one of the swordsmen guards angry and had to run out of town. She got on one of the traveling caravans and ended up in a different city and reconnected with Hekla. At least that's what she'd told me."

"Caravans?" I asked. "I didn't see those."

"They had them. I got on one, and we passed by the circus and then ended up in the skyfowl town where I met you."

I remembered, then, what Eva had said to Katia in that moment before Katia had tried to kill her. *This is why I left you behind on the third floor*. That revelation must have hit her hard.

The program continued to showed Katia's grand return to the daughters and the formation of the plow in front of the train. We watched Katia's level rise as she plowed through the ghouls.

And then, finally, it showed Katia killing Hekla. They did not show it to be an accident, but an act of rage on Katia's part once she discovered she was being used.

"That's not how it happened," Katia groused. "They're making me look like a bloodthirsty crazy woman."

I grunted. "Welcome to the club. When I first…" I paused, my eyes on the screen. The moment the episode ended, the leaderboard changed. All three of us turned to look at the new list.

1. Lucia Mar – Lajabless – Black Inquisitor General – Level 35 – 1,000,000

2. Prepotente – Caprid – Forsaken Aerialist – Level 34 – 500,000

3. Carl – Primal – Compensated Anarchist – Level 34 – 400,000

4. Donut – Cat – Former Child Actor – Level 32 – 300,000

5. Quan Ch – Half Elf – Imperial Security Trooper – Level 38 – 200,000

6. Florin – Crocodilian – Shotgun Messenger – Level 32 – 100,000

7. Miriam Dom – Human – Shepherd – Level 30 – 100,000

8. Katia Grim – Doppelganger – Monster Truck Driver – 37 – 100,000

9. Dmitri and Maxim Popov – Nodling – Illusionist and Bogatyr – 30 – 100,000

10. Ifechi – Human – Physicker – Level 29 – 100,000

"Carl, Carl, we're in the top five! You're number three! Katia! You're in the top 10!"

"Oh, wow," Katia said. "The list has changed quite a bit."

"Yeah, Elle fell off the edge," I said. "Also, it turns out you're not the highest level in the dungeon, Katia. Quan has you beat." I regretted saying it as soon as the words came out of my mouth. Any mention of Quan Ch was enough to send Donut into a tirade.

"He's a cheater," Donut started to grumble, but then she paused, finding something else to be outraged about. "Hey, why do those two guys get to be in the same spot? That's not fair! Carl and I should both be number three! Katia, too!"

"I don't know," I said. "It's also weird they hardly ever show that goat thing, but he's number two."

We were interrupted by the start of the daily announcement. It wasn't anything interesting. They were nerfing the running speed of the blister ghouls but increasing the running speed of creatures suffering from stage three DTs, which was pretty terrifying. The moment the announcement ended a notification appeared.

Warning: You may not wield your weapons while in the presence of Admins. Any attempted violence against an Admin will result in your immediate execution.

Before I could react, there was a *pop*, a splash of cold water over my legs, and Zev teleported into the room.

"Oh my god, hi Zev!" Donut said. "You didn't say you were coming!"

"Donut. Carl, Katia. Mongo. Hello."

Mongo rocketed from his spot on the floor to press his face against the kua-tin's glass helmet, almost knocking her over.

"No, Mongo!" Donut yelled. "It's Zev! Be nice!"

The tiny fish woman still wore the ridiculously-cumbersome deep-diving helmet on her head along with the spacesuit. I remembered our very first conversation with the creature, and she'd said she was only going to wear it for the first few floors.

"Still wearing protective gear, I see," I said.

Zev furiously and uselessly rubbed at the exterior of her helmet where Mongo had fogged it up. "Yes, Carl. The protections aren't in place like they should be."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"It's of no consequence to you, but the dual layer system integration utilized for the initial capture and subjugation of the planet was supposed to be replaced by the pocket system at the end of the third floor. When it didn't switch over, people just thought we were being cheap. Turns out Hinter, the company who normally rents out the necessary cores for the integration, wouldn't allow us to use them at the last minute. I don't know the details. It's confusing, boring, business stuff. I don't even understand it all. The bottom line is I'm wearing this suit when I enter the dungeon for the foreseeable future."

Weird. I wanted to ask more questions about it, but I knew that would be a bad idea.

"What can we do for you today?" I asked.

"Several things. I figured it would be best to talk in person. First off, I wanted to officially congratulate Katia on hitting the top ten, and to congratulate you two for getting in the top five. Also, just an

FYI. Odette has amended the contract to include a Katia option, so she's now obligated to travel to the post-floor interviews. She went to the last one anyway, but now it's official and permanent."

"What about Mongo?" Donut asked.

Zev cracked a smile. "Mongo, too, Donut, but dungeon-born pets are considered Borant property, so there's no contracts involved. So, Katia. Regarding Odette's show. She had to pay quite a bit more to make you exclusive, so she added a few, uh, riders to the contract. Namely, you need to be more 'zippy' I think the word was. Apparently last time Odette thought your interview performance was a little lackluster."

Katia frowned and crossed her arms.

"I'll tell you what," I said. "Katia, I'll give you a zip lesson right now. Okay? Repeat after me. I want you to say, 'Go fuck yourself, Zev.'"

Katia laughed. "I'm not going to say that."

"Don't be crude, Carl," said Donut. "Also, Mongo is not anybody's property. This is an outrage!"

Mongo squawked in agreement.

Zev, I suddenly realized, wasn't accepting our abuse with her usual, chipper obliviousness. She looked very tired. An ominous feeling came over me.

"Why are you really here, Zev?" I asked.

"Look, guys. In case something happens to me, I wanted to let you know how much I really appreciate how hard you've worked."

Oh, shit. "What's going on?"

"You didn't do anything. There's another representative who wants to take over your account. Her name is Loita. Nothing has happened yet, but I think they might give it to her."

"What?" Donut said. "No. No way. We only work with you."

"She's Bloom. She just lost her main account, and technically she was Katia's rep first, and now that Katia is in your party, she has a claim. Not a strong one. But, like I said. She's Bloom, and I am not."

Bloom was the kua-tin political party that ran Borant. From what little I knew, the party members received much better treatment.

That last substitute we'd had, the Mukta guy who'd put us on the Maestro's show, had been a party member.

"Loita? I've heard that name before," I said. "Isn't… wasn't she Hekla's representative?"

"That's right. The outreach associates represent the whole party, and since Katia was in Brynhild's Daughters, she's making noise that she should be the one in charge of you three. The only thing I have going for me is that you guys pulled in more money than Hekla, for interviews at least."

I shrugged. "Tell your bosses that Donut is right. We only work with you." The last thing we needed was some new asshole tossing us on shows like the Maestro's again. Especially one that probably held a grudge against us because we killed off her client. Zev, as annoying as she could be, attempted to keep us out of trouble with these shows. It rarely worked, but she tried. Plus Donut really liked her. And so did Mordecai.

"I wish it was that simple," Zev said. "Plus there's more. Something happened back at home. A bunch of people… I really can't talk about it. It's difficult for those of us who aren't party members. I'm holding on the best I can, guys. But I gotta go. I believe in you. Keep doing what you've been doing. Oh, yeah, I forgot to tell you. They're going to make your chats public starting tomorrow for people who pay extra. Sorry about that."

And without another word, she popped and disappeared, splashing more water over the floor.

"That's just wonderful," I grumbled.

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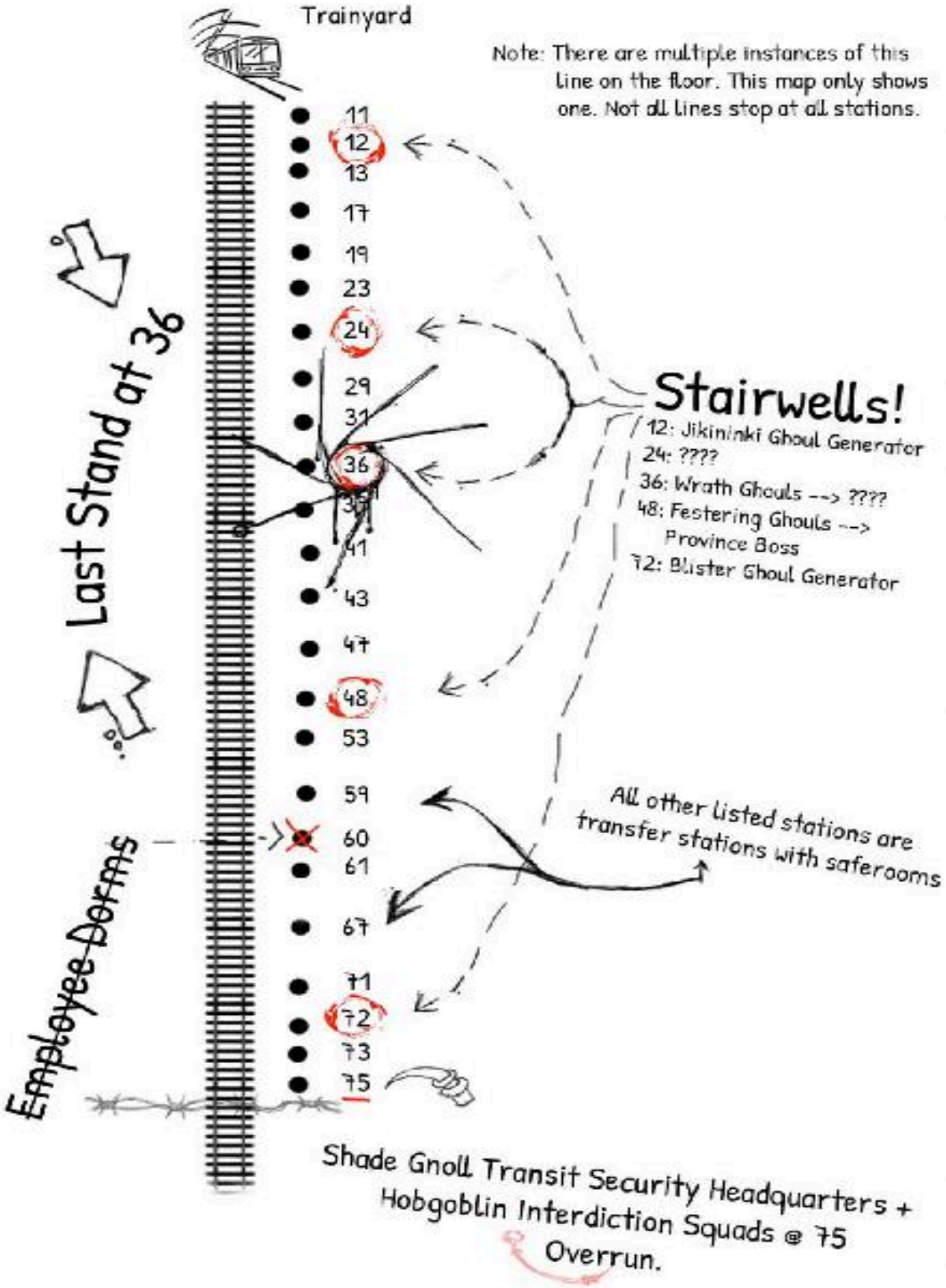
Trainyard
Note: There are multiple instances of this line on the floor. This map only shows one. Not all lines stop at all stations.
11
12
13
17
19
23
24
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31
36
41
43
47
48
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59
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61
67
71
72
73
75
Last Stand at 36
Employee Dorms
Stairwells!
12: Jikininki Ghoul Generator
24: ????
36: Wrath Ghouls --> ????
48: Festering Ghouls --> Province Boss
72: Blister Ghoul Generator
All other listed stations are transfer stations with saferooms
Shade Gnoll Transit Security Headquarters + Hobgoblin Interdiction Squads @ 75 Overrun.

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[26]

The level-25 gnoll bartender's name was Growler Gary. He was conscious when we re-entered the bar. Barely. He was so drunk he couldn't sit up.

"They're all dead. Every last one. Even those ugly-ass, greasy hobgoblin fucks," he said to us with no introduction.

Donut jumped to the counter and made a face. "This is what happens when you put dogs in control. Disgusting."

"Not true, your majesty," the gnoll said up to the ceiling. "Growler Gary tried to help. Fought from the door. The best Gary could do."

"Aren't *you* Growler Gary?" Donut asked.

"They all died," Growler Gary said.

"So what happened?" I asked. I pushed a few empty bottles away, clearing space on the bar. Everything was sticky.

"We got fucked by the Tangle, that's what happened," he said. He suddenly rolled right off the bar and clattered loudly to the floor. He groaned, followed by the clink of glass bottles. I peered over the edge as he blindly rummaged under the bar. He grasped a bottle and pulled it to his mouth, but it was empty. "If you're looking for dinner, it might be late tonight, folks. You ain't hobgoblins are you?"

"So the ghouls came and killed everybody?" I asked. The gnoll found a full bottle and struggled to get the top off.

"That's right," he said, grunting with the effort. "Growler Gary can't leave the bar for some reason. Went out there to fight and got

stopped right at the door. Jumping Jen-Jen called Growler Gary a coward. But it was like an invisible wall."

"Why don't you let hobgoblins in the bar?" Katia asked.

"Have you seen a hobgoblin?" he said. The bottle opened, and he whimpered with happiness, even as half of it spilled onto the floor.

"How was all of this the Tangle's fault?" I asked.

"Turned the whole thing into a Krakaren nest. The whole damn system. Instead of declaring bankruptcy. Sold us all out. You sure you ain't hobgoblins? Tried to fight. Wouldn't let Gary. Then afterwards that woman ripped Gary's throat out, but Growler Gary didn't die."

"He's gone crazy, Carl," Donut said. "Typical."

"Who ripped your throat out?" I asked.

"That woman. Came through and took everything from my brothers and sisters. Then she came in here and grabbed me by the throat and pulled it out. Stole all my alcohol. Didn't get the stuff under here though. Woke up in a pile of my own blood. Growler Gary ain't no coward. Fuck Jumping Jen-Jen. Gary would've fought. Doorway was like a wall. Not a coward."

A memory tingled the back of my mind. Something I'd read in my book. I'd read through the NPC chapter earlier, and I was suddenly reminded of a particular passage.

<Crawler Azin. 17th Edition>

Some NPCs are indestructible. You can kill them, and they regenerate in a matter of minutes. If you find one of those, it means they have something on them or they know something important. Big important. The trick is finding out what that is.

<Note added by Crawler Drakea. 22nd Edition>

We found one of them and tied him to the front of our shield. Ha. The next day the Nagas patched it. Didn't make an announcement or anything, but the guy disappeared. Went back to the church to grab him again, and it wouldn't let us take him from the building. We dragged him out the door, and he exploded and then was reborn. Tried it five times before

giving up. Turns out he knew the password to the safe that held the key for the stairwell chamber.

Donut, as if she'd read my mind, asked the relevant question.

Donut: WHY WOULD HE COME BACK TO LIFE?

Carl: In some games, you can't kill NPCs if they're necessary to complete quests. I think maybe this is the same thing.

Donut: OR MAYBE HE'S A LIAR. HE'S A DOG. DOGS ARE LIARS.

Carl: Maybe. Let's find out if he knows or has something.

"I believe you," I said to Growler Gary. "I believe you're not a coward."

The hyena looked up at me, wide eyes registering surprise, as if he just realized I was there. It was awkward talking to him like this, with him on the floor, and me leaning over the bar. His eyes held my own for a moment, and I feared he was about to burst into tears.

"We're going to stop them," I continued. "The people who made it so you couldn't leave and fight are the same people we're trying to stop. But we need help. Do you think you can help us?"

"I'm useless," Growler Gary said, using "I" to refer to himself for the first time. "I'm just a bartender. They wouldn't let me fight. She was so pretty, and she called me a coward. But I tried. I couldn't leave. And then she died right in front of me. Right outside the door. She died thinking I was afraid."

"Hey," Katia said. "Don't call yourself useless."

"Why?" he asked. "I am."

I leaned a little deeper over the bar. "After we're done here, we're headed to the end of the line to meet up with some friends who need our help. Is there anything at this station you think could assist us? We're going to take one of the trains up there, but there are monsters on the tracks. Plus I'm worried about the power. We're afraid we're going to get stuck."

Growler Gary closed his eyes, and I thought for certain he'd passed out again. But then he said, "You could take one of the interdiction team carts. The carts are normally driven by a pair of transit security gnolls and an interdiction repair team of five

hobgoblins. Jumping Jen-Jen was a driver. I kept the marrow juice cold just for her. Sometimes they'll have a second team if the tracks need repair, too. This station services over one hundred different lines. You just dial in the line you want to go to, and the cart goes there. They're powered by batteries, so they run even if the line is out. Make sure you take a lead car. They got the front portal. Cleans everything up nice and tidy."

"That's great," I said. "We'll go check them out."

"You do that," the gnoll said. "Now let me finish this bottle."

"If he is important," Donut said as we left the bar, "we still haven't figured out why. All he did was blabber on about stuff we could figure out without him."

"Agreed," I said.

Both the repair station and the armory were indeed looted. There were empty wooden cases of hob-lobbers sitting on shelves in the repair station, along with multiple tables and empty tool shelves. There was something called a **Repair Bench** that was stupidly left behind by whomever had looted the place. I took it along with the plain tables and the shelves and the empty boxes. The armory was similarly empty, though it was filled with metal shelves designed to hold spears along with forty wooden mannequins designed to hold armor. I took them all.

From there we returned to the small yard just off the tracks. A line of carts sat there, parked in rows. In addition, six portals stood at the end of the small yard. The first five were attached to tracks. The smaller, sixth portal was up on a landing and was meant to be walked through. This last one, I realized, was a way to get to additional platforms, similar to the one at station sixty. If we went through the portal, it'd lead to more portals eventually leading to various colored platforms. The map would help us walk to platforms we'd already traveled to, but the whole system gave me a headache.

I was glad we didn't have to deal with it. I turned my attention to the five, larger portals.

I moved to the portals before we investigated the carts. Each of the five were up against a wall, meaning none of them were pass-through portals. A manual switching station allowed one to choose which of the tracks to enter. There was a small sign above each station.

The first was a one-way portal that led to trainyard C. The little sign could only be read using my Escape Plan skill, and it simply said, "Trainyard." I took a screenshot, and trainyard C was a burned-out mess. A pair of large, ogre-sized ghouls stalked across the trainyard, headed for the distant, knocked-over gate. Were those wrath ghouls? Yikes.

The next four portals were a little more complicated. Each sign was a long list of colored lines, each one different. Each portal had a list of 48 different colors, from Orange to Amaranth to Pink to Zomp. On each of the four lists, the colors were numbered from one to 48. I examined the first of the portals using my skill.

Ultima Corp DungeonWerx Industrial Subspace Multi-Destination Light-Duty Portal.

Analyze? Yes/No.

I clicked **Yes**, and I scrolled to the bottom of the list.

Type: One-way, selectable portal. Requires DungeonWerx Portal Selector to dial destination. If no selection is made, portal defaults to selection one: Orange Line.

Can you pass this portal? Yes

Environment on other side of portal: Compatible.

Visual Analysis? Yes/No.

I clicked **Yes**, and all I could see was a regular train track. I assumed it was the orange line, but I had no idea where on the line it would be.

"It looks like they can dial a destination and drive there, but I don't know how they get back," I said. "They probably have to go all the way to the end, but I'm not sure."

From there, we moved to investigate the carts. There were three different types. The first was a simple, flatbed cart with two sets of four wheels on it. Each of the battered, well-worn carts was about the size of a small car. It had no controls. Just a hitch on the back along with holes around the edges, likely so equipment or a railing could be attached. This cart was like a trailer designed to be attached to the other, powered carts.

I tried to pick it up, and even with my strength I couldn't do it. I could lift one end up and drag the whole thing, but there was no way I could put the whole cart into my inventory. Just one set of four wheels and axle alone felt as if they weighed more than a ton and a half by themselves, and there were two of them. That plus the heavy wood made the prospect impossible. Even Katia couldn't do it with her mass maxed out. Not yet.

The next cart was the same thing, but with an engine on the back, like an outboard motor, with a few additional controls, including a strange, glowing switch that appeared to be magical. This was by far the most common type of cart. It was basically a flatbed we could use to ride on the rails. I examined its properties.

Interdiction Auxiliary Railway Repair Cart. Contraption.

Main Passenger-Line Gauged.

The simplest of the powered railway carts. Includes battery power or powered track selection option. Includes portal track selector. Interdiction teams are supposed to use these to carry *additional* personnel and supplies to repair areas as backup and support to the more robust Rapid Response Carts and their teams. They are *not* supposed to be used as a primary response vehicle.

As such, a Gnoll Transit Security Officer is not required to run this vehicle.

The engine had a connector that allowed it to run off the third rail power or it could run on battery power. I lifted the top of the battery compartment and pulled the brick-sized battery. It was a familiar dwarven battery, and it was at 2% power.

Since these lines off the main weren't powered, it was probably just enough juice to get the cart through one of those portals.

I had traded the rest of my Louis L'Amour books along with a single jug of moonshine for the dwarven battery fabricator. The moleman shopkeeper had practically begged me for the trade, having finished the books I'd given him. I'd had a sneaking suspicion the fabricator's odd placement at the first store we came across wasn't a coincidence, and I was glad I had. The cookbook had a short but informative section on power supplies, and these batteries were common throughout the previous crawls. Each battery required four full mana potions to fully charge. Once charged, the batteries would supposedly last a very long time. The fabricator had come with fifty of them. Most were at 10-15%, though five had been fully charged and another five were at 50%. I'd also charged up another two just to see how it worked, giving me a total of twelve useable batteries. Plus it only took five minutes to charge one up, though our supply of mana potions, while healthy, was not endless.

For now, I pulled the empty battery from the cart into my inventory. If every one of these powered carts had one, that'd be another 40 plus added to my stash.

There were only ten of the last type of cart. They were pushed into the back, lined up on two different tracks, and it didn't appear as if they'd ever been used, which was odd, especially considering the description of the auxiliary carts, which were heavily worn.

Each of these ten carts were about twice as long as the auxiliary ones. They had three sets of wheels instead of two. A line of seats filled the first half of the open-top cart, with cargo space in the back. There was a raised platform in the center with a small, enclosed driver cabin above the main deck, making the small train car look like a flybridge game boat. The raised cabin was accessed via a small ladder. Despite the height of the cabin, the train was still shorter than the typical, colored-line subway car.

The engine took up the entire back of the train, much larger than the engine on the auxiliary cart. The battery compartment took three batteries.

But the carts' most distinct feature was the odd blade that ran in front of them, almost like a flat squeegee. It was a wide blade that appeared to be the exact width of a regular subway car. It ran across

the front of the cart, close to the ground. The pole had two track-shaped indentations in the center, so when the cart ran along the tracks, it appeared the blade traveled right against the ground, molded to fit. The only give was the port side of the blade, which rose at two 90-degree-angles, allowing for the third rail to pass by underneath.

"Weird," I said, examining the train. How did the blade thing work? It seemed it would immediately snag on debris while the train zoomed down the track, breaking off, or worse, wrecking the whole damn thing. I read the description.

Interdiction Rapid-Response Railway Repair Cart. Contraption.

Main Passenger-Line Gauged.

The main workhorse vehicle of the Hobgoblin Interdiction Team. Includes battery power or powered track selection option. Includes portal track selector. Includes dual-destination, selectable debris scoop.

When it comes to cleaning up a crashed vehicle on the tracks, nothing works better, faster, and more efficiently than the Hobgoblin Interdiction Team.

In the rare case of an accident on the Iron Tangle, one of these vehicles is immediately dispatched to clear the line.

This cart will move up a line at up to five times the speed of the regular passenger cars. The debris scoop will safely transport any active and running trains and their passengers back to the railyard. Once the wreck is reached, the debris scoop is switched to abyss mode, clearing the line of the damage. In case of a broken rail, the debris scoop automatically detects and removes anomalies and track breaches, allowing for the hobgoblins to do their thing.

Unfortunately, the corporation running the Iron Tangle has little trust for the hobgoblins and requires security to escort these vehicles at all times. As such, this cart may only be started by a pair of gnolls.

"Whoa," I said. "We need to figure this thing out. That weird blade thing is a mobile portal."

I saw how the car worked. The blade had to be turned on the entire time. The contraption traveled through the tunnel on the rails, and the portal filled the entire tunnel ahead of the cart, tossing everything on the tracks—including other trains—to one of two places, either a trainyard or the abyss.

"It says only a gnoll can drive it," Katia said. "Two gnolls. Do you think we can remove the portal part and just use that? I wonder if we can somehow detach it from the cart and bring it with us. The blades are wide, but they don't look heavy."

"That's what I was thinking," I said. I moved to examine the metal blade in front of the first cart. The other two cart types had bodies made of wood. This was made of metal. My portal skill didn't work on it because it wasn't turned on, though I suspected we were out of luck. I suspected the entire cart was part of the mechanism, not just the blades. "Shit, I don't think that'll work." I started to ascend the ladder to the cockpit.

Donut jumped to my shoulder as Mongo sniffed about the train. The ladder was covered in dust. It had clearly never been used. "We need to get that Growler Gary out here. That's probably what he's for. To drive the train," Donut said.

"It has to be," I agreed as I opened the door to the driver's cabin. "But we need two of them, and if he can't leave the bar, then how would that work?"

I looked down at the controls, and then I understood.

"Oh," I said. "Fuck."

<u>Bautista</u>: Okay. So somebody found the Sinopia line. That's about five levels deeper than where the most of us are, but there's a group down there. For my group, there's a gangway up one level to the Mindaro line. The gangway is still intact, but those Wall Monitors are congregating near there. We'll have to fight our way up, but I think we can

make it. That only leaves one more group heading toward the Grullo line. I think that's everybody.

Carl: Good work. Let me get this first part done, and then we'll start working on getting you guys through.

Bautista: Thank you, brother.

Carl: Don't thank me yet. I have no idea if this crazy shit is going to work. And I still have something very unpleasant to do.

"Hey buddy," I said as we entered the Downward Dog. "You awake, Gary?"

Growler Gary didn't respond. I hesitantly walked to the counter and looked over the edge at the sleeping Gnoll. He hadn't moved. He clutched onto the same bottle as before, like he was holding a baby. It was now empty.

"We should do it now while he's still asleep," Donut said.

I nodded. "Killing a guy while he's asleep seems like such a dick move," I said. "But you're right. If he's going to just wake up again after we do it, maybe he won't even notice. Plus I guess it's not really killing him if he's just going to resurrect."

Katia remained in the personal space. She knew and understood what had to be done, but she didn't want to be a part of it. That was okay. I understood. I didn't want to be a part of it, either.

She was still desperately trying to form into a gnoll shape that would trick the magical key into accepting her. So far she'd been unlucky, despite getting it to 98% accuracy.

It was painfully clear what the dungeon wanted us to do.

You will not break me. Fuck you all.

Mongo had recently risen to level 23, but the dinosaur was woefully behind the rest of us. We'd decided ahead of time to allow the dinosaur to kill the gnoll.

"Face first," Donut said. "Then the hands. Don't eat the hands. Give them to me."

Mongo squawked excitedly.

The interdiction cart only turned on with a pair of gnoll hands on a magical sensor plate. The two plates were far enough apart that a

single gnoll couldn't do it, but if the hands were no longer attached to the body…

We'd first tried farming a body part from one of the corpses strewn out in the station, but there was absolutely nothing useful. Every single gnoll had been chewed to hell. There was no way that wasn't on purpose. *You fucking assholes*, I thought for the hundredth time. Then came Katia's insistence that she could change into a gnoll and activate the train cart that way. That didn't work, either, though when she emerged that last time, the system designated her as a gnoll. The skill, when she used it for this sort of thing, was terrifying.

She'd tossed all of her most recent points into constitution, but seeing her as a perfect gnoll made me realize maybe those earlier points she'd tossed in charisma wasn't such a bad idea. If we continued to work on her self-confidence we'd have the perfect spy on our hands.

"Go," Donut said.

Mongo jumped over the counter and chomped down on the sleeping gnoll's head. It killed him instantly. The creature had a single gold coin in his inventory. Mongo quickly and efficiently chomped off the hyena's two arms right at the elbow, horking them onto the counter.

"Yuck," I said, picking up both of the hairy, severed arms. I tossed them both into my inventory. "Sorry, Gary."

The plan was simple, but it wasn't without risk. It was a "Carl plan" as Donut called it. After talking with Bautista, we learned there were three groups of people trapped at the abyss. Since the colored lines all emptied into the massive pit at different heights, coming into the giant crater from different directions, and since the walkways that circled the pit's interior were now blasted to hell, these groups couldn't reach each other. We had to make three separate trips.

We didn’t need to drive the train ourselves. We just had to get it started and send it along.

That was okay. As long as we got the engine and scoop portal turned on so everything it touched went to the trainyard, and we got the interdiction cart on the correct track, it would speed along the line all the way to the end, scooping up everything on the path and sending it to the trainyard. The stranded crawlers would stand on the tracks and allow the train to hit them, thus also getting teleported to the trainyard.

We had a list of almost 200 colored lines to choose from, and after almost two hours of going back and forth, we discovered three lines that would work.

That, at least, was the first draft of the plan. Both Katia and Bautista pointed out a few problems with the idea.

First off, if the track itself was sufficiently busted, the cart would derail, despite the portal, and it wouldn’t make it all the way to the end. We hadn’t tested these things yet, and we didn’t know how well they worked. For all we knew, it’d faceplant the moment it hit something.

Secondly, if we scooped up *everything* on the path, the crawlers waiting at the end of the line would be tossed face-first into a pile of crashed trains and possibly thousands upon thousands of ghouls and mobs suffering from stage-3 DTs. It’d be less dangerous to just throw them into the pit.

We had ten of the rapid-response trains to work with. After thinking on it some, we came up with an alternative idea.

We’d send two trains down each track. The first would have the portal tuned into the abyss. So the crashed trains and all the mobs and ghouls running up and down the line would be hit by the portal and sent directly into the pit. Fifteen minutes after the first train, we’d send a second train through, but this one would have the portal tuned to the train station. The crawlers waiting at the end of the line would have to get the hell out of the way of that first train. Bautista said the tunnels opened up as they approached the pit, and that wouldn’t be a problem.

This plan wouldn't work if the track was broken. We had a contingency in place for that eventuality. One I hoped we wouldn't have to utilize.

"What if there are people on the track we don't know about?" Katia said. "We'll send them into the abyss. Also, how loud are these things? Will they even know when to expect them?"

I shrugged. "We're talking about three colored lines out of possibly thousands. By now most everybody who hasn't given up has gotten to a trainyard. We've spread the word out as much as we can. It's a risk, but this is the best idea we have. Don't worry about the trains being loud enough. I already have a plan for that."

While Bautista and I had spent those two hours playing the telephone game trying to figure out the three lines that would work for our plan, Donut, Katia, and I started the process of moving the train carts out of the way to make way for the rapid-response carts, which were shoved in the back of the parking area. The small carts we simply pushed onto the main track in front of our Vermillion engine. Then we drove the auxiliary carts out of the way. Most of them had just enough battery power to drive. Once they were safely out of the way, I pulled all the batteries. We also started the process of taking apart one of the engines and putting all the pieces into my inventory. Katia led this process. She had a wealth of knowledge about engines thanks to her earth hobby potion. She'd received the "Gear Head" knowledge base, and it was mightily useful here. She was certain we'd be able to reconstruct the engine and put it on something else.

The rapid-response carts wouldn't budge until they were turned on. I climbed the stairs of the first one now. I pulled one of Growler Gary's arms from inventory and placed it on the hand-shaped key console. "Here goes nothing," I said to Donut. I held my breath.

The console glowed green. I relaxed. I had to put a rock on top of the hand to keep it in place while I moved to the second key console on the other side of the small cockpit. It was only about eight feet away, but it was just far enough that a single gnoll couldn't activate both at once.

I placed Growler Gary's second hand on the key.

Warning: You must use your left hand to activate the key.

"Fuck," I said.

"Mongo," Donut called. "Come on, we're going back to the bar."

Growler Gary was sober when we returned. Apparently the act of resurrection did that, which was unfortunate for everybody involved. He was desperately searching through his stash for another bottle when we arrived. He wouldn't find one. We'd taken the rest.

"You're back," he said. "Sorry, dinner isn't ready. Growler Gary seems to be low on supplies. Someone drank them all."

He didn't know we'd killed him, but he did remember us. I sighed.

"Hey Gary," I said. "I'm really sorry about this."

He looked up at us, wiping his hands on his fur. "Sorry about what?"

Mongo leaped across the tavern, landed on the counter, and chomped him right on the head. It sounded like a walnut being crunched.

Five minutes later, we had the first of the portal carts turned on. We started the engine and positioned it in front of the third portal. Number 17 on the list was the Sinopia Line. The DungeonWerx portal selector was nothing more than a pair of handles with numbers. I put the first to one and the second to seven. The little selector changed to 17 on the dust-covered screen.

We turned a switch, turning on the front portal. The blade in front of the cart hummed, and a large, tunnel-shaped portal appeared, throbbing. It looked a little different than the static-television-channel style of most open portals. This was like a frosted mirror, allowing us to see through it. Sort of.

"Hopefully the act of pushing a portal through a portal isn't like dividing by zero or anything," I muttered as I moved to the front of the train to investigate the magical doorway. I had a horrifying thought of it blowing up. There was a section on portals in my book,

but I'd only skimmed it and hadn't seen anything like that. I did remember something about arrows with small portals at the end of them. If they didn't cause an issue with being added to inventory or passing through doorways, hopefully this would be okay too. Hopefully.

Ultima Corp DungeonWerx Subspace Heavy-Duty, self-adjusting Clean-up Portal.

Type: One-way, selectable portal.

Can you pass this portal? Yes.

Environment on other side of portal: Warning. Drill down for more information.

Visual Analysis? Yes/No.

The portal was switched onto the abyss, and I pulled up the screenshot. It looked as if it just jumped things in the middle of the air over the pit. So anything that got caught up in the portal would fall a good half of a mile before it hit the ground. I clicked on the environmental warning, and a new page of numbers appeared. Elevation above solid ground was highlighted, confirming that was the issue. I went back to the cab and switched the selector to the trainyard instead of the abyss, and the environmental warning went away.

I put the portal back to the abyss, and I went to remove the hands so I could start the next train.

The moment I pulled one of the hands away, the train shut off. I'd been hoping once the train started, it no longer needed the hand keys.

"Fuck," I said. "*Fuck, fuck, fuck*."

"Mongo," Donut said. "Back to the bar."

In the end, we had to collect a total of 14 left hands from Growler Gary. We could have stopped at 12, but I wanted to have an extra pair, in case we needed to drive that seventh cart.

Gary only fought back the first few times. We were too strong for him. He hid in the back of the bar each time, huddled into the corner, holding onto his spear. He whimpered like an injured dog, and the sound hurt my heart.

"I'm sorry," I said when we came for the fifth hand. He jabbed at Mongo, who screeched gleefully as we approached.

"If you're sorry, then why are you doing it?" he said. "Get back! Get the fuck away from me!"

The floor of the back room was slick with blood. Upon regeneration, every body part remaining in the tavern disappeared except items we placed into our inventory. But the blood remained, and it was everywhere.

"Everyone stop," I said. "Mongo, wait." The dinosaur looked to Donut, who waved him down. He squawked with disappointment.

"I'll tell you," I said. "You deserve to know why we have to do this." And I explained it to him. I told him exactly what we were doing and why we were doing it. He stared up at me, wide-eyed and afraid as I told him we'd have to kill him ten more times.

"So you need Growler Gary," he finally said, looking down at his own hand. "Gary never realized that was the problem with those carts. Jumping Jen-Jen and the other drivers were always complaining, but he… I didn't understand. That was why they never went out. The hobgoblins took their own carts instead, but they couldn't clear the crashed trains without the portals. Gary's not a driver. Hadn't realized it worked that way." He looked up at me. "Ten more times?"

"Ten more times," I said.

"And this is to get the people who killed my friends?"

"Yes."

"Do you have any alcohol on you?"

"I do," I said.

"Will you give me some when it is done?"

"Absolutely."

He put the spear down and walked back to the bar. He cracked his neck. He looked over at Mongo and said, "Do your best to make sure it doesn't hurt."

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[27]

"He ended up being really brave," Donut said as we lashed the last hand to the pedestal. "Especially for a dog. It's kind of sad."

"Kind of?" I said. "Everything about this sucks. God, we really need duct tape for this." We had to use rope to keep the hands in place. If one of them fell off then all of this would be for nothing.

Katia, who hadn't participated in any of this, had returned to her human shape. She was beating herself up over her inability to get the carts started on her own, though in the end it hadn't mattered. Our plan to hit the crawlers stuck at the abyss with portals required six trains to work, and no matter how she looked at it, we would've still had to collect several of those hands.

Bautista had fought his way up to the correct station, though he'd lost almost fifty guys during the battle. A few of the crawlers could fly short distances, but apparently there was some sort of black hole effect on the pit the closer you got to the middle. They'd flown off the walkway to fire arrows and spells at the lizards—called wall monitors—and gotten themselves sucked in. Several more died when one of the gangways collapsed.

Now that we had a portal straight to the abyss, we'd been brainstorming alternate plans in case this didn't work, but so far everything that seemed viable at first kept fizzling out. None of our plans were feasible, especially since there were so many people trapped there. We couldn't use a flyer to go through the portal and bring hats. We tried a rope attached to a weight, too, with thoughts

maybe we could dangle a bag over the massive hole and Bautista's crew could try *something* to get to it. But the moment we started to feed the test rope into the portal, the rope went tight for about a half of a second and then started to tingle. Surprised, I dropped it, and the whole thing disappeared. I was lucky I hadn't gotten dragged in with it. We decided to stop experimenting after that.

I announced I needed to use the rest room and went to the personal space and pulled up the chapter on portals in the cookbook.

> *<Note added by Crawler Milk. 6th Edition>*
>
> *Portals are hard to understand. It seems like there are dozens of different types that all work in different ways. Sometimes they're like doors, and you don't even know they're there. Sometimes, like the entryways between floors, you just need to touch them and they work. Sometimes you have to put your hand through, and you start to feel like you're getting dragged. If you let yourself go slack, you get pulled in. But you can still break free. It's not consistent. Sometimes you have to be big enough to fit through it to work, and sometimes a portal the size of a button will toss you into a monster den. Teleport traps are the worst.*

I added a note about the different brands of portals, but I didn't have time for writing. I'd add more later. Since I didn't have to have the book open to add to it, I'd been spending a lot of time mentally writing in that second, hidden scratchpad, mostly when we were on a train or sitting down to eat. I didn't know if any of it made sense. I wasn't a writer, and whenever I started to mentally type my feelings onto the pad, I couldn't tell if it was coherent or just bullshit. I assumed some future crawler would find my chapter and just think I was being a whiny bitch.

We had everything lined up and ready to go. If all went as planned, we guesstimated it would take about 8-10 hours for the first three trains to reach the end of the line. The system said these

things went five times faster than the normal trains. I really hoped this worked.

Also, it turned out while every single one of the portals on the rapid-response carts was a two-way switch where one could select the abyss or a trainyard, the trainyards themselves were different on each one. The trainyard number was helpfully painted on the edge of each cart, likely so the workers would know which cart to use when an interdiction was required. I supposed in the end it didn't really matter which cart we used, though the three separate groups at the end of the line would all be sent off to different instances of the trainyard. We picked three where we knew people were already holed up at the local version of station 36.

Only one of the carts had a portal that was tuned to trainyard E, the same yard where we had come in earlier, and the same one where we could easily return to the *Nightmare* and Imani's group if we needed. We'd keep that cart here with us.

Meanwhile, Imani and Li Jun and everybody else from station 101 were in the process of fortifying station 36. They'd disabled the Vermillion train on the track, blocking any monster coming down the line. I was afraid that'd mean the blister ghouls coming from station 72 would simply turn around and head back toward us at 75, but it appeared they were congregating in front of the train. Not that it mattered much. There were literally dozens of lines that fed into that station, and they were in a constant state of battle, pushing the invaders back. I hoped they'd be able to hold out.

"Okay, everybody cover your ears," I said as I finished placing the final trap onto the sixth cart. "I'm putting a delay on all of them, but I'm going to set this one off just to make sure it works like we want."

"How am I supposed to cover my ears, Carl?" Donut asked.

"Okay, go to the other side of the station then. Remember last time? It's loud as shit."

The regular subway cars were big and heavy and thundered through the tunnels. These carts didn't appear to make hardly any noise at all. As Katia pointed out earlier, that'd be a problem for those waiting at the other end of the line. Therefore we needed one last touch so the crawlers could hear the portal coming.

I reached down and set the one-minute delay on the last of the traps. I had one on all six of the carts. This one would go first. The others all had a 30-minute delay, but I wanted to make double sure that the delay function worked as intended before I sent it through the portal. I engaged the engine, double-checked to make sure the portal was set to the abyss and that the car was dialed to the correct portal. Everything was a go.

"What do you think it's going to be?" I called over to Katia, who stood by the side of the tracks, covering her ears.

"It'll be 'Wonderwall!' I just know it," Donut shouted from the far side of the platform. "It's the greatest song of all time!"

"Wonderwall?" Katia said, turning and laughing. "You mean the song by Oasis?"

Peaking at Number 1 on Nov 16, 1981, it's "Physical!"

The alarm trap activated, and the Olivia Newton John song started playing, so loud I took a small amount of damage. I pushed the throttle of the train and jumped down. I watched as it shot down the track, hit the portal, and disappear.

I rushed forward to get a screenshot so I could see if the train had actually made it, but I could hear it. It was distant, barely audible, and it sounded as if it was far below us, but it was there. The line it had transferred to was physically nearby. I took the screenshot, and I could see the end of the train, already far way. The scoop portal was still intact.

Holy shit, it worked.

Carl: Bautista. Sinopia line is on its way.

Bautista: What was the song?

Carl: "Physical" by Olivia Newton John.

Bautista: Damn. I had one gold on "Eye of the Tiger." I don't think anybody picked that one.

Carl: There's no way people are going to guess the song. The trap uses any song that ever charted on the Billboard hot 100. There's gotta be a million choices. I'm going to send the Grullo and Mindaro trains now. Then in fifteen minutes we'll send the second trains tuned to the yards. Your team will end up at yard Q. There's already about 400

people guarding station 36 at that one. Remember to take the employee line. It should be clear.

Bautista: Okay, buddy. Thanks.

"Monsters! Monsters!" Donut cried, running up just as I saw the wave of red dots on the Vermillion track. There had to be about thirty of them. They were moving fast.

"Shit," I said. "Okay, let's get ready."

"Carl, they're really, really big. I think they're those stage-3 DT monsters. I don't think we can handle them!"

We only had about thirty seconds to decide what to do. If we hid, they'd probably stream around the subway engine car we had parked here and continue down the line, where they'd eventually come to the disabled train on the track right before station 36, mixing in with the blister ghouls. That'd be fine if they stayed put. But I remembered how big those fuckers were, and if they managed to break into the car and open a path down to station 36, it'd be another weight on the shoulder of Imani and Li Jun. Though I strongly suspected they'd be dealing with these guys whether we liked it or not.

Still, we couldn't just let that happen. I had an idea.

"Hide," I said. I turned toward the Downward Dog and started jogging. "Come on, guys, let them pass. But as soon as they do, we gotta move."

Katia and Donut sent the last three rapid-response carts through the portals while I attached the explosives to the back of the vermillion train. I needed to get this done quick. I was placing them on the short shelf in front of the door that'd turn into the between-train gangway when it was properly attached to another train. I had to tie everything together with a rope and then use the door to keep it in place.

"You know," I said up to the ceiling while I worked, "If any of you guys want to send me duct tape, it'll make this sort of thing a lot

easier. Rope sucks for this stuff, and pus is too expensive to waste. I'd be able to make bigger bombs. Just saying."

Even though the battered vermillion engine faced the wrong direction, it did have that half-assed, standard-issue cowcatcher device in the back, which really doubled as the connector mechanism. Still, I was afraid this wasn't going to work. Either way, it would be spectacular. I warned Li Jun and Imani what I was doing, and they agreed to it.

Yes, I knew I could probably use one of the interdiction carts, and that'd clear the line much more easily. But I wanted to see if I'd get experience if I did it this way. Plus I really wanted to see if this would work. Other than the landmines I'd used to derail that first train, I hadn't gotten the opportunity to use much explosives on this floor, so I jumped at the opportunity to sandwich a bunch of ghouls and monsters between two trains.

Nobody was on the tracks on this line, so the worst that could happen was it went off prematurely. Or it didn't go off at all. Or I caved in the line. Or I killed myself.

The plan was to reunite this engine with the rest of its old train.

Elle: Hey Carl. She's not here. I did as you asked and went through every single person. No four-armed cobra lady. There are some pretty weird ones, though. There's a guy here who is a mushroom. Why would you turn yourself into a mushroom? He looks like a penis. Like one of those weird ones that's really wide and short. My boyfriend before my Barry had a dick like that. It smelled like mushrooms, too.

Carl: Shit. We know she's alive. Where the hell is she then? Maybe try sidling up with one of the former daughters and asking them.

Elle: Already did. Talked to that fairy with the two mage daughters. She claims the bitch is not answering anyone. She might have come in with the rest of us, but if she did, she took off, and nobody says they've seen her. She's probably off pouting somewhere.

Carl: Okay. Everything else good?

Elle: Same ol' shit. Imani is mother hen-ing every damn person in here, even though they're all terrified of her. Your friend Li Jun doesn't know his best friend is in love with his sister even though she's turned into a demon, and most of those girls from Hekla's group are as helpless as I was when I was still in the wheelchair. On top of that, some crazy asshole who doesn't want everybody to think he's a crazy asshole is throwing a train full of explosives in our direction. So, you know. Typical day.

I laughed out loud as I tied the last piece of hobgoblin dynamite onto the pile. The train would splatter random ghouls on the way down the track, but I didn't want the bomb going off until it hit one of the larger stage-3 monsters, who'd hopefully be in the midst of the gathering ghoul horde. The hobgoblin dynamite was much more stable than the regular goblin stuff and would, in theory, survive multiple impacts. Still, the bundle of dynamite was up high and shouldn't go off until it was triggered. For that, I used a device I'd already built in anticipation for just this sort of thing. It was part of my first prototype for the landmine. A long pole with an impact-detonated hob-lobber at the end. The pole was too high to hit the regular blister ghouls, but it would hit one of the giant stage-3 monsters. Or, if it missed, it'd go off when the train crashed into the back of the other train. Or if the whole thing derailed. Hopefully.

Bautista: The trains are definitely working. It's raining crashed trains and monsters into the abyss. I haven't seen any crawlers fall thankfully. But it's a lot of those giant monsters. Are you getting experience for this? They're splattering across the bottom of the abyss like hail.

Carl: No, unfortunately. The system can be damn stingy sometimes. You never know what's going to give it to you.

Bautista: Yeah. My pets usually give me experience if they kill something, but not as much as if I had done it myself. Sometimes, though, I don't get any experience at all, and every once in a while I get a big bonus. I don't know why.

Carl: Your pets? I didn't know you had pets.

Bautista: It's complicated. Most other crawlers think it's a spell. I don't want them to know the truth. It's kind of embarrassing. I'll explain it if we ever get together.

I liked Bautista, I thought as I finished building my train bomb, but his Tigran race made him look like a tiger that had been vomited upon by a Lisa Frank notebook. I didn't know how anything could embarrass him.

It took a minute to get the pole positioned correctly, but once it was, I didn't waste any more time.

"Everybody say goodbye to the vermillion train," I called over my shoulder as I re-entered the gore-filled engine car. I waded through the starting-to-stink-even-worse entrails and bodies and hit the controls, easing the engine up to full speed. Just as I prepared to jump out the front window of the backward-moving train, I spied something sitting on the floor. It was one of Eva's two sabers. She'd dropped it when Donut had raised Hekla from the dead. It'd fallen into the gore, and I'd forgotten about it. I grabbed it and pulled it into my inventory as I slid out the front window and jumped heavily to the track below.

Christ, I thought as I hit the gravel. *I need another shower*. I turned to watch the train rush backward down the track. It wouldn't be long before it hit something.

The ground suddenly shook with a distant explosion. It didn't come from the train, which I could still see. But the ground rumbled, like distant thunder. Dust fell from the ceiling.

What the hell was that?

Imani: Carl, are you okay?

Carl: That wasn't my bomb. Mine is still on its way.

Imani: I thought you blew yourself up.

Carl: Not yet.

Donut, Katia, and Mongo came jogging up as I pulled myself off the track. "What was that?" Katia asked.

"Carl, what did you do?" Donut asked. "I thought you killed yourself."

"I don't know," I said. "It sounded far, far away. But it was big."

I pulled up my chat to see if anybody knew what it was, and I saw with dismay that a group of four crawlers I'd tossed into a group I'd called "Yard F" were now all dead. For a horrifying minute, I thought maybe this was my fault, that I'd done something because of the portals. But that didn't make any sense. None of the carts were tuned to that area.

But then I remembered that those guys weren't trying to defend their station 36. They were part of a team that was attempting to kill the blister ghoul generator at one of the station 72s. It had to be pretty far away, but it was still loud and powerful enough that we felt it here.

"Holy crap," I said. "I think they blew the soul crystal. I warned them that it was dangerous. Goddamnit."

That group had been something like 300-400 people. The last I heard they were going to attempt to fight their way to the generator and remove the crystal or disable the machine.

I messaged everybody and told them what I suspected had happened.

Carl: Imani and Elle, you should get a group together and send them to sixty to see if they can find a platform that'll take them to that F line. I don't know what the color was, but somebody else might know. If the generator blew, everything over there will be dead, but the stairwells might still be open.

Imani: I was just thinking the same thing. If we don't know the colors attached to the F station, how can we find it though?

Carl: Last time I went through station sixty, there was a dwarf sitting there at the entrance to all the colored-line portals. His name is Tizquick. Seek him out and ask him if he knows.

Elle: I'll go. I'll grab a squad and we'll… holy shit!

The moment she said it, I heard and felt the new explosion. A whole line of experience notifications appeared. This one *was* my work. Not only had my train bomb gone off, it had killed a bunch of mobs. And I had gotten experience for it. More than I expected. I hit

level 35. I didn't get any achievements, which was kind of irritating, but my explosives handling skill ticked up to 11.

Elle: Yikes, Carl. That knocked everybody off their feet. You're lucky I can fly.

Carl: Shit. Sorry about that. Is everyone okay?

Imani: Carl, let's not do that again. Okay? I think everybody is fine. People guarding that entrance took some hearing damage, but nothing permanent. I think that line is good and sealed off now.

Elle: I think the mushroom guy shit himself.

I should have put the bomb bundle together at my sapper's table. That way I could've seen and adjusted the bomb's total yield. Just the act of putting anything explosive on the table had a tendency to increase its total yield, but I could now easily adjust it up and down. Hobgoblin dynamite was much more powerful than the regular stuff. In fact, next time I went into the crafting room, I'd put together some different-sized bundles so I had everything ready to go.

I sighed, thinking of everything we needed to do. Part of me really wished we had a hundred or more of these carts. That way we could strategically park them around the stairwells. But as it was, they had so many entrances that it wasn't feasible. Plus we only had one Growler Gary. We still didn't know how long until the portal carts would reach the abyss. The level timer was now at two days and twenty hours. That meant we had just over a day until Mordecai returned. I wondered if we had enough time to go back to the trainyards to build a few more train bombs. That'd be a great way to farm more experience.

And while we were now seeing mobs suffering stage-3 of the DTs, we still hadn't seen what happened when the DTs killed them. I had a suspicion of what was going to be, but how that would be implemented, I had no idea.

"Carl," Donut called. "You pissed off the ghouls. Now they're heading toward us!"

Sure enough, with the tunnel officially sealed off, the ghouls being generated at 72 had stopped heading toward 36 and now

were coming this way. I could already see them shuffling up toward us on the edge of my map.

Shit, I thought, thinking once again of Growler Gary. We'd collected one extra pair of hands from the poor gnoll, but it turned out we were actually one pair short.

I couldn't use the portal carts to protect the others, but we could certainly use it to protect ourselves right here and right now.

"Guys," I said, "help me position one of the carts on the track. Then we gotta go talk to Gary again."

We placed the turned-on portal into the tunnel, blocking it like a cork. The blister ghouls didn't even pause. They dropped like lemmings right into the abyss. We had the cart parked at the edge of the vermillion line. My explosion appeared to have knocked the power out. We had to run the carts off of battery power, but that was fine. I now had plenty of them.

We had the second cart, the one with two fresh hands lashed to it, pointed in the other direction on the track. Only a handful of additional stage-three monsters had appeared over the past few hours. According to the prattle on my chat, the stage-three monsters were mostly heading toward station 24. They were running down the tracks, reaching outrageous speeds. But they were also coming up from the trainyards, so they were either riding the rollercoaster line—though I didn't know how—or they were getting portaled there. I suspected maybe those neighborhood bosses at the Krakaren drug dens had something to do with that. But the monsters weren't actually entering stop 24. They would stop and camp just outside of the station, oftentimes fighting with one another.

The few who did come down our track from the north did not voluntarily throw themselves into the pit. Instead, they stood there at the edge, growling and snapping with their round mouths while I observed them through the distorted haze of the tunnel-width portal.

We'd spent the past few hours grinding against the constant stream of ghouls. I'd turn off the south-facing portal, and we'd advance and kill. I practiced with my xistera some, and Donut was practicing with mounted attacks. Katia practiced with forming spikes on her arms and using them as weapons.

She also spent some time in her smaller form with Eva's saber. The description said it was part of a set and only magical when the two weapons were together. Otherwise, the enchanted saber, called **The Left Fang of the Green Sultan**, offered no buffs or powerups. That was good, however, as it meant Eva had also lost her main weapon.

The level-20 ghouls did not pose a serious challenge, but they were useful for practicing new techniques, if not for experience.

The stage-three monsters, I knew, would be a much better trial. We had a new technique we needed to try out, and it required a higher-tier, stronger monster to test it on.

While the DT monsters didn't voluntarily throw themselves into the portal, I knew I could curate our battle experience on that side easily by hopping onto the cart and pushing it forward, sucking in the stage-three monsters until there was only one left. The portal, when tuned to the abyss, was unforgiving. Like with the rope we tried earlier, if just a tiny portion of the creature touched the edge of the magical gateway, the whole thing was sucked in like a strand of spaghetti.

Bautista was giving me a running update of all the oddities that were raining into the abyss. We still had an estimated two hours left before the carts would arrive. We didn't know for certain that all three carts were still moving, but I was hopeful based on the sheer amount of stuff falling into the pit.

We weren't ready for how powerful the stage-three monster was. The thing was stronger than a regular neighborhood boss. The system didn't allow us to properly examine the creatures through the window of the portal's backside, so I couldn't read the description until we were ready to fight.

But one thing was obvious even before I turned off the portal. It didn't matter what sort of monster was the original source of the

creature, whether it be a massive ogre or a tiny, rat-sized mob. By the time they reached stage-three of the DTs, they were all pretty much the same creature: a hippo-sized monstrosity with thrashing tentacles on its back. Instead of a normal face, they held nothing but a round mouth circled with teeth. There was a skull there, visible through its transparent, jelly-like skin, a talisman of the creature it once was. For this one, it was a small skull, much smaller than the bear-like skulls we'd seen before. The creatures looked over-inflated, like they'd explode at any moment. The things bulged with veins, reminding me of the second boss we faced, the Juicer. The tentacles were thick and meaty, with round, thrashing mouths at the end.

"Okay, get ready," I said to Katia. Donut stood back with Mongo on the platform while I sat up on the raised cockpit of the rapid-response cart. I was afraid the monster would trash the cart, so the plan was to back it up and out of danger. I'd then leap down to engage while Katia did her thing from the edge of the platform.

Katia rolled back and formed into the sentinel gun. Three, spider-like legs formed, turning her into a tripod. The flesh-colored shield went up, and the automatic crossbow, which had been sitting in her inventory, appeared, locking into place just behind the shield. A firing slit formed, which she could open and close like a mouth.

"I'm ready," she said. She'd formed a pair of eyes and a mouth just behind and above the lump of flesh that held the crossbow, allowing her to peer down onto her target. The plan was to eventually form eyes strategically on the exterior of the large, half-moon shape shield, but she wasn't quite ready for that.

"Okay, here we go," I said.

I pushed forward with the cart, and the single monstrosity scattered back, having seen his friends sucked away earlier. I reversed the throttle and quickly backed up, turning off the portal that blocked the tunnel. I jumped from the cart's cockpit, crunching onto the gravel. The monster continued to run away for a good ten or twelve more seconds before realizing he'd been bamboozled. Now a distant speck down the track, he stopped and turned back toward us. He howled indignantly, turned, and charged.

Razor Fox. Level 22.

Warning: This mob is suffering from the DTs. It is in stage three of three.

In stage three, this mob's form has changed, and it bears very little resemblance to its original self. Kind of like how all you humans did after you finally got out of quarantine. It is now covered with multiple tentacles. If this monster has recently fed on another living creature, the contents of its stomach may be quite valuable. Or toxic. Or explosive. Or worse. That's what makes these guys so fun.

Unfortunately for them, this form is only temporary. The DTs are always fatal.

I'd explain to you what a Razor Fox is here, but it's pointless because this isn't a Razor Fox anymore. It's a shame, really. I kinda love those ninja-star-throwing fuckers. But all is not lost. We'll have normal versions of these guys on the fifth floor, too. Too bad you won't be seeing them since you're probably about to get ripped to shreds.

A moment passed, and then it was in range. Katia opened fire. *Thwap, thwap, thwap, thwap*. The bolts shot out of the large crossbow, coming at about two a second, which was pretty damn fast, but not nearly as fast as it'd been before when Hekla owned it. The crossbow was auto-loading, cocking, and firing. All she had to do was hold the prod down, and it'd start spamming bolts like one of those tennis ball machines.

Each magical, razor-tipped bolt was about twenty-inches long. The bolts disappeared on their own about a minute after being fired, but that was plenty of time to do some serious damage. Hekla's bolts had been fire-tipped and sometimes electrically-charged, but we'd lost whatever caused that buff when we lost access to the rest of Hekla's gear. The monster bayed as the bolts tore at its face and side, like a nail gun. Each hit knocked its health down, but only a tiny bit.

What the hell? How strong were these assholes?

One of the side effects of Katia forming into these odd shapes was that it confused monsters. Like when she was the train's scoop,

the mobs hadn't realized she was living flesh and hadn't attacked her directly. This mob, despite being riddled with holes, reacted the same way. The only living creature he saw was me. He howled again and charged.

The thing was terrifyingly fast. I loaded a banger and twirled, tossing the metal projectile directly at the round mouth. The ball shattered teeth as I scored a hit. It made a strangled noise and stopped, sliding on the rail. Katia continued to pump it with bolts, and now Donut joined the fray, tossing *Magic Missiles* into the creature from Mongo's back.

The monster whimpered as it tried to dislodge the metal ball in its throat. I loaded another, this one a half-strength, impact-detonated hob-lobber. It was too close for a full strength. I fired again, again getting it into the monster's giant mouth. I took out another tooth, like I was playing a game at the carnival. *One more, and I win a prize*. There was a muffled *thump*. Its tentacles thrashed about, one of them grasping a wooden railroad tie and breaking it in half. The monster was no longer focused on me or anybody else. It was starting to look like a hedgehog from all the bolts. Injury to its body only did minor damage. We had to get inside its mouth.

I started to shout for everybody to focus on the area when it suddenly exploded. Sizzling gore showered the track. It'd blown from the inside out, like a water balloon filled with Beefaroni.

The battle was over just as quickly as it started.

"Jesus," I said. "I don't even know how we killed it. Either those bolts suck ass, or that thing is tough."

"Carl, I didn't get any experience at all," Donut said. "These things cheat."

Katia returned to her regular form. She wore the backpack to make the sentinel gun, but only had enough metal to form the shield.

"I don't think it's the bolts," she said. "I think the body might be like living armor. When I hit the tentacles, it did a lot more damage. But they're hard to hit. My crossbow skill is still only four.

We'd try again, but these things usually came in groups. It was going to take a lot of practice before I'd be comfortable facing two

at a time.

Donut and Mongo jumped down from the platform. Mongo sniffed at the remains of the exploded monster. He made an odd, whimpering noise. Donut jumped down to inspect. She also sniffed at the remains. She froze.

"Carl," Donut said. "Um, I think you might want to see this. It's quite disturbing."

Donita Grace: Holy shit. Holy shit. Guys. Don't go to stop 24. They're everywhere. Millions of them. Worse than the grubs. Don't...

Warning: This message is from a deceased crawler.

My message screen exploded with people asking what was going on as I jogged up to the corpse of the monster.

"What the shit," I said as the tiny, little red dots started appearing on my screen. I wasn't reminded of the grubs. Instead, I thought of the fire ants.

That explained the lack of experience. We hadn't killed the monster at all.

It had hatched.

When the creature had exploded, he'd dislodged several thousand, teeny-tiny, squirming monsters.

The AI took on a mock-motherly voice, as if it was trying to emulate a kindergarten teacher.

Krakaren Crotch Dumpling. Level 1.

Gather around little crawlers. It's story time.

Once upon a time, on a distant planet, there lived a lonely creature. This planet teemed with flora and fauna, all of them growing and evolving and generally thriving and having a great time as they dashed forward through the eons. This creature also wanted to thrive, she also wanted to have a great time. But there was only one of her. She could not have children of her own. And this made her very angry, very cranky, but also very sad. More importantly, it made her determined.

And as Doctor Ian Malcom once famously said, *Life, uh, finds a way*.

The creature had a special ability. Her stomach was like a gas-station coffee vending machine, one where you could pick one of a thousand different choices. You could mix and match. She soon discovered if she ate this creature, she could make this substance. And if she ate that creature, she could make a different one. So she began to experiment. The creatures of her world thought of her as an apothecary. She could cure all ails.

But what she truly wished for was to create a child of her own. And after a thousand generations, she did just that. Almost. It's a complicated process that involves a lot of failures. A lot of troublesome ghouls. But as another Earth saying goes, you need to crack a few eggs to make an omelet, no?

What these wriggling parasites you see really are, are clones. The next part of the Krakaren story, where she discovers the ability to speak to all of clones telepathically, and then eventually form a collective mind, where she starts spreading across the universe and making a general nuisance of herself is for a different time.

All you need to know now, little crawler, is that you have to kill these things, and you have to kill them fast. After all, like all children, they grow up so very fast.

I suggest a nice, firm stomp.

I was already smashing them with my feet before the long-ass description ended. There were thousands of them, all about the size of a grain of rice. But they were already growing. And we were on gravel, which made my smushes ineffective.

"Step back," I said. I'd killed most of them, but a few red dots remained. I had a half-full jug of moonshine in my inventory, and dumped it onto the track and tossed a torch, lighting the whole area on fire.

"Growler Gary had said they'd turned the whole place into a Krakaren nest," Donut said. "He wasn't kidding."

"I guess not," I said.

"I hope they stay at station 24," Katia said.

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The second cart for the Mindaro line never arrived. That was Bautista's, leaving his group stranded at the end of the line. So without any further fanfare and very little discussion about how terrible of an idea this was, the four of us loaded up onto a rapid response cart and dialed ourselves onto the Mindaro line and headed down the track in an attempt to find the source of the problem.

"What color is Mindaro, anyway?" Donut asked as I pushed the throttle forward. We had to remain in the small, raised cockpit with the windshield, otherwise Donut would get blown clear off the train. We were going insanely fast. The cart moved smoothly over the track, making very little noise. We kept the portal tuned to the abyss in case more mobs came at us. The line's power was out, so we had to run on batteries.

"I have no idea," I said. "I don't know what any of these colors are. Ask the art professor."

Katia shrugged. "I think it might be a shade of chartreuse."

"What the hell color is chartreuse?" I asked.

"It's between yellow and green. It's named after a French liqueur. Actually, there's some controversy on what the exact shade should be. It's very interesting."

"I'm sure it's riveting," I said.

Katia stuck her tongue out at me. And then her tongue formed into a little hand with a tiny middle finger pointing up.

I laughed. "Holy shit, that's weird. You're getting fast at that."

"It still hurts to make big changes, but little stuff like that I can now do with very little effort."

The cart plan had worked as intended for the other two lines. For the Sinopia and Grullo line, the abyss cart appeared, still blasting its music ("Mack the Knife" for the Grullo line), and the trainyard cart appeared soon thereafter. In both cases, the portal-to-the-trainyard carts arrived just minutes after the first, which suggested that the carts sometimes slowed down if they hit something big, allowing the second trains to catch up.

Which, we realized, was what had probably happened with the Mindaro line. It was a stupid mistake. If the second cart had caught up with the first, the portal in the front would have tossed the whole abyss cart back to the train station. So when Bautista's crew only saw one cart—this one playing "Rock of Ages" by Def Leppard—it was actually the cart they needed to jump in front of, but they had no way of knowing that.

I shouldn't have put delays on those alarm traps. I should have known what song went with what cart. It would have saved us this trip.

That cart had been tuned to trainyard Q. I warned my contact there that we may have accidentally hurled a bunch of monsters in their direction. That plus a cart with a dangerous portal attached to it.

When the carts hit the portals at the edge of the abyss, they didn't plummet over the edge like I'd been expecting. Instead, they worked like engine cars and punched right through back to the trainyards.

Since the abyss gate at the end of the Sinopia and Grullo line did not line up with the associated trainyard track of the rapid-response carts, those who got transported through never saw the carts again. Instead they joined up with the defenders at the closest nearby station 36. It was 800 people between the two groups, and we had gotten them all to a stairwell station. That was the best I could do for them.

At first I worried that the rogue carts would now start looping up and down the tracks. But a group happened to be grinding their way

through yard M when the first cart—the same one playing "Physical" by Olivia Newton John—appeared. Because of the way the switching stations worked, the cart was automatically routed into a dead-end parking space intended as a holding area for the train engines. The cart reached the end of the track and flipped. It caused the entire awning system to be sent into the abyss. But the portal automatically shut itself off a moment later. The cart remained on its side, wheels still spinning.

A few minutes after that, the second cart showed up and also flipped over.

That group at yard M then managed to get enough people together and physically flip one of the two carts back over and then bring it to a track. They managed to get the thing turned back on, giving them a new weapon to keep at least one of the nearby tracks clear.

The tunnels were eerily quiet and empty as we rode up toward Bautista. I kept the portal on in case something else was on the track. I tuned it to the abyss, but I kept an eye out for the tell-tale blue dot of crawlers on the track. I could switch it back to station E, but we had to be careful. It took the portal a good ten seconds to make the switch, during which time it wasn't on at all, making the cart vulnerable.

Katia's fan box became available while we rode down the line, but we didn't dare stop. We now had less than two days left, and every second counted. Seven hours in, and we still saw nothing on the tracks except the occasional exploded corpse of a post stage-three monster. The baby krakarens were nowhere to be seen.

Back at the front of the line, Elle's away team, with the help of Tizquick the dwarf, found the correct colored line, making their way to the exploded station 72. Loads of other crawlers had the same idea, and she found a group of people waiting there. The ceiling had caved in, but the circle of stairwells remained, and people had cleared the rubble. We sent out word that it was a place to descend without fighting, and people were now flocking to the area. The crawlers who'd died blowing the soul crystal had, at the very least, not died in vain.

Others, like Imani and Li Jun, thought it was best to remain put. The monsters approaching station 36 were trickling to a stop, and the crawlers had built a solid, defensible position. So far the Krakaren babies were staying put at all the station 24s. The wrath ghouls, it turned out, formed a similar boss to the one parked at stop 48 if they were allowed to congregate. This one was also a province boss.

Our plan was to get Bautista's crew, get everyone to trainyard E, and then work our way to station 60. From there people could decide to go wherever they wanted, either to one of the many heavily-defended station 36 stairwells or to the free station 72. A few people were also putting together raiding teams to take on the station 48 boss. Nobody else was braving station 12, 24, or the other occupied station 72s.

As for us, we'd decide what we were going to do when the time came.

"People on the track!" Katia suddenly yelled just as we passed station 432.

"Shit," I said, flipping the switch to change the portal. The cart was like a boat and didn't have brakes. I cut the throttle just as the blue dots appeared. The train slowed. I mentally calculated our trajectory, and I saw we'd make the switch in plenty of time. The dots were moving fast, probably running away from us once they saw our light. Poor guys. They had to be terrified.

"Get ready," I said. "If they don't know who we are, they might shoot at us."

Sure enough, the crawlers appeared a moment later. They were a group of five people running full speed down the track and away from the cart, and one of them had presence of mind to shoot an ice bolt directly at us. It hit the portal and disappeared. I didn't know if the bolt went through or what, but the poor guys didn't have a chance. We plowed right through them, teleporting them to train yard E, which had to be a serious shock. They all probably thought they were about to die.

"Sorry," I called back over my shoulder as we continued down the track, approaching station 433, which appeared much more quickly

than I anticipated. This was where the mimic lived. As far as I was aware, nobody had killed one of these things yet. Dozens of Xs appeared on my map, all of them on the platform where the previous portal cart hadn't been able to scoop them up.

God, so many dead. Every time I saw something like this, I felt the anger start to rise in my chest.

"What is that?" Katia asked, pointing ahead. There was something on the tracks right outside the platform to station 433. Whatever it was, it didn't appear on my map.

A red and white wooden crossbeam appeared to be sitting across the tracks, blinking. It had a stop sign attached to it. What the hell? This was like a regular railroad crossing, though usually these things went across the road, not the tracks. I just stared at it, confused for a good two seconds, not sure what to make of it. The track beyond the barrier appeared to be fine. There was no cross traffic. Where had it come from?

"Fuck," I said the moment I realized what it was. It had only fooled me for a pair of seconds, but it was enough. *You idiot*. I moved to flip the switch back to the abyss, but I hesitated. *Too late. Too late*. We were going to hit it. A long, fleshy appendage snaked from the end of the crossbeam, leading up into station 433.

We hit the crossbeam a moment later. There was a mighty *thwum* as the portal sucked it away.

We'd just accidentally teleported the entire station mimic city boss to trainyard E.

"Whoops," I said.

"Bautista," I said, stepping off the platform. I shook hands with the hairy, orange tiger man. He'd reached level 28. We'd stopped about 100 meters before the giant, swirling portal that led into the abyss. There was a wide space on either side, along with a small doorway that led to the now-collapsed interior walkway. A pair of crawlers, both human, stood guard. One had an enchanted, old-school sling.

The thing crackled with purple and black energy. He twirled the weapon and shot a rock, likely aiming at one of the lizard monsters who crawled up and down the pit's interior. The crawlers both cheered, presumably after scoring a direct hit.

"Hello, Carl," Bautista said, clasping me on the shoulder. "You have saved us. Again."

"We ain't done yet," I said, looking over the ragtag group. There were about 600 people gathered here. I quickly told him what had happened with the station mimic as I shook hands and traded fist bumps with dozens of crawlers, who ranged in level from the distressingly-low 18 to 30. Most were human, but there was a scattering of orcs and elves and other oddities.

"So we have to fight that thing again?" Bautista asked, sounding sick. "Carl, it's a city boss, and it's really strong. I don't know how to kill it. If you chop a part off, it turns into a spider and crawls back to the whole. Bashing weapons don't do anything. It's magic resistant. Maybe blowing it up will work, but you'll have to go big. Like really big."

I stepped in front of the portal attached to the front of the cart and took a screenshot.

"Holy shit," I muttered.

The station mimic was so large it took me a minute to figure out what I was looking at. It was significantly larger than I anticipated. The monster had taken up residence in the middle of the trainyard and hadn't yet changed shape into anything. It looked as if the wall of the trainyard had moved, swallowing half of the station. Only after staring at the image did my brain start to figure it out. It was a potato-shaped blob the size of a neighborhood block. The damn thing reached all the way up to the ceiling, taking a huge portion of the yard. It seemed much too big, like the total mass was enough to mimic five or six or more stations.

The blob looked disturbingly like how Katia appeared when she was not formed into anything.

I thought of that group we'd accidentally teleported to yard E. They were probably dead. We'd sent them to the yard, and less than

two minutes later, we'd sent that thing through the same portal. Maybe they'd gotten away. I hoped so.

It seemed much too big to be only a city boss. Which begged the question, how strong were those things at the stairwell stations? The province bosses? For fuck's sake.

Carl: Elle. Do me a favor and ask your manager if there's a secret way to kill a mimic.

I'd already looked it up in my book, and there wasn't much in the monster section. There was a warning that mimics were all over the place on the 8th floor, but I had the impression they were more of a nuisance than a real threat, implying that this huge mimic was a new thing, or something no previous cookbook-owner had come across.

Elle: Are you about to do something really stupid, or have you done it already?

Carl: Both.

Elle: Hang on. Let me ask. Don't get your hopes up.

I looked over at Donut, who was preening at the attention of the other crawlers. She was mounted on Mongo while a group of people surrounded her and the dinosaur. She talked animatedly, telling them about the ride up here.

Katia held back shyly, leaning up against the side of the cart. People kept looking at her. Everyone by now knew exactly what had happened, but that golden, shining skull over her head was hard to ignore. I watched as Bautista approached her and held out his hand. They shook and started talking.

I walked up to the massive portal that overlooked the abyss, and I took a screenshot. The cart behind me with the much-smaller portal led to yard E. This one led to yard H. There was no mimic here. I could see the interdiction cart, the one that had been playing the Def Leppard song. This one hadn't flipped and was sitting stopped a short distance away, having gotten itself wedged against the wall. The portal appeared to still be on. It'd jumped the track at the service bay but remained upright until it hit the cavern wall which, thankfully, hadn't teleported the entire cave system away. I

didn't see any mobs, though there were dozens of corpses spread throughout the abandoned trainyard.

Elle: She says you don't fight giant mimics. Little ones are easy to kill if you know what they are, but this thing is a whole different story. If you slice part of them off, the pieces grow legs and return to the main body. If you can get more than 50% of the mass off the main body at once, it'll no longer be able to heal or transform. And then it'll be vulnerable. But the separated pieces, unable to return to the main body, will instead attack you. They only die when the mimic dies.

Carl: Well that's terrifying. And that's only a city boss.

Elle: Yeah. I'm on my way back to the crew now, but I just talked a group out of attacking the province boss at station 48. One day we might be strong enough to fight one of those things, but it ain't gonna be on this floor. Fuck that. You can hear it screaming from here.

I walked back to the cart and took one more screenshot. The mimic appeared to be forming into a large building, though it was still in mid-transformation. It was taking the shape of an Iron Tangle administrative structure, though it had so much mass, it had to make the building huge. A mouth that had to be 300 feet wide comprised the entire first floor. Each jagged tooth was the size of a person. A red, lumpy, train-sized tongue lolled out of the mouth, reaching off screen.

The entire building and mouth was faced directly at the portal. I knew if I took another screenshot in a minute, the mouth would be gone, and only the building would remain.

It's waiting for us.

Carl: Sorry, Donut.

Donut: WHAT DO YOU MEAN?

I climbed back into the cockpit and turned the switch. The portal to trainyard E shut off. I looked down at Bautista where he stood next to Katia. "New plan. We go through the abyss portal instead of the cart portal. I have enough hats in my inventory for everybody here, so we don't need to worry about fighting this mimic thing. It's

expecting us, and if we go through that portal, we'd be like pigs walking to slaughter.

Bautista looked relieved. "Thank god for plan B."

"That was actually plan C," Katia said.

"Oh, don't look at me like that," I said to Donut as we watched the last of the hat-wearing group make their way through the portal to yard H.

"You have to tell them to give the hats back after we go through," she said. "Millions of gold, Carl. Millions!"

"They weren't ours to begin with," I said. "People gave them to us to help others."

"We only have 83 of them left," she sniffed. "I really want to buy the social media board. So we can see what people are saying about us."

"Actually, it's less than that." I pulled thirty of the hats from my inventory and started tossing them onto the ground behind the cart. "In case there are any stragglers."

Donut looked at me like I'd just slapped her. She made an incredulous, scoffing sound. "You know, it's no wonder you were always so poor. There's a fine line between being helpful and being a dumbass, Carl."

"We still have over fifty of them."

Katia laughed as Donut glowered. The cat looked back over my shoulder, as if she was contemplating jumping off the cart to go retrieve them. I put my own hat on my head. Donut didn't want to remove her tiara, so instead she sighed and held an engineer's key in her mouth. Mongo went into his carrier. I suspected that since the cart was allowed through the portal, we didn't need either the hat or the key, but there was no sense risking it, especially since there was a cliff on the other side of the portal. Katia pulled the hat and plopped it on her head. It disappeared into her mass. A moment

later, it reappeared as she did something to make it visible. She really was getting better at the doppelganger stuff. A lot better.

I eased the cart through the portal, and just like that, it was done.

Our plan was a success. There had been just over 1,400 people trapped at the end of the line, and we'd gotten them if not to safety, to a place where they at least had a chance.

The cart clunked loudly as it changed tracks. I eased off the throttle. Def Leppard's "Rock of Ages" continued to blare from the immobile interdiction cart, but the song stopped a moment later after the guy with the sling scored a direct hit on the small trap.

There was this moment, right after the music abruptly ended, where our slow-moving cart coasted to a stop right behind the other cart, and we just faced the large crowd. The silence hung for a good few seconds, and then the 600 people broke out in applause. Bautista walked up and gave me a hug as we jumped off the cart, then he did the same to Katia. He patted Donut on the head.

"Thank you. Thank you so much."

"We still have a little more than a day and a half, my friend," I said.

"I know," he said. "But we couldn't have made it here without your help. And for that I'll be forever grateful." He gave me a wink and pulled the hat off his head. He put it on the ground in front of Donut, who looked up at him with wide-eyed surprise. "For you, Princess Donut."

"It's not necessary, I'm sure," she said, suddenly switching to her imperial voice. "Please, keep it. I insist."

But suddenly there was a line of people, all of them putting their hats in a pile of front of Donut. Her eyes shined, and her jaw trembled, revealing her two lower fangs as the people, one by one bowed in front of her and dropped the stupid train hat on the ground in tribute. "Thank you, Princess," they said, one by one.

"Of course," she said to each person. "It was nothing. Our pleasure."

Carl: Was this your idea?

Bautista: Your partner, Katia, suggested it.

I looked over at her, and she grinned.

Donut gathered all the hats up into her inventory, tail swishing with pleasure. I suspected now that most of the crawlers were all at the front of the lines, shopkeepers would be less likely to give us money for these things. But we held onto the moment. I didn't know what was going to come next, or if we'd even done anything here today other than delay the inevitable, but it felt good.

By god, it felt good.

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Time to Level Collapse: One day and 16 hours.

The group turned and headed toward the gate. We'd instructed them on how to find the employee line, which would be free of monsters. Bautista and about twenty others held back as I went through the complicated process of trying to get the cart switched over to one of the regular colored lines. It didn't matter which one, as long as it had a platform at both 60 and 75. I walked ahead, switching the lines while Katia eased the cart forward.

"Whoa, hey. I just got a box from my sponsor," Katia suddenly said. "A silver benefactor box."

"Yay!" Donut said. "That means you have a sponsor box and a fan box to open!"

"I got a sponsor box not too long ago, too," Bautista said. I reached up and manually slapped the transfer switch. It made a loud *clunk*. "But I haven't had the chance to open it yet. I'm on my way to do it now."

"Who is your sponsor, anyway?" I asked the tiger man.

"Jaxbrin Amusements, Limited. The same folks who make my babies."

"Your babies?"

"Yeah," he said. "I've been meaning to talk to you about this. Did you get any of them? Some do what I say, but sometimes they don't, and I don't know why. One even attacked me once. A green variant Slizzer. But the other Slizzers were fine. I still have another green variant, but I don't dare use it now."

I just looked at him. I had no idea what the hell he was talking about.

"Miss Quill? The old skyfowl lady from the last floor? Remember her?"

"I remember," I said. I reached up and fingered the necklace with the small charm. How could I forget? She ended up being the head bad guy of the area. Her failed spell was the reason I had the about-to-explode nuke in my inventory. Bautista had a quest to kill her. A quest that failed because we'd inadvertently killed her when we blew a hole in the ceiling of the magistrate's office. Bautista had been trying to get into her apartment at the time, but he'd found it empty except for…

"Are you talking about the beanie baby things?" I asked.

"Yeah," he said. He pulled one from his inventory. A brown frog wearing a spiked helmet. It still had the tag on it. It was the same type of creature Mordecai was currently shape-shifted into. Bautista tossed the bean bag to me, and I caught it. I rolled it over in my hand.

Stuffed Grulke Infantry Figure. (With tags)

This is the most common variation of the Grulke line of collectible figures. In terms of rarity, these things clock in just below frat boys with early-onset liver disease. It's literally not possible to enter a waystation kinder shop and not find one of these for sale on the shelf. You'll be hard-pressed to find a collector who will buy this off you.

It sure is cute, though.

"Miss Quill had more than 1,000 different stuffed monsters in her apartment. So far, I've used about 40 of them. You can keep that one if you want. I have four more just like it, though one has a different colored hat. They'll attack bad guys for you, and they're

pretty strong, but they're common, and the common ones only last about fifteen to thirty seconds before they're done."

I read the little paper tag on the stuffed creature. All it said was "Grulke Infantry. Jaxbrin Amusements, Ltd." There was a symbol of a smiley-faced star on the other side. That was it.

"Wait, these things turn into real versions?" I said. "I didn't know that! How?"

"You pull the tag off. Like a grenade. And then you throw it. Takes about 10 seconds for it to work. Depending on what it is, it'll fight for you. Or, like I said, attack you. The rarer it is, the longer it lasts. When they're done, if they haven't been killed, they turn back to the beanies, but the tag is gone, and you can't use them again. If they do get killed, the little beans fly everywhere when they die and then disappear."

"That's crazy," I said. "We only have one. It's a dude riding a horse. Named Kimaris. How did you figure it out?"

"The first one I did was called a Crane Crasher. A bird thing. We were sitting in a safe room, and I was just playing with it, and the tag came off. It came to life in my hands and flew to the ceiling, screaming. Then it attacked a guy in my party and teleported away. After that, I found another one. A Sage Sprite Lecturer. It said he was a teacher, so I pulled the tag. I thought he looked a little like my grandfather. He was helpful, but I should have saved him for later when I was better prepared. He was really rare and valuable. But he told me what was up with these things. Acted like I was an idiot for not knowing. He was one of my most valuable. Legendary rareness. Only one of five, but I didn't know how to see that until he taught me. Lasted two whole hours. He was in this weird glass case. I have five more legendary rares, but I'm afraid to open the cases now because the description says there's a chance I'll be blasted with fire if I open the door. I can open them in safe rooms, but the Sage Sprite said the fire could still trigger in the safe room. I'd be safe, but the case and the item would both be ruined. I think maybe I can open it in my inventory, but I'm too scared to try."

He was talking about a Sheol Glass Reaper Case. The same protective case my Kimaris figure had been in, but now housed Carl's

Doomsday Scenario. My Kimaris figure was a demon. It was also Unique, not legendary or rare.

"You just rip the tags off, and they appear?" I asked.

"That's right. But you can actually rip the tag off inside of your inventory, which is what I do. It takes about two seconds off the summoning time. You gotta be careful, though, because if it's a monster you're not familiar with, you don't know how big it's going to get. Or how mean. Some of them are huge. Also, the sprite lecturer. His name was Atwin, by the way. He said these are actual summonings. So you must be careful. It looks like you're making a new one because of the way they die. But you're actually teleporting one of those creatures to you. I don't really see the difference, but he insisted that was a big deal. I guess there are spells that say they're summoning, but they're really just creating a temporary, fake version. This is a true summoning."

I thought of Donut's clockwork triplicate spell. That was most definitely not a real summoning.

"What was the name of the one you had?" Bautista asked.

"Kimaris."

"I don't have that one. You should probably hold onto it until you know how valuable it might be. Anyway, I am worried I'm going to run out of these things. My class is something called a swashbuckler, and I need to practice more with my sword." He patted the glowing, orange sword on his belt. "But I've been relying on these monsters a lot. That's why I'm glad I got sponsored by Jaxbrin. I hope maybe they can replenish my supply."

"You should train with your sword as much as you can anyway," I said, suddenly worried for the man. "You can't rely on somebody else's goodwill to keep you supplied. Also, some of your friend's levels are too low. The guy with the sling is good at 28, but his friend is only 21. That's not enough. He's getting left behind."

"I know," Bautista said. "We're doing the best we can."

Bautista and his team's plan was to go find that free station 72. He promised they'd train on ghouls on another line until it was time to go. Apparently Tizquick, the dwarf with the daughter who never existed, was standing vigil at station 60, helping all the passing crawlers to find their way from one colored line to the next. I was starting to get worried about too many people congregating in the same place at once, though apparently there were actually two different stations 72s with blown ghoul generators now. And there were rumors of a station 12 that had also blown. The last I'd looked we still had just under 275,000 people running about the floor, and it would be much too easy for too many of them to crowd into the same place and get overrun.

In fact, that number of remaining crawlers actually seemed too high based on the number of people we had in our circle. I had at least one person in over a dozen different station 36s, but none of them had more than a thousand people. Most were more like 50 to 100. I talked about this some with the others, and we realized we simply didn't know enough about the true nature of the floor to get an accurate picture of where all these people really were. Katia had, for a few days now, been saying that we were missing something when it came to the way the Iron Tangle was set up. She kept saying, "I don't understand how there can only be six station mimics." I told her it didn't matter, not as long as we had an exit to our back and we'd done everything we could.

We said our goodbyes to Bautista's team, and we found ourselves on the zomp line. We had two interdiction carts. The "E" cart, the one we'd driven all the way up the line, and the "Q" cart which we now called the Def Leppard cart. We dragged it behind us, facing backward so we were sandwiched between two portals, both tuned to the abyss. Nothing could get to us while we were on the track. Not unless it attacked us from the sides.

The plan was to make our way to Imani and Elle and Li Jun and reunite with their teams who were now camping and guarding station 36. They said they hadn't seen a real monster in hours except an occasional ghoul. I told them we'd be there later. And to

stay away from trainyard E, which now featured a brand-new resident.

In the meantime we were going to pick a random transit station and hit the safe room, open Katia's boxes, watch the recap show, and then have ourselves a reunion.

We ended up stopping at station 59. The track was filled with ghouls and baby krakarens, who were now all about the size of small dogs. We teleported them all to the abyss as we rushed up the line. The only time we were in any sort of danger was as we passed station 24. The juvenile monsters covered the platform. There were thousands of the octopuses, swarming over each other. I tossed a precious jug o' boom off the side of the train as we passed. Even then, almost a dozen of them were fast enough to leap onto the cart. Katia's crossbow made short work of them. They didn't drop any loot at all, and their blood sizzled against the metal deck of the cart.

We stopped the two carts outside of platform 59 and left the portals on, both tuned to the abyss. Then we sent a message to everybody to stay off the zomp line. As long as the batteries held, and they appeared to last a really long time, nobody would mess with the carts. The transit station also had six other lines attached to it, but it was all clear as we walked to the saferoom, which was down stairs this time instead of up.

The swarming Krakaren babies appeared to be remaining close to station 24. For now. Meadow Lark was setting up a flame-thrower based kill zone at the choke points in case they were invaded. I hoped it wouldn't come to that.

The saferoom at station 59 appeared to be a restaurant from Costa Rica called "Soda." We pushed our way through the small room, past the Bopca, and into our personal space. It seemed like we hadn't been here in forever.

"Open your boxes now," I said, collapsing into the chair. "Let's see what we're dealing with."

Katia straightened. "Okay. I'm doing the fan box first."

We'd already agreed we had to get this done as soon as possible, before Mordecai got back. The last thing we needed was that Chaco guy showing up and getting into another fight.

But we needn't have worried. Two items popped out. A goddamned baseball bat and a shield. The shield was tall, about six feet high, and curved, shaped like a half cylinder. There were loops in it for her to either hold with both hands or to slide a single arm through.

There was a small, plastic-like window in the top of the shield for her to see through.

It had the words "Get Back" in Syndicate Standard emblazoned on the front in white, blocky letters.

"It's a riot shield," I said.

The baseball bat was actually a police baton, I realized. At first glance there didn't appear to be anything special about it. But as Katia rolled it over in her hands, eyes wide, I could see the slight glow of enchantment. Her lips were tight with what appeared to be both irritation and fear.

I picked up the large shield to examine it. It was absurdly light.

Enchanted Shade Gnoll Riot Forces Crowd Control Shield.

Sometimes the galaxy isn't a happy place. Sometimes the unwashed masses forget their place in the machine. And sometimes these dregs bubble up to the surface, causing a phenomenon widely known as "Civil Unrest."

And when that happens, the powers that be don't want to become the powers that were. So they hire backup. An outside force to come down and kick everything back into order, and maybe commit a few war crimes in the process just so the filth knows their place. One such outfit, trained specifically for this sort of situation, is the Shade Gnoll Riot Forces.

This enchanted shield offers both offensive and defensive crowd control options. A frontline defender utilizing this

item is afforded the following benefits:

+5% to Constitution.

+5 to the Rooted in Place Skill

+Upgrades Rush ability to Crowd Blast.

Warning: You may not equip this item. The Rush ability is required to equip this item.

I immediately looked at Crowd Blast, the enhanced Rush ability. This was the same battering ram skill Katia had used to kill Hekla. She could only use it once a day. Crowd Blast had two huge differences. She still rushed forward, causing a ton of damage. But now everybody in a wide cone in front of her were also hit with the attack. The bulk of the damage was still from whatever she physically hit, but everything in the cone took 10-20% of the damage. The fact she'd managed to kill Hekla with the regular version of this skill meant this upgraded version packed a serious punch. Even those monsters not directly hit by it would take major damage. With her wrestling belt bonus, it would be the equivalent of hitting someone with, well, a monster truck.

But more importantly, she could now use the ability once every five minutes. Not once a day.

"It looks like you'll be getting more practice in with that Rush attack," I said as I looked up Rooted in Place. She made a noncommittal grunt.

Rooted in Place

This skill makes it much more difficult to knock you over or back. That's not necessarily a good thing, physics being what they are. Be careful with this one.

"Interesting," I said, moving to the baton.

Enchanted Shade Gnoll Riot Forces Telescoping Crowd Control Baton.

This enchanted truncheon is designed to crack skulls and to teach those ungrateful bastards to show some got-damned respect.

This item's length is adjustable, from 25 centimeters to 3 meters.

Automatically casts Level-five *Cone of Knockback* if swung at a group of 10 or more like mobs. This triggers only once every five minutes.

"Those are both pretty awesome," I said. "Especially the shield. I'm kind of worried about the wording on that rooted in place skill, but Crowd Blast is exactly what you needed."

"I can't tell if people were trolling me with this or not," Katia said. "People know I hate using Rush."

"It's not very thrilling," Donut agreed. "This is like getting an electric litterbox for your birthday. Indeed it's useful. But it's a litterbox for goodness sake. I was hoping for something with a little more pizazz."

"First off, that's what Bea asked for," I said. "I don't understand how someone can get pissed for receiving what they asked for. Second, that thing was like 300 bucks. Anyway, Katia, this is definitely a good thing. Troll or not, you're getting more and more powerful. Mordecai said he got a sex toy in his first fan box."

"Did you really buy your girlfriend a litterbox for her birthday?"

"He did," Donut said. "Miss Beatrice was quite rightfully upset."

Katia laughed as she attempted to equip the large shield. She frowned after a moment. "I guess I don't need this anymore," she said. "It doesn't let me equip both at the same time." She removed an item from her left wrist and placed it on the table. "You should take it. You need a shield anyway."

I picked up the wrist bracer. It looked similar to the bracer I had on my right wrist, the one that allowed me to form my gauntlet. I'd forgotten she'd had this thing. She pretty much only used it to increase her mass.

Enchanted Auto Buckler of the Peach Pit

Forms a metallic buckler on command. May be triggered via hotlist or by shaking your wrist like you're thinking of your hot Aunt Lydia.

This item is enchanted with *Shatter*. Any attack that lands upon this shield has a 1.5% chance to disarm the opponent. If the opponent is disarmed, there is a 90% chance the item will drop to the ground, a 5% chance the

weapon will break, and a 5% chance the weapon will be immediately transferred to your own inventory.

"Hey, this is cool," I said. I put it on. I had to slide it over the arm of my jacket. I experimented making it appear. I could twist my wrist, and the small shield would pop into place. I could shake it in a similar way, and it'd disappear. "Thanks!"

"Much better than a litterbox," Donut said.

Katia nodded, attention already on the next box. The benefactor box. "Okay. We ready?"

"Do you think it'll be something bad?" Donut asked.

"We don't get cursed items from boxes," I said. "Let's just see what it is."

Soon after Katia had been sponsored by the Princess Formidable, the youngest sister of Prince Maestro and Crown Prince Stalwart of the Skull Empire, we explained to her everything we knew about the psychotic orc family. Maestro was dead along with the mom. Stalwart was in the dungeon, presumably walking around in the skin of the war god Grull. King Rust was supposedly in the dungeon, too, though we didn't know where. I still wasn't clear on how levels 6, 9, 12, 15, and 18 worked. Mordecai always told us to not worry about them until we got there.

We also didn't know how the sister factored into all of this. If her brother was out of the way, I knew she'd become the heir apparent. But how close was she to her brother? In books and movies royalty were always murder hoboing each other in order to gain power. But since we knew literally nothing about Princess Formidable other than the fact she existed, there was no way to predict what sort of item Katia would receive.

Katia opened the box. We silently watched the single, small item appear. Katia picked it up, saying nothing. She examined it and passed it to me.

It was a crossbow bolt. She'd only received one.

The Bolt of Ophiotaurus

This is 1 of 100.

This item acts as a regular crossbow bolt unless it is shot directly into the eye of a deity.

Upon a successful strike to the god's eye, the deity's invulnerability pauses for fifteen seconds.

"Well, shit," I said. "I'm starting to think the sister isn't a huge fan of her big brother."

We had time to take showers before the show started, but that was it. Mordecai would return right after the show finished airing, and then we'd all need to take two hours to sleep.

The recap featured a montage of people setting up and fighting in a wide array of stairwell stations. We watched as a group of twenty people stupidly faced off against a station 48 boss. The monster, a hulking conglomeration of screaming, gnashing ghouls made short work of the crawlers. It formed a giant pincer made of ghoul body parts and gathered the crawlers up. Mouths formed on the interior of the claw and devoured the crawlers as it crushed them. They all died screaming.

"Jesus," I muttered.

"I can't watch this. I hate this show," Katia said, getting up. She produced a towel from I-don't-know-where and moved around the common area, cleaning up the remaining blood splatters from where Mongo hadn't licked it clean. "We need a maid in here."

The recap showed something unexpected. A group found a new stairwell, one that wasn't listed on that early map. It didn't say where they were, but this was clearly a different area we hadn't seen. It was a dark, dripping cave, and it was only lit by the *Torch* spell of one of the crawlers. There was only a single stairwell here. It was clearly a level stairwell, but it was different than usual. It went both up and down, and I wasn't sure why. Only the part of the stairs below the ground glowed, but it still reached upward, corkscrewing into the air and disappearing into the dark. It was only on screen for a moment, so I didn't have enough time to investigate what that meant.

"I think I know where that is," I said, suddenly realizing what we were looking at. "That's where we teleported the mimic away. That's station 433. I bet there's a stairwell there. Just like with Grimaldi. If a city boss is sitting on a stairwell, it's invisible on the map until he's gone."

"What?" Donut said, suddenly incredulous. "Are you saying we could've just gone back down to that place and used those stairs?"

"That's what I'm guessing," I said. "But I'm not certain. This is a good thing. It means there's a way to get home for anybody still trapped on that side of the tracks."

"I guess they won't be needing the 150,000 gold's worth of hats just sitting on the ground up there, either," Donut grumbled.

"They still gotta find that station," Katia said over her shoulder. I did a double take. She'd grown thin and tall and was scrubbing one of the walls ten feet off the ground. "There are five more mimics up there. How did this blood even get up here?"

"Shush!" Donut waved her paw. "Stop talking. We're on!"

"Oh fuck," I said, seeing the scene laid out. They showed me standing over Growler Gary, the cowering gnoll. They'd altered the lights and colors of the scene to make the room dark, showing it from a low angle with me looming over the creature. Mongo materialized, coming into focus like a monster emerging from the fog, biting his hands off. Gary whimpered. The whimpering sounds were added in. Gary was always dead by the time we removed his hands. The scene switched to me wishing for duct tape while I attached one of the poor guy's hands to the keypad. It showed us doing it over and over again. It never even explained why we were collecting the hands.

It didn't show the rescue. Instead it moved on to Lucia Mar beating a mantaur to death by smashing him against a train over and over. It appeared she was set up in one of the trainyards, but I couldn't tell which one. Something had changed with one of her two rottweilers. It was huge now, twice as big as the other.

"What is this?" Donut said. "They cut out the best part! They didn't show everybody saying thank you to me. They usually get it wrong, but this is over the top. This is outrageous!"

"It's okay," I said. "People are watching it happen live. More every day. They know what really happened. It's the same with the other crawlers. By now everybody knows all of this stuff is pure propaganda."

"Do you think that means this Lucia kid isn't as crazy as she looks?" Katia asked, coming to stand beside me.

"I don't know. Maybe." I remembered what Lucia had done to the Desperado Club. And to Odette's assistant. Odette had called her a psychopath. And Lucia had talked some serious shit about Donut on that one show. So there was probably some truth to it. But it had to be exaggerated. It had to be.

"You did a good job," I said, looking about. "The room is very sparkly." I remembered what Katia had said about her mother being a clean freak, and how she'd rebelled against it. Apparently not so much. Then again, it *was* predominantly blood stains she was cleaning up. That's not something most people wanted splattered around their living area.

"It was mostly Mongo," Katia said, patting the dinosaur on the head.

Hello Crawlers,

This will be your second-to-last message before the floor collapses, and I just wanted to say how proud we are of human tenacity. Quite frankly, we expected the number of deaths to be much higher on this floor. It's making us rethink how easy the next floor was going to be. Hah.

Odds are good you might have your hands full this time tomorrow, so we're sticking all the important information into this message. The next floor will see the crawlers scattered throughout, further apart than usual. Parties will still travel together, but only parties that are formed before this message started. We love how you plucky humans are starting to all band together to defeat the big, bad monsters, and it's great, it really is, but we wish to focus more on individual stories the next floor. Feel free to chat to your friends, but if they aren't in a party with you right now, it's best to get your goodbyes out of the way. There will still

be Desperado Club and Club Vanquisher entrances throughout the level, so don't worry about that. But if you haven't trained yourself up, you might regret it.

And speaking of chat, we've added a new and exciting feature to this season. For a small fee, all viewers may now subscribe to your private messages between other crawlers. Isn't that great? Sign-ups started yesterday, and we are very pleased with how many have already joined up. The system goes live the moment this message ends.

We have also patched a few persistent bugs with the inventory system. Effective immediately, you may no longer store liquids in your inventory unless they are in a container.

That's it for now. See you guys tomorrow. Now let's get out there and kill, kill, kill!

"Where is he? Where did that fuck face go?" a familiar voice yelled. It was Mordecai, skidding to a stop in the room. His toad eyes grew wide. Apparently, for him, no time had passed. He'd just blinked. "Oh. Oh shit. Oh fuck," he said, eyes flashing as he read a page of notifications. "By his left tit. Seven days?"

"Hello, Mordecai," I said.

The toad man just stared at us. His eyes immediately moved to the golden skull over Katia's head and then to the skull over Donut's. He straightened as Mongo squawked and jumped in circles all around him. "I see I missed a few things."

"A few things, yes," I said. "We need to…"

I didn't finish.

Katia exploded.

At least that's what I thought had happened at first. Blood erupted out of her. Gallons and gallons of it, flying in every direction. It just kept coming and coming, an impossible amount. We all cried in surprise. I was blasted in the face, getting bukkaked by the fetid, stinking liquid. I fell over trying to get away, gasping and choking. Donut squealed and leaped across the room. Mordecai also flew backward, stumbling over the couch, his frog legs sticking straight up into the air.

And still, the red spray didn't let up. It hit the ceiling and all the far walls, like it was being sprayed from a multi-directional pressure washer.

Mongo shrieked in joy, spinning about like a child in the rain. It kept coming for twenty full seconds before trickling to a stop. Katia just stood there in the middle of the room, eyes huge. Once it stopped, the room was filled with the sound of my coughing and Mordecai's croaking and the tap-tap-splash-tap of Mongo dancing in circles like he was playing in a wading pool.

It took me a moment to understand what the fuck had just happened. Katia had stored all of the blood when she'd been attached to the front of the train. She'd had to put it directly into her inventory to keep her scoop clean.

But the rules had just changed. One could no longer store liquids that weren't in a container. Apparently this was how the system now dealt with the paradox.

I focused on Katia. The blood spread out from her in a circle. It hadn't gone straight up, but in every direction around her. She hadn't been touched. Holy shit. There wasn't a single damn drop of blood on her. I had a thought. An exploit. I wondered how well it would work. But it was definitely something they'd patch if I even tried it. I filed that information away.

"Really, Katia," Donut said, leaping to my shoulder. "If you need to borrow a sanitary napkin, just ask."

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THE FIRST THING WE DID WAS WALK OUT TO THE MAIN RESTAURANT. Mordecai, who was somehow even more soaked with gore than I was, approached the counter with the bopca.

"We are purchasing a personal space upgrade," Mordecai said. "A cleaner bot." The bopca looked distastefully at the blood dripping onto the counter. Mongo had the zoomies and zipped back and forth through the room, spraying little red dots everywhere.

The upgrade cost 25,000 gold, making it one of the least expensive environmental upgrades we could get. That was still expensive as shit, but none of us complained. Donut didn't even try to negotiate. Katia wordlessly paid for it, and we marched back into the personal space. The moment we stepped into the room, the new upgrade went to work. It was a frisbee-shaped robot, similar to the Mexx-class robots we sometimes saw in production trailers, though this thing didn't look as if it could talk. It was basically a flying Roomba. Donut had to admonish Mongo not to attack it. It hummed like a muted drone as it buzzed about the room, blinking disdainfully at the mess.

It went to work cleaning up all the stinking, congealed blood, hovering over it and magically zapping it away. It cleaned quickly, but it was still going to take time. A long time.

"Let's all just take showers, pretend like this never happened, and meet back here in five minutes," I said. I had ghoul blood in my

mouth, but I didn't have anything clean to wipe it off with. It tasted like metal soaked in dead rat.

We returned to find the blood was still everywhere, but the cleaner bot was working as quickly as it could. It'd thankfully started at the kitchen counter, leaving the area habitable. Katia sat there eating a pineapple she'd gotten from the Bopca. She sat there as if nothing had happened, humming a little song to herself. She used her hand to form a knife to cut and core it. She offered me a piece as I approached. I declined. All I could taste was the blood.

"Okay," Mordecai said, holding up his hands as he emerged, clean, from his room. "Before you say anything, I know it was a mistake. I shouldn't have lost my temper like that at Chaco. It won't happen again. And, no, we are not going to talk about it."

"Someone told us if you do it again, you'll be gone for good," I said.

"I assure you it won't happen again," Mordecai said. "You have my word. Now what did you pick from that prize carousel anyway?"

"He got a stupid recipe book," Donut said. "It was a joke prize."

"Really?" Mordecai said. "Can I see it?"

"Later," I said, trying to change the subject. "We don't have much time, and we still need to sleep. We need to catch you up, but then we need to get back out there."

"Did you see my sunglasses?" Donut asked. "Aren't they just the greatest? I got them from Princess D'Nadia. If I hadn't gotten them, we wouldn't have known Hekla was trying to kill Katia. Oh, oh, and I have over 100 in charisma now, and I got the Love Vampire skill. Just like you told me to get. I've cast it a few times, but it never triggered."

Donut's love vampire skill allowed her to basically reflect any damage to a mob that was a lower level than her. She hadn't used it yet because we'd been careful to keep her from getting hit on this floor.

"Okay," Mordecai said. His eyes got huge at the mention of Hekla. He once again zeroed in on that golden skull floating over Katia. "That's great, but slow down. We have a lot to go over, but we don't have to do it all at once. First explain the circumstances

regarding the player-killer skulls you two have, how Katia is the highest level of all of you, and then we'll go over all of your new skills and…" he trailed off, his eyes fixed on my left hand. He took two steps toward me, grabbed my wrist and held it up so he could look at the ring I'd gotten from Frank. The Ring of Divine Suffering.

"Take this off," he said. "Take it off right now."

"I'm not going to use the Marked for Death skill," I said. "It gives a five percent bonus to my stats."

"If I wasn't afraid I'd be kicked out of the game for good, I'd smack you into the next floor. Even if you were a player killer, you'd be an idiot to keep this on you, let alone on your finger. Every season, several of these rings are generated, and every season, the crawlers who own them are the first to be tracked down and killed by the hunters on the sixth floor. The bonuses for this ring work both ways. One of the reasons why those idiots flock to the hunting grounds is to obtain one of these things."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because in the hands of a sadistic bastard, a combatant can raise his power exponentially. Once it is charged up enough, its owner gets massively stronger each and every kill. I don't think there has ever been a faction wars where the victorious army is led by a champion who doesn't have one of these rings, amongst several other items. And those rich assholes who fight it out on the ninth floor will do anything they can to win. This sort of item can't be brought in from the outside. But the factions *can* collect them if they can convince an idiot to go hunting for one on the sixth floor. And if there's one thing this universe doesn't lack, it's idiots. You need to sell this ring. Otherwise you'll have a huge target on your back. Bigger than the one you already have."

I just stared down at the ring on my finger. I didn't want to take it off. "So the faction wars winner always has one of these?"

He smacked me, then. *Thwap*, right on the side of the head. He did not freeze or teleport away. If he had hit me just a little harder, it probably would've gone bad for him. My father used to do the same thing, though he'd done it much harder. I felt my eyes narrow.

Mordecai looked at his webbed hand, just as surprised as I was. *So much for promising to hold his temper.*

"Carl. I shouldn't have done that. But out of everything I just said, that's what you're holding on to? Crawlers don't get involved in winning or losing faction wars. They ride out the ninth floor like it's a tornado passing by overhead. They keep their heads down, and they pray it doesn't sweep them away. We already have one impossible task to deal with when we get to that floor. You attempting to hold onto a Divine Suffering artifact when the entire universe knows you have it is just another level of idiocy we don't need."

I started a retort, but he held up his hand, interrupting me.

"Plus, don't you remember the magic pulses on the last floor? Events that activate magic are a real danger. There will be traps that activate your spells and items. Triggering something like that could be devastating. Despite what its description says, this item is not meant for crawlers. It's meant for tourists, designed to get them to gather up combatants by the hundreds and farm them for power. It is evil, and if you don't get rid of it, gods help me, I will tell Donut to stay the fuck away from you the moment you hit the sixth floor."

"Oh, for fuck's sake," I said, pulling the ring off. I felt my strength lower, which pissed me off further. "We'll talk about selling it on the fifth floor. Before we get to the sixth. Don't touch me ever again."

He looked like he was going to object, and insist on me ditching it now. He opened his mouth, as if to say something, but Katia interrupted. She had the map out, spread onto the counter.

"What was it?" she asked. "You said you knew how to get to the lower train stations. We figured it out, but there's a bunch of different ways, and I want to know what you saw."

Mordecai looked down at the large paper, worn and blood splattered and filled with many more marks than when he'd started working on it over a week earlier. He blinked a few times, staring at the mess of circles. I still couldn't make sense of it. I couldn't imagine how anybody could make sense of this confusing bullshit. I had the sense whoever designed this let it get away from them. I hoped the same asshole wasn't in charge of the next floor, too.

"You see this?" he said, pointing to the circle that was the *Nightmare*'s loop. "And this, and this?" He indicated several other named lines. He grabbed the pen off the table and drew a symbol in the corner. It was a group of overlapping circles, similar to the Olympics logo, though the rings were all a different size. "It's the logo for the Syndicate, at least from the top down." He pointed to the second circle of the logo, then tapped the *Nightmare* line again. "See here, it matches up perfectly. The named trains make a specific pattern. That means there is a train that has to loop to the front. Probably at this station here. Yes, look, you discovered it already. The *Escape Velocity* line. Yeah, that makes sense. *Escape Velocity* is the name of the ship that discovered the worm hole to the first system where a Gleener scientific crew investigating a Primal ship graveyard came across the Vog Generation Ship. A few hundred cycles later, the Syndicate was formed. So it's obvious once you know what you're looking for."

"What?" I said. "How in the hell were we supposed to spot that? How would we even know what the Syndicate logo looks like?"

"Isn't it etched on the doors to the next floor down?"

"No," I said. "It's a massive kua-tin."

"Huh," Mordecai said. "When I did it, it was the Syndicate logo. Odd."

"You said this is from the top down?" Katia asked. "What does it look like from the side?"

He drew again, but this time it looked like a lopsided mattress spring. The circles were actually all connected together. "Honestly, I don't understand how these wormholes work, and that's what the logo is based on. It's not usually portrayed in 2D, but in a twisting, 3D shape. Sometimes they show the rings fly together, but when it rotates, it's one piece. It's like one of those optical illusion things."

Katia snatched the pen from him and started re-drawing the logo from several different angles.

"Anyway," Mordecai said, "that's how I knew. The abyss here represents the center of the galaxy. You really filled this in well, Katia. The tracks probably represent the worm paths." Mordecai leaned in. "Yes, I see it now. The whole thing is a simplified map of

the galaxy, and the trainlines are the original worm paths." He paused, reading some more. "Does that say station mimic?" He laughed. "They really went all out. There's a story about the early days of the Syndicate where the H'lene system set up six waystations near the center. They were traps. The H'lene were robbing and eating all the travelers and then stealing their tech. The H'lene don't exist anymore, and they weren't really mimics, but they're oftentimes represented as them. They got wiped out by the Valtay and the orcs."

"Jesus," I said, looking it over.

"What about all these Krakaren bosses and the ghouls?" Katia asked, looking up from her sketches. I had no idea what she was doing, but she was now drawing lines from the logo to different parts of the map.

Mordecai returned his gaze to the map, frowning. "Oh, wow. I see it now. The Krakaren is a real creature. It is a collective mind, and it is spreading throughout the universe. Its proliferation causes a lot of anxiety. A better translation of its name is the Apothecary because of its ability to synthesize elements. When they call it the Krakaren, it's them deliberately bending the translation into a negative. What we have here in the dungeon is a caricature."

He pointed to one of the stations where Katia had written, "Drug dealer."

"They have the Krakaren making the drugs and the Pooka are the ones handing it out. I think the Pooka are supposed to represent the Plenty. They are a caprid race. They look like goats."

We hadn't seen or fought the Pooka, but I remembered that Elle and Imani had. They were the ones who gave the addictive "vitamin shot" to the mobs. Elle had described them as goblin things that turned into giant goats when you fought them.

Mordecai continued. "The Plenty invented the modern tunneling system. It's only been around for a few hundred seasons, but it allows near-universal, real-time communications. The technology is proprietary, and nobody knows how it works. There's a ridiculous conspiracy theory that they use Krakaren technology, and it's all a ploy to get everyone into the Krakaren collective. Previously,

everything had to be filtered through the wormholes. Borant had a stake in the communications relays that are now obsolete. It's a long story. I barely understand it all. Before, even in my season, the crawl would get just as many views as it does now, but most everyone in the universe would receive it on delay. Maybe an hour. Maybe a year, depending on where you lived. Only the center system would get it live. It's only a recent thing that the outer systems are able to follow and favorite crawlers in real time. The breakthrough changed everything. The Plenty are responsible for so much prosperity, but some, like the Bloom of the kua-tin, think of it as some insidious plot. They're like a telegram company protesting the invention of the telephone. Or a typewriter company protesting the invention of the word processor."

"Wait," I said. "So when they have the Krakaren manufacturing drugs and giving it to the pooka to distribute to everyone else, what they are really doing is making some sort of bullshit metaphor? To make a political point?"

"That's what it looks like. This whole floor is a racist political cartoon, telling the universe how shifty the Krakaren and the Plenty are. Borant has been very vocal about this for a while now. They say the Plenty are selling everybody this technology just so everybody will become addicted to it. But one day they will take it all away, and that will, somehow, allow their overlord, the Krakaren, to I don't know, absorb the entire universe. It's a bit ironic if you ask me, considering how Borant are actually using the tunneling technology to spew their hate everywhere."

All of this was interesting, but I didn't really give a shit who was racist against who when all of them were stepping all over us. As far as I was concerned, they could all go fuck themselves. But the story itself was important to know.

"But anyway," Mordecai said. "Now that we know how to get to the front, we just need to wait out the timer and hop down the stairs. Oh, and then give me your table upgrade coupons so I can boost up my alchemy table before we go down a floor."

I exchanged a look with Katia. We'd both already spent the upgrade coupons. "Okay, I said. We'll give you a quick recap. But

you gotta promise not to smack us again."

"Wait until you hear about how we stuck Katia to the front of a train and then killed Hekla," Donut added.

We took our naps and reset our buffs. By the time we were ready to emerge out into the world again, we had one day and 10 hours left. Mordecai had been busy while we slept. He'd rearranged the crafting room. He'd installed that repair bench I'd found and bought three more benches. Two with our coupons and then one with gold. He bought a second alchemy table, which he said was necessary because he could specialize one of them. He bought a metalworking table, which he said he'd explain the purpose of later, and he bought something called a **Bolt-Thrower's Workshop**, which would eventually allow for the mass production of explosive and other magical crossbow bolts.

"Once we get that sapper's table up a few more levels, you can build Katia some great ammunition," he said.

We hadn't yet told him about the bolt she'd gotten from her sponsor. There was just so much he'd missed. I'd bring it up soon.

He'd been aghast with some of the chances we'd taken over the past several days, and we had argued quite a bit over some of the expenses, but he'd been particularly impressed with the progress Katia had made plus some of the items I'd manufactured, including the landmines and the heal-infused smoke curtains. Both of those items I'd actually gotten from the cookbook, but if he suspected anything, he said nothing.

We still had a lot to talk about. We hadn't discussed the Kimaris figure nor the PVP coupons nor a dozen other small items. I wasn't finished with him regarding that bullshit with Chaco, either, but we simply didn't have the time.

I finished my daily training to find Katia leaning over the map, chatting with Mordecai.

"But if these railways represent paths to the center of the galaxy, are they really all on the same plane?"

"All I know is what I've learned from years of watching Syndicate programs," Mordecai said. "When my world was taken, we weren't much more advanced than your world was. We'd colonized a few planets in our solar system, and that was it. I was more interested in fungus and plants than the stars. But you're right. I think maybe it's, I don't know, squished."

"I put it all together, and we're still missing half the system," she said. "Plus that symbol only works from above." She trailed off. She started scribbling furiously.

"It doesn't matter," I said, coming to look over the table. "We know where the stairs are. We just have to defend it."

"Wait," she said, drawing a line. "Are they able to make things upside down? Like make you think you're right-side-up when you're really upside down?"

I thought of the fight with the rage elemental. He'd cast a spell on us that had turned the hallway upside down.

"Yes," I said.

"They have done that before," Mordecai said. "They've done it several times, actually. It's easy to do and saves space."

She took the paper, and she folded it in half. She held it up to the light. She ripped it a little and rearranged it again.

"I figured out how to make the logo work," she said. "Also, I think I know why there were only six station mimics. And why they're so big. They're really occupying two stations at once."

"Wait," I said. "So right below our feet, like if we dig down far enough, we'll come to another train station, and you're saying it'll be upside down?"

"It *could* be right side up," she said, "but I don't think so. If it's upside-down and mirrors the tracks above it, then the map works. We are at station 59 on the zomp line. If we dig, we'll end up at

station 59 on some other line. Probably whatever the inverted color is on the color wheel. Plus, I think there might be an empty chamber between the two levels. Remember that room from the recap episode? With the stairwell and the ladder? I think that's the space in-between."

"These tracks are twisting around and over and under each other already. A mirror world doesn't make sense."

"I don't think it's a mirror of the entire tangle. Just each individual line."

"What? Katia, what the fuck? How does that make sense?"

"Just think of every line as a noodle, and the track is on the outside of the noodle. And there's another track on the opposite side of the same noodle. And think of the abyss as a fork stuck into the middle of the bowl that has been turned a few times. It's not so much a spirograph pattern like we originally thought, but a chaotic mess. And in the middle of that giant bowl, the named lines make a pattern, spelling out the logo of the Syndicate. Actually, they do it either 12 or 24 times. Or maybe 48. I'm not sure."

"Yeah, not helping. Jesus fuck. Nobody can follow this."

"Just pretend like you half understand."

"Sure. Why not. That's wild. And weird. And it just makes everything more, not less, complicated. Which goes back to my original statement. It's amazing that you could figure this out. Really. I don't want to come across as a dick. But how does this information affect us now other than giving me a bigger headache than I already have?"

Katia shrugged. "I don't know if it will. But this double-sided noodle thing is a lot of trouble to go through for it to not make any difference. Maybe it's just extra fluff to appease the nerds. But it's been bothering me for days, and now it makes sense. It feels like a trap to me. The announcement said we'd have our hands full, but unless something new happens, that's not true."

She was right. But what was the purpose other than to be confusing as shit?

"Hey, Mordecai," I said. "When you first said you figured out the map, before your time out, you said this was something you'd seen

before, just on a smaller scale. What did you mean?"

"There was a floor once that was like a rat maze, and it had rooms that were like giant, sliding puzzle pieces. It was also a fourth floor. The pieces of this one area slid together to make the Syndicate logo, and it opened up the exit. Actually," he said, eyes going wide. "I forgot about this part. Once the pieces were together, the whole thing spun on the center axis, flipping everyone upside down into a hidden chamber below them."

Carl: Hey Imani and Elle. What do you know about the province boss that's hanging out in some of the station 36s?

Imani: It's a bunch of wrath ghouls tied together. It forms a giant monster covered with mouths. It fills the whole station. It's pretty much the same thing as the boss at all the station 48s.

I thought for a moment. If the floors flipped, it wouldn't make a difference. Unless… *Holy Jesus*.

Carl: Is the boss attached to the ceiling of the chamber?

Imani: I don't think so. But I don't know for sure. What are you getting at?

Think, think.

Elle: The fuckers sound scary as shit. You're not thinking about fighting one are you? Because I'm pretty sure we talked about this already, cowboy. Nobody can even kill one of those city boss mimics, let alone a province boss. Did you watch the recap? Those poor bastards fought that boss and were wiped in about thirty seconds. Also, that was pretty fucked up. What you did to that poor hyena. I know the show is exaggerating things, but I worry about you sometimes.

Carl: Do you know if the ghoul generators at 12 and 72 hang from the ceiling?

Imani: I think they just float in the middle of the room. Carl. Speak to me.

I returned my gaze back to the circled station 24, where the Krakaren babies were gathered. They were getting bigger by the hour. By all accounts, they weren't ranging far from the area. But if

there were so many of them, getting bigger by the moment, where were they all going?

"You know," I said. "If this whole thing is a metaphor like you say, about how bad the Krakaren monsters really are for the universe, about how they're using the tunnel system to spread their influence or whatever, then I'm guessing they'll want them to be the final blow. The exclamation point to their stupid political cartoon."

"But how?" Katia asked.

I think there might be an empty chamber between the two levels.

I thought back to the time Katia and I entered the empty stairwell station. It'd been a group of stairwells, all closed. They were in a circle in the middle of the room. How big was that empty space in the middle of the circle? Pretty big. About the circumference of a railway tunnel.

Carl: Fuck me. I think I've figured it out.

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Immediately after the revelation, we jumped into action. I frantically sent out a notification for everybody to abandon all stairwell stations. Any other place would be safer. We didn't know exactly when it was going to happen, but I suspected it would be soon.

A few groups thought I was full of shit, and they happily said so. Thankfully I talked Bautista over at the crowded station 72 to get out of there. They mostly fell back to the employee station 60, waiting to see what would happen. Several other groups retreated to the tracks and the platforms. They still had ghouls to contend with there, but not so many. For now the Krakaren babies were staying put and only attacking if you got near station 24. The little fuckers were getting bigger by the hour.

Elle took a team of fighters, including Katia and Donut, to range down to the outskirts of station 24 to fight and grind on the things, which were now all level 14-17 **Krakaren Juvenile Clonelings**. They were monkey-sized and covered with tentacles. Katia was trying out her new crowd control techniques while the others experimented with different types of attacks to see what worked best against them. Fire worked well. Crossbow bolts took them down, but only if you hit center mass. Chopping off their tentacles caused them to retreat, but only temporarily. Spells like *Magic Missile* worked, but not too well. Lightning did nothing. Elle's freeze attacks did nothing unless it was an icicle through the body. Bashing weapons only worked if you hit really hard. Psychic attacks worked

really well, causing them all to stop for a moment, but it didn't do any real damage. We only had two people who could cast that type of magic.

The monsters were fast and had round, teeth-filled mouths that worked like living garbage disposals. Their tentacles burned on touch. Their blood was caustic, like with the xenomorphs from *Alien*. Plus they screamed, Katia said, which was really unnerving.

While Katia and Donut killed Krakaren children, I went to work. It took a good five hours to get the two interdiction carts back to station 75 and then dialed into a colored line that intersected with the correct station 36. From there I gathered 20 high-strength crawlers, and we went to work transporting one of the two carts—we chose the Def Leppard cart—from the rails to inside the main chamber of station 36. We physically lifted it off the tracks. I was worried 20 guys wouldn't be enough, but once again I underestimated our extreme strength. We lifted it easily and with little effort. After some experimenting, I found it only took five or six guys to lift the cart.

When I first came up with the idea, I hadn't thought it through. Each rapid-response cart was about the width and height of a cargo van, and maybe one and a half times longer. While the station platform, and the stairwell itself, was just wide enough to carry the cart, there was no way to get it through the tight hallway system that led to the main room of station 36. In my head, the caverns had been much bigger, but when I arrived, I realized the plan was DOA. The hallway walls were practically indestructible, and we didn't have time to fuck around trying to figure out how to widen them, go around several bends, and then get the train cart into the room.

Salvation came in the form of Zhang, Li Jun's best friend. He emerged just as I was directing the crawlers to put the cart back on the track. I examined the bald, Chinese man's properties as he came jogging up. He was still human. He was a level-28 **Earth Mover**. Li Jun had said he was a mage-tank combo. He now wore glowing, black and gold, segmented armor.

"Stop. Wait," he said. He bent over, breathless. "Sorry. I ran here from the safe room. Li Jun told me what you're attempting, and I've

come to help." He held up a stick. "I got you guys."

"What is it?" I asked.

"It's a magic wand. It shrinks. It only has one charge left. It doesn't work on living things, but we still used it get past a few bosses. Once we shrunk the monster's collar, and it choked him to death. And once I used it to stop a train that was going to run us down. I was saving the last zap for an emergency. It'll work on the train cart, make it small for five minutes. But it'll still be as heavy as before."

"Holy shit," I said. "That's amazing. How small will it make it? If it's still heavy, we'll still need it big enough that we can push and turn it."

"Size is easy," he said. "It starts shrinking once I zap it, and it keeps getting smaller until I turn it off. Otherwise it stops on its own when it's about the size of a button."

"And you did it on a train before? You know it'll work?"

"Yes," he said. "It worked on the whole train and killed everybody on board. I jumped six levels all at once. I even got a boss box and a multi-kill box. It saved our lives."

"Well, shit," I said, turning to the other crawlers. "Let's get this thing back up the stairs."

After a harrowing four and half minutes rolling the much-smaller cart through the twisting hallway, we pushed heavy cart into the main chamber. We quickly shoved it to the center of the room, stopping it between the circle of inactive stairwells. It sat on the circle in the middle of the room. The floor had a faint etching on it: a side view of the Syndicate logo that I'd never have noticed if Mordecai hadn't shown us the night before. We all quickly backed up as the cart returned to its regular size, making a popping noise like a balloon being inflated.

"All righty," I said, slapping my hands together. "Now comes the fun part."

Imani came to stand next to me. She regarded the cart suspiciously. I knew she wasn't a big fan of this idea, especially the next part. Still, she'd contributed to the plan. She'd still had a few of

those chain-making scrolls in her inventory, and I asked her to use them. Several piles of the magical chain sat coiled and ready.

"Are you sure about this?" she asked. She had her colorful butterfly wings fully extended, and every time they touched me, they gave me a constitution buff that lasted ten minutes. The buff didn't stack, but the timer reset every time the ethereal wings brushed across me. Each brush felt soft against my skin, like a sudden, pleasant breeze.

"No," I said. I started pulling large, metal pieces from my inventory as the others started attaching the chains to the cart. "No, I'm not sure. But nobody else was coming up with any other ideas."

She nodded. "What about the others? At the other stations."

"I warned them what's coming. That's the best we can do. Some people are sending folks to the Desperado to buy smoke curtains and hobgoblin dynamite to get ready. Others are forming outside the rooms and waiting to see what happens. If it happens like I anticipate, it's about to get crazy. Everyone is going to have to fight. They'll have to carve their way to the stairwells and then keep that path open while everyone goes down."

"And you really think this cart will keep us from having to fight?" Imani asked.

I grinned. "Oh, I'm sure there'll be plenty of fighting. I just want to even the odds a little."

Across the way, a man with a spell that worked like an arc welder joined up two pieces of metal that had been too big for me to work at my engineering or new metalworking table. I'd already attached the two train wheels to the top, which were part of the pulley and lever system that we'd use to lift the cart. When they were done putting all the pieces together, the crane would have five legs, one placed between each of the five stairwells. Each piece would arch up and meet high above the center of the five stairwells. When we were done, it would look like some bullshit college campus art installation, or a half-finished jungle gym, instead of what it really was: a crane.

Less than an hour later, we used Imani's magical chain to lift the back end of the interdiction cart into the air. The cart lifted easily, and the magical chain did not break. Once it was pulled all the way

up and about a half of an inch off the ground, we locked the chain into place. The entire cart hung vertically in the room, like it was a prize fish on display. The front of the cart faced downward. The small scoop that represented the bottom of the portal scraped against the marble floor. With a group of us holding the cart in place and several others leaning against the crane's five legs, we made a few slight adjustments. Once we had the cart where we wanted, we used additional chains to anchor the front in place so it wouldn't swing.

From there, I used my handmade ladder to climb up and to the cockpit. I patted the two Growler Gary left hands to make sure they were still firmly in place, and then I turned on the portal. I tuned it to the abyss.

The portal crackled to life, facing downward. It was almost the exact same size as the circle of marble in the center of the room.

Katia and Donut returned to the chamber. Katia was still 37, but Donut had raised a level to 33. Mongo had gone up a few levels to 26. Mordecai had insisted that we used Mongo as much as possible before the level was done, and I was glad to see the dinosaur had done well against the octopus monsters.

"I think it's going to happen soon," Katia said. She was in her she-hulk form, about eight feet tall and wide. She had her riot shield on her left arm, and she'd chosen to keep it in its original form. It made her look especially imposing. "They all started heading back into the station a few minutes ago."

"They're quite easy to kill," Donut said. She jumped from Mongo's back to my shoulder and gave me a side headbutt. "You should've been there. It was fun."

"I bet it was," I said. I pointed to the dangling interdiction cart with the crackling portal. "God, I hope our theory is correct."

"Well," Katia said. "If the entire floor disappears, and not just the center, then there's nothing we could've done anyway. The clock is going to hit one day left in ten minutes. I bet it'll happen then."

"Okay, guys," I called. I looked nervously down at the floor beneath my feet. "Everybody out of the station. Quick."

The clock ticked down to one day left. We'd all left the station, spreading out to the several different platforms that led up to the main room. We stood upon the Vermillion line platform, where my sole remaining interdiction cart waited. This was the same cart we'd ridden all the way up to the end of the line to save Bautista and crew. This one was tuned to station E, the same station where the mimic still waited for crawlers to munch upon. No monsters had approached for a while now, but we didn't want to gather everybody in the same place, nor did we want to get sneaked up upon. So we dispersed. Donut stood on my shoulder while Mongo leaned up against me. Katia and Elle chatted while Imani moved about the others, making sure they were all okay.

And just like that, it was on.

System message. Attention. Attention. The management of the Iron Tangle would like to warn all customers and employees that the system has broken down. No more lines are running. You are no longer safe. We have been betrayed by the Krakaren, whom we thought were benevolent. We have been forced to initiate the self-destruct sequence. Throughout the system, the emergency escape tunnels are opening. Please be aware of possible gravitational shifts when you enter the escape tunnels. All employees are urged to use the tunnels to proceed to station 60 and await further instructions. All customers please use the escape tunnels to proceed to the stairwell portals at stations 12, 24, 36, 48, 72, or 433 on any of the lines. These stairwell portals are powering up now and will open in exactly 18 hours. They will only be open for six hours before the self-destruction charges will blow.

This is the Iron Tangle, signing off. May the gods have mercy on you. Thanks for riding with us, and have a great day.

"They're laying the story on a little thick," Donut grumbled. "I mean, really. Are we supposed to be cosplaying as terrified commuters now? Do I look like someone who would use public transportation?"

A mighty screeching noise filled the entire dungeon, like a rusty, old door being forced open. I felt a rumble under my feet.

My chat was suddenly filled with people screaming for their lives.

Ronaldo Qu: a round section of the floor disappeared in the middle of the station. It fell away and then it shot up and out of the hole. The octopuses are pouring in. They're falling into the room, but from below. They're big now. Human sized. Jesus. Jesus. They just keep coming. We have to run. We need to find another stairwell. There's too many.

Gwendolyn Duet: The bomber guy warned all of you dumbasses. Fall back to the train lines. Hold them at the choke points.

Ronaldo Qu: He didn't say it would happen this bad.

Gwendolyn Duet: Are you on crack? This is exactly what he said was going to happen. It's literally the exact thing he warned you about. Now clear the chat.

Ronaldo Qu: Fuck you bitch.

Several iterations of this conversation filled my screen. All over, the center of the stations were falling away, and then the Krakaren monsters were pouring into the rooms. I felt an odd mix of terror and pride that we'd accurately predicted what would happen. But that pride was short-lived as I realized how many people, despite our warnings, had chosen not to protect themselves. I couldn't believe people could've gotten this far and still remain such idiots.

We were ready for an onslaught of the monsters to pour out of our own stairwell station and come at us. We all waited, weapons ready. Imani barked at the flamethrowers, telling them to be on the lookout. Nothing happened.

"Holy shit, Carl," Elle said after a minute. "You crazy sonofabitch. I think your stupid idea worked. Let's go check it out."

We cautiously returned up the stairs and through the tunnels. The flamethrower squads uprooted their defensive positions and followed. We entered the station. The interdiction cart remained hanging upside-down, directly over the hole. Monsters poured into the portal. We could see it through the haze of the portal's backside. The Krakaren monsters fell headfirst, feet first, and sideways into the portal, like the hole in the ground was actually in the ceiling. Thousands of them. They kept coming and coming, getting sucked directly into the portal and to the abyss.

We all stood and stared. The portal crackled like it was getting hit by hail.

Imani was the one who snapped us back to reality. "Secure the entrances. Set the flamethrowers back up like before," she yelled. "I want a ring of flamers and mages around this portal in case something happens to Carl's cart."

Behind me, someone cried out in surprise. I turned to see a pair of juvenile Krakaren beasts slinking into the chamber from one of the opposite entrances. They weren't coming into the room from the newly-opened "escape tunnel" but from one of the main railways. The things had likely been filling the secret tunnels between the tracks, the center of Katia's "noodle," and once the hatches all opened, they were being spooged all over the place. If they were also going into the regular, empty stations, then me plugging the hole here was only a temporary fix.

We jumped into action. Katia rolled forward, turning into her sentinel gun. She took out both of the octopuses while the others set up their perimeter defensive positions. Donut leaped to Mongo and rushed to defend one of the chokepoints while I stood sentry over the portal.

Once the defenses were set, Katia returned to her humanoid form and stood next to me and Imani. I imagined the giant abyss pit filling up with the monsters, so many of them together that it overflowed. The pit was much too big for that to really happen, though I suspected the majority of these monsters were surviving

the high fall from the portal to the bottom of the abyss. These things were squishy and resistant to blunt trauma. The pit was probably a writhing mass of these monsters by now. I wondered if they got along with the hordes of ghouls that lived in the bottom of the abyss. Or with the wall monitor lizards who lived on the edges.

It didn't matter, I decided. As long as they remained way over there.

In fact, I realized as I watched the constant stream of creatures, it was probably a good thing for everybody if they did survive the fall into the pit. These were living, non-undead creatures, which meant every time one of them died, a ghoul was generated at a nearby ghoul generator.

"Some of these guys we've had to kill three times," I said. "Once when they hit the stage-three DTs, then again when they're Krakaren babies, and then again if they turn into ghouls."

"It's a lot more than that," Imani said. "The stage-three monsters were each birthing thousands of these octopuses. Octopi? What's the right word?"

"We got incoming," someone shouted. A group of red dots appeared on the map, though it wasn't so many. Maybe twenty of them. I felt the hot whoosh of the flamethrowers even halfway across the room. The mobs were killed in seconds.

"Hey, don't be an experience hog!" Donut shouted at a crawler at the front defensive position.

"Yo, Donut," I called over my shoulder. "Play nice. We're all on the same team here."

"Carl, I said I had the monster on the left, and he shot him first with the flamethrower!"

"You did not call the target," the crawler said. "And I am not a 'he.'" I looked over and saw what the problem was. The crawler operating the flamethrower was a Level-27 **Dog Soldier**. Her class was something called a **Crisper**. She looked like a walking, talking German Shepherd. She had a Vietnam-era helmet on her head with little holes cut out for her ears. Her name was **Tserendolgor**. I couldn't even begin to imagine how to pronounce that name, nor

guess what nationality she originally was. But the fact she was a dog-themed race meant Donut would have an instant dislike of her.

"Goddamnit, Donut," I said. "Go to a different position and leave her alone."

"Yeah, go to a different position, cat," the woman said.

Donut hissed but led Mongo to the other side of the room.

"And I thought she was getting better after all that business with Growler Gary," Katia said.

"That *is* better," I said. "You should hear her talk about cocker spaniels."

"Oh, I have," Katia said. "She's told me all about your next-door-neighbor's dog, Angel."

"They're still coming from below, but maybe not as many," Imani said, leaning over the portal to get a better look. "I wish it wasn't so blurry so we could see into the hole."

"It's definitely getting less thick with monsters," Katia agreed.

"You know," I said to Katia. "If your whole double-sided track theory is correct, then there's a straight line through that hole to the other chamber 36, and there's probably one of those province bosses in there. Super close. That's what I was originally worried about when you said the tracks were mirrored."

"Yeah, me too," Katia said. "If we didn't have your portal, I'd be worried about it spreading into this room."

Behind us, another group of mobs approached and were quickly dispatched. Then another. Soon, we had red dots all around us. There were four chokepoint entrances to the chamber, not including the secret one to the employee line, which we kept closed and guarded. The *Nightmare* was down there, still parked a few stations down. I'd poked my head into the line a bit earlier to see if the train was still there. We'd last used it to ferry Brynhild's Daughters to sixty, and that's where it remained.

Donut and I had walked down there earlier to see if Fire Brandy was still kickin', and she was. We'd found her leaning out of her hole in the cockpit, talking with a pair of dwarven engineers who'd apparently climbed in through the broken side window. One of them had wanted to take the train to I-don't-know-where, but Brandy had

refused. “There’s nowhere to go, you fool,” she’d been saying when we walked up. The dwarf had argued, and I’d thought maybe we’d have a fight on our hands. But they quickly left upon our arrival.

The train was still on and idling. I could tell right away that something was wrong with the demon woman. Her usual, matter-of-fact, southern-belle-but-also-German persona had shifted to something more melancholy. She was still giving birth regularly. I didn’t know if we’d get another chance to see her before the floor ended, and I’d wanted to collect more of the sheol rocks. I’d shown one to Mordecai and he’d practically jizzed himself and told me to retrieve as many as possible. I’d asked her if she could part with any, and she allowed me to take several hundred still-burning pieces along with a few dozen that hadn’t yet caught on fire.

“I’d give it all to you,” she said. “But I need to keep the fire burning nice and hot. Keep my babies happy, for as long as it will last.”

“Brandy, are you okay?” Donut asked.

“I talked to that dwarf friend of yours,” she said. “Tizquick. He told me about his daughter. They killed her, you know. Once word spread, they started to get angry.”

“Who?” I asked. “Who is they? And who did they kill?”

“The dwarves and the gremlins. They killed Madison, the human you brought up here. The human resources woman. They built a stand and a noose, and they hanged her. I didn’t see it, but they brought her body to me. I took it into the fire.”

“Holy shit,” I said.

“Only those mantaur creatures are holding the faith. I guess a few tried to fight the dwarves, but they all got chased off. I don’t know about those guys. There might still be some out there, so be careful.”

“That’s… that’s crazy,” I said. Madison hadn’t deserved that. Well, her *character* deserved it. That was the thing, wasn’t it? All these NPCs were playing characters, and only a handful were starting to realize it.

And that, I realized, was the problem with Brandy. She’d finally realized that this was all a construction. How did one deal with that?

Especially one who had children?

"We gotta get back there," I said. "If I don't see you, take care of those babies, okay?"

The demon woman didn't answer. She just nodded and returned to her fire.

An hour later, and the number of monsters coming through the hole in the center of the room had trickled to a stop, but the mobs were now approaching us from all the other angles. We were starting to see blister ghouls mixed in with the octopus monsters. I moved to stand next to Donut. We let the flamethrowers do most of the work, but I tossed smoke curtains and the non-explosive bangers at the incoming monsters while Donut hurled *Magic Missiles* at them. She occasionally cast *Second Chance* on one of the corpses and then *Clockwork Triplicate*. The zombie Krakarens wreaked havoc on their fellow clones for several seconds before they were torn down. Katia returned to her gun form. She towered over the group, choosing to sit high and fire down into the throngs. We stood amongst hundreds of other crawlers all throwing fire at the mobs. We held them back, but sometimes the waves were so thick, so frenzied, I feared we'd be overwhelmed.

Our only respite came when the dead filled the hallways so much, it created a clog. It'd remain that way for several minutes until the acid blood broke down their own bodies, and the corpses started to melt. Sometimes the corpses exploded for no reason, showering acid at the defenders. We lost several people that way.

We'd had to form barriers to keep the caustic liquid from pooling into the chamber, which would in turn burn the feet of the defenders. The acid didn't burn away with fire, but we found it could be frozen. The acid would eventually melt, but it lost its acidity after that. That became Elle's job. She zipped from one chokepoint to the next, freezing the pools of acid.

I worried about the others. I sent a message to Bautista, asking him for an update.

Bautista: We couldn't get back into 72. There are both ghouls and the Krakaren monsters, and they're coming from everywhere. We've fallen back down the line. We got chased to station 60, but we couldn't get in. There's a big group of those mantaur things guarding the platform. Each one is a neighborhood boss. They're super strong. One of them has gotten his hands on one of those alarm traps, and it's playing some heavy metal song over and over. I think the song is giving them a buff, and it's making everybody's ears bleed. We had to fall back. We're stuck between the two groups.

After that, I started to receive even more dire messages from several other groups. One group was pinned in the area between trainyard E and the monsters all pouring from the tunnels. They'd thought to switch over to the employee line, but they couldn't get close. And the station mimic at the trainyard was sending pieces of itself out to hit them from behind. They were getting squeezed.

Everywhere, groups who'd stayed in the stations had taken heavy losses, but those who'd fallen back were unable to get back in, and now we had reports of province bosses appearing in the rooms where there hadn't been one before.

"We need backup!" a voice cried behind me. It was the dog soldier woman. She was falling back. A human to her right abruptly had tentacles wrapped around him. His body exploded into mist. These new Krakaren monsters were suddenly all level 20 to 23 and about seven feet tall.

"Donut, Katia! Ludacris!"

"Mongo, stay!" Donut yelled as she jumped to my shoulder.

We detached from our spot and ran toward the hole in the defenses. "Get back! Let them through!" Elle cried. I pulled a boom jug from my inventory.

"Ready?" Katia asked, widening as she moved. She rotated her riot shield 90 degrees and pushed it forward, like a literal battering ram.

Ahead, the hallway was full of monsters, crammed tight. They screamed and rushed at us.

"Go!" I said.

She activated Crowd Blast. She rushed forward, exploding into the crowd like a wrecking ball. The Krakaren monsters and ghouls rocketed back like bowling pins. Acid misted into the air, and Katia cried out in pain.

I was already running, following her. She'd gone far, all the way to the first intersection. This junction was like a T, going left and right, both with short stairwells leading down, which in turn led to a dozen other chambers in each direction. I made a split-second decision as I ran, and I pulled a second boom jug.

Katia, dazed, but still on her feet, pulled her crowd-control baton and swung it in one direction as the crossbow flipped upside-down and fired in the other.

We came running up.

"Let me know when you're ready!" I yelled.

"Go," Donut said. "Counting down from three now."

I tossed the boom jugs in both directions just as Donut puddle jumped us back to the main room.

Twin fireballs erupted at the end of the hallway. The three of us stumbled backward, having been teleported back into the main room.

Only then did I feel it, the acid burning my face and legs. Donut cried out in pain, also burning.

But Imani was right there, and all three of us glowed. She'd cast something to negate the acid, and a moment later, it was as if nothing had happened. Though my jacket, my only non-magical clothing item, now had a huge hole in the left arm. My cloak and other magical items were unharmed.

The dog soldier and the others quickly reset their defense while Imani shouted for backup at the chokepoints.

"That was pretty awesome," I said, breathing heavily. "Katia, you okay?"

"I hate that ability," she said, wheezing. "But wow, it works well. Did you see them all? There were like fifty of them at the bottom of

both stairs, and you hit both groups."

"We just wasted my last *Puddle Jump* of the floor," Donut said. Mongo came rushing up and sniffed worriedly at Donut. "I'm fine. Mommy is fine." She looked over at the dog soldier woman. "You're welcome."

The woman just grunted and reset her magical flamethrower.

Boom. We all felt the ground shake. A huge explosion rocked the chamber. A moment later, a second explosion also rocked the walls. Everyone paused, looking about.

I looked worriedly over at the crane, but the device held. The chains groaned, and the cart trembled, but it remained hanging there.

"What was that?" Katia called.

I shook my head. "It was nearby. I think that was maybe the soul crystal over at station 12. The second explosion was maybe the one on the other side of the noodle."

"Fucking hell, Carl," Elle said, floating up. "Did you do that?"

"Why is it every time there's a big explosion, you immediately think I had something to do with it?"

"Because it usually is you," she said.

"She does have a point, Carl," Donut said.

"Was there somebody over there? Why did it blow?" Imani asked.

"I didn't see anybody on the map," Katia said.

Imani pointed. "Elle, take a team and check it out. Be careful. We might have to fall back to station 12 if the ghoul generators on either side are gone."

"On it," Elle said. She shouted at a pair of crawlers, and they headed toward the employee-line exit.

I had a thought. I sent a quick message to Mordecai.

<u>Mordecai</u>: I think you're right. I'm guessing the soul crystals they use for those ghoul generators are a little smaller than the one you have in your inventory, so they can't handle so much simultaneous stress. I know this because you're still alive. Too much local stress, and they pop, like fuses. Luckily when they go that way, they'll only

kill everything in the room and maybe a block in each direction. And not an entire quadrant.

Carl: Holy shit I have a glorious idea.

Mordecai: No.

Carl: You don't know what it is yet.

Mordecai: I don't care what it is. If it's a Carl idea, it's probably a brilliant idea that's going to get you killed. Donut told me about how you captured the *Nightmare* train. I bet you thought that was a glorious idea, too.

Carl: No, that was a dumb idea. This is much better. Though it's funny you mention the *Nightmare*.

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[32]

Time to Level Collapse: 17 Hours

Time to the Opening of the Stairwells: 11 Hours

When Katia had performed her crowd blast, quickly followed by me tossing the twin boom jugs, we'd killed several of the larger-sized Krakaren monsters at the same time. I didn't know if it was because we'd killed them all at once, or if the constant fighting and killing had finally added up to some lifetime load limit. Whatever it was, soon after, the two closest soul crystals had popped. At least that was what I was gambling on. I suspected the bigger the Krakaren beasts grew, the more of a burden each one put on the crystals when they died.

This was likely all by design. A part of the game. A way to keep everything "fair." In fact, I also suspected killing one of those province bosses likely had the side effect of blowing every soul crystal in the area.

Elle: First off, there was one of those weird-ass double stack boss dudes on the employee line. A mantaur or whatever they're called. I thought they were regular NPCs, but he attacked us. We took care of it. But make sure there's

a sentry on that employee entrance in case there's more. Anyway, station 12 is definitely the one that blew. All the monsters are dead. There's not even that much rubble, not like the last one. There's loads of corpses. The crystal is still floating in the middle of the room above the burnt-out generator, but it's not glowing anymore. It's tiny, like the size of a marble. There's a hole in the floor here, too, but nothing is coming up.

Imani: Look through the hole in the floor and see if you can see through to the other room. Don't go down there. Look quick and then come back.

Elle: I'm walking up now. Yeah. Hey Katia, has anybody called you a genius lately? The hole goes all the way to the other room. There's about a 20-foot drop, and there's another door. That room looks burnt-out, too. Weird. It's upside down. What a trip. Hang on, I'm going to drop a rock in to see what happens.

Imani: Don't. Just come back.

Elle: Oh, unwad your panties. What are we calling the inbetween space? The escape tunnel?

Donut: WE ARE CALLING IT THE NOODLE.

Elle: I dropped a rock, and it fell all the way into the room across the way, but then it fell back. It hit the edge of the hole, bounced once, and then it rolled along the interior of the noodle. I thought it would float in the middle, but it looks like "down" is just toward the closest interior wall. You could walk a loop-de-loop in the thing and always feel like you're standing upright. Like one of those carnival rides that spins really fast. I wonder what would happen if I balanced a rock exactly in the middle. Maybe it *would* float.

"Imani," I said. "I need a team to help us fight our way back to my last interdiction cart." We'd left it turned on upon the track, plugging the southward hole toward the train station. However, the mobs were coming from all directions now. Hopefully they'd left it alone. "If it's still there, Donut, Katia, and I are going to jump on

and then head toward the trainyard. I'll need to keep three or four of them with us because we're going to need to lift the thing up."

"What about the mimic?" Imani asked.

"We're not going to approach it. But if it comes for us, we'll just hit it with the portal again."

She looked at me dubiously. "All right. I'll ask for volunteers."

But before she even had the chance to ask, Li Jun, Zhang, and Li Na were suddenly there, right by my side.

"He has his volunteers," Li Jun said.

"What about the rest of your team?" I asked. I looked for the others. I recognized their old boss, one of the men we'd saved from the Maestro. He was standing next to the mushroom guy and several of the others, defending one of the four exits.

"They are needed here. We will help best we can and return," Li Jun said. "It is the least we can do."

"Awesome," I said, looking at the three in turn.

I hadn't had the time to examine, or meet, Li Na yet, but I examined her now. I remembered her as a slight, almost mousy woman. She was taller now, rail thin. Her skin was deathly pale, ghost-like. She still resembled the woman she was, but her face had taken on an odd, demon-like appearance. Her mouth was almost twice as wide as it should be, and her brow was deeply ridged. A short pair of black horns stuck up through her black hair. She wore a flowing, white and red robe with long, wide arms that almost reached the floor. Chains hung from the arm holes, and they dragged as she walked, causing her to jingle. I knew from the recap episode that she had at least four different chains she fought with. One caught on fire and another tossed wind blades when she swung it like a lasso over her head. One could keep mobs immobilized. She was level 30, and her race was something called a **Changbi**. Her class was the ominous-sounding **Slave Driver**.

She met my gaze, her dark eyes boring into me. Despite her disturbing appearance, I could see why Zhang had a thing for her. There was something there, deep and alluring. But also terrifying. She had an I-might-murder-you-at-any-moment-but-it'll-probably-be-fun-for-both-of-us aesthetic.

She bowed slightly. “Thank you for saving me and my brother. Twice.” She turned to Donut and bowed again.

“You are quite welcome,” Donut said, swishing her tail.

“Okay,” I said. “We have a lot to do, and not much time to do it. But the first step is to get to that cart.”

“Maybe you should tell us the whole plan before we dive headfirst into battle,” Li Na said. “In case you die, then we will know what the mission is and can carry on.”

Donut: SHE DOES HAVE A POINT, CARL.

Li Na, it turned out, was pretty damn smart. And intense. She reminded me a little of Imani, plus Chris, Brandon’s brother, who was still in the wind somewhere. And Hekla. She did not talk often, but when she did speak, it was usually to point out an obvious flaw in my plan. Both Li Jun and Zhang were too timid to tell me if I was full of shit. Donut wasn’t, but she rarely had an alternate plan. Katia often had good ideas, but she was prone to second-guessing herself to the point of letting me bowl right over her. I could tell right away Li Na would not suffer any fools, and if she opened her mouth, everybody around her paused to hear what she had to say.

We would never work well together as a party. Not after this, not if we wanted to remain friendly with one another. It’s not that I didn’t want to work with someone like her. In fact, I probably needed more people like her around me. I thought she was pretty cool, but I could tell she was quickly getting irritated with me. That was okay. Small teams that occasionally worked together was still the best way to go. There possibly was a formal way to attach separate parties according to the cookbook, but it didn’t get turned on until the sixth floor. A guild system. It was only mentioned in the 22nd edition of the cookbook, so I didn’t know for certain if it was still a thing or not. That happened a lot, where they tested new features for a crawl or two before they decided on whether to keep it or not. I hoped it remained.

It was Li-Na's idea to raise up the Def Leppard cart and then poke at the ass of the province boss on the other side of the noodle. If we enticed it to attack, it'd hit the portal and teleport to the abyss. "It'll sweeten the pot and give us an additional fall-back point," Li-Na had said.

It was a fantastic idea, and I told her so. We couldn't kill the thing, but we could at least get it the hell out of here. We'd have to do this now before we left. I quickly told the others the plan.

The monsters continued to come at us in waves from the hallways. It was constant, though less intense than before. About twenty percent of the people on my chat were just gone, which was a devastating amount, but honestly, it was much less than I anticipated. It turned out the Krakaren monsters had invaded all the transfer stations, but the regular, empty stations that weren't prime numbers or stairwell stations did not have trap doors in them, and those places all had only a single entrance. Bautista and his group were set up at three such stations. Each station had a short, easily-defensible entrance that was at the top of a thin set of stairs. All around the tangle, others were doing the same.

I warned everyone to keep at least two stations away from either station 12 or 72, the two types of station with soul crystals. We were going to attempt to blow them all at once.

But there were several things I had to do first, starting with this province boss. As Li Na had said, teleporting this thing to the abyss would just add to the pile.

There hadn't been any Krakaren mobs in the noodle for a while now, but we'd had dozens of reports of the boss from the other side seeping its way into the opposite room, thus occupying both. People who had abandoned their station 36 were fighting their way back to find a giant boss in the room, a boss they couldn't handle.

The province boss directly across from our room hadn't attempted to come in our space, likely because of the portal. Li-Na's idea was to raise up the Def Leppard cart, leaving enough room for someone to lean in and get its attention. We could only lift the cart an additional foot, but that was enough for Donut to carefully stick her head into the hole and peer across the way to the other room to

see if there even was a boss there. There was nothing on her map, but that didn't mean anything.

"Be careful," I said worriedly. If even a whisker touched the portal, she'd be zapped away to the abyss. We didn't dare turn it off. We should have used Katia for this, but Donut had insisted.

"It's there," Donut said as she peered into the escape tunnel. The noodle. "It's just hair and quivering skin covering up the hole. It's disgusting. It looks like one of those guys whose pants doesn't cover his butt. Like when your smelly friend used to come over and play video games while you two lied about your exploits with women. What was his name? Monobrow Sam? Really, Carl. I don't know why you had such revolting friends."

"Okay, pull back," I said. "Goddamnit, be careful. Watch your head."

She backed up and looked at me.

"I got an achievement just for looking at it! At the boss, I mean. Not your friend's butt. But I should've received an award for having to see that, too. The monster is glowing blue. And another color. It's sparkling."

"It's a province boss. It probably has a million buffs going at once. Can we get on with this? You're probably going to get another achievement for hitting it with a magic missile, too."

"It's going to be a good one," Donut said. "I have a full-powered shot stored in my glasses, and I'm going to hit it with a double shot."

A group of crawlers detached the chain holding the cart up and held onto it. I threatened each and every one of them not to drop it prematurely.

Donut leaned in, shot it, then scrambled back. "I hit it! I hit it!"

The monster bellowed, a thousand mouths suddenly shrieking at once. "Drop it! Drop the cart!" I called. The crawlers groaned, lowering the cart back into place. I locked the chain while I secured the lower chain.

The moment I did, the whole cart shuddered. I felt it. It had worked.

"Fuck yeah," I said. I turned to Li Na and held up my hand. "High five."

She just looked at me. “If I touch you with my hand, you will experience excruciating pain throughout your entire body that will cause you to lose control of your bladder and bowels.”

“Okay, then,” I said. “Moving on.”

A blast hit the portal, and the whole thing shook.

Something screamed. Loud and high-pitched, though not nearly as loud as before. Another blast hit it.

“Shit,” I said. “Maybe we only got some of it.”

“I knew this was a bad idea,” Imani said. “We should have left it alone.”

“These portals are pretty stout,” I said. “Nothing can get through it.” I didn’t actually know if that was true or not.

“Hello? Who’s there?” a voice called from the other side of the portal. He had a nasally British accent, like how a spoiled prince might sound. “Show yourselves, you cowards!” A moment passed, and then he screamed. Each cry was loud and short. It was unlike anything I’d ever heard. “You have deprived me of my prey, and I demand satisfaction!”

“Carl, it’s another crawler,” Donut said. “Look at the map.”

I looked over at Katia. “Turn off the portal, but get ready to flip it back on.”

She nodded and rose into the air on stilt-like legs to reach the controls. The portal flickered and turned off. I leaned over and looked down. Across the way another crawler stared down at me, also standing at the edge of the noodle and looking in. We met eyes over the distance.

“Carl,” he said. “I should have known such a colossal fuck-up could only be perpetrated by such a colossal dolt.”

“Hello, Prepotente,” I said.

The goat creature screamed, suddenly and unexpectantly, causing me to almost jump out of my skin. There was no reason for it.

“What the hell,” someone muttered behind me.

Prepotente went on as if nothing had happened. “Oh, hello, Donut,” he said, brightening. “Well met. You are even more delightful in person. I’ve been wishing to meet you for some time

now. We are two of a kind, you and I. From what I understand we're the only two remaining Earth creatures in the dungeon who have gained true sapience. I was so very disappointed to learn you'd obtained access to the Desperado Club and not Club Vanquisher. I do wish to share a brandy with you some time and to discuss our unique circumstances. Now, Carl. Is that other one with you? The murderer? If so, then there are five of the top ten here all at once. That must be a first."

"We have a few former top tens in here," I said. "Now what the hell are you doing over there?"

"What do you think? I was about to kill the boss. I had it asleep and entranced, and I was working on lowering its blood pressure enough to initiate cardiac arrest. Another two hours, and it would've worked, too. And when it perished, it would have blown multiple soul crystals, thus causing a chain reaction throughout the entire system that would allow our fellows to proceed to the next floor. Instead, I am now looking through a hole in the floor at definitive proof that humans and Neanderthals are related. Where, pray tell me, did you teleport my target to?" the goat asked.

"To the abyss. Why don't you come over here and call me a neanderthal to my face?"

He screamed.

"Gentlemen," Imani said, appearing next to me. "Both of you put your dicks away. We don't need this right now."

"I could kill you," Prepotente said. He said it to Imani. "I could crunch on your bones and glory in the sound that they made when they splintered."

"Bitch, what?" Imani demanded, her demeanor changing on a dime.

He screamed.

Thwap! The goat bleated in pain as he was smacked in the head with a stick. The attack came from someone standing right next to him. He disappeared from view, but he kept screaming, over and over in short bursts just out of sight. A new head appeared in the hole. A woman.

"I want you to sit there and think about what you've said, Pony," she said over her shoulder. This was Miriam Dom. The human shepherd. The goat lady, they called her. She was about forty years old, a little plump and dark-haired. She carried a long staff with a hook at the end like she was goddamned Little Bo Peep. She had a gentle, Italian accent.

"Don't you mind him," the woman said. "He says things like that, but he doesn't mean them. He was always a little ornery, even before the change. It's nice to meet you all. Sorry for the disturbance."

The goat returned to the hole and screamed once again. I didn't know how the hell she put up with this. Jesus fuck.

"I will kill you tonight as you sleep," Prepotente said to Miriam as he rubbed his head. I saw, then, that he had human-like fingers, though his fingernails were long and curled and black. Whatever change he'd undergone to make him intelligent was different than the one Donut had undergone.

"No you won't, sweetie," she said. She reached over and kissed the goat on the top of the head where she'd whacked him.

"Do it again," he said a moment later. "It still hurts."

"Only if you're a good boy. And apologize to those two."

He nodded solemnly and looked down at us. "I'm sorry I wanted to murder you."

"Good Pony," Miriam said and kissed the goat on the head.

Prepotente screamed.

"I have questions," I said. "So very many questions."

"Maybe some other time, sweetie," the woman said. "We need to find a different boss monster now. Ciao!"

They both departed from view. A new creature appeared, but only for a moment. It was huge and dark and covered with phantom, black flames that flickered with wisps that drank the light. Three pairs of human-like breasts ran down the monster's underside. This was another goat, transformed. It was the size of a horse. We'd seen this thing before. Mordecai had called it a hellspawn familiar. It made a wet chittering noise, something I felt deep in my bones. The air crackled with heat as it passed.

I exchanged a look with Imani, and she shook her head. The bizarre exchange told me all I needed to know about that group. We needed to stay the fuck away from them.

"Did you hear that?" Donut said. "He called me delightful!"

We had to fight our way to the cart. Imani dispatched a crew to help us grind our way down there. There were still dozens of the Krakaren monsters in the halls and on the tracks. I had no idea how the hell the goat team had survived in this. Reports from around the dungeon were that the waves were still thick everywhere. I knew we could be overwhelmed at any moment, so we needed to hurry.

Both Li Jun and Li Na were ferocious fighters. Li Jun was like a damn kung fu master, flipping through the air and grabbing tentacles and throwing the monsters. Li Na was similar, though she twirled and wrapped the monsters in her chains, paralyzing them, allowing Zhang to cast a spell called *Dirt Clod* that pummeled them to death with rocks.

All three of them, it turned out, had an immunity to acid attacks. After the incident with the Brindle Grubs on the second floor, it was something all three looked for in their respective classes. I didn't blame them.

The cart, thankfully, remained where we left it. The monsters had ignored it. It was turned on and facing stop 24, but there weren't many creatures coming from that direction anymore. Katia set up at the back of the cart, facing backward to take down anything that gave chase. Zhang, Mongo, Li Jun, and his sister stood guard in the middle of the cart while Donut and I took to the cockpit. We had but minutes to get on and get going before a new wave of red dots would descend upon us.

I hit the throttle, and we were off.

My immediate worry was station 24. The last time we passed it, we'd been jumped by Krakaren babies. I knew they'd all gone inside to pull their escape tunnel bullshit, but surely there were more

hanging out at the station, just waiting for some dumbasses to stroll on by.

And sure enough, as we blasted past the station, a single Krakaren stood on the platform. This one was huge, a massive octopus thing with swirling tentacles. A neighborhood boss, probably just as big, if not bigger, than the one we'd fought on the second floor. Luckily it was half-slopped onto the track, its giant tentacles casually hanging over the edge of the platform. We hit it with the portal, and it teleported the whole thing away, leaving a wet spot on the tiles as we continued to zoom toward the trainyard. I eased off the throttle after that, coasting to a stop just before we left the tunnel and entered the massive cavern that housed the trainyard.

We needed to get this cart onto the employee line, facing the deeper levels. In order to do that, we had to maneuver the cart to the entrance of the employee line with the portal facing the opposite direction it faced now.

The problem with that was two-fold. One, this cart was a different gauge than the employee line. The wheels were too close together, so we wouldn't be able to drive it on the tracks. And two, in order to get it there, we had to physically pick up the cart and carry it across dozens of other tracks, all through an area crawling with both ghouls and minions of the mimic.

We eased out of the tunnel and paused, taking in the massive cavern. The main, fenced-in area of trainyard E was still a good half of a mile away. I could see the wrecked remnants of the giant fence. The massive gate still stood, and so did the real administrative building. I could smell the acrid stench of burnt wood and bodies.

The walls here were dotted with dozens of cave entrances, and the ground was filled with just as many train tracks. Corpses lay everywhere, mostly ghouls, but there was a good number of crawlers sprawled throughout.

There had to be five hundred or more monsters between here and the trainyard. Most of them were south of us, near the old building and fence.

The mimic itself was too far away to attack us directly, though I knew from dozens of frantic messages that the monster's minions

and ridiculously-long tongue were causing havoc upon anyone in the area. It loomed huge in the distance, as tall as the chamber, only half-pretending to be a building now. A pair of blimp-sized red eyes glowed. One of the towers in the trainyard collapsed as we watched, though I couldn't see what had knocked it over.

A group of several dozen crawlers were holed up in that burnt-out administrative building fighting off the waves of ghouls and the mimic's minions, which were apparently nothing more than giant, car-sized mouths with centipede-like legs. If you chopped them in half, it just made two of them. I could see a few of them from our position in the tunnel. The strange mobs reminded me of those wind-up toys that were nothing but a chattering mouth.

There was another group of crawlers trapped inside of a lone train car in the yard itself, unable to leave because they were within reach of the massive city boss. I only heard about them second-hand, and I had no idea if they were still there or if they had survived.

There was a lot of that, in these last, desperate hours of the fourth floor. Cries for help. Rumors of groups in need.

You will not break me. Fuck you all. You will not break me.

We really needed to deal with this thing. The mimic. It was my goddamn fault it was here in the first place. But other than sneaking past the area, our mission for the moment didn't involve the monster. I could possibly use the portal cart to teleport it away like we did before. But we were no longer in a tunnel, with the protection that a tunnel provided, and the monster could easily get at us from the side or above or any other angle before we maneuvered the track-based cart at it. It was just too risky.

The plan was to sneak along the wall until we got to the employee line and to carry the large cart in. Hopefully we'd remain undiscovered. We'd need to protect the cart while Elle brought the *Nightmar*e up to meet us. Elle was already in the train, waiting for my signal to come down the track and meet us. She complained that Fire Brandy was being less than helpful and wouldn't do anything without talking to me first. At least she allowed Elle to move the train.

But then I spied the pair of mantaur creatures guarding the entrance to the employee line, and I knew that plan was out the window. With all the chaos spreading in front of them, they hadn't noticed us yet. I eased the silent cart backward, slipping it back into the tunnel and out of sight.

"Why did we stop?" Li Na asked.

"Hang on," I said, thinking. I formed a fist and stared down at my glove. Mantaurs.

Carl: Hey Mordecai. Quick question. If I, uh, accidentally summon the war god Grull, how long do I have before he's un-summoned?

Mordecai: Run. Don't fight him. He's goddamned invulnerable. You can't kill him. Take my special brew potion. Run. Don't look back.

Carl: Chill. I haven't actually summoned him. It's just a question.

Mordecai: By the gods, Carl. Don't scare me like that.

Carl: So…?

I actually knew the answer to this already, as it was discussed in my cookbook, but I wanted to confirm it, and I wanted to make sure there was a record of me actually asking the question.

There wasn't a whole lot about deities in the book. What was there didn't even warrant its own chapter. I'd found the information stuffed in the middle of the miscellaneous chapter:

<Note added by Crawler Coolie, 19th Edition>

There are three types of deity summonings. Avoid all three. Only idiots deal with deities. Some of them are genuine NPCs, but the big ones like Apito and Eris and so forth are always sponsored by some rich prick who basically paid extra to play a game called the Celestial Ascendency. The game is contained on the 12th floor, but the individual gods sometimes get called away. That game is different than the faction wars game and has its own followers and storyline. I don't really understand, but I do know this. The gods are invulnerable

except on the 12th and above floors. They are strong. They kill everything. And there ain't a damn thing you can do about it.

Anyway, the three types of summonings. All three require a physical vessel. Usually a mob. There are celestial boons, which is when a worshipper prays to a god, and he comes to fight for his worshipper. There are indentured summonings, where a powerful mage summons the deity to fight for him for a short time. This is against the god's will, and they are usually pissed when it happens. And finally there are involuntary summonings. That's when some poor fool accidentally summons the god because of some trap or spell or just bad luck. The gods are usually pissed about this one, too, and what's worse, they arrive untethered, which allows them to smash everything in sight.

In my short experience, all three scenarios lead to the summoner's death. Even the first scenario. Don't trust deities under any circumstance. Just stay the fuck away. That's my advice.

<Note added by Crawler Forkith, 20th Edition>

They may be invulnerable, but they still feel pain. They still bleed. The drivers of these bodies suffer. In honor of my sister, I pray I make it to the 12th floor just so I may slay one. I know this is but a dream, but I will look in the god's eyes and say to him, "This is for Barkith. This is for my sister."

Following this was a second note by Coolie, which focused mostly on involuntary summonings, which is what happened when I used my gauntlet. Apparently this was a pretty common thing, a way to collect more sponsorship money. God-summoning equipment was sprinkled throughout the dungeon, allowing for special guest appearances. Oftentimes the deity spots were purchased by celebrities. It was a safe way to get in on the game if one wasn't part of one of the dynastic families who controlled the armies of the 9th floor.

At the end of all that, there was one additional note. It wasn't something I'd be able to utilize any time soon, but it was interesting, and I filed the information away.

<Note added by Crawler Tin, 21st Edition>

I have noticed something quite curious. The gods and goddesses are Soul Armor. So when the aliens inhabit the bodies of the gods, they do so like the Intellect Hunters, the Scree, and the Valtay. The aliens are wearing the gods like clothes. That means they can, in theory, be removed with a successful cast of any spell designed to remove biological armor, such as Take That Shit Off *and* Laundry Day*. You'd have to first defeat the invulnerability, of course. Plus it won't hurt the gods, who will revert to their programing, natural state, whatever you wish to call it, and who knows what'll happen to the aliens who were driving them. But if you need a god to do your bidding, it might be in your best interest to first shed it of its off-world influence. I have noticed that the aliens are quite unpredictable in their manner.*

It took Mordecai an unusually long time to answer my question. I suspected he was consulting with Donut to make sure I wasn't planning anything stupid.

Mordecai: A deity involuntarily summoned lasts as many seconds as the level of the vessel plus as many seconds as the god's level. Grull is a sanctum-tier deity, which means he is level 250. Mantaurs are level 40, so it would be for a total of 290 seconds.

That was slightly different than what it said in my book, but the end result was similar. Actually, better. It said they'd last for about five minutes. They probably didn't know the exact formula. I quickly added it to the book.

Carl: How big will he be?

Mordecai: Why are you asking this?

Carl: Running low on time, Mordecai.

Mordecai: The answer is kind of complicated. The short answer is once summoned, he will grow until he fills the chamber he is in. Like that rage elemental you faced earlier. The real version can change sizes, but if he's summoned the rules are different. Summoning is a very complicated process that we don't have time to explain.

Carl: Wait, so if I summon him into a potion vial, he'll be tiny?

Mordecai: Yes. But he'll be strong enough to get out unless you build the proper sigil, and none of you are level-20 summoners, so that's not going to happen.

Carl: Gotcha. One more question. After he's summoned, how long before I can summon again. Can I summon him again right away?

Mordecai didn't answer for a long moment.

Mordecai: Once he's summoned and then unsummoned, you can bring him back right away. There's no cooldown. You can also steal him from one summoning to a second summoning. So if he's captured in a sigil, and a worshipper summons him again via a different means, the god will break his containment and move to the new vessel. This… this is very important to know. I learned it the hard way. The hardest way possible.

Carl: Thanks, Mordecai.

Mordecai: Now don't you even dare think about…

I closed out the chat. I turned to the others. "The plan has changed."

"To what?" Li Na asked the same time Katia said, "Uh oh."

"Don't worry. You'll figure it out as we go."

I stepped out from the tunnel, loaded the banger sphere in my xistera, and I spun, hurling it at the pair of mantaurs. They were pretty far away, and I honestly didn't think I could possibly throw the

damn thing that distance, but sure enough, the round ball sailed directly at them. My aim was off, but the metal ball hit the ground just in front of them with a *plink*. One of them reached down to pick it up. My second ball was already in the air, and this one hit home, crashing into the creature's head. He cried out in pain. A distant health bar appeared over him.

Their dots had been the white of NPCs, but the ghouls weren't attacking them, and I had multiple reports of them attacking all crawlers on sight. Their dots both turned red the moment they saw me there. I waved and waited. They fell forward and started galloping toward us. They moved quickly, but in an odd, halting fashion, straight out of a horror movie.

"They really are disturbing," Donut said from my shoulder. "They should have two pairs of legs and one set of arms, not one pair of legs and two pairs of arms."

"Yeah, it's pretty weird," I agreed.

"Li Na is really mad at you about this," Donut said. "She called you an idiot."

"That's because I am an idiot," I said. "I've never denied it."

We stepped back into the tunnel to wait for them.

All of us stood in front of the cart. All except Zhang, who now stood in the cart's cockpit, ready to turn it off if he had to. The portal swirled ominously behind our backs. From the business side of the portal, it looked like a pool of mercury. I had an inexplicable desire to reach out and stick my hand into the pool of magic. And then it would be over. All of this would be over.

The two creatures came galloping up, screaming at the tops of their lungs. They both had their Wolverine-style claws out and ready to engage.

"Hail! The battle is met!" one of them cried just as Katia, who'd been cosplaying as an oddly-placed wall pillar, swung down with all of her might onto the creature's back, pinning him to the ground like he'd been caught in a mousetrap. She held the powerful creature still the best she could. The mob cried out and scrabbled at the ground with his claws, showering rock.

Li Na bounced off the wall as a glowing chained ratcheted out of her arm on her dress. She flipped in the air, lassoing the chain around the creature's neck. He glowed blue, called Li-Na a wench, and closed his eyes.

The neighborhood boss fell into unconsciousness. He'd remain that way for a full minute, though she could do it again another four times she said until she had to rest.

Holy shit, she's something else I thought. How did Li Jun hit the top ten and not her?

And then I saw how Li Jun had earned his spot on the list.

I dropped a smoke curtain as Donut pumped a magic missile into the second mantaur. Katia remained atop the first, but her crossbow appeared and started pumping bolts into him. The creature howled as he stood to his full height. "Kill with power! Die! Die!" he shouted. His clawed hands glinted in the tunnel's light.

He charged directly in my general location despite the smoke curtain.

Li Jun, standing to my right, had cast a buff onto his hands that caused them to glow red. He slid forward, sliding along the track, and he slammed a fist into the creature's leg, ducking under a savage swipe that surely would've decapitated him. The leg shattered, causing the monster to cry out and tumble forward. Li Jun backflipped as the monster fell, again narrowly dodging a swipe of the claw.

Before I could react, Li Jun bounced off my shoulders and leaped forward. He sailed over the still-falling monster, landing behind him. The creature swiped forward. Mongo, who'd been to my left, dodged and savagely tore at his upper left while a mounted Donut pumped magic missiles point-blank into its head.

"Don't kill him!" I said, stepping forward. "Get ready!"

"A warrior's death is a good death," he croaked just as Mongo tore through his arm, completely severing off the metallic claw. The dinosaur roared, louder than I'd ever heard. Donut was also screaming. She shot one more missile into the creature's face. Despite all this, that large creature's health was only about 3/4's gone.

"Jesus, stop," I yelled. "Remember what we're doing here."

I punched the dazed and dying mantaur in the arm. The one not mangled by Mongo. I felt it break, like a heavy branch snapping.

1.5

I jabbed down with my foot, landing atop the back of the metal blades coming from the top of the creature's hand. More bone splintered under my heel, bursting suddenly from the skin. The thing groaned in pain. I leaned forward and punched again. And again. I punched until the notification over the creature's head finally started to blink.

"I feel the power," he croaked. "He comes. Oh god, my purpose is fulfilled. He is risen!"

A ten-second timer appeared over his head.

"Come on!" I yelled, jumping forward. Me, Li Jun, and Li Na reached down to pick him up. He was heavy as shit, even with our combined strength.

"Grull comes," he cried. He reached down with his two lower arms and clamped onto the track, making it so we couldn't push him closer to the portal.

Eight seconds.

"Zhang," I yelled. We'd anticipated this.

Zhang eased the cart forward as Mongo and Donut scrambled past us, getting out of the way. If we couldn't bring him to the portal, we'd bring the portal to him. This was dangerous, though, as we had to let go before he got sucked in.

Five seconds.

"Countdown!" I cried. "Three, two, one, drop him!"

We all jumped back just as the creature's head hit the portal. The timer was at one second.

He got sucked away.

And at that moment as he disappeared, I realized with horror he'd let go of the track with his lower hand, and he had that same hand wrapped tightly around my foot.

My invulnerability, I thought, as I was also pulled into the portal. *I couldn't feel his hand because my foot is numb. How fucking ironic*.

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Entering Trainyard E.

The idea, had it worked properly, would've played out something like this:

- We summon Grull, and using the portal to the trainyard, we throw him at the mimic.
- Zhang immediately switches the train portal back to the abyss. It takes ten seconds for this to happen.
- During this time, the war god Grull hopefully kills the mimic.
- Before trainyard Grull does too much additional damage or figures out where we are relative to his position, I pound the second, unconscious mantaur silly in order to initiate the summoning sequence once again. Another ten seconds.
- We throw this second mantaur into the portal, just like we did with the first, but this time we send him to the abyss. We do it when he has about one or two seconds left on his summoning. That way when he transforms, he's already on the other side, but it's before he splats against the pile of the crap at the bottom of the pit.
- The god, now hundreds of miles away in the abyss, possibly —hopefully—takes his rage out on the multitudes of

Krakaren monsters and ghouls and the province boss all piled atop one another.
- With the mimic gone, we get on with the plan, which may or may not be necessary anymore based on what happens at the pit.

For a strategy I'd made up on the fly, I thought it was pretty clever. I suspected most people would have thought that, too.

Had it worked.

Instead, I suspected most of the viewers were instead thinking to themselves: *Yep. That idiot was crazy. He jumped right into that portal. Not a surprise he got killed in such a gruesome manner*. *It was only a matter of time.*

All of this ran through my head as I tumbled into the trainyard, spinning painfully next to the glowing mantaur.

A massive pair of red eyes gleefully focused on me. The mimic. Its mouth yawned. Teeth appeared.

The world froze.

Music started to pulse. This was heavy metal. A deep, pulsing, bass-driven *chugga-chugga-chugga*.

Ahh, fuck, I thought.

A framed graphic of my face splattered into the air. The words **Death Challenge!** Stamped onto my face, with blood running from the words.

Ladies and gentlemen, we have ourselves a treat for you today. It's the death of a celebrated crawler, Crawler Carl, brought to you live! Who will be the lucky monster to kill him? *Who will it be*?

On the right, we have one of this floor's most infamous monsters! A lost soul, some say. The current crawler-killer champion of the floor, with over 23,000 deaths attributed so far. The apex predator of her world, the voracious, the insatiable, the grand impersonator supreme! It's a city boss! It's a level 90 Mimic Rex!

The mimic's portrait slammed into place as the real mimic howled, its train-sized tongue whipping out of it and arcing toward me.

The world froze again.

But will she get to Carl fast enough? On the left, we have nothing short of a god, and while we're all familiar with Grull, this is the *Dungeon Crawler World* debut of Grull's sponsor. Coming to you for the first time ever, once thought dead, thought abandoned by his family, shunned by society, but ready for his comeback. It's the host of *Death Watch Extreme*, it's Prince Maestro of the Skull Empire!

"What the shit?" I muttered as two more portraits slammed onto the screen with digital explosions.

The first was of the Maestro. The hair-covered orc sneered down at me.

The world remained frozen. In my periphery, far beyond the edge of the trainyard I saw movement. It was Donut astride Mongo, galloping full-tilt toward us. She was still far away, and she had dozens of ghouls and minions between her and me. Half were frozen in place, the other, closer half moved toward her. She fired missile after missile at them.

No, I thought. *Stay the fuck away. You're just going to die, too.* I tried to send a chat, but it wouldn't let me.

The portrait of the Maestro became animated for a short moment. It was an interview with him. "Yeah," he said, his condescending voice echoing oddly throughout the trainyard. "People thought I was on that ship, but my brother had already brought me into the dungeon." He laughed. "Like I'd be stupid enough to be vulnerable like that. You gotta try harder next time, worms. The Maestro ain't going down that easily. Oh, and rest well, mom."

The second portrait was that of Grull. He was a black-skinned, overly-muscular minotaur-like beast, but with a horse's body. A centaur with the head of a big, pissed-off bull complete with a golden ring in its snout. He held a smoking, double-headed axe.

Frozen on the ground next to me, the mantaur cracked in half. Steam burst forth. It was the only movement in the frozen area of the trainyard. I knew in order to be summoned, Grull had to emerge out of a "vessel" which meant he would pop out of the body like a chick from an egg.

The two portraits, of the Maestro and of Grull merged, forming a single picture. The god now had a distinctly Maestro-like face. The portrait sneered down at me from the air.

War God Grull. Level 250. Sponsored by Prince Maestro of the Skull Empire.

Warning: This is a deity. He is invulnerable on this floor.

This god has been involuntarily summoned to this location. Summoning rules apply.

The child of Taranis and Apito, Grull, the god of war, is one of the few trueborn heirs to the Celestial Ascendency. But with an angry streak as long as a horse's cock, Taranis worries his son may not be the best choice to rule the heavens. Plus his worshippers tend to be donkeys and other equine-themed creatures. It's a bit unsettling, even to a god.

Grull cannot die. But even if he could, would it really matter? At level 250, he could raze this entire floor in a day.

I hope you said your prayers and brought the lube, because you about to get fucked from here to eternity.

The description ended. The portraits all disappeared with a strobing explosion, sprinkling onto the ground like glitter. It was like we were at a goddamned monster truck rally. We were still frozen. The music got louder, faster.

The god has the obvious advantage here, ladies and gentlemen, but the Mimic has the speed, the minions, and the head start. Who will win? Will Carl die screaming? What will be left? Get your bets in now because.

Here.

We.

Goooooooo!

The world unfroze just as light burst into the air from the mangled mantaur body. The mimic tongue lashed at me, fast as a whip, slapping into the still-forming god, tossing it aside. It flew through the air, rocketing away from me.

I rolled and slammed onto the last item in my hotlist. I applied my potion of Invisibility just as the tongue smacked into the spot I'd been.

Dude! Where'd you go? You are invisible for 30 seconds. (Your Intelligence X 2)

Fucking hell, I should have put more points in that damn stat.

The mimic roared in anger. It—she—belched, and a fetid stench washed over the trainyard. A mass of the mouth minions burst forth, chattering. Each one was the size of a rhinoceros. They fanned out, several coming toward me.

At the same time, far to my left, trains and rocks and hunks of metal exploded outward as the god formed, rising higher and higher into the air until his head was halfway to the ceiling. I cowered as debris showered around me. On my map, a pulsing and spiraling red star appeared, spinning in circles like a buzzsaw.

One of the minions cried out as it was splattered by a falling rock. The gore sprouted legs and rushed back toward the mimic.

Grull screamed, his voice as loud as one of those alarm traps. He held the gigantic axe in the air. The handle looked to be a living oak tree, and the metal head of the axe moved, as if it was made of still-molten metal. He swung it up over his head, the axe trailing smoke. The top of the weapon seemed to clear the roof of the chamber by inches. He swung down, hitting nothing. He swung the axe a few times, as if testing the weight and heft of the weapon, which was the size of a goddamned passenger jet in his meaty hands.

The front part of Grull himself stood about four stories tall. Huge. Imposing. Terrifying. Yet, he still seemed small. As if this was a miniature version of his true form.

The mimic, I realized, was still bigger than the god. But it didn't matter. It was clear who was stronger.

"Here piglet, piglet," a deep, rumbling voice called. "You can't get away from me this time. I've been waiting for this."

I got up to run along the back wall, away from the god and away from the city boss.

Donut: CARL! CARL! WE'RE COMING!

Carl: Donut. Get the fuck away from here. Bring the cart closer and bring that goddamned mantaur. But don't come into the trainyard. I'm going to angle around and try to run out.

Donut: THE TRAINYARD WALLS MAGICALLY CAME BACK, BUT THEY'RE ONLY HALF VISIBLE. IT'S LIKE THE BOSS BATTLES ON THE FIRST FLOOR. I THINK YOU CAN GO IN, BUT YOU CAN'T COME BACK! YOU'RE STUCK IN THERE. I SAW ONE OF THE MINIONS GO IN, BUT THEN HE COULDN'T COME BACK TO GET ME.

Fuck. Fuck.

The tongue smashed onto the ground twenty feet in front of me, throwing me off my feet. A train car split in half, parts showering everywhere. A pair of the giant mouths made gargling noises as they shuffled forward on their millipede feet. I was about to be cornered, despite being invisible.

Carl: Okay. Forget about me. Continue with the mission. Don't risk the cart. You need to get the bomb into the abyss. Brandy will walk you through setting the *Nightmare* up to explode. After, go to Elle and Imani. They'll take care of you.

Donut: DON'T BE AN IDIOT, CARL. THAT'S NOT FUNNY.

Grull cleaved down with his axe, hitting the ground. The entire world shook. He was facing away from me, but I flew off my feet. The ground all around where he hit buckled and tore up, like it'd been struck with a meteor. The shockwave hit me, and it felt as if I'd been hit with a train. I hit the ground, bounced off the wall, and tumbled and rolled. I hit the edge of a portal. One of the portals the named trains used to go back to the loop. My heart leapt, but only for a moment. The portal was turned off. All of the trainyard portals were off.

Carl: Goddamnit, Donut. I'm fucked. Go. Get out of here before he sees you.

My health was in the red. I took a potion. I turned from the wall and ran along the tracks, running between a pair of named engines sitting cold. I could see the glowing walls of the trainyard, a quarter mile away. To my left, Grull loomed, slowly turning. The mimic's tongue lashed into the air.

I had but seconds left on my invisibility. I contemplated just staying here, between the trains. I was hidden. But for how long?

A shadow appeared, blocking the exit between the trains. It was one of the mouth things. Huge, slobbering. It was a giant mouth of sharp, needle-like teeth and nothing more, an impossible piece of anatomy.

Jabbering Jibber-Jabber. Level 35.

This is a minion of the Mimic Rex.

Have you ever gone to one of those buffets? One of those absurdly-cheap, all-you-can-slop-into-your-gullet affairs? The price is suspicious. The instant mashed potatoes taste like they're cut with sawdust. The meat is gray. The surrounding neighborhood is awash with missing cat flyers. You know what I'm talking about. You go, you feed, and as you leave, having gorged yourself to the point of oblivion, you can't help but hate yourself and think: *This is it? This is what life is? A trip from one trough to the next?*

The Jabbering Jibber-Jabber is the reanimated mouth of those who frequent such places. They hate everybody and everything and want nothing more than to feed. They are in a constant state of pain, and the only thing that alleviates this agony is the act of feeding. Anything it eats is instantly broken down and converted into stored energy, which it returns to its master after it has fully stuffed itself.

Warning: this monster is a splitter. If killed, there is a chance one or more smaller versions will appear.

Fucking hell, I thought. The monster didn't see me, but it was just standing there, snapping its mouth up and down like an alligator. The invisibility notification started to blink.

I kept running. I pulled an impact-detonated hob-lobber and jumped and rolled, leaping through the side of the monster's open

mouth like I was a trick poodle jumping through a hoop. I continued on my way and dove to the ground, covering my head as the Jibber-Jabber chomped down on the hob-lobber in his mouth. He exploded, showering body parts everywhere. None of the pieces got back up.

"There you are, Piglet," Grull-Maestro growled. The words were as loud as the end of the world. I'd put a good distance between us, but he was still terrifyingly close. He turned to stride toward me. The mimic was in the way. He cleaved down with his axe, splitting the monstrosity in half, as if it was nothing. A cleaved-in-two mountain of flesh appeared, slopping guts and strange organs and liquid everywhere.

All around, all the remaining minions looked up into the air and screamed.

I pulled a smoke curtain and tossed it. I started spamming the smoke curtains in every direction, filling the area as much as I could. Grull casually stepped through the gore of the mimic. The centaur god dragged his axe on the ground. All around him, the enraged bereft minions launched themselves at the god's legs. He ignored them, occasionally stomping them down.

He lifted his axe, and I knew what was coming next. It wasn't going to hit me, but it would hit close. Close enough to kill me. My Protective Shell spell wouldn't help me this time. But I did have one last trick.

I slammed the potion. Mordecai's Special Brew.

It gave me almost-invulnerability for thirty seconds. But I wouldn't be able to take another potion for ten hours.

Gold-Standard! Your healing is super accelerated!

A thirty-second timer appeared.

The ground underneath me buckled, and I flew into the air as if I'd been launched from a fiery catapult. I crunched hard against the wall of a train. The shockwave caught me, slamming me again. I felt my back shatter, blowing into hundreds of bits over and over, all while getting healed again and again.

Grull, who couldn't see me in the smoke, stepped right on top of me with his back leg. I cried out in pain as the flaming horseshoe pressed me deep into the ground. My pelvis shattered as I flattened.

My head missed the edge of the horseshoe by inches. Again, I was healed.

The whole world shook. A new achievement appeared big on my screen, but I was in too much screaming pain to read it before it fell in with the others into the folder.

Grull kept walking. He slammed his axe down again. I remained on the ground, waiting for the shockwave to hit. A train car rolled across the yard, bowling right over me, flattening me once again. Again, I healed. I gasped and gasped, unable to catch a breath.

Katia: Shut up and listen. Run back toward where the portal brought you in. We're sending help through.

"You can't hide, meat," Grull said as I jumped to my feet. Despite the blasting music, his voice cut through it all. I once again rushed along the wall, leaping over tracks and burning bits of rubble. *Don't think. Just run*. The billowing clouds, unfortunately, clung mostly to the ground here. It was enough to cover me, but it didn't impede Grull's view of the trainyard. "Isn't it just delicious?" he continued, apparently undisturbed by the smoke. "You can't even hurt me. Even if you tried to use that magical bolt my cunt of a sister wasted on your friend, it wouldn't work. You're not strong enough yet to hurt me. I have a dozen ways to kill you, but I want to pick you up and crush you in my hand. You're nothing. Your planet was nothing, and after this season is over, nobody is ever going to remember or care there was even a society here. Every single one of you pathetic worms will be forgotten. All of your lives and all of your history will be for nothing."

He rumbled in pain, and I looked over my shoulder, shocked at what I saw.

A second icicle bounced off the god's head. He grunted with annoyance as Elle shot by, rocketing past him like a bullet. He swiped at her, coming so close I feared she'd tumble from the air. At that same moment, I saw both of the trains barreling toward us. The portal cart rumbled forward on one of the colored-line tracks, and the *Nightmare*, further behind, chugged toward us on the employee track. I had no idea if anybody was driving either. Neither would

reach the trainyard for a good thirty seconds. Neither was on a track that would come anywhere near the god.

Elle passed by Grull one more time, again coming dangerously close. I had no idea she could fly that high or that fast. Grull opened his mouth, and a blast of heat shot forth, missing her by inches. The gust of magic was like a death ray. It melted everything in its path. *Jesus*. It tore through the trainyard, turning trains and awnings into slag. Elle rocketed across the trainyard, landing atop a stopped train that had derailed near the massive gate entrance, a good third of a mile away. When she landed, she stood next to a familiar figure.

Me. It was me.

It was, of course, Katia changed into me. But holy shit, even at this distance, I could see she'd done a good job. I stood there, cloak flowing, heart-covered boxers and all, both hands in the air flipping off the god. Katia turned and jumped off the train and disappeared as Elle took back to the air.

Grull screamed in rage and moved to pursue.

If he'd been even casually following my feed, the trick would be obvious. But the Maestro wasn't a smart dude, and everything was moving so damn quickly now.

Carl: What the fuck are you doing, Katia?

She didn't answer.

Li Na, Li Jun, Donut, and Mongo suddenly appeared in front of me, emerging out of the solid wall. They'd transferred into the trainyard via the portal cart, which was still barreling toward the trainyard. They must have all jumped in front of it. They all tumbled to a stop, all staring with awe at the pulsating remains of the mimic, which looked like a jello mold that had been dropped upside down.

"Goddamnit I told you to stay away," I cried, running up. My invulnerability ran out.

"You're welcome," Donut said as Mongo screeched in greeting. The Maestro continued to gallop in the other direction. At any moment, he'd realize he'd been tricked and come back this way.

"Well, what the hell are we doing now?" I asked. There were still a good two minutes left in the Maestro's summoning. That was plenty of time to kill us all.

Then I saw the almost-human-sized figure on the ground, struggling and wrapped in chains.

"Holy shit, what the hell?" I said.

But I understood, then.

<u>Donut</u>: I HAD NOTHING TO DO WITH THAT.

Li Na shrugged. "Similar concept with what you did with that gnoll. I had to waste a few healing potions to keep him alive."

Li Jun looked ill, but he said nothing.

It was the second mantaur, but only his top torso and head. He'd been savagely ripped off his main, lower body, and his top two sets of arms had also been lopped off. She'd healed him after each amputation, ensuring he'd remain alive.

"He's much easier to handle this way," Li Na said matter-of-factly. "And now we can throw him into the portal instead of risking another accident." She looked up. The portal cart came barreling into the trainyard, Zhang at the controls. He moved perilously close to the back of Grull, but the god didn't turn. He had given up on his earthquake attack and was now melting through the other side of the trainyard with his heat breath.

"You best get punching," Li Na said.

It only took five punches for the summoning to start. The moment it did, Grull cried out and turned in our direction. He roared and started galloping at us.

"Oh, fuck," I said. We picked up the former mantaur, who mumbled under his breath about killing with honor and drinking mead at the table of kings. His blue face paint ran off his face in rivulets mixed with tears and blood. "Sorry, buddy," I whispered at him as we tossed him up at the rapidly-approaching cart. We jumped

out of the way as the body, with only one second left, entered the portal and disappeared.

Grull, who appeared to have been readying some massive, body-glowing attack, whiffed away, leaving nothing but a smoke outline in the air.

The music stopped. There was no additional announcement like there usually was. Suddenly the only sound was the chugging of the *Nightmare* as it pulled up to a stop a few tracks over. Tizquick the dwarf leaned out the window and gawked at the remains of the dead mimic. In the distance, a group of wide-eyed crawlers emerged from one of the crashed train cars. They turned and ran from the scene, not trusting that this was over. I didn't blame them.

A whole page of notifications scrolled by.

"Glurp, glurp, motherfucker," I said before I collapsed in an exhausted heap.

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[34]

Time to Level Collapse: Five Hours

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"I wish we could've used my bolt," Katia said as we carried the portal cart, turned it and positioned it onto the employee track. The wheels fit just inside the wider track.

"It would've been a waste," I said. "He was right. We couldn't have hurt him. I'm pretty sure Princess Formidable giving it to you was more about sending a message to her brother than about actually getting us to kill him. Don't worry. We'll get to use it eventually."

With the death of the mimic, even more ghoul generators had exploded. After the Maestro hit the abyss, we received reports of a few additional blown generators at a few station 72s, though I suspected and hoped we could do better than that. My guess was the Maestro had bailed on his sponsorship after getting teleported away, thus creating less destruction in the pit than I hoped for.

In the middle of the enormous, disgusting pile of dead mimic, a single object appeared on the map. The neighborhood bosses dropped the neighborhood map. The borough bosses dropped the field guide. I already knew what this was going to be thanks to both

the cookbook and Mordecai. It was a little late to be useful now, but I figured I might as well grab it anyway.

I waded into the gore, picking up the prize. It was called the Map of the Stars, and it added boss locations and descriptions to a large area of the map. I zoomed out and saw nothing nearby except a few mantaurs who were moving in the opposite direction.

"I can't believe that jerk is still alive," Donut said. "At least you got to humiliate him all over again. I mean, really. He had unlimited power, and he completely messed it up. You're lucky it wasn't somebody who knew what he was doing."

"You're right," I said. I looked up at the ceiling. "That had to be really embarrassing. I bet even the mom would've done a better job. Too bad she died instead of him."

"What, exactly, are we doing here?" Elle asked. She floated just off the ground. She couldn't normally fly as high or as fast as she'd just done. She'd wasted a precious scroll on the maneuver. I promised her I'd find another and give it to her. She'd laughed and kissed me on the cheek.

"We're going to send the *Nightmare* into the abyss, and it's going to blow up, and it's going to kill loads of Krakaren monsters and maybe even that province boss. The whole ghoul system is already overloaded. One more big shock, and hopefully the whole system goes down."

"But it's way on the other side," she said.

"It doesn't matter. As long as it's on the same floor. Enough things dying at once, and the rest of the soul crystals will pop, and no more ghouls will be generated."

Elle cocked her head to the side. "Sometimes I think you're cheating, Carl. How do you know all this stuff? It's like you have one of those teacher's editions with all the answers in the back."

"He does," Donut said before I could think of an answer. "His name is Mordecai."

She grunted. "You lucked out with him. Our Mistress Tiatha is as useless as tits on a goose. You should figure out a way to use that nuke you have in your inventory. I bet that'd clear out the abyss."

"I'm saving that for something very specific," I said.

System Message. A champion has fallen. A bounty has been claimed.

We all looked at one another.

Imani: Are you guys all right?

Bautista: You okay?

Carl: Not us.

"What do you think that was?" Donut asked.

"I don't know," I said. "Believe it or not, Donut, there's all sorts of stuff going on out there that we're not part of. I'm too tired to care right now. It was probably that shepherd killing the goat because he wouldn't shut up."

"I hope it was Lucia Mar," Donut said.

"I doubt it," I said. "I really do."

"Okay," I said to Fire Brandy. "Let's get you and your babies out of here."

Tizquick the dwarf, who'd helped drive the train down to the yard exchanged a look with the demon.

"No," she said.

"What do you mean? We're driving it into the abyss. It's going to explode. You'll die."

"Yes, Carl," Brandy said. "We're aware. We're both aware. The dwarf and I have been discussing this, and we've decided to stay with the train."

"Honey, what about your two babies?" Katia asked.

"It's three babies now," Brandy said. She smiled sadly. "They gave me three this time. I remembered. After talking with Tizquick. I remembered my babies from before. Last time I was in a boiler, in an engine that controlled the heat for a massive boat. And the time before that, it was for a castle's heating system. Each time, I thought it was just a job. A way to earn money for my children. And I'd have them. I'd have one sometimes. Sometimes two. This time it was three. But then they were just gone. I had names for them.

Each and every one. You're not supposed to name them until the ceremony, but I had given them names. Each one is different. They've never returned to me. But I'm always back. Every time. But not anymore. They won't use me like this ever again."

"Nor me, lad," Tizquick said. "Dontchu worry. I know how this works. I'll make 'er blow nice and big just before we hit the bottom of the pit."

Donut: CARL. IF THEY BLOW UP THE TRAIN AND NOT YOU THEN YOU WON'T GET THE EXPERIENCE.

Carl: That's okay, Donut. Sometimes it's not always about the experience.

"Okay," I said. "I have a few more explosive satchels to place at the back of the train, and then you'll be ready to go. Goodbye, Brandy. Goodbye Tizquick."

"Carl," Brandy said as I stepped off the train. "I understand now. I understand what this is. You must help us. I know you have your own people to help, but we shouldn't be enemies in this."

"No," I agreed. "No, we shouldn't."

The train backed up to the edge of the trainyard, whistled twice, and then sped toward the portal.

"Another floor ending with a big explosion," Katia said after the train disappeared.

"Spoiler alert, Katia," Donut replied. "It's always going to end with an explosion."

Zhang climbed back into the cart and turned off the portal. Li Jun and Li Na stood off to the side, talking amongst themselves. I remained there, staring at the empty space where the portal once was. Fire Brandy had just killed herself to save her from losing more children. Tizquick had killed himself because his daughter had been a lie.

I thought of my own mother, who'd attempted to kill my father and then herself as a goddamned birthday present to me. She'd only

half succeeded.

I thought of everybody here with me now. They'd all jumped into certain death, just to save me. *Me*. I couldn't have survived without them. All my life, I'd felt alone. And now, at the edge of the apocalypse, I finally realized how much I needed other people.

Donut jumped to my shoulder. "How long before we know if it worked?"

A line of notifications appeared. Experience notifications flew past, one after another.

"It worked," I said. "Hey Katia, bad news."

"Oh yeah?" she said. "What's that?"

"I'm a higher level than you now. I just hit 41. Got a fan box, too. It looks like we killed lots of monsters in the abyss, and I got at least partial credit for it. Don't know why, but I ain't complaining. I don't think we killed the province boss, but that's okay. Plenty of time for that later."

Bautista: You did it. You bastards did it. We just felt the generator explode. We're going to move in toward the stairwells now. Thank you. Thank you so much.

Donut purred heavily in my ear.

"You shouldn't have done that, Donut," I said as I reached up and scratched her. "You risked yourselves, and you risked the cart."

"I wasn't just going to abandon you, Carl," Donut said. "Who do you think I am? Miss Beatrice?"

"No," I agreed. "You most definitely are not."

We walked up the employee line and returned to station 36. Ghouls still appeared occasionally, along with full-sized Krakaren monsters. But Imani held the line. The entire group waited for us. The stairwell had been open for some time now, but nobody had gone down yet. They all waited for us.

"Carl, Carl!" Donut cried as we approached the stairwell. "We never tried to sell my hats!"

I had, actually, tried to sell one while she was in the training room. The proprietor had laughed at me and said nobody was buying them anymore. Not even for a single gold. I hadn't the heart to tell her.

"We'll try on the next floor. They'll be collectibles by then."

She gasped, light glinting off her oversized sunglasses. "You're right. We'll sell them on the next floor. We'll be millionaires!"

"If I never see another train again, it'll be too soon," Elle said as she went down the stairs. "See you guys on the other side."

"Be safe," I said.

I moved to step down the stairs, but they suddenly turned into a ramp. I turned to see a familiar crawler pushing a squeaking shopping cart. Agatha. She was now level 8. It still said she was human and that she hadn't yet chosen a class.

"Agatha?" Imani asked.

"I see you lot are still kicking," the old woman cackled. The pink flamingo still stood in the front of her shopping cart. The entire group watched, open-mouthed as the woman moved toward the stairwell.

Imani moved forward to intercept her. I held out a hand to stop her.

"Don't," I warned. "We'll talk later."

"But," she began. "I… What? What is happening?"

The woman disappeared down into the stairwell.

Loita (Admin): Odette is waiting for you. I'll be joining you in the green room to discuss our new arrangement.

Donut: WHERE IS ZEV?

Loita (Admin): We'll discuss it in person.

"Goddamnit," I muttered as we went down the stairs.

Here's the thing. These poor bastards are just as much victims as we are. Not just the NPCs, but the mobs, too. That doesn't mean don't kill them. Hell, I realized something today.

Killing them is actually the best thing we can do for them. But you know what I also realized? All of you, all twenty-four of you who have come before me? You've all failed in one thing. If we're really going to burn this place to the ground, we need to actually do it and not just talk about it. We need to start killing them, too. I don't know for sure how to do it yet, but I'll come up with something.

They will not break me. Fuck them all. They will not break me.

But I will break them.

This is my promise to myself, to my friends, and to you, anyone who reads these words.

I will break them all.

- Crawler Carl, 25th Edition of The Dungeon Anarchist's Cookbook

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EPILOGUE

Loita stood atop the table that normally contained our snacks in the production trailer. She looked very much like Zev, but maybe a little taller and thinner. She did not wear the deep-diver suit but instead had a simple, rebreather-like device around her fish neck. She stood in a puddle of brackish-smelling water. A shiny, blinking pin sat on her breast area. It was the dahlia-like symbol for the Bloom. I tried to commit it to memory. I was no artist like Katia, but after this, I would do my best on the scratchpad. I'd already drawn out the symbol for the Syndicate and several other symbols I'd come across, like that toy company who made Bautista's stuffed animals.

Keeping track of that stuff was something the cookbook sorely lacked, and I would make certain that was fixed. Symbology seemed important to the mudskippers, which meant it was important to the crawl and the future floors. The last floor had proven we really needed to pay attention to stuff like that.

"First off, put that thing away," Loita said, pointing at Mongo, who'd rushed up and sniffed at the admin. She did not flinch at the dinosaur's attention.

"We can't use our inventory," Donut said.

The production trailer was above the surface, meaning we were in the secondary zone. I still didn't know what that really meant, but I knew certain dungeon-specific items and protections didn't work here. That was something else I was determined to find out about.

Loita raised her hand. "Your inventory is open for twenty seconds. Put him away. Put that book away, too, Carl. Katia, store the backpack."

I had pulled one of the horror novels out of my inventory as we descended the stairs. Last time we'd had to sit here for almost an hour, and I wanted to make sure I had something to read. This one was an old, beat-up novel called *Stinger*.

Katia had been in the habit of keeping a smaller backpack and just a few pieces of mass when she was in her "regular" form as a way to make herself taller. But when she appeared in the trailer, she'd been her human self with the heavy backpack straining on her shoulders. It appeared her doppelganger abilities did not work in this area. That was strange. She put the backpack away.

Donut looked up at me, and I nodded. "Come on, Mongo, cage," Donut said. Mongo screeched in dismay but turned back toward the cat as she activated the carrier. He sucked away into the ether.

"And the book," Loita said. "You can't bring the book onto the set."

"Fuck off," I said. "It's so I can have something to read while we wait."

Loita looked angry, but only for a moment. She shrugged. "Suit yourself, but you need to keep it in the green room."

"It's what I always do," I said. "Where's Zev?"

"Zev is taking some much-needed time off. She's had a… personal tragedy… back home. She's been sent off to a temporary reeducation retreat so she may reflect upon her life and her personal philosophies. But do not worry. Such things never take long, especially on the weak-minded. When she returns, she will remain as your social media manager, but I will be taking up primary duties as the team's PR agent."

"Well if we don't have Zev, then we're not…" Donut began. I held up my hand to stop her.

"Zev didn't usually come with us to our interviews. Are you always going to be here?"

Donut jumped to my shoulder. She was trembling with rage. I reached up and put a calming hand on her.

"Yes," Loita said. "We are putting tighter controls on the information crawlers are being fed through these interviews in an attempt to make the crawl more equitable toward those who aren't privileged enough to get a view of the world outside the dungeon."

That's just wonderful, I thought. In addition to the cookbook and Mordecai, our once-a-floor, post-interview chat with Odette had done more than anything else to help keep us alive.

"Great," I said.

"Indeed. Do you have any questions for me?"

"Yeah, I have a question," Donut said. "Why don't you take your ugly…"

"Stop," I said. "We don't have any more questions."

"Carl," Donut said. "You said we only work with Zev."

"Don't worry, Donut," I said, staring directly at the fish. "We can't do anything about Zev right now. She's on a short vacation. Isn't that right, Loita?"

"That's right," Loita said, her mouth forming a straight line.

Donut let out a hiss.

I again patted her. "Sometimes things are beyond our control, Donut. We need to pick our battles."

"Well, I don't like it. We should have a say in who we work with. She's *our* PR person." She glowered at the empty counter. "Zev always made sure there were snacks. Very professional. I don't like this one bit."

"We've determined that some crawlers were receiving illegal buffs via interview refreshments. As a result, crawlers will no longer be offered food or drink while outside the dungeon."

Donut gasped with dismay.

Odette's assistant Lexis entered. She stopped dead sensing the tension in the room.

"Hello all," she said hesitantly. "We're on in five."

"Thank you, Lexis," I said, not taking my eyes away from the mudskipper. "You don't need to wait with us anymore. We have our new PR agent now to keep us company."

"Okay," she said, backing away.

"You don't scare me," Loita said after a few moments of me just staring at her. "I have a job to do, and I will make sure it's done. I will make sure it's done right this time."

"Ditto," I said.

"So, Katia," Odette said as the audience roared with laughter. "When you changed yourself into Carl back there, you sure did a good job. Almost like you'd done it before. Is there anything you need to tell us?"

Katia's cheeks burned red. She'd been doing a better job at being "zippy" though she was still shy, not fully comfortable playing to an audience. Donut was doing her best to prop her up.

This time, however, Katia recovered on her own. "I'm getting better at emulating other people. Next time maybe I'll pretend to be you."

"Oh you don't want to do that," Odette said, laughter in her voice. Her gigantic breasts sloshed on the table. She rose up and down on her crab lower half. "I don't think anybody wants to see me back in the dungeon. Do they?"

The audience clapped and laughed. I felt myself gritting my teeth. *Smile. Keep smiling.*

Odette leaned in. "Whose idea was it, anyway? To save Carl like that?"

"It was Katia's idea," Donut said. "Mongo and I were ready to just charge in there and start blasting. Once I saw that the god was being played by that silly pig boy, I knew we had a chance. That's what, the third time now he's gotten fucked by Carl? I really wanted to get in on the action. It's been a long time since I've gotten laid, Odette." The audience continued to roar. "I mean, really? What's a girl gotta do?" She sighed dramatically.

"It sure was something indeed," Odette said. "Minutes after the Death Challenge ended, a new snick appeared on the net. Even as we speak, its views are going through the oort cloud. This one is a

little more obvious that it's a snick than the last." She cocked her head. I couldn't see her face, but I could sense her devilish smile. "We all know Mongo likely isn't that well-endowed." She looked up at her audience. "Does anybody know what this new one is called? I forget."

Multiple voices shouted their answers.

Odette laughed. "That's right. That's right. Carl's Naughty Little Piggie Goes to Market."

Donut gasped. "I was in the video?"

The audience's howling reached a fevered pitch.

"Oh, you were there."

"Do you have the video? Do you? I want to see! Who wants to see the video?"

The audience shouted their agreement.

I just shook my head.

"Glurp! Glurp!" the audience chanted. "Glurp! Glurp!"

"Unfortunately, the showrunners are saying no to us showing the snick." Boos filled the room. "I know, I know," Odette said, laughing. I sensed a hint of sourness to her voice. I was relieved. Either way, I knew Mordecai would be pissed. He didn't want us dealing with gods or factions, and here we were.

But we had so little, and goddamn if it wasn't fun to needle at the prick. I wished he'd had stayed dead, but I would settle for humiliating him over and over.

"Speaking of the Death Challenge, Carl, are you aware of the significance of what happened today?"

"Well, I got stepped on by a god and got a close-up view of a building-sized monster get split in half. That was pretty significant."

The audience chuckled. "A Death Challenge is not a boss battle. It's a pop-up gambling event where viewers, in systems where gambling is legal, are given the option to bet on a multiple set of outcomes, with each possible outcome being given different odds. There are dozens of possibilities, and people can bet on general or specific outcomes. Like 'Carl survives' would be a general outcome. And 'Carl survives, the Mimic is killed by Grull, and Grull is ejected

from the arena via a secondary summoning.' is a specific outcome. The system AI initially put your general odds of survival at 50 to 1."

"What? Fifty to one?" Donut exclaimed. "And they knew the Maestro was driving Grull, right?"

Everybody laughed.

"Needless to say, a lot of viewers agreed with Donut and thought that was a good bet. The odds started sliding once the votes poured in, but it didn't change as much as you'd think. Borant just filed an appeal on the AI's decision to give you such terrible odds, citing its sluggish response in altering the spread. If the appeal doesn't go their way, there's nothing they can do."

"Wow," Donut said. "I'm with Borant on this one. Fifty to one? I mean, really. It's offensive. Haven't they been paying attention? They had to know we'd come save him. I'd like to think we'd make the odds a little better. Did you see how fast Elle flies? Or Li Na's chains? Or how Katia dodged that death ray? There were five people who'd been in the top ten in the area."

"Oh, I agree," Odette said. "While the body count is much higher than in traditional crawls with a longer timer, some of you guys are also much stronger than usual. Everyone is interested to see what happens next, especially after the sixth floor when the loot floodgates open. Anyway, we don't know yet how much money Borant lost, but it has to be a significant amount." Odette leaned back. "And just between you, me, and the galaxy, Carl, you made me a good amount of credits today. Though the way things are going, I'm not confident I'm ever going to collect."

I fake laughed. *Don't say it.*

I said it.

"I hope it covered the amount you lost sponsoring Hekla."

Odette did not skip a beat. She waggled her finger at me. "Oh, we're not talking about that, buddy. That was my husband, not me. He's still sleeping in the skiff for that one. I don't run the finances for the crab ranch." The audience laughed. "But I do want to talk a bit about that whole affair with Hekla. That really was something."

"Hekla?" Donut asked. "That bitch is yesterday's news. Why would we want to talk about her? Also, I didn't know you sponsored

her. Carl, how did you know that? And why didn't you say anything?"

"Crab ranch," I said, pointing at Odette's body. "She told us she had a crab ranch when we first met. I thought it was obvious."

I still wasn't certain what Odette's angle was in all this with Hekla and her team. I mean, her angle was money. It was always money. And Mordecai. But the specifics were beyond me. Maybe she was helping us since she never gave them loot boxes, though I imagined that was an expensive way to do it. Maybe she was hedging her bets in case I died. I didn't have all the information, but I did, and would always, remember Odette's first piece of advice.

Don't trust anybody until you know their motivation.

"What about Eva?" Odette asked. "Her riding the front of the train and almost…"

Odette suddenly went mute.

Loita (Admin): Hang on, guys. We're informing Odette's people to end this topic.

A moment passed. Now I could tell Odette was pissed. "Anyway," she continued once her voice finally got unmuted. "Let's talk a bit about what we know regarding the next floor. Here's the preview video Borant released."

The studio darkened, but the show was still on the air. We weren't visible to the audience while the video played on the screen. It was blurred, and we couldn't see it.

"What the fuck was that?" Odette demanded, ripping her bug helmet off. "Get that goddamned, slime-covered fish stick in here right fucking now. Lexis! Lexis, where are you?"

Lexis emerged, shuffling quickly across the studio to the other door toward the green room.

"Back on in forty seconds," a voice said.

"Delay," Odette said. "I'm going to need at least sixty more to fry and batter this fucking… Darling! Loita, you're looking especially moist today!"

"Hello, Odette," Loita said. She'd entered the room before Lexis even had the chance to get her. The tiny admin sprayed water from her rebreather when she talked. The terrified assistant retreated into the green room.

"We did not agree to this level of censorship," Odette said, looking down distastefully at the small kua-tin. "It is absolutely ridiculous. You know the Syndicate's rules regarding a journalist's right to ask and answer during interviews. And you don't enter the studio unless you've been invited. It's rude."

"Well, sweet Odette," Loita said, "If you read the changes we amended to the contract when we added Crawler Katia to your… Actually, hang on a moment." She looked at us, waved once, and they once again went mute.

I turned to say something to Donut, but I couldn't. No words came out.

Well this is fun. We watched as Odette and Loita went back and forth, suddenly screaming at one another. And just as abruptly as the argument started, it ended.

"Talk to you soon. We'll have a lunch date, just like old times!" Odette said sweetly as Loita returned to the green room. She popped the bug helmet back on.

"On in three, two…"

The lights popped on, and Odette continued. "That looks pretty exciting. I know the audience was split on the last floor's layout, with so many complaining about how complicated it was. They won't be able to complain about this floor being complicated, that's for sure. At least not the layout, though I dare say the possibilities are almost endless. I am going to miss all of you guys banding together like that. It makes for some delicious combinations, like that epic battle with Grull, with Prepotente and Miriam Dom losing out on killing a province boss twice thanks to you guys and then to Quan Ch, and of course, that hilarious but ultimately tragic fight between Lucia Mar, Florin, and Ifechi. Not to mention the Popov brothers butting heads with team Cichociemni. And then we have those rising stars, the min-maxing team Flamengo. So many great stories, so many different ways to play."

"So you know exactly what the floor is going to be?" I asked. "You didn't know last time. And we didn't get to see the video."

"Oh, we all know what it is," Odette said. "We don't know the exact details other than what's on the preview, but we're excited to

find out. A while back, Borant opened up voting on the fifth floor's theme. You had to pay, of course, to get a vote in, but I think we're all pretty excited for what won the poll."

"So what won?" Donut asked.

Odette sighed dramatically. "Can't tell you that, I'm afraid. But I can tell you this, my friends. I'm glad you have all those crafting tables."

The show ended, and suddenly Loita was there. Lexis followed, wringing her hands. "I'm sorry, Odette, she just keeps barging in."

"No giving up secrets," Loita said to Odette as the host removed her helmet.

"That was a good show," Odette said, ignoring Loita. "Katia, much better than last time. You still need to learn to relax, but you're getting there. Donut, hilarious as always. Next time maybe keep Mongo out."

"That's what I've been saying!" Donut exclaimed.

Odette turned to look at me. "It wasn't my husband. It was me," she said matter-of-factly. "I hope one day to explain it further." She looked pointedly at the angry, little kua-tin. "You were right to call me out. It plays well to your smoldering anger personality. Smart but dangerous. Love it."

"*Odette*," Loita warned.

"Oh, calm down," Odette said, finally acknowledging the tiny kua-tin. "Your grandmother wasn't nearly as high-strung as you are. We're talking as friends. It's not about the crawl. It's not like I warned them that Chris…"

Odette went mute.

"That's it," Loita said, sounding pissed. "Everybody to the green room. You're getting transferred back to the dungeon in a few minutes."

"Chris? What about Chris?" Donut asked as we walked out.

"I don't know," I said, looking over my shoulder. They were screaming at one another again, but then they both started laughing. "There's obviously something going on with him. That's been clear for a while. We'll have to be careful until we figure it out."

"I can't tell if those two like each other or hate each other," Katia said.

"I'm pretty sure it's both," I said.

"I'm worried about Zev," Donut said once the door irised closed behind us. "What does reeducation mean anyway?"

I exchanged a look with Katia. I sighed. "Nothing good, Donut."

"Well I hope she comes back," Donut said. "I know we're not supposed to like the bad guys, but she is my friend. We're going to write a tv show together."

Loita never returned to the green room. Instead, we got a notification we were being transferred, and that was it. We glowed, and suddenly we were in a large, warehouse-like room. There were no notifications. My UI was still blocked out. I clutched onto the novel, unable to stick it into my inventory.

There were four doors, one on each wall. These were all one-way portals. The Valtay implant worked, but the information was limited. I couldn't pass any of the doorways. I couldn't take a screenshot.

In the center of the stark room was a pair of large, round wheels, similar to the wheel of fortune game from the casino. The first of the two wheels featured four equally-sized selections. The second wheel was blank. The three of us approached, and a notification appeared.

Before you enter the fifth floor, you must choose your quadrant. The result will be random. Your team leader will spin the wheel.

"That's me!" Donut said, walking up to the first wheel. The four choices were **Land, Sea, Air,** and **Subterranean.**

"That's a bit worrying," Katia muttered.

Donut stuck her paw on the wheel and swiped. The wheel spun and spun, ticking loudly.

"This is very exciting," Donut said. "Remember when you almost got sucked away into the Nothing, Carl?"

"Yes, Donut. I remember."

The wheel slowed, *click, click, click*. It hovered on **Sea**, looked like it was going to settle, and it ticked over one more spot, landing on **Air**.

You will enter the fifth floor in the Air Quadrant.

"I don't know if that's good or not, but I'm glad it's not Sea," Katia said. "I'm a terrible swimmer."

"Yeah?" I said. I had an ominous feeling. "How're your flying skills?"

Donut gasped. "Maybe I can pick a class that flies this floor. Wouldn't that be great?"

To our left, the door against the wall disappeared, revealing a new room with four more doors.

The second wheel populated with four choices: **the Razor Fox Kite City, the Dirigible Gnome Wasteland Fortress, the Nightgaunt Precipice,** and the **Great Dirt Island of the Wind Sirens**.

Choose your opponent.

Donut did a little hop and moved to the next wheel. She put her paw on it and spun. "Oh, I hope we get the fox one," she said. "It'll be fun to kill foxes."

I held my breath, hoping for anything but the Nightgaunt choice. My cloak's description specifically warned that Nightgaunts would be enraged by the sight of my cloak, and I didn't want to have to get rid of it. *Click, click, click*. The wheel stopped right in the middle of the second choice.

Your opponents will be the Dirigible Gnomes. In order to pass this level, you must storm their castle in the sky, known as the Wasteland Fortress.

One of the four, distant doors disappeared, revealing a dune-swept, desert landscape. Sand started to cascade into the room from the open door. A harsh breeze swept in, pelting grains into my face,

stinging and hot. I was half expecting the door to open and reveal nothing but air. At least we were on the ground.

"It looks like a giant litterbox out there," Donut said. "I must say, I'm very excited about this. Come on, team. Let's go kill some gnomes."

The End.

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WHY DO WE KEEP MEETING LIKE THIS?

Three books down. More to come!

Book IV, *The Gate of the Feral Gods* is almost ready to hop on over to your naughty little e-readers. It will release in July of 2021! Camels and gnomes and geese and shapeshifters and the universe's biggest chainsaw!

This is where I, again, beg of you to please, please do me a solid and leave a review on Amazon. We live and die by our reviews. It is important. Even if you're like that asshole Jed who left me a one-star because I swear too much, please just leave a goddamned review.

Also, fuck you, Jed.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Matt Dinniman is a writer and artist from Gig Harbor, WA. When he isn't attending cat shows, wrangling dogs, feeding turtles, playing bass in a punk/metal band, or writing books that make guys named Kyle threaten to kill his family because he called a goblin an incel, he designs cat-themed greeting cards and decorations. If you've ever walked into a Target or an IKEA or a Home Goods, looked at the weird wall art they have for sale there, and thought to yourself, *who buys this crap?* The answer is, "Not nearly as many people as Matt would like." So please buy all his books. (Or his art!)

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THE PAGE WHERE WE TOUT FACEBOOK GROUPS SO THEY LET US SPAM THEM ABOUT THIS BOOK

Over on Facebook, if you want to talk about Gamelit. I mean if you really want to talk about Gamelit, check out the Gamelit Society!

Wait, there's more! There's the super-awesome extreme LitRPG Books Group!

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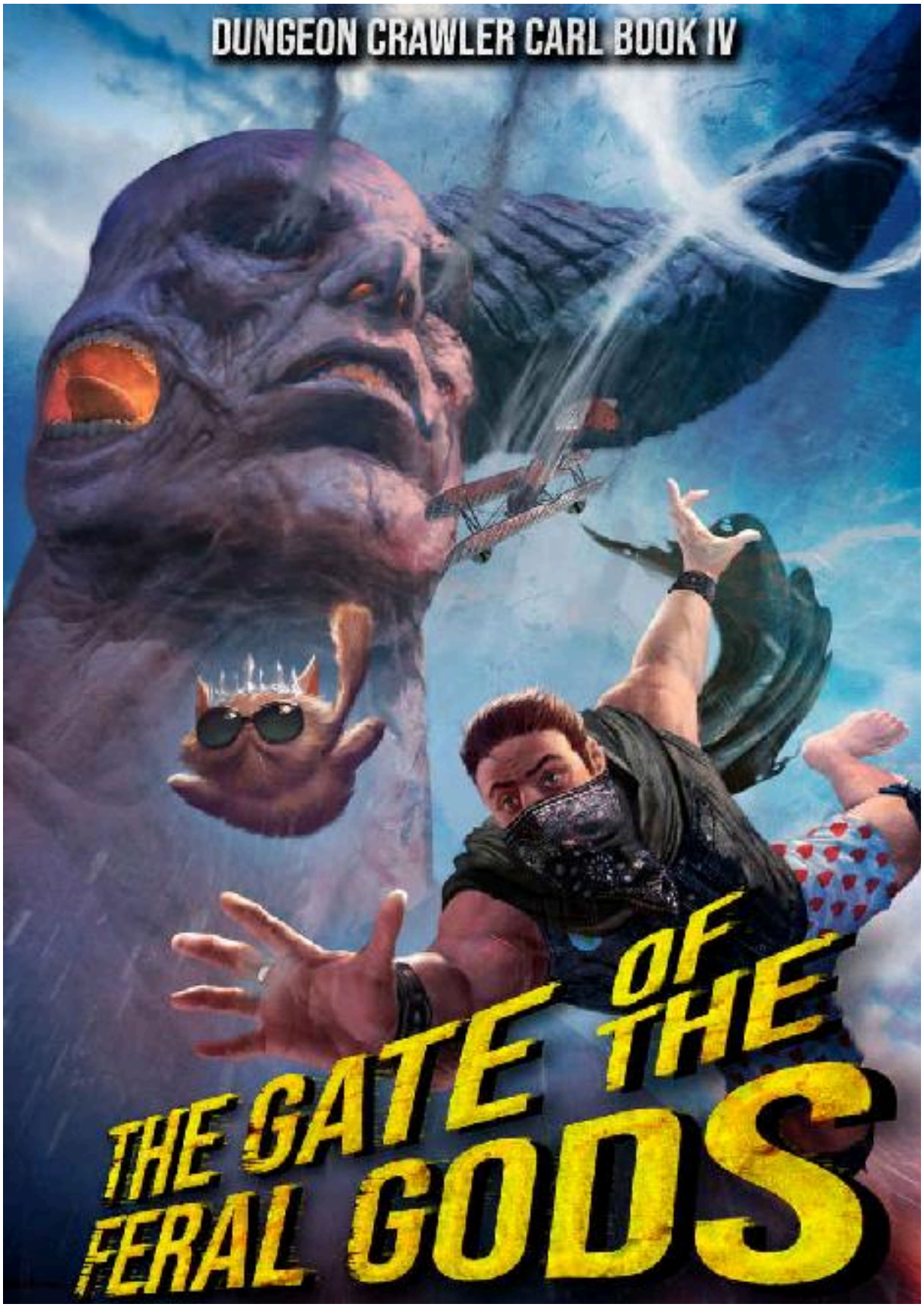
DUNGEON CRAWLER CARL BOOK IV
THE GATE OF THE FERAL GODS



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DUNGEON CRAWLER CARL BOOK IV

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Thanks so much to everybody who has helped make this series something really special, including all my friends over on Patreon and Royal Road. Also, extra special thanks to the person who messaged me a random picture of her (?) foot with no message or explanation. I've forwarded them off to the AI for you.

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Capital punishment means those without the capital get the punishment.

- EXECUTED PRISONER, JOHN A. SPENKELINK

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Woohoo!
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Also by Matt Dinniman
The page where we tout Facebook groups so they let us spam them about this book

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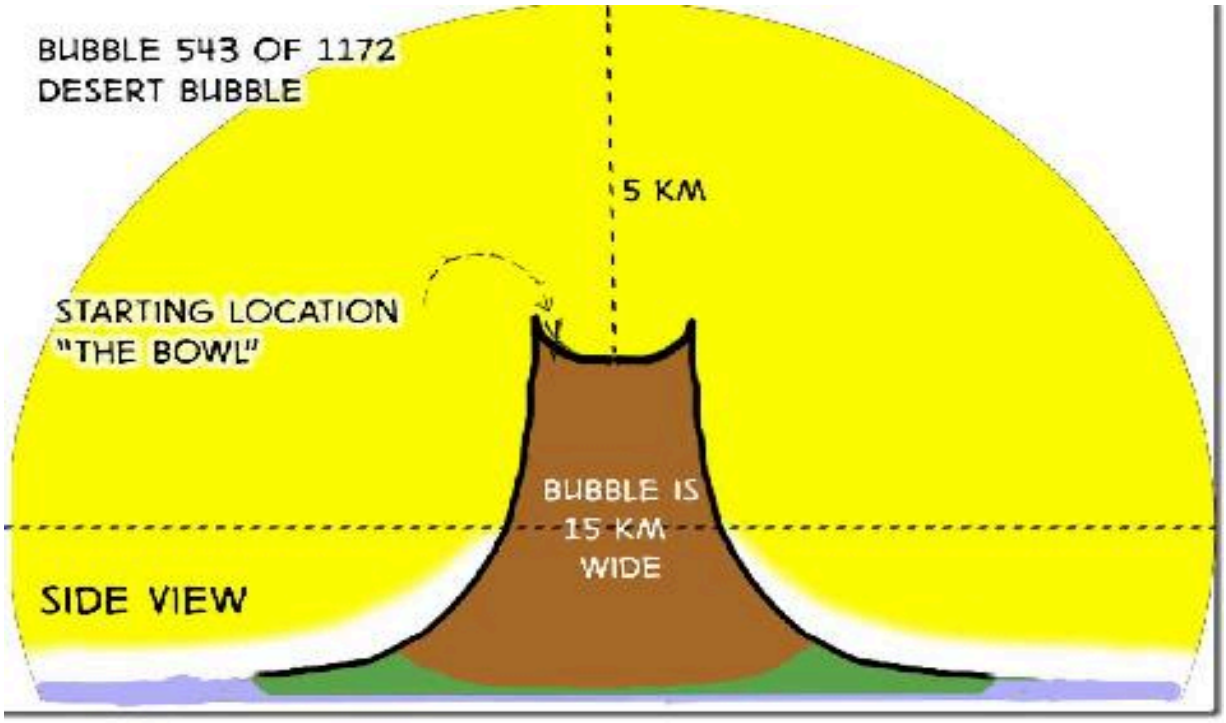
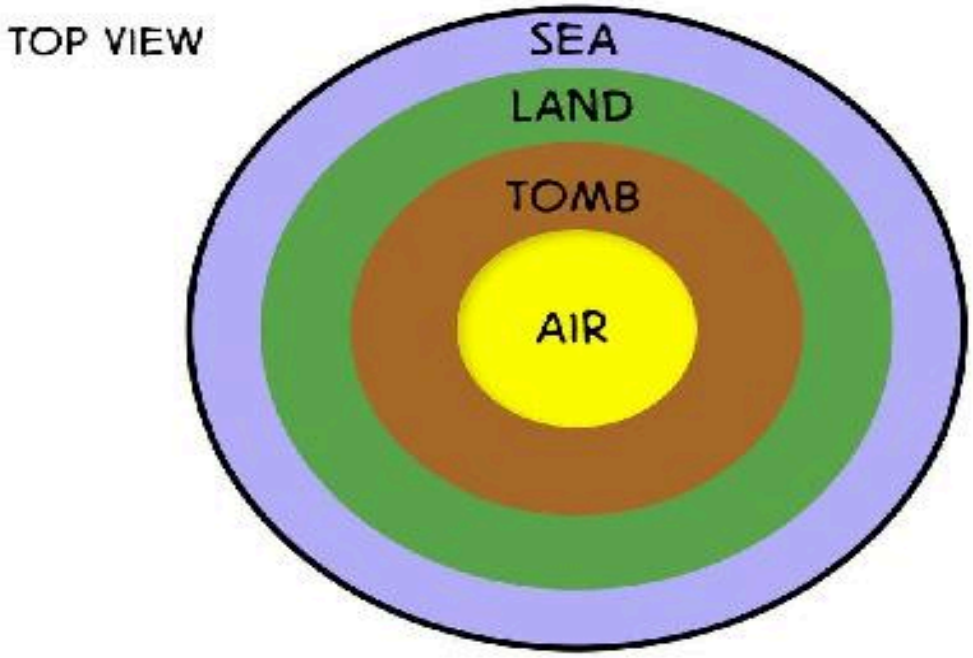


- EACH BUBBLE CONTAINS FOUR QUADRANTS: LAND, SEA, AIR, TOMB.
- EACH QUADRANT CONTAINS ONE CASTLE, WHICH CONTAINS A STAIRWELL.
- ONE MAY NOT LEAVE THEIR STARTING QUADRANT UNTIL THE CASTLE IS TAKEN.
- STAIRWELLS DO NOT OPEN UNTIL ALL FOUR CASTLES HAVE FALLEN.
- YOU MAY LEAVE THE BUBBLE ONCE IT "POPS" I.E. ALL FOUR CASTLES FALL.
- YOU MAY NOT ENTER OTHER BUBBLES UNTIL THEY ARE POPPED.



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[1]

PHASE ONE OF FOUR. THE GNOMES.

Time to Level Collapse: 15 Days.

Views: 1.43 Quintillion
Followers: 7 Quadrillion
Favorites: 2.4 Quadrillion

Leaderboard rank: 3
Bounty: 800,000 gold

WELCOME, CRAWLER, TO THE FIFTH FLOOR. "THE BUBBLES."
Sponsorship bidding initiated on Crawler #4,122. Bidding ends in 45 hours.

Remaining Crawlers: 178,887

Entering Bubble #543 out of 1172. Air Quadrant.

New Achievement! The Quarry Sees Another Spring.

You managed to enter a stairwell while listed in the current top 10. You're a survivor. A scrapper. And just as the buck's antlers grow another point as they mature, you too, have grown as both a crawler and as a prize.

***Reward*: You have received a Gold Venison Box! Don't get too excited. It's just money. In addition, all bounties against you now and in the future will have a (x2) modifier attached.**

Hey, at least the prize for surviving the floor goes up, too.

"What the shit?" I said, seeing the notification. Nobody had warned me our bounties would double. Mordecai hadn't mentioned it, nor had I seen it listed in the cookbook. I wondered if that was a new thing. *Those fuckers.*

I coughed, regretting I'd said anything out loud. I spit the sand from my mouth.

Tens of thousands of crawlers hadn't made it past the last few hours of the fourth floor. I felt my fist clench and unclench as we trudged forward, leaning into the wind.

Donut mewled with irritation from my shoulder. Hot wind blasted against us, and every time I breathed, my mouth and nose started to fill with sand. We needed masks. We could only talk using chat.

We'd stepped from the warehouse onto the fifth floor just a few minutes after the fourth level collapsed. I felt the standard rumble in the ground while we were still in the warehouse, but it was much more distant than usual.

Donut: I NEED TO PICK A NEW CLASS! I REALLY WISH THEY GAVE ME MORE TIME. THE CHOICES ARE ALL DIFFERENT.

Carl: Mordecai. Help Donut choose. We're in an air zone.

Mordecai: There you are. By the gods, did Odette make you clean her house first before she let you go? I'm already

here and have been gathering intel. Come to the town that's hunched up against the northwest curve. The walls block the sand storms. Locals say the storms only last an hour or two each day. Apparently there's only two towns in the area. Donut, read me your choices.

Donut quickly read off some of the class choices. None of them had a flying ability. Many sounded more interesting and exotic than usual, like Nine Tails and Demigod Attendant, though there were a few in there that had to be a joke. Like Vape Shop Counter Jockey. Mordecai asked rapid-fire questions. He zoomed in on two choices.

Mordecai: The class choices keep getting better. We still need to keep your Constitution up. You just lost ten points from losing your Football Hooligan. There's one that'll replace it and more. Glass Cannon normally forbids you from adding to your constitution upon level-up, but it comes with a plus fifteen constitution base, and it'll also greatly increase your training speed on all spells. It does not increase your intelligence, but it lowers the cost of all spells, which is almost the same thing. Your *Magic Missile* will be much stronger, and it's already pretty strong. You can't train constitution anyway, so it's a good choice, especially if we grind on your magic. But if you don't actually obtain some of those benefits, it could be a waste of a class.

Donut's Character Actor benefit went up in power each time she descended a floor, but it still came with a risk. She didn't always obtain all of the chosen class's benefits, and once she picked, it was set for the floor.

Donut: I CHOSE IT!

Mordecai: Well? What did you get?

Donut: I… WELL, I GOT EVERYTHING. EXCEPT THE PLUS 15 TO CONSTITUTION.

"*Goddamnit,*" I muttered and immediately regretted it. I had to spit out more sand.

Mordecai: Okay. We need to really focus on keeping Donut out of harm's way until we get her better armor. No more riding Mongo into battle.

Class choice out of the way, we started to move. Dust and sand swirled around us. The ground felt solid, though my feet sank to the ankles with each step. With the dust storm, I could barely see more than twenty feet in each direction. I looked up, and I saw nothing but brown. I turned, and the door we'd just left was gone, replaced by a curved, rocky but uniform wall. It seemed to rise high and away, like we were standing inside of a crudely-sculpted bowl.

Katia: Okay. I see the edge of town. It's close, about three hundred meters ahead and to the left. My pathfinder skill is acting a little odd. I can't see anything behind us except the mountain wall.

Donut: THERE ARE NO TUNNELS AT LEAST. I HATE TUNNELS.

I wasn't so sure about that. My chat was filled with people checking in with their surroundings. I minimized it until we were someplace safe, but I saw a few people mentioning tight, claustrophobic tunnels. Bautista was in one such passageway. Elle and Imani said they were on a round, floating island that was really a bunch of boats lashed together. They were being pelted with a hailstorm and had taken shelter in the hold of a cargo ship that was filled with level-29 fish monsters.

Carl: I can't see shit. Watch out for mobs.

Donut: THIS IS RUINING MY FUR. AND IT'S HOT. I DON'T LIKE THIS, CARL. MONGO IS MISERABLE.

Carl: Mongo is still in his container. You don't know if he's miserable or not.

It *was* hot. It felt like a hairdryer blasting on us. I remembered how cold it was when we'd first entered the dungeon. My eyes caught a countdown timer in my upper left vision. It was my potion sickness indicator from when I'd taken Mordecai's Special Brew. I still had over four hours until I'd be able to take another potion. At least the timer had kept ticking while we were on Odette's show.

Carl: Donut. Minefield.

Donut unleashed Mongo, who squawked with dismay at the driving sandstorm. She cast *Clockwork Triplicate* on the pet, and she ordered the two automatons to range ahead of us. With our limited

vision, they'd provide an early warning for both mobs and sand dunes.

The town was close, but getting there was a chore. We didn't see any mobs. We passed a cave-like entrance in the ground that offered shelter, but the clockwork Mongos were unable to enter despite it being wide-open. It was a short, sloped descent filled with swirling eddies of sand. In the hole I could see a tunnel fading away into darkness. I took a few steps down the slope, and I saw the shimmering wall. It was not a portal, but a forcefield of some sort, similar to the wall of my *Protective Shield* spell, protecting the entrance to the cave. The sand passed right through. A clockwork Mongo walked up and swiped at it, claw bouncing off it like it was a physical wall. The creature didn't explode or blow back. I formed my gauntlet and hesitantly reached out to tap it.

Warning: You may not enter this quadrant until your current quadrant's castle is liberated.

I tried to shout what I'd learned at Donut and Katia, but the wind was just too loud. We had to stick with chat.

Carl: This is a cave entrance to the subterranean zone. It sounds like we can't leave the air zone until we deal with the gnomes.

Katia: The map won't let me see anything inside there. But look at the walls. I thought this was a mountain, but it all looks carved. I think there's a building under our feet.

I took a banger sphere and rolled it down the slope. It bounced a few times down the uneven ramp, entered the area as if the wall wasn't there, and just kept going. It disappeared into the darkness.

A moment later, the ground rumbled with a distant explosion. I didn't hear it, but I felt it in my feet.

You have set off a trap. Maybe next time you'll be more careful.

Carl: Shit, it sounds like the subterranean tunnels have traps in them. We need to be extra vigilant.

Katia: I believe it's an underground tomb. Like Indiana Jones stuff.

She pulled a regular torch from her inventory, lit it, and tossed it through the forcefield. It lit up a long, sloping hallway made of carved bricks.

Carl: I think you're right.

Relief patterns of what looked like a flaming, screaming pterodactyl adorned the walls. *Well that's ominous.*

Donut: CAN WE DISCUSS THIS AFTER WE GET OUT OF THIS SAND? I MEAN, REALLY. WE CAN'T EVEN GO IN THERE. THAT'S NOT OUR AREA. THIS IS JUST AWFUL. SOME PEOPLE ON THE CHAT SAY THEY'RE IN A TROPICAL PARADISE AND SOME SAY THEY'RE IN A SNOWING ZONE. ANY OF THOSE WOULD BE BETTER THAN THIS, AND I DON'T EVEN LIKE SNOW.

We abandoned the cave entrance and continued on toward the town. The fact we hadn't seen any mobs was concerning. Less mobs usually meant *stronger* mobs.

We did see one oddity as we trekked to the town. There was a twisted, burned-out shell of metal on the ground. It appeared it'd been there for some time. I couldn't determine what it used to be, but it might've once been a vehicle. The system didn't label it at all. I touched the metal to see if I could take it into my inventory. It felt solid and light, but rusted. It was half-buried in the sand. We left it and continued on our way.

We soon came to a tall, curved wall made of sheets of metal riveted together. The walls rose high, maybe twenty feet, and a fabric awning covered it above that. The thick, blue and white striped material whipped violently in the storm, threatening to rip away at any moment. The fabric curved up and away into the darkness. Every few dozen feet, large, dark boxes stood atop the walls. They appeared to be lookout towers. They were closed up against the storm.

Katia: The town is built against the wall. There's an entrance that way.

She pointed right, and we followed along the patchwork metal until we reached an arched doorway built into an alcove that was mostly protected from the wind. Donut started hacking up sand onto

my shoulder. There was a crude sign over the large, double doorway. It read "Hump Town. Bang twice to enter."

The knocker was a mallet, like for a giant drum. It hung from a chain by the entrance. I grabbed it and smacked it against the door twice. The whole doorway echoed loud and deep.

"That was louder than I expected," I said. We could finally talk here, though we still had to raise our voices.

Donut continued to hack in my ear.

"Hey, don't puke on my shoulder."

"Where else am I going to do it, Carl?" she said between breaths. She proceeded to puke on my shoulder.

"Goddamnit, Donut," I said.

"In ancient Egypt, it was considered an honor for a cat to vomit upon you. You should thank me."

"Hump Town," Katia said drily. "I can't wait to find what that's all about."

Several minutes passed, and nothing happened. The clockwork Mongos timed-out and collapsed. I was about to bitch at Mordecai to come open the door when it groaned, opening inwardly.

"It's a big NPC," Donut warned just as the creature appeared.

The tall creature looked down on us while we looked up at him. It was a camel. A giant camel wearing a headscarf and robes. The thing walked on two legs and had long arms with two fingers and a thumb. The tan creature had to be eight feet tall. His giant hump looked odd when he stood straight, like an overstuffed, low-slung backpack covered with robes.

Clay – Dromedarian. Level 30.

The Dromedarians are a common, formerly nomadic race that is found throughout the drier parts of the universe. With the ability to store mass amounts of liquid in their bodies, it is said a Dromedarian can survive up to two months without taking a single sip of water. When these hunters and warriors are placed in a situation where they can no longer wander, they tend to become lethargic, sloth-minded creatures. But make no mistake, this is a mighty

race of warriors who were once known for their abject brutality.

Trapped atop the Necropolis of Anser, these local Dromedarians are locked in a three-way stalemate with the Bactrians and the Dirigible Gnomes. Any day now this smoldering conflict could boil over into an all-out war. A war they probably would not survive. In the meantime, they're perfectly content to sit around, smoke weed, and do their best to drink all their problems away.

"Hump town," Katia said, looking up at the camel. "*That's* what they mean."

"Yo," Clay the camel said. "Welcome to Hump Town. Don't just stand there. Get in so I can close the door."

I just stared, blinking at the creature. Based on the way he was dressed and the description, I was expecting a stereotypical middle-eastern type accent. This was more like a gruff, biker dude. *Like Joe Camel*, I thought. The old cigarette mascot.

"You don't worship Grull, do you?" I asked as we stepped in. The wind howled around the village, and sand still rained in a dozen little spots here and there. The ground was covered with it. But it was nothing like out there.

"Do I look like a face-painting, bull-worshipping bitch?" Clay asked.

"Uh, no," I said.

"You lot got here just in time. Storm's almost over. It's dangerous to be out there when it stops blowing." He slammed the heavy door closed. He carried a long, dangerous-looking spear over his shoulder. But he also carried a long tube that looked like a homemade bazooka or mortar. Sure enough, five, pineapple-shaped explosives dangled on a string from his back. My UI tagged each one as a **Guided, Anti-Air Rocket**. They were unarmed, so relatively stable. If they were "guided" then it had be magical, as they appeared to be pretty simplistic. It wouldn't let me examine them further.

"So the beasts hide when the wind is blowing?" I asked after Clay caught me staring at his gear.

Clay grunted, a loud, wet sound that sprayed snot everywhere. "You must be new. You're lucky you ain't dead."

"There's a Desperado Club," Katia said. "No Club Vanquisher. I see several stores and inns."

"Not so fast," Clay said as I took another step. "You can't just enter Hump Town empty-handed. You gotta pay the toll. And if you're the Club Vanquisher type, you are in the wrong place. They don't call it Hump Town for nothing."

"What's the toll?" I asked.

"Gold, drugs, or pleasure." He looked me up and down. He snorted again, spraying more snot. "Gold or drugs for you."

It was the dungeon version of the old bumper sticker, "Cash, grass, or ass. Nobody rides for free." I chuckled.

"How much gold?"

"How much you got?"

Donut, sensing a deal to be made, straightened on my shoulder. Sand cascaded off of her. I held up a hand to stop her.

"How about this?" I asked, pulling a single blitz stick from my inventory. It'd gotten a couple of these from Quint the Desperado Club pharmacist.

Clay pulled it from my hand and squinted, examining it. He immediately popped it into his mouth and lit it.

"Good shit. Welcome to Hump Town. Stay out of city hall. Dromedarians only. Other than that, have fun. If you're into weird shit, Weird Shit Alley is up against the far wall on the northeast side of town. Otherwise, the regular girls are mostly on Hump Street. I recommend Jazmin Delight over at the Wiggle Room."

"Wait," Katia said. "So the town is called Hump Town because…"

"Yeah, we're a brothel town. What did you think? Now get out of here. And again, stay out of city hall."

New Quest. "Stay out of city hall."

Find out what's in city hall. It just might be important.

***Reward*: You will receive a Silver Quest Box.**

"Well that's, I don't know. A little obvious," I muttered as the camel wandered away, smoking his blitz stick. He stopped and talked to another camel, pointing at us. They both laughed.

"Do you think the prostitutes are more camels?" Donut asked. "Because that's just weird."

"Not as weird as an entire, prostitution-based economy when there's only two towns. It's like the Iron Tangle all over again. It doesn't make any sense." Clay proudly showed his blitz stick to another camel, who also laughed. I was starting to realize what had just happened. We'd gotten scammed. I grunted. *You asshole. Well-played.*

"Let's find Mordecai."

The town's streets were laid out like a set of nested semi-circles, like a rainbow. The residences dotted the outer ring, just inside the wall, interspersed with barracks-like buildings. The second ring consisted of shops and a handful of training guilds with the large City Hall building in the center. It was the largest building in town, rising up to the top of the fabric awnings, which all ran from the top of the building to both the town wall and the tomb wall behind it, like an umbrella. Each individual awning piece was triangular, like a jib on a sailboat, but much, much bigger.

The town was larger than I expected. Larger than the medium skyfowl town I "owned" from the third floor. The inns and Desperado Club were all on the third ring, the aptly labeled "Hump Street."

As we made our way, the wind abruptly stopped. And just like that, dirty light streamed in from the spaces between the fabric awnings. Shouts rose around town, and suddenly camels were everywhere. A group appeared, pulling ladders and climbing the walls, unhooking the fabric. We had to step out of the way as a group of tall camels strode by on steampunk-like, metal and spring stilts. We watched as they rolled the fabric up. In minutes, the massive sails were pulled up and placed atop the city hall. I caught the shimmer of enchantment in the fabric. A group of camels expertly twisted the sails atop of the tower. The blue and white stripes formed a pattern, making something between a minaret, the onion towers atop Saint Basil's cathedral, and soft serve ice cream. Only it was all made of fabric. Fabric they could quickly unfurl and re-deploy the moment another storm arrived.

"That's pretty nifty," I said, amazed at how quickly they'd taken it all down.

"Amazing," Katia agreed.

I stared up into the sky, agape. On the third floor there'd been a fake ceiling with an illusory sky. There'd really been ceiling up there, one I could easily hit with my slingshot.

Now, I could see the distant shimmer of what appeared to be a forcefield, but it was high, high in the air. Airplane height. I turned in a circle. The city ended at a massive wall that had to be over a hundred feet tall. Before, I had thought we were in a giant bowl. I realized now that I was correct. A bowl that sat atop a tomb. What had the description called it? The Necropolis of Anser.

"Carl, this doesn't feel very dungeon-like to me," Donut said, looking up at the sky.

I laughed. "You said you didn't like tunnels. There's a top. It's just really, really high up there. Remember what it said when we first came in? It called this place bubble number 543."

Katia was also turning in circles, looking into the air. "We're under a dome," she agreed. "Look at the way the light shines. It's gotta be four or five kilometers to the top."

Something flew by high above. It was a giant bird of some sort. It dove out of view past the edge of the bowl.

"If we're in the air quadrant, and the subterranean quadrant is under our feet, where are the land and sea quadrants?" I asked.

"I don't know," she said. "But if we're in a bowl. Maybe it's like an island, and there's water outside the bowl."

"You're close," a new, almost-familiar voice said. I turned to look at the skyfowl. The large eagle approached us from one of the deeper streets.

"Mordecai," I said, looking at the light brown and beige eagle. "Is that you? Like the *real* you?"

He grunted. "Are you taking the scenic route? By the gods, I had to come looking for you. This isn't what I really looked like. They made me a rock edge skyfowl. I was a centurion. Darker feathers. Larger wingspan. Bigger talons. Much more handsome."

Mongo rushed up and sniffed at the manager, and upon realizing who it was, started bouncing up and down.

"You eagle guys all look the same to me," I said. We, again, had to move out of the way as a group of dromedarians marched past. There were seven of them, and the system listed them as **Level 48 Waster Patrol**. They were decked out in dark robes. They carried spears and more of the bazookas over their shoulders. These guys walked with purpose and headed straight for the exit.

"Don't get me wrong," Mordecai continued. "It's amazing. It's the first time I've been in a body similar to my real form in a very long time. But they fucked me." Mordecai spread out his wings. "I'm in the body of a goddamn cleric. That means I'm clipped. I can fly, but only short distances. Imagine if you suddenly woke up in the body of a eunuch and were then thrown into a supermodel orgy." He looked up into the sky and sighed heavily. "At least I'm still a skyfowl. And anything is better than the damn toad."

Skyfowl didn't have arms. Just feet and wings, like regular eagles. "Can you still, you know, do potion stuff in that body?"

He looked at me as if I just asked to see nudes of his mom.

"Better than ever," he said. "Anyway, Katia, you were close. We *are* in a dome. Like a snowglobe. They're calling them bubbles. The Necropolis of Anser is a very high tower, and we are on top of it." He pointed up. "That bubble is bigger than it looks from here. The ground and the sea are far below us. You came in a few minutes late, so you missed the first announcement, but there's going to be another announcement explaining the floor's rules in a couple of minutes. Let's get into a saferoom and get some food and listen to what they gotta say."

We walked toward Mordecai's chosen inn, a bar called The Toe. I walked ahead with Mordecai, while Katia, Mongo, and Donut held back, oohing and ahhing at all the sights. The town was an odd mix of stereotypical, movie-style, middle-eastern village mixed in with the Burning Man Festival. The adobe buildings were oftentimes augmented with rusty, metallic exoskeletons. I couldn't tell if it was armor, something functional, or just art. One residence had a steampunk-ish telescope on top, pointing up. Another held a

weather station that glowed with enchantment. A battery-powered engine chugged outside of another building. A pair of young camels zipped by on a tracked cart, like a mini tractor, dragging a rickety wagon stacked impossibly high with branches. They laughed as they bounced. The whole town smelled of smoke and oil and dirt.

Every NPC I'd seen so far was a camel, but that changed once we hit Hump Street. A pair of women standing outside one bar spied us, and they both changed shape, one into a human woman, the other into a skyfowl.

"Are those changelings or doppelgangers?" I asked. The tag over them said they were what they portrayed.

"Changelings, like me," Mordecai said sourly. "Don't trust them. If you're feeling like you need to, you know, stick with the Desperado Club."

The cookbook had something similar to say about changelings. It'd called them thieving, backstabbing whores, or something of the like.

I observed a pair of crawlers gawking at us. Both were level-22 humans. I waved, and they backed away into a different bar, as if they were afraid of me.

"Fifteen days, huh?" I said, changing the subject.

"I was expecting 12," Mordecai said. "The fact they gave us three more than expected is not necessarily a good thing. I already know how the floor works, and we're already screwed. So with the extra three days, I suspect we might be in for a nasty surprise."

"Why are we screwed?" I asked.

"You're stuck in a quadrant with maybe three dozen other crawlers. That's it. Every one I've seen so far other than you guys is so underpowered, it's a miracle they've made it this far. And what's worse, you gotta use them to help you storm the gnome castle to get to the stairwell."

"Yeah," I said. "We need to reset our buffs, get some sleep, open up all our boxes, and then see if we can find the place."

"Find it?" Mordecai asked. He pointed up. I looked, following his wing. High, high above, brushing the ceiling of the dome and far to the side was a tiny, little speck. "There's your castle."

"Shit," I said.

The Toe was a simple, inn-style tavern with a Dromedarian proprietor. The place smelled like a petting zoo. This inn only employed a single prostitute, a woman changeling named Juice Box, who sat pouting in the corner after we all rejected her. In addition to the woman, the Toe also offered alcohol, food, and a few rooms.

The incoming message was not a regular announcement as we still had ten more hours until the recap episode. The bar had the traditional three screens, but the middle screen with the top-10 was empty. A countdown appeared, indicating it would populate in ten hours after the recap. Apparently that was a normal thing.

We ordered drinks and food and sat at the table, waiting for the message. It came quickly.

Hello, Crawlers. Welcome to the fifth floor! We are so very excited for you to enjoy this new and exciting level! We have just over 178,000 of you joining us. The last floor was somewhat of a mystery, and finding out how it worked was part of the fun. This floor is a little different. The layout is not so much a secret, and the rules are pretty simple. We want you guys to have a great time with this one.

There are over 4,000 castles on this floor. Every castle contains a single stairwell. No two castles are the same.

Think of a sheet of bubble wrap. Every bubble is its own self-contained world. Each individual world has four zones or "quadrants."

There are a total of 1,172 bubbles. All of you are inside of a bubble, equally and randomly distributed the best we could. That comes to a little more than 150 crawlers per bubble. Like with the castles, every bubble is different.

Each bubble is split into four quadrants. Land, Sea, Air, and Subterranean. Each quadrant has a single castle within. Your mission is to find the castle, raid it, and take the throne

room. Once the throne room is occupied or the quadrant's boss is killed, the castle is considered conquered. The stairwell is also located in the throne room, so no need to be scrambling around, worried about not being able to find it. Easy, right? Take the castle, take the stairwell.

"That sounds simple enough," I said. But it wasn't simple. If we couldn't fly, how the hell could we get up there? It's not like we could build a cannon to toss us. We were going to have to build a balloon. Or an airplane. Or find a way to shoot it down. *Something*.

But, there is a small hitch. In order for your stairwell to actually open up and be passable, all four castles in your bubble must first be taken. That's right, the Land, Sea, Air, and Subterranean castles must *all* fall in order for you to proceed to the sixth floor.

Mordecai groaned.

"Goddamnit," I said. I exchanged a look with Katia, who looked ill. Even Donut seemed taken aback.

Luckily for you, once you have taken your own castle, you may traverse outside of your quadrant to lend a hand to your fellow bubble buddies. Once all four castles are taken, the bubble is popped, and you may proceed outside of the bubble area if you wish. You may not enter other bubbles until they are also popped.

Good luck, folks. Some of these castles are much easier to crack than others. Also, the second round of sponsorship bidding is underway. We'll have another message in a few hours after the regular recap episode. Now get out there and kill, kill, kill!

We sat in silence for several moments. Mordecai's feathers around his neck ruffled and unruffled. He turned to look at us.

"I'm going to assume right now that out of the 150 or so crawlers in this bubble, every single one of them is an incompetent idiot. That means you have less than four days to take each castle. So get that food in your mouths, open all the boxes you've accumulated, get your asses to bed, and then get back out there. We got a lot of work to do."

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THE FIRST THING DONUT DID WAS BOUNCE OVER TO THE MAILBOX AND GRAB her spellbook-of-the-floor club prize as we headed toward our personal space.

"Maybe it'll be a flying spell," Katia muttered.

"We won't be so lucky," I said.

We did, however, have three very rich sponsors amongst us, and we were about to receive three more. I hated, absolutely hated, having to depend on them for help, but I was at a loss as to what we were going to do.

"What's the point of being able to leave the bubble if we can't get into the other bubbles?" Katia asked.

"Right now we need to focus on that flying castle," I said.

Imani: Hey, Carl. What's a backstay?

Carl: In sailing terms? It's the rigging that runs from the mast to the back of the boat. There are different kinds.

Elle: There are 20 of us, and not a one of these old farts has ever sailed a boat. Can you believe that? I told them not to put me into Meadow Lark. I would've been better off in one of the more expensive old folks homes surrounded by rich old codgers who grew up on boats, but no. The system is giving us a sailing tutorial, but it doesn't tell us where the things are. How are we supposed to pull the boom vang when we don't know what it is? This thing is more complicated than those trains.

Imani: We need to figure this out quickly. There are rocks everywhere. What's a spinnaker? Wait. We don't need that part yet.

Carl: Jesus, you guys need to be careful. Sailing a boat isn't something you can figure out on the fly. It takes months.

Imani: We would have an NPC helping us if Elle hadn't iced him.

Elle: He was being suspicious. We're on our way back to the island. If we crash, we crash. There are boats everywhere. We have our pick.

Imani: Not all of us can float, Elle.

Carl: Weren't you on the island already? You know what, never mind. Just be careful.

Donut gasped. "Carl, Carl, I got a good one this time!" She glowed as she read the book.

I took a deep breath. "Donut. We talk about the spellbooks before we read them. Remember?"

"Unwad your panties, Carl."

Katia laughed. "You got that from Elle."

"I know, right? She's been teaching me sayings from the olden times."

"That's not very princess-like," I grumbled.

"Oh, Carl. Just chillax."

"That *is* a good spell," Mordecai said. "It's another utility spell, like *Hole*."

"What is it?"

"*Astral Paw*," Mordecai said. "Not as good as *Astral Hand* because there's no thumb to manipulate and hold things. But there's more force to it, especially at higher levels, and it can be used as a weapon. She can grow claws on it at level five. At level 10, she can make the paw a lot bigger. At level 15, her skills and abilities will translate directly to the paw. That's a big deal since her regular swipe is pretty strong. There's a similar spell we might want to get for you. *Astral Fist*. Anyway, she can manipulate items at a distance

as if she was physically touching them. Distance grows with level-up. At level one, it's about 10 meters."

I laughed. "Hey, Donut. If we were back home, you'd finally be able to knock that vase off the high shelf."

"That thing was a menace, Carl. It was haunted."

We'd had a high shelf covered with knickknacks and some heirloom vase thing over the television in our apartment. She'd tried several times to jump up there, but never got close. Sometimes she'd sit on my lap while I was playing a game, and she'd stare up at it and start meowing.

We returned to our personal space. Almost two days later, and the cleaner bot had not yet finished cleaning all the blood. It was almost done. It was on the couch, sucking away at the back of the cushions when we entered.

"That thing needs a raise," I said.

The bot beeped in agreement.

"Open your boxes and then assign your stat points," Mordecai said.

I sat in the kitchen chair and pulled up the achievements I'd missed. I had several, including a few really good ones. I did not get any sort of credit for killing the mimic, though I hadn't been expecting it. Most of the achievements revolved around dealing with Grull and tossing the *Nightmare* through the portal to blow the soul crystals.

New Achievement! Let There Be Chaos.

You have successfully summoned a god into the dungeon. That's a great way to get more friends. Everybody loves it when someone brings immortal death machines to the party.

***Reward*: It might've been a bad idea, but it's sure going to be entertaining.**

New Achievement! Divine Epiphany.

You have seen a deity. Don't get too excited. It doesn't mean you're a prophet or anything like that. This is a pretty common achievement that all crawlers eventually receive if they survive long enough, so you aren't really that special. Finding a god is easy. What you don't want is for that god to find you.

***Reward*: You now have the option to worship the god Grull.**

Admin Note: There is a new tab now available in your interface.

I laughed. I looked up at the ceiling and said, "Grull can suck my dick."

Donut and Katia, who'd both just received the same achievement, also laughed.

"Worship Grull? At this point, I'm quite sure it's the other way around," Donut added.

New Achievement! Indomitable.

You have been physically attacked by a deity, and you survived. This is a feat that has only been accomplished by a handful of crawlers in the history of *Dungeon Crawler World*. Good job! Unfortunately for you and anybody around you, whenever this happens, the other deities tend to notice.

***Reward*: You have received a Legendary Deity's Box.**

"Wow," I said. A legendary box!

The next achievement came in the AI's creepy, I'm-touching-myself-and-smoking-a-cigarette voice.

New Achievement! Smushed for Daddy.

You have been stepped upon by a deity. You have survived the encounter. And while this wasn't the pink-fleshed suppleness of a human-shaped foot that crushed your fragile, wet body, it's nice sometimes to switch things around. You know, just to test the boundaries of your own limits. When one experiments, oftentimes one finds new and exciting ways to get that rush.

While fun, it wasn't quite the same. You probably don't realize how lucky that is for you.

***Reward*: You have received a Platinum Spicy Box.**

"For fuck's sake," I muttered. I remembered that moment, when the god had stepped upon me. I would've been obliterated had I not been under that potion's protection. I remembered the dungeon had rumbled, but I was a little preoccupied to notice it at the time. After that, there were only a few more notable achievements.

New Achievement! Hail Mary!

You have initiated an attack that has caused more than 100 casualties more than 100 kilometers from your current position. You're either the universe's greatest sniper, or you've been a sneaky, little, portal-using bitch. Either way, that's rather impressive. You'd have a great career in politics ahead of you if, you know, we hadn't destroyed your world and all the governments and stuff.

***Reward*: You've received a Gold Sniper's box!**

New Achievement! Extinction Event.

You have, with a single attack, killed every last member of a non-unique species on a dungeon's floor. That's not an easy thing to do, and it takes a special brand of asshole to pull something like this off.

Species killed: Wall Monitors.

***Reward*: You have received a Platinum Asshole's Box!**

The wall monitors were the lizard creatures that lived in the abyss. When the train had popped through the portal and blown everything to hell, we must've killed them all.

In addition to all of that, we'd all received two bronze boss boxes for killing the mantaurs even though we hadn't technically killed either of them. Both had been summoning vessels for Grull. I wasn't going to complain. Nobody else in the party received the Indomitable achievement, though Katia had received a similar one

for surviving a god's magic attack, but it was only a gold box. Apparently Elle was the only other one to get the Legendary box.

I also received a Silver Fan Box for having the most "switchovers" during a battle. I didn't know what that actually meant, but we'd find out tomorrow what the people had picked for me. Since it was a lower-tier fan box, I wasn't too enthusiastic.

Of the three of us, Donut had received the least amount of boxes, though she did receive a Platinum That Wasn't Too Smart, Was It? Box for attacking the Province Boss. Her two regular boss boxes were coins and healing-themed scrolls. However, she did receive a scroll that filled me with dread.

Scroll of Water Breathing.

Allows you to breathe underwater. Lasts as many seconds as your intelligence stat times three. It does not protect you from swimmer's ear or being eaten by an undead barracuda. I hope you know how to swim.

"I am saying this right now, Carl," Donut announced the moment she received the scroll. "I am a cat. Cats do not swim. Cats do not go in water. It is unnatural, and it is not going to happen."

Mordecai: Goddamnit, Donut. Don't say that stuff out loud.

Donut: I CAN'T EXACTLY SAY IT IN CHAT ANYMORE, CAN I, MORDECAI?

Mordecai: Your chats are still protected if I'm in on it. If you need to vent, make sure you do it to me.

She swiped her tail angrily several times. "This is not acceptable. I do not like this one bit."

"The scrolls are clunky," Mordecai said, sighing. "If I can get the right materials, I will make a potion for water breathing. There are also several different spells that'll allow you to travel freely in water."

"What about flying?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Spells and items, yes. Lots and lots. But potions? If you'd saved one of the bench upgrade coupons, then maybe. I really need two upgrades. Otherwise we'll have to do it another way." He said this loudly. He was really talking to our sponsors.

Donut's final, platinum box contained another magic book. It was a 15-mana spell called *Wall of Fire*.

"That's an escape spell," Mordecai said. "It's about a 10 meter wide, two meter high wall of fire that lasts 15 seconds at level 1. It's a common spell. Powerful later on, but it's also fire. Fire tends to spread. When the magic goes away, if it's cast on something flammable, it stays on fire. I've seen it a hundred times. Fire gets out of control very easily."

"It's not *Fireball*," Donut grumbled. "That's what I really want." She glowed as she read the book.

Katia opened her boxes next. In addition to gold, she received several more of the water-breathing scrolls along with antidote potions. The water breathing scrolls and antidote pots seemed to be pretty common, making them this floor's version of the torch and the bandage. In her gold Survivor's box, she received a skill potion that she was forced to drink right away. It raised her Catcher skill, which she'd been training relentlessly, up to level 11.

I went next. My boss boxes contained a few healing scrolls, a useless magical shirt, and a handful of the water-breathing scrolls. But I also received one more invisibility potion. That potion had saved my ass during the fight with Grull.

"That's an easy, but expensive, potion to make," Mordecai said. "Some of the materials for it are rare. It's good that you're getting them."

"It's like once you start getting something, you're more likely to keep getting it," I said.

"That's absolutely right," he agreed. "And sometimes things, like those water-breathing scrolls, are a not-so-subtle hint about what you might find on a level. See all those antidote potions Katia received? It means we have lots of poison-dealing monsters and traps on this floor as well. Good thing both you and Donut are immune to poison."

"How wonderful for you," Katia said drily.

I received 40,000 gold for surviving the level in the top 10. Donut had gotten 30,000 and Katia 10,000. We still needed to purchase some environmental upgrades for the space, but at the moment we

had about 650,000 gold between the three of us, and that was before I opened the rest of my boxes.

My gold sniper's box contained a crafting item. It was a case containing 25 small, black items, each about the size of a bottle cap.

Surefire. Crafting item.

A Surefire adds the "Guided" status to any projectile, powered or not. It may be utilized on a vast array of crafting tables. If added to an arrow or bolt, you must choose a target prior to unleashing the weapon, and the projectile will seek that target.

If added to a trap, additional options become available. Such as "Target any healers within range" or "Target anyone who thinks it's okay to put mayonnaise on hotdogs."

If added to a powered weapon, such as an explosive-based rocket, targets may be assigned during the crafting process or upon firing, but not both.

Note: this upgrade alone does not add range to the projectile.

"Cool," I said, moving to my two platinum boxes.

The platinum Spicy box—the one I'd gotten because the system AI was a goddamned pervert—contained a toe ring.

Enchanted Toe Ring of the Leprous Bandit.

This is a unique item.

Most children in the universe know the exciting tale of the Leprous Bandit, the infamous human thief whose people were starving to death because of a planet-wide quarantine. While all the planet's residents were carriers of the disease, it did not affect them. But because the disease was deadly to the Forsoothed, the planet's regents, the aliens placed themselves in floating protection platforms, guarding the gardens and food stores in hopes to starve the humans all out.

The bandit climbed a mountain, jumped onto a platform, and broke into the floating garden. He was quickly killed, of course, but not before he infected the Forsoothed and caused them to flee the planet. Thanks to the bandit's

intervention, the human planet survived another 100 years before it was obliterated in an unrelated conflict. To this day, the Leprous Bandit remains an inspiration.

This toe ring imbues the following:

The Sticky Feet Benefit.

The Super Spreader Benefit.

"Two benefits in one item?" Mordecai said. "That's a pretty damn valuable ring. That's almost legendary tier."

Sure enough, I stuck it in my inventory to check, and its value was up there, right above the Ring of Divine Suffering and below that Kimaris figure. I inspected the two benefits.

Sticky Feet.

Once every six hours, for (Dexterity x 2) seconds, you may walk upon a non-horizontal surface, such as a wall or ceiling. Gravity will not change, so leave your beer on the ground and make sure you tuck in your shirt first. Your bare feet must be in contact with the surface. No socks, no shoes.

"Hey, I'm like spiderman," I said. "At least my feet are. Too bad it's only once every six hours. I looked at the second benefit.

Super Spreader.

You have been given the power of every plague rat and kindergartner since the dawn of time. You may pass any active debuffs onto a target of your choice once per hour. This does not remove the debuff from yourself.

"Gross," I said as I slid the toe ring right onto my left pinky. I sighed, looking down at my shiny feet.

When my next box opened, the Platinum Asshole's Box, I realized what it was the moment the symbol appeared in the air.

"Oh fuck me," I said. A moment passed. I looked at my arms. I rubbed my hand across my neck. "Where did it go?" I said.

"It's on your face, Carl," Donut said, disgust in her voice. "You've been ruined. You look like one of those white guy rappers now."

Katia laughed, leaning in. "Don't worry, it's tiny. It's just below your left eye. Barely noticeable. Like a teardrop tattoo, but smaller. It's almost like a freckle. What is it? It looks like a gecko foot. It's cute."

"It's a tattoo of a lizard foot," I said.

Extinction Sigil Tattoo

Wall Monitor Race.

Removes automatic hostility for any natural enemies of lizard-class creatures.

Warning: holding this Extinction Sigil will cause lizard-class enemies to deal 20% more damage against you. Any Wall Monitors will deal 150% more damage against you.

You may only hide this tattoo with a cover-up sleeve.

"How in the hell am I supposed to use a cover-up sleeve on my face?"

"Hmm," Mordecai said, also examining the tattoo. "I don't think I've ever seen this. I've seen plenty like that goblin pass tattoo you have, but not like this. Everybody hates lizards, but I don't know what their natural enemies are. Maybe birds. They like eating eggs."

"I guess we'll find out," I said, reaching up to touch the tattoo under my eye. I now had three tats. My goblin pass, my Desperado Club pass, and now this. Hopefully it was as small and unnoticeable as Katia said.

I had one item left. My legendary deity's box. It was a potion. It looked different than most potions. The bottle was rounded and more ornate, like an expensive perfume bottle. Smoke rose from the glass.

"Holy shit," Mordecai said. "Can I see it?" He picked it up with his talon, and it was shaking.

"Who's Pawna?" I asked.

"She's the goddess of peace," Mordecai said. "In the pantheon, she's Grull's sister and arch enemy. Don't take this now. Save it."

I passed the potion around to the others and then took it back. I added it to my inventory. It was the first item I'd seen that was valued higher than the Kimaris figure.

The description was very simple.

Pawna's Tears.

This potion adds plus five to any spell or skill of your choosing.

"Why is it so valuable?" Katia asked. "Because it's plus five? We've seen skill potions before. We've seen potions that max out skills, like that one that Maggie My lady has. Plus there are those Cheat Code potions that do the same thing, but for three skill levels."

Mordecai answered. "It's valuable, my dear, because it's not only plus five, but he can choose any skill he wishes. Legendary skill potions that max out skills are also quite valuable, but they are only available for a limited number of skills. The Cheat Code potion is also precious. It is plus three to a random skill. However, the Cheat Code has a short shelf life, meaning he has to take it immediately. With this potion, Carl can save it. He can now train one of his skills to fifteen, take the potion, and raise it to twenty. It is, quite simply, the single best item of loot he has received since he entered the dungeon."

"Not including the pet biscuit," Donut said.

"Not including the pet biscuit," Mordecai agreed.

"My powerful strike is already 13," I said.

"It's 13 because you have six levels from equipment buffs. We'll want to use it on something that's naturally 15. Catch-all skills like Powerful Strike are hard to train up, especially after 15, but items that increase the skill are more common. We'll need to sit down and decide which specific skill to use it on. We don't have to decide right away, and we should probably wait until after you pick your subclass when we hit the sixth floor. Things might jumble around somewhat after that."

"Didn't Elle get the same box? What did she get?" Katia asked. The god had physically swiped at Elle a few times, though he hadn't actually touched her. She'd still gotten the box.

Carl: Elle, what did you get in your deity box?

Elle: Not a good time to talk. Imani crashed the boat. I had to freeze the water to keep everybody from drowning. But I got a spellbook called *Graupel*. Big ice storm. Most powerful spell I have now, but I'm kinda scared to try it. It costs 50 mana. Long cooldown. Talk soon.

I told them. Mordecai shook his head. "That's a war spell. Tell her to be careful with it while we're stuck in these snow globes. Do you

know anybody who is in this same bubble?"

"That's a good question," I said. "I haven't asked yet."

"I asked the former daughters, but nobody answered me," Katia said. "By the way, Eva is still alive. She's still on my chat."

"If she's not in this bubble, then we don't have to worry about it. Keep your find crawler up and running."

"I have been. There are eight crawlers I can see nearby, but I don't know any of them. They're all in the low twenties."

"Hmm," Mordecai said. "I wonder if they're averaging out the player levels in the bubbles. That'll explain why we're stuck with the dregs. Carl, your level 41 might be the highest in the dungeon. We won't know until the top 10 populates."

I sent out a group message, asking if anybody else was in bubble number 543. I received only one reply. A human named Gwendolyn Duet. She was a level-27 **Boring Ol' Fighter**. That was her class's actual name. "Boring Ol' Fighter." I'd seen "Fighter" listed before, but not that one. I couldn't remember meeting her, but she was pretty vocal and outspoken in the chats.

She was in the land quadrant, so somewhere far below us at sea level.

Gwendolyn Duet: Oh, hey bomber guy. It looks like we're neighbors. All of these dumbasses I'm stuck with don't know what they're doing. Me and the other two folks in my team are the highest level here. We rolled land, and we rolled something called the Sandcastle of the Mad Dune Mage. There are giant snakes, giant spiders, and these half-human, half-scorpion punk rock guys with no shirts and nipple rings running around all over the place. Plus bird things carrying chainsaws, though we haven't fought them yet. We haven't checked out the castle up close, but it's a big 'un. There are four levels of walls. It's built into the side of that giant tomb or mountain or whatever that is. I don't know how we're going to get in.

Carl: Do you have a Desperado Club down there?

Her damn name took up half the screen. I went into the chat interface and changed it to "Gwen."

Gwen: There are three villages not including the castle, and I heard one of them does, but this one doesn't. I don't have access anyway. I'm a proper fucking lady. I got a Club Vanquisher ring.

Carl: Okay. Keep me updated. If you know anybody in the sea or the tomb quadrants, let me know.

Gwen: 10-4. There's a coral reef ringing the island. You can see it from the shore. I've seen sharks and jellyfish. Don't know where the sea castle is. Ain't seen nothing on the water's surface yet. Don't know shit about the tomb, but there are lots of entrances we can't get into. It looks like it's a maze inside. After that last floor, I ain't too keen on going in there.

Carl: Roger that.

Fifteen days suddenly seemed like an impossibly-short time.

Post nap, we reset our buffs. After a quick discussion with Mordecai, we decided we needed to keep up our strict training schedule. Katia and Donut hit the training room while I returned to the village. We gave Mordecai our environmental coupons and several hundred thousand gold. He and Donut were going to purchase the store interface and kitchen upgrade. Donut also wanted one of the social upgrades, something that'd allow us to see messages from followers. None of us except her thought it was a good idea, and she'd been pouting about it for an hour straight.

I let Mordecai deal with that while I stepped out of the Toe. The "sun" was out, though it was threatening to sink below the western edge of the tomb's lip. I had to hurry.

All up and down the street, the prostitutes standing out front of the other bars suddenly turned into human women. A few of them gave themselves ridiculous proportions, like Odette-sized breasts. They turned a rainbow of colors. I noted about half of them were male before the change.

There didn't appear to be any other customers about. I shook my head and moved one street closer to the wall. "I can be anything you want, honey," one of them called after me as I walked away. "I have the biggest library in town."

I found the house I was looking for and knocked on the tall door.

I was expecting a lanky dromedarian, but the door was answered by a small, gray, featureless humanoid. Surprised, I took a step back. It was like a person wearing one of those body socks. No nose, no eyes, just a blank mannequin. The thing stood only about five feet tall. It reached forward and touched my hand. I took another step back. If it didn't have the white dot of an NPC, I would've clobbered it. I read the description and was glad I'd stopped myself.

Skarn. Level-3 Changeling Juvenile.

As I watched, he changed, features lumping together and clumsily forming into that of an eight-year-old boy. Unlike Katia's early attempts at changing, by the time he was done, he was indistinguishable from a regular human. He wore heart-covered boxers and clothes identical to my own for about ten seconds until it changed to a dromedarian-like robe. The tag over his head even changed. The kid looked up at me, wide-eyed, not saying anything.

"Uh, hey kid," I said. "Is your mom or dad home?"

"My parents were killed in the bombings. Flint is out on patrol and won't be home until after the darkness. He takes care of me now. He says I should always take the form of new people I meet so they feel more comfortable." The kid delivered it in a robotic, completely unnatural voice, like he was talking for the first time in his life.

"Yeah, good idea," I said, completely freaked out. It hadn't been a thing before, but I now had a new phobia: creepy-ass little kids.

What the kid had said finally registered. Shit. "I see you have that cool telescope on the roof of your house, and I wanted to use it to look at the gnome castle."

The kid, whose name was Skarn, brightened, suddenly becoming animated. The more he talked, the more personality he formed. "The *Wasteland*? I can show you that!" He paused. "Flint says I'm

supposed to ask for a gold coin. He says orphans can only get by if they use their talents to take money from people dumber than them."

"I take it Flint is a dromedarian?" I asked as I followed the kid into the house. It was a wide, open room with a straw bed, a tall table, and a whole wall of herbs and vegetables hanging from it. A ladder led to the hatch in the ceiling. The kid scurried up it, much too quickly.

"We had a village, but the gnomes bombed it," Skarn said. "Most of us died, but the dromedarians took us in. Not many kids lived. Ruby lived, but Flint says she's destined to spend her life in Weird Shit Alley."

"Why did the gnomes bomb you?"

"Flint says it's because gnomes are short little assholes who deserve nothing but to be trampled to death and to be ripped apart by the feral geese."

"Ah," I said, coming onto the roof.

From here, I had a panoramic view of the city. Most of the buildings, including the Desperado Club one street over, were only a single floor. The city hall was nearby, rising about four stories not including the massive fabric swirl atop it, which was another two. With the air clear, I could see the entirety of the "bowl." It was almost, but not quite, a circle, maybe a little more than three miles from edge to edge. I could see the other city in the distance, a mirror of this one on the opposite wall. Sand dunes and cave entrances dotted the dune-swept badlands between the two towns. Metallic wrecks dotted the landscape. Hulking shapes patrolled the desert, too far to see what they were. The area appeared much smaller than it had seemed now that I could see it all.

This is all we have to work with.

Skarn moved to the telescope, which was pointed toward the desert. "I like to watch the patrol to make sure they're okay. Flint says if I grow up big and strong, maybe they'll let me stay, and I can join the patrol one day."

I thought of the mass of desperate prostitutes one street over. It still didn't make sense to me, but the story was becoming a little

more clear. Skarn moved the telescope, searching. The telescope was a white tube covered in pipes and gears. The material of the body was odd, maybe ceramic. I examined it.

Enchanted Gnome FarSeerer.

Used to sight long-range targets for their bomb runs, the FarSeerer is credited as one of the key inventions that allowed the Dirigible Gnomes to obtain air superiority. When properly installed on a Gnomish Dreadnaught, this device increases the accuracy of gravity-based bombs by 75%. Allows for inspection and information on objects at a distance. It's pretty good for spying on your neighbors, too. You don't need porn when you got this thing hanging off the edge of your airship.

Warning: All gnomes targeted with this device are given a notice that they are being watched.

"Where did you get this?" I asked.

"Flint found it in the dunes. There's lots of crashed stuff from the last war out there. There! There it is! Okay, you can look now. Hurry 'cause it moves. But you gotta pay."

I flipped a gold coin to the kid, who let it fall to the roof. He picked it up with two hands and did a little jump. "Thanks, mister! Use the turny thing on the right to zoom in and out."

"Sure, kid," I said, leaning into the eyepiece. I was expecting the image to appear upside-down like with the telescope we had on the cutter, but the gnomish castle came into view, big and clear.

"Whoa," I muttered, surprised at the telescope's clarity. "It's huge. It looks like a goddamned floating junkyard."

"It used to be bigger, but some of it broke off and fell in the water."

The Wasteland Castle appeared to be a jagged-edged, almost-rectangular island ripped straight from the ground. There was so much going on with the thing, it was difficult to focus on the whole. From this angle, I could only see the top, shingled roof of what appeared to be a house sitting on the center of the landmass, but dozens of other smaller structures dotted the edges, most of which were made with what appeared to be corrugated metal, similar to

the walls of Hump Town. A group of absolutely colossal balloons kept the island aloft. Three brown, blimp-shaped balloons were flanked by a pair of even-bigger, round monstrosities. The five balloons were individually attached to the island by glowing ropes, and the whole group was held together with a net. The distinctive glimmer of a magical shield surrounded the balloons, causing the whole top section to shimmer in the dying light of the day.

If the scale was correct in my head, the island itself was approximately the width of three football fields. Like a goddamned floating aircraft carrier, but wider. Several of the small buildings dotting the exterior were actually weapons, I realized. I could see ballista and trebuchets and all sorts of weird odds and ends.

Hundreds of ropes and chains and other strange items hung from the bottom of the flying island, twinkling in the light. This included what appeared to be small, round huts. Some of the items only hung a few dozen feet, but other chains and ropes and oddities dangled past the telescope's display.

Also attached to the side of the floating island were dozens of different flying machines of various sizes, from tiny, single-person hot-air balloons, to bus-sized, floating boats that appeared to be held aloft by magic. Most were moored to the far side of the island. All of the devices seemed to be mismatched, rusting hulks that shouldn't be aloft, like the cars in a *Mad Max* movie. As I watched, one hovering vehicle, the size of a rowboat, floated into view. The driver was clearly a gnome, similar in size and shape to the Bopca Protectors, but maybe a little smaller and with even more bulbous noses. It wore the stereotypical red, pointy hat. In fact, I realized, the whole damn island was covered with the little, red hats bouncing around.

The small airship was held aloft like a drone, with a set of four propellors spread out under the vehicle. The distinctive shape of a refrigerator-sized bomb dangled precariously underneath the small airship. I zoomed in further, and to my surprise, all the information appeared like I was examining it up close.

Gnomish Knock-Knock

Type: Fuel-air bomb.

Effect: Thermobaric Explosion.

Status: 40. Barely stable. I wouldn't be tapping on the thing.

Ever seen a hundred Dromedarians die because their lungs imploded, followed by their skin getting melted off their body just before they all shatter into mist? Well now's your chance! Fun for the whole family, this was the main weapon of the Gnomish Bombardier Squads. There are only a few of these things left, and they're usually strapped to the failing air force's most reliable patrol ships.

The fuel-air Knock-Knocks were once used to devastating effect in the early days of the last conflict. The remaining munitions are instead used as a mutual-standoff weapon. These are simple, crude, but highly-effective bombs. They are detonated using an adjustable, pressure-based fuse that can allow the bombardier to fine-tune the height at which they explode. Requires the bomber to know the altitude of their target to obtain maximum efficacy.

Famously unstable. But god-damn do they put on a show.

"Yikes," I muttered, pulling back. I looked down at the kid. "Did they drop one of those knock-knock bombs on your old village?"

"Yep," he said. "It was a long time ago, though. I don't remember it. Flint says the gnomes are bomb-dropping cowards. He says anybody who uses a bomb is a pussy."

"Flint sounds like a real peach. Why don't the gnomes drop bombs here?"

Skarn shrugged. "Flint says it's because of what they have in the town hall. The Bactrians have the same deal. That's why there's peace."

"What is it?"

"Flint says they don't know what the Bactrians have. But here in Hump Town we have something that makes it so the gnomes don't bomb us. The gnomes have a leader guy who's really mean, but we have something he wants to keep safe, so he doesn't bomb our town. They still attack anything outside the walls. That's why Flint

and the others only go out right after the storm, when the Wasteland is over the water."

"But do you know what they have hidden in town hall?"

"I don't know. I'm not allowed to go over there. I know it eats mushrooms."

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[3]

"Okay, here's what we gotta do," I said after I finished my training. "Step one is to find the other crawlers and make sure we're all on the same page. Step two is to figure out who they have locked up in the town hall. It's probably the gnome leader guy's kid or something."

"Maybe it's his pet," Donut said. "Nobody wants to bomb their pet. What eats mushrooms?"

"Lots of things," Mordecai said.

"So, we go out in there, and if it turns out it's this gnome guy's kid or something, what's the next move?" Katia asked. She was doing her best dromedarian impersonation. It was almost flawless. The system pegged it at 95%.

"It's going to depend on what it is, but after we find out, we'll have to go over to that other town and do the same thing again, I think. It sounds like they also have something to keep themselves safe. So far we only know a little kid's version of the story. We need to understand as much as possible before we move on."

"Okay, but before you go out there, let's do a quick tour of the new upgrades," Mordecai said, indicating the new kitchen renovation, which was nothing more than three cabinets sitting in a row against the blank wall of the kitchen. "We'll be able to upgrade this into something much better once we get to the tier-two upgrades. I'm looking forward to that, mostly because of the magic room. But we'll talk about that later. These are food synthesizers,

bought with Katia's coupon. You can only use one a day, but this upgrade came with three different cabinets, so it's breakfast, lunch, and dinner or whatever. I know from experience these things can be a little buggy. I suggest not picking the same item twice in a row, or suddenly you'll find yourself with that as your only choice. Otherwise the selection changes every day and is customized to you. It'll learn your tastes."

I walked up to the first cabinet, put my hand on the door, and a menu popped up. There were about twenty choices listed, all of them breakfast items, from cornflakes to bacon to hominy grits. I clicked on **Sausage Bagel Sandwich**, opened the door, and the kinda-hot sandwich was sitting there, like the wooden cabinet was a microwave.

"Hey, cool," I said.

"Don't get too excited," Katia said. "Wait until you try it."

I took a bite. It tasted like a microwave biscuit sandwich, which I'd probably eaten a thousand of over the years.

"It's not bad," I said, chewing. "It's not great, either. Bopca food is better."

A new buff notification appeared.

You are full! Your warm tummy increases your healing speed by 5%. It decreases debuff times by 5%. It lowers all indirect damage by 5%.

"The food buff lasts all day, so you don't have to eat all three meals here," Mordecai said.

"Thank god," Katia said. "I had it give me skyr and jam, and it tasted like bad sour cream mixed with Jolly Ranchers."

"What the hell is skyr?" I asked.

"The second upgrade is just as important," Mordecai said, interrupting. "It is the marketplace interface."

"Marketplace?" I asked. "So we can buy stuff?"

"Yes and no," he said. "We bought the marketplace upgrade early, and it doesn't really open up until the next floor. For now it's like having a virtual general store interface. The second-tier version is the same thing but twice as expensive, so we had to buy it now. You can purchase basic potions and scrolls, and random items will

also pop up for sale. You can sell things. Carl, this was your coupon, but we gave it to Donut to use, so she got credit for it. It is her account. We did this because her Charisma bonus is automatically added to the prices."

Donut had actually told me they were doing this as they did it, and I had said it was okay. If she died or we separated parties, I'd lose the upgrade. But at this point, our shit was so intertwined, losing this particular upgrade would be the least of my worries.

"How does it work?" I asked. I already knew the answer to this question, but I wanted Mordecai to state it.

He pointed with his wing over at a screen sitting against the wall next to his door. I hadn't noticed it until now.

"It's a simple interface. It's like buying and selling on Ebay. There will even be bid auctions available next floor. If you want to sell anything magical, like those low-tier clothing items you keep receiving, I'd wait until then. For regular junk, just toss it to the AI storekeeper, and you'll get a good price thanks to Donut."

"I don't like it," Donut said. "It doesn't let you haggle. Also, it's broken. It says my hats are only worth one gold piece each. We need to get it fixed."

"Bid auctions?" I asked. "The customer base gets smaller and smaller each floor. How many of us have this thing? Do people actually use it?"

"Oh, yes. The tourists and the factions will be able to start trading using the system once the sixth floor opens. You'll see. The marketplace will be flooded. Some of the factions will be snatching up anything magical that appears, so you'll make some good money selling your loot. Much more than you would get selling it to a store."

"Wait," I said. "Are we going to have to fight the guys we're selling this gear to?"

"Yes," he said. "This is how they outfit their armies. But if you don't sell your gear, somebody else will."

"So Prince Stalwart has one of these interface things, too?"

"Actually, no," Mordecai said. "The factions on the ninth floor don't get the interface. The funnel city of Larracos has actual stores with NPC proprietors, and the faction leaders have to physically go

to the store and buy or bid on the items. Once you crawlers get there, everybody gets kicked out of Larracos and the fighting begins. So you make the most money selling your gear on the sixth through eighth floor. Once the ninth floor opens, the factions are no longer able to buy new gear and can only take it from the other armies. I'll explain all of that when you get there."

"I don't like the idea of selling shit to people who'll use it against us."

Mordecai grunted. "They'll mostly be using it on each other. Now go over there and check out the interface."

"I will in a bit," I said. "We got work to do."

I actually really wanted to go over there and take a look at the interface, mostly because it would finally give me a definitive gold value for most of the items in my inventory. However, I'd been warned by *The Dungeon Anarchist's Cookbook* against using the marketplace interface while I had the book on me. Currently, the book showed itself as having almost no value. Certain things, like that unexploded nuke also showed themselves as having no value in my inventory. However, the cookbook included this warning:

<Note added by Crawler Batbilge, 12th Edition>

Be careful with the marketplace interface. It uses a different system to value items than whatever you might have installed into your UI. It tags this tome as a unique, heirloom item, giving it a ridiculous value, something like 50 million gold. Nothing has happened yet, but I am afraid of giving a third party access to my inventory like that.

<Note added by Crawler Allister, 13th Edition >

I don't know if this is the cause, but this appears to be Batbilge's last entry into the Cookbook. I've been leaving the cards casually on my bed whenever I use the marketplace. Make sure you don't have it on you to be safe.

I knew the cookbook manifested itself in different forms. For Allister, it appeared as a massive deck of playing cards from his home planet. They were for a game called T'Ghee, which seemed to be a mix between chess and go fish from the little information

Allister gave. The game was also a part of their meditation-based religion, which made it easy for Allister to spend hours studying the cards.

I had a little bedside table in my room, though I barely ever went in there. Donut still insisted on us sleeping together. I would try to leave the book in there and then go use the marketplace later.

But for now, we had work to do.

The first two crawlers were a pair of humans who'd set themselves up at a brothel bar called Spit and Swallow. The bar's logo was a bird skewered on a stick. We entered the dark, incense-smelling saferoom. Mongo was in his carrier. Donut stood on my shoulder. Katia stood beside me. A dromedarian barkeep looked up at us. Multiple dromedarians were here, sitting at tables and drinking at the bar. Quiet music wafted through the large, L-shaped room. I saw it was a young, teenaged changeling playing a stringed instrument that was like a square-shaped guitar. The music was subtle, but haunting. It had kind of an Asian vibe. It was completely out-of-place for such a dive.

The two crawlers were the same guys we saw when we went into the Toe earlier. The first was a thin and tall man with an angular face, about 25 years old. He had olive skin and looked he might be of middle eastern origin. He was a level-22 **Hammersmith** named **Firas M**. The second was an overweight, balding guy about the same age. He looked maybe Spanish. He was a level-22 **Pest Exterminator** named **Louis Santiago 2.**

Sitting on Louis's lap was a prostitute. She was doing a rough approximation of Jessica Rabbit. Louis and Firas were laughing as we came in. "This is much better than the slave Leia," Louis said.

The woman pouted. "You said that was good. What about my…." She trailed off, seeing us stop at the table.

"They're making her change into different famous people," Katia said, sounding disgusted. They could hear what she was saying, but

she spoke as if they couldn't.

"Yup," I said. Each time they would have to describe the character like they were doing a sketch for a police artist. Their Jessica Rabbit was close, but the woman's forehead was too small, and the nose was much too big. Plus the dress was all wrong.

The prostitute, a level 14 "Human" was looking at Katia up and down with a sour expression. She spit on the ground before getting up and moving to the other side of the room.

"Why I never," Donut said. "Did you see that? I don't think she likes you, Katia."

"Mordecai warned me," Katia said, watching the prostitute move away. The woman melded back into the weird, changeling shape before leaning up against the bar. She was the only prostitute in the room. "He said sometimes shapeshifters don't like each other very much."

"She's probably just jealous," Donut said. "You can turn into anything you want, and they can only do regular monsters they've touched."

"Maybe," Katia said. "They can still change their features, obviously. Plus they gain some of the abilities of the race they choose. Sometimes I think that's better. I'm never going to be able to fly, not like them."

We'd discussed this earlier. Katia, as a doppelganger, could change into a flying creature and possibly get herself off the ground. But even with no mass added, she weighed more than most flying creatures anywhere close to her size, making liftoff a problem. She'd have to go big, like a dragon or something, but that would take a lot of work and time to get right, time we simply didn't have. A changeling's mass changed wildly from body to body. I asked Mordecai about it, and he said simply, "Magic."

The two crawlers were just looking up at us, wide-eyed the whole time.

"You're Carl," Louis said. He turned to Firas. "I told you that was Carl."

"I believed you," he said.

"We're working on a plan to get off this floor," I said. "I'm collecting everybody in town so we can discuss it. We're all going to meet up at the Toe after the recap episode."

"Toe," Louis said, cracking up. "Get it?" he said to Firas.

"Get what?" Firas asked.

"The joke! The name of the bar is a joke."

"The Toe is a joke?"

"Yes, man. Come on. It's a camel town. You wouldn't call a restaurant back home the human finger, would you? You'd just call it the finger."

"What?" Firas said. "I don't get it."

I finally realized both of these guys were drunk off their asses. There was no debuff warning over their heads. I still didn't understand why it was there sometimes and not others. The shitfaced debuff only appeared in specific circumstances, I guessed.

"Look," I said, leaning in. "We need to all work together. The recap is in like six hours. Meet us there."

"Or what?" Louis said, suddenly sounding inexplicably hostile. "You gonna blow us up?"

"No," Donut said, jumping on the table and scattering their glasses. Vodka spilled everywhere. "Carl won't hurt you. But if you're not a part of the team, we are going to make sure you are kicked out of town. Have you seen the mobs out there in the desert? I haven't seen anything lower than level 30. And since you two chuckleheads are level 22, I don't think that will go so well. Now say, 'We'll be there, Carl.'"

"We'll be there, Carl," Louis said, swallowing.

"Lovely," Donut said.

"Chuckleheads?" Katia asked. "Another Elle term?"

"I got that one from the AI!" she said. "I've been waiting to use it."

"Those guys aren't going to help," I said. "They've already given up, and they're coasting."

"I want to know how they got this far," Katia said.

It'd only been dark for two hours, and dawn was already starting to crack in the distance as we left the Spit and Swallow.

"Hey," I asked a passing dromedarian who walked with a massive bundle of reeds on his back. He stopped to look at us impassively.

"Is it only dark for two hours here?"

He looked at me like it was the dumbest question anyone had ever asked. "Taranis strolls across the sky, chased by his red brother, Hellik, who catches him four hours before dark. Taranis dismisses his evil brother with the storm before descending to rest for two hours before it happens again."

"How long does Taranis take to move across the sky?" Katia asked. "And how long before Hellik appears?"

"You are truly new to this world, like they say," the dromedarian said. "Taranis's stroll is about twenty-two hours, except in the dark months after his brother finally catches and betrays him. Hellik is only in the sky for eight hours a day. You don't wish to be out there when both are in the sky, as the heat is unbearable."

"So there are two suns it sounds like," Katia said. "How long until the red sun rises?"

"You have 12 hours," he said. "But we approach the time of the switch. In eleven days is the Red Equinox. That is when Taranis will be caught, and he will be gone for but four hours a day. The light of Hellik will wash the world for eight hours, but four of them will be the blowing season. Now leave me be." He turned and walked off.

"Did you understand that?" I asked Katia.

"I think so," she said. "Days are 24 hours long like on earth. It's only dark for two hours. The storms come every day at four hours before sunset and last two hours. The second sun is up for eight hours, and it gets really hot during that time. It sounds like our last three days here will be mostly dark, and the storms will last twice as long."

"So, he said we have 12 hours until it gets super hot?" I asked.

"That's right," she said. "And we have 18 until the next sandstorm. I think."

"It's already super hot," Donut complained.

"We better hurry then," I said. Time was always weird here in the dungeon. The dungeon timers were mostly based on earth's 24-hour clock, but the recap episode and some of the spell cooldowns worked on the Syndicate Standard day, which was something weird like 30 hours and 17 and a half seconds. It reminded me of having to deal with both metric and imperial measurements, something I'd had to cope with daily before all of this.

After Louis and Firas, we found another group of six crawlers in another bar. These guys were a party of half-elves and humans. They were all level 21-24, and they all seemed older, mostly in their thirties and forties. They were all Archers. All six of them had the exact same class. **Archer**. All six were male. It turned out they were a group of automobile salesmen from Helsinki. They worked at neighboring car dealerships and had been at lunch when the collapse happened. On the first floor, they'd been beset by bow-wielding goblins, and their group had been decimated. But after striking back, bow-and-arrow themed weapons had been the only thing they received in their loot boxes. They had swords and knives and clubs, but the only weapon they all excelled at were the bows.

Them all choosing the exact same class had to be one of the dumbest things I'd seen since entering the dungeon, but knowing how this place worked, it probably wasn't entirely their fault.

They'd hooked up with a much larger group the previous two floors, but they kept their own party. The archer thing had worked well on the third floor, but it had severely hindered them on the subway level. The "leader" was a stocky man, about 45-years old with greying blonde hair and ice-blue eyes. His name was Langley, and he was the highest at level-24.

These guys were more serious about their predicament despite their lower levels. They'd also received the quest to find out what was in the Town Hall and had been discussing what to do about it when we'd arrived. I talked them into holding off for a bit and to start stepping out of town to train themselves up while we walked

over to the Bactrian town, which was about three miles away on the other side of the dunes. We'd all meet up later.

The town's door was wide open, and there was no guard when we left. Katia added extra mass, rising up and hulking out. She pulled her riot shield and wore it on her left arm.

"I'm not gonna lie," I said as we left town. "It still freaks me out when you change."

"That's because you're used to being the biggest guy in the room," she said.

"Maybe," I said. "Or maybe it's because it's fucking weird. How is this our lives now?"

Nobody had an answer for that.

The sand dunes spread out in all directions. Here on the ground, it was hard to see how small this world really was. I knew the Bactrian town wasn't too far, and it was straight ahead. We had to just keep walking, up and down through the dunes. The town's walls would soon appear.

The Wasteland floated high above, having moved almost directly over the desert. A handful of other flying machines circled about, brushing the top of the bubble, but none were directly over the "bowl" as we called it. A v-formation of birds flocked away in the distance, heading up and over the lip of the bowl, diving out of sight and toward the land area.

Donut released Mongo and rode on his back while we attempted to navigate south toward the other town. I was expecting to immediately fall waist-deep into sand, but other than the random dunes, it was mostly hard packed and no more than an inch or two deep. In some spots, bare stone was exposed. We truly were walking atop a massive tomb. I hoped the team working their way through it below our feet didn't do anything stupid that caused our world to collapse.

The ground wasn't flat. I'd been assuming the up and down of the bowl's surface was caused by the dunes, but the ground itself was stepped in places, creating a low, hilly landscape.

Rusted-out hunks of crashed flying machines dotted the bowl like forgotten and scattered toys. There didn't seem to be anything

lootable in the old wrecks.

"There's a mob coming," Katia said after about five minutes of walking. "Coming in fast."

"It's big," Donut added.

"Okay guys," I said as the dot appeared on my own map. "Counter."

Katia moved to my right while Donut leaped to my shoulder. Mongo moved to my left just as two Clockwork Mongos appeared. The two automatons spread out ahead of us and to the sides as Donut barked orders at them. I prepared my *Bang Bro* spell, but I wanted to wait to see what we were facing first. Katia widened, and her crossbow clicked into place over her shoulder.

The monster crested the dune, looked at us, and hissed.

"Holy shit," I said as Donut started pelting it with *Magic Missiles*. A moment later, crossbow bolts commenced hitting the creature's armored surface, most of them bouncing off and away.

The monster was a brown and orange, speckled lizard covered with angry, 10-inch spikes. Its long, red tongue darted at us. The thing was the size of a goddamned grizzly bear. It hissed again and moved at us, its body undulating back and forth like a crocodile running across land.

Male Thorny Devil. Level 34.

These pokey fuckers are pretty common in desert-themed worlds. They're big and fast and dumb and angry. Their bodies are covered in defensive spikes, which begs the question, how did something so big develop such a defense mechanism in the first place?

These guys tend to have a reverse harem thing going on. Odds are good you'll recognize the queen when you see her. Odds are even better she'll be the last thing you'll ever see.

Warning: This is a lizard-class mob. It will inflict 20% more damage against you thanks to your Extinction Sigil. That's what you get for killing so many poor, innocent monsters.

"Outstanding," I muttered. Katia's crossbow bolts weren't doing shit, but Donut's newly-enhanced *Magic Missile* blasts were taking

large chunks of health away with each bullseye. The creature stopped at the top of the hill, suddenly realizing he might've bitten off more than he can chew. He started to back up as I unsummoned my gauntlet and loaded a banger sphere. I twirled and fired, scoring a hit on the monster's head. It dealt solid damage, almost as much as one of Donut's missiles.

Donut held off killing it while we allowed the clockwork Mongos to attack. I wanted to see how they'd do. The mob roared defiantly, continuing to back up while we kept pace, moving up the small hill. The two dinosaurs leaped upon the larger creature, mouths biting at its armored body. It kept moving, thrashing its tail and snapping back at the dinosaurs.

They did no damage. The thorny devil reached around and caught one of the Mongos and crunched like a kid chomping onto a lollipop. The automaton exploded. The other Mongo screamed and dug at the creature with his claws, scrabbling ferociously while the real Mongo howled in outrage. Donut cried for him to stay back. The remaining automaton managed to open up a tear on the creature's side, which started gushing blood. The monster whipped around, rolling onto its back and to its feet, moving astonishingly fast. It chomped on the second Mongo, also causing it to blow.

"Their armor is really thick," Katia said. She aimed her crossbow at the tear in the creature, finally scoring some damage. Its health was deep red now, almost gone. Donut could kill him with one more shot, but she held off. We needed to experiment with all new mobs, see what worked and what didn't.

"Stay back," I said, judging the distance. I loaded a quarter-strength hob-lobber as the creature desperately tried to flee back over the hill. I tossed the explosive in an arc, sinking it just past the horizon of the hill.

Bam!

A red geyser of lizard gore showered, mixed in with a bigger cloud of dust. The ground shook with the small explosion. Debris and lizard bits smacked into us like rain. The red dot turned to an X.

"Nice shot," Katia said.

"I do like explosions, but why does it always have to be so disgusting?" Donut asked from my shoulder. "Sand and blood is a terrible combination." She returned to Mongo's back and started cleaning herself.

I grunted. "Those quarter strengths are still a little too strong for close combat. That guy was what? Thirty feet away? Any closer, and we'd get some shrapnel. I need to make some maybe half that strength."

We walked up to investigate the corpse. Mongo whimpered at the sight of the clockwork pieces, which started to whiff away. The monster dropped twenty gold, a thorny devil liver, and several teeth, which appeared to be moderately valuable. It all went into the inventory.

"Can you see the other town yet?" I asked Katia.

"Yes," she said. "Once we left the gates, most of the bowl showed up on my map. We should see the town after we crest the next hill."

"Do you hear that?" Donut said, suddenly looking up into the sky. She pointed up with her paw. "Look, there!"

"I think we attracted some attention with that explosion," I said, shielding my eyes. "Whoa!" I ducked as the plane rocketed by a hundred feet over our heads.

The flying machine whined loudly, like a flying buzzsaw. It'd come from nowhere. The thing must've dropped from the *Wasteland*. It looked like a goddamn, open-air, twin-engine biplane, with each engine nestled between the wings. I saw the distinctive red hat of the pilot along with a second gnome passenger, facing backward. The creature pointed down at us and shouted. Two ominous shapes hung under the main fuselage, hanging vertically. Both of the egg-shaped objects were smaller than a knock-knock, but not by much. Each were attached to the bottom of the plane by a small net.

The plane started to bank back toward us. There was nowhere to hide.

I tossed three smoke curtains—I only had four left after this—and we doubled back the way we'd come so we'd have a small dune

between us and the plane. The smoke started billowing into the air, twirling in eddies and pushing out in all directions.

The plane lowered as it curved through the air. I could see it well now through the smoke. The nose of the plane had a face painted on the side, some sort of gray, screaming animal. It looked almost like a jacked-up, rabid koala.

Gnomish Drop Bear. Contraption.

This is one of the Dirigible Gnome's earliest fast-attack planes. There are only a handful of these still in service. While able to quickly reach most targets when drop-launched from home base, the twin engines of these early models were famously underpowered. Damaged Drop Bears oftentimes had difficulty obtaining enough altitude to reach home, even after ditching their payload. This is why most of these planes carry rapid-deploying, quick-escape balloons, making them sitting targets for enemy aircraft and flak.

That information is not going to do you any good when you're sitting there on the ground watching this thing barrel at you like a robin descending upon a glistening, fat worm.

Don't worry, these guys don't drop bombs. Their standard payload is something much more entertaining.

The twin objects hanging under the plane sure as hell looked like bombs, but my explosives handling skill didn't activate. That did not make me feel better.

The plane leveled out about thirty feet off the ground, lining up for a bomb run. We only had seconds.

"Fuck," I said, seeing how perfectly the plane was lined up with our position. They could either sense us through the smoke, or they'd guessed we'd backtrack. I pointed at the ridge to the right of us, back where we'd encountered the Thorny Devil, now a good 300 feet away. "Donut."

"That's a little too close, Carl."

"Do it," I said. "We'll jump behind the hill after. Katia. Make a shield."

"On it," she said, already starting to change shape. She formed into a half-shell, something she'd been working on. She faced herself

90 degrees away from the plane. I pulled a fused hob-lobber and prepared to light it. I also turned to the left.

The plane's twin, rotary engines sounded like chainsaws cutting through metal, all grinding gears and pistons. They could clearly see our position, despite the smoke. We'd discussed this possibility of being attacked by a plane and had a contingency, but we hadn't planned on the smoke bombs not working. That was going to be a problem. If we fucked this up, we wouldn't have an escape.

"It's cast," Donut said. "Three, two, one."

Thwum.

We teleported away just before the plane dropped one of its two objects right on top of us. We appeared atop the small hill. I lit and tossed the hob-lobber, trying to lead the plane best I could.

The dropped object clanged loudly into the ground and bounced once. Nothing else happened.

The full-strength hob-lobber detonated in mid-air, much too low and behind the fast-moving airplane, though it was enough to knock me and Donut back. It sounded like I'd blasted a shotgun right by my ear. Katia didn't budge. The biplane shuddered in the air. The engine whined even louder, and smoke started to trail from one of the two engines. The drop bear banked away and started to climb. It was fleeing the fight.

Jesus, I thought, pulling myself up. My bombs were getting stronger.

"Carl, that hurt Mongo's ears," Donut said. Mongo croaked in agreement.

"Did you hit it?" Katia asked as she watched the plane go.

"I don't think so," I said, brushing myself off. I kept my eyes on the spot where the object had landed. The metallic egg was the size of a garbage can. Nothing was happening. Nothing moved.

"Look, it's turning into a balloon," Katia said, still watching the plane. "They just dropped the second bomb way over there. It didn't go off either."

"Their engine went out. They're deploying their escape balloon," I said.

"Donut," I said after a few more seconds of nothing happening. "Do me a favor and create some more clockwork Mongos and send them over to that bomb thing."

She complied. A moment later, the two Mongos ranged forward, coming up to the dented bomb as we backed away, putting even more distance between us. The metallic egg sat on its side. There was a clear line through it, like it was one of those eggs they used to store candy at Easter. If it was supposed to pop open, it hadn't. The two clockwork dinosaurs banged on the side of the object while we continued to flee even further. After a minute of this, nothing still happened. They continued to jump and attack at it.

The duplicates only lasted ten minutes. After eight minutes passed, there was still no indication that the egg actually did anything.

"Wait," Katia said a moment later. She'd returned to her she-hulk form, but she kept the crossbow out. "I see something on the map now. I think they cracked it." She let out a stream of breath. "It's a dead boss. I think there's a neighborhood map there."

I felt relief. I was expecting something awful, like acid gas or a swarm of bees or a magical blast. "Okay, let's go check it out."

We returned to the spot, keeping a wary eye on the distant location of the second bomb. The two mongos stood proudly over the egg, which had popped upon. They timed out and exploded as we approached.

A single corpse lay dead inside of the egg. It looked like it had been run over by a truck.

It was a goose. A Canada Goose with the distinctive brown body and black head with the white stripe.

Lootable Corpse. Feral Goose. Level 45 Neighborhood Boss. Killed by getting splattered against the ground.

You are goddamn lucky this thing is dead.

I kicked at the egg, which was labeled as an **Altitude-Based Deployment Device – This Item is Broken**. "The egg thing didn't work. Look how rusty it is. It didn't open, and it killed it."

"I think you're right," Katia said, looking over her shoulder at the distant hills. "I'm pretty sure the other one didn't open either. It

bounced a few times."

Carl: Hey, Mordecai. Do you know what a feral goose is?

Mordecai: Not specifically, but anything with feral in the name is usually bad news.

I reached down and looted the neighborhood map. Several red dots appeared in the area. They were all Thorny Devils. None were moving in our direction. I didn't see the other boss, living or dead.

I couldn't help but feel as if we were on rails. There was a storyline here, and we were being forced along the path of the narrative. Them dropping a boss on us, only for the boss to be dead didn't seem so much an accident as a clue. We were being forced along a scripted path. I did not like that one bit. We needed to break away as quickly as possible.

"Yeah, let's leave that other egg alone," I said. "No use tempting fate." I picked up the corpse of the dead goose and stuck it in my inventory.

"That's really gross, Carl," Donut said.

I now had a tab in my inventory called **Mob Morgue**. The monsters' bodies were all worthless, but one never knew when something might be useful.

Even though the egg was broken, the mechanism that popped it open looked interesting. There was a dial apparatus that I wanted to look at. I tried picking up the entire shell, and while it had some heft to it, I lifted it easily. I pulled the whole thing into my inventory.

"Okay, let's keep moving," I said.

Donut was looking up at the sky. "There are more airplanes up there all of a sudden. I think we made them mad."

"Oh, hell. We need to get our hands on some of those camel rocket launchers," I said.

"I count eight of them," Katia said, shading her eyes. "They're being more cautious than the last one."

These were different planes than the last. This was an eclectic mix of vehicles, though they were too far up there to examine properly. They were circling down, almost casually, like a flock of birds. At this rate it'd take them several minutes to get here. We would never get to the Bactrian town now. We had to run.

"Change of plans. Back to Hump Town," I said. "Go, go."

Donut and Mongo took off, heading back to the city as we followed and started to run.

I looked up over my shoulder as we ran. I caught sight of the drop bear, which was continuing to rise into the sky. A separate airship deployed from the Wasteland, on its way to intercept.

"Katia, you still have those engine parts in your inventory? From that interdiction cart we disassembled on the last floor?"

"I do," she said, huffing as we ran. We'd taken apart one of the smaller rail carts from the previous floor. I had most of the cart's body in my inventory. Katia had taken the mechanical parts. Her Earth Hobby potion gave her an enormous wealth of knowledge regarding engines.

"Good," I said. "We need to build ourselves a dune buggy. And fast. We don't have time for this shit. They're making it so we can't get to the other town while the weather is good. They want us out here while it's super-hot, dark, or during the storm. I don't want to do any of those."

The walls of Hump Town loomed. The swooping airships stopped their descent, though they kept a holding pattern a thousand feet up.

"We'll need defenses," I added. "You work on the engine, and I'll come up with an anti-aircraft system."

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It didn't take long to build the rickety, compartmental vehicle. Thanks to the engineering and metalworking benches, I could fabricate anything I needed in minutes. The second-level engineering table was great for complicated designs that required multiple objects put together, like the front suspension system and drive shaft. The level two metalworking table allowed me to view the tensile strength and load limits, and the interface had more shaping options. Mordecai said once we got that table up to level three, we would be able to melt down some of the less valuable items we came across and reforge them into stronger, more dense alloys, which would allow me to make precise explosive spheres instead of relying on expensive hob-lobbers.

Katia and I worked on the first part of the design while Donut and Mordecai went shopping. But before they left, Donut took one look at the vehicle-in-progress and said, "I've decided to name it the Royal Chariot." She flipped her tail and exited the room astride Mongo, following Mordecai.

"What the hell, man," I said as the tooltip popped up over the unfinished vehicle. It didn't yet have a description, but the system suddenly labeled it **The Royal Chariot - Contraption**.

The "chariot" was nothing more than a glorified, oversized ATV with an optional wagon. With the back cart attached, the contraption reminded me of the MOAB design we had fashioned to fight the rage elemental, but big enough to carry all of us. The most difficult part

of the chariot was the tire design. We had some random rubber that I could shape into tires at the engineering table using my tools, but not nearly enough for four. I also had several black discs the goblins used for wheels on their copper choppers, but they had no real tread on them and weren't very wide. We had to be able to traverse the sand dunes and deal with the hills. We really needed actual, bouncy tires. Mordecai could make the materials at his alchemy table, but it would take time. Time we didn't have.

So instead, our first attempt was with metal tires. I made them as lightweight as possible, but after some experimentation, we realized they simply weren't feasible. They were still too heavy, making the suspension system useless. The single-gear, magical train cart engine was pretty darn powerful, but I soon realized the design would still end up with us bogged helplessly down in the sand, even if we tried to avoid the bigger dunes. The whole purpose of this was to have something to travel around the bowl as quickly and efficiently as possible.

We solved this by using the engineering table to fashion a wide, treadmill track, like on the back of a snowmobile. The dromedarians used something similar. They had several tracked carts zipping around town. We still utilized two, steerable wheels in the front, which I was able to make out of rubber. The belt mechanism required multiple, toothed wheels of specific sizes, plus the tracks themselves. We'd eventually coat the treads with rubber, too, if this worked. Katia sketched it all out as we stood side-by-side at the engineering table. It only took about two hours to put together a working vehicle once we had the design. It was crude, and it was still heavier than I wanted. Plus I worried about the vehicle's ability to handle deep sand.

But the goddamned thing worked.

The whole contraption without the cart was pretty small, maybe about twice the size of the long-lost copper chopper. The vehicle sat low and was just wide and strong enough for hulk-version Katia to sit up front with me right behind her in a second seat, raised. She looked a little ridiculous astride the thing, like an adult sitting on a kid's sized ATV.

We most definitely could have made it larger and safer, but this design allowed me to lift it and stick it into my inventory. Sort of. We had to break it apart into two pieces. But we successfully built a vehicle that was both portable *and* big enough to handle the three of us. Katia wouldn't be able to hold as much mass as I liked, but this thing was mostly built for speed. It was not a tank. It wasn't for protection.

For now.

Katia and I discussed using the chariot's body as a chassis for a much-larger, more flexible vehicle. One where *she* was the vehicle's body. But she wasn't fully onboard with the idea. Not yet. Plus, I made the mistake of suggesting we start calling her "Katia Prime," and she didn't find it nearly as amusing as I did.

After another half-hour tweaking the design of the chariot, we were ready for a quick field test.

"If we weren't worried about storing it, I think two treads and no wheels at all might work better," Katia said, admiring our work.

I grunted in agreement. "You're not wrong. But we're already going overboard here, and we've already wasted too much time. Anyway, you're really good at this. I think you missed your calling."

She waved at the track mechanism underneath the vehicle. "This is all thanks to that earth hobby potion," she said. "Like I was sitting here, wondering how the heck we were going to put this thing together, and suddenly it was there. Do you think the aliens, you know, the ones not in the dungeon, can just teach themselves stuff like this on demand? Like in that *Matrix* movie? Like one guy out there can just take a few potions, and he's suddenly a super genius in kung fu and piloting helicopters?"

"I don't see why not," I said. I bent down and unfastened two bolts. I strained, picking up the back half of the chariot. It disappeared into my inventory. "We don't really know enough about the outside universe."

"That seems like it would have such a huge impact on society. If anybody can be an expert in anything, what does that even mean? It doesn't make sense to me how there's such… I don't know, cruelty."

"It's probably crazy expensive," I said, moving to the front half of the Chariot. I pulled it into my inventory. "So only the ultra-rich can use it. Maybe it's like plastic surgery. Only some people can afford it, and there are probably limits. Like if you do it too much, bad stuff happens."

"Maybe," she said. "I can't stop thinking about it. It's so… *odd*. I know how these engines and all the related mechanical parts work, but the knowledge is unnatural. I'm not sure how to explain it. It's like I know it, but I don't *know*, know it. Like maybe it's getting downloaded into my brain on demand. Like I'm tapped directly into Wikipedia."

"That *is* weird. My cesta punta skill translates pretty well into action, but it's mostly muscle stuff. So maybe it's different. We still don't know what Donut's earth hobby skill is. It's something really strange. Scutelliphily. I've asked a hundred people, and nobody knows what the hell it is."

We headed outside, passing multiple dromedarians as we exited the city. Mordecai and Donut were nearby, and they said they'd be done "negotiating" in a bit. We didn't want to go far, so we set up the cart just outside the gate.

It took us about five minutes to assemble the vehicle, which was much too long. We'd have to work on it.

We stepped back and admired our work. A new description popped up.

Tracked All-Terrain Suicide Machine. *The Royal Chariot* – Contraption.

If a snowmobile got drunk on moonshine and had a sweaty, ill-advised night with a hillbilly's coon-hunting ATV, this oversized birth defect of a vehicle would be the result. Quickly traverses through both sand and snow. Don't worry about the lack of roll cage or the grossly-misplaced center of gravity, or the fact this thing will do an impressive impersonation of a catapult the moment it hits a rock. The most important part is that it looks kind of badass.

"Whoa," Katia said. "I just got an achievement for inventing something. That description is kind of worrying."

"The system naming it means they think the design has at least some merit."

I was making that up, but it sounded good. All I really wanted to do was get from point A to B quickly. I looked at the machine dubiously. "Let's see how much of a deathtrap this really is."

The dunes closer to the wall of the bowl were much more steep and were perfect for testing. The dromedarian waster patrol kept the town's outskirts mob free, and the air was clear. I ran up the closest hill just to make sure I wouldn't sink through like with snow.

I stood at the top and waved. Katia started the vehicle and moved, slowly easing the chariot up the dune. It quickly and quietly ascended. The engine was completely silent. Only the tracks themselves made any noise. You couldn't even tell the thing was running until she eased the throttle forward. She pulled it next to me.

"It works," she said. "I can tell it'll go pretty fast. We have to be careful with turns. I'm worried about rolling it. Maybe we *should* build a cage."

The cart's passage kicked up a huge plume of dust even though she'd only driven it about a hundred feet. I looked nervously up into the air. The *Wasteland* was near the edge of the bowl's lip on the opposite side. Mordecai and Donut had just spent some time talking with the locals, and they learned that the gnome fortress kept to a pretty specific schedule. It was usually directly over the bowl except during the daily sand storm, when it moved to the edge of the bubble, parking itself over the water. After the storms were done, it'd spend the next few hours moving back into position. By the time the two-hour "night" was over, the fortress would be back in place several thousand feet over the center of the bowl.

We still had over 12 hours before the sandstorm was due to start, which meant the airship was not where it was supposed to be.

"The *Wasteland* isn't really doing what Mordecai claimed it would," I said.

Katia's face turned to the sky. "Yeah, you're right. It looks like it's headed out to the ocean now. They must have misunderstood its schedule."

Three flares rose into the air. Two red and one white. All three hung in the sky, crackling. They'd come from the south, in the general area of the Bactrian village.

That's when I realized the *Wasteland* was directly over the other village. From behind and within Hump Town, shouting rose. A high-pitched, wailing siren suddenly filled the air. The siren was strangely urgent in its call, like the wailing of a child. Behind and above, on the corrugated metal town wall, the sheet covering one of the large boxes pulled away. Two of the camel creatures stepped into box.

"It's an anti-aircraft gun," I said. It had four barrels, turned to the sky.

The whoosh of rockets rose into the air behind us. It was three more flares, this time fired from within town. I looked up and saw these three were red.

"I wonder what the colors mean," Katia said.

"Let's get back into town," I said, jumping onto the back of the chariot. My seat was higher than hers and could swivel, allowing me to see over her shoulder. Once Mordecai and Donut returned, I'd build the Chariot's defenses. Katia drove down the hill. The vehicle seemed pretty steady to me. It continued to raise a huge plume of dust. I wondered if there was a way to better disguise our passage. Probably not.

We stopped outside the gate and started to quickly disassemble the vehicle. When we were done, I turned one last time to look south.

And that's when the bombs started to fall on the distant town.

"If they were in safe rooms, they'll be okay," Mordecai said as we waited for the recap episode to start. They'd managed to purchase two dromedarian bazooka tubes and ten rocket-propelled missiles. These were straight, line-of-sight missiles. The camels absolutely refused to sell their guided ones. I'd already taken one apart and given the chemical drive mechanism to Mordecai so he could

reverse-engineer it. He said he was certain now that he knew how it worked. He could make me some components that I could use to manufacture my own rockets at my sapper's table. They wouldn't pack as much punch as I'd like, but their range would be amazing. And once I added a surefire to some of them, I'd have actual guided missiles.

"If the whole town blows up, the safe rooms really are safe?" Katia asked.

"Yes," Mordecai said. "But not all bars are true saferooms. Generally if the proprietor isn't a Bopca, then there's like a 50/50 chance. The Toe is not a real saferoom, but as long as we're in the personal space, we'll be fine. I think there might only be one or two other places in town that'll protect crawlers.

I remembered Growler Gary from the last floor. His bar had not been safe for him.

"So the NPCs will be safe if they're in the correct bars?" I asked.

From the sheer amount of explosives dropped from the *Wasteland*, there was no way anything was left in the town.

"Well, it's actually complicated," Mordecai said. "Certain NPCs will be safe. *I* would be safe if I was in a saferoom. The whole room would be protected. If there aren't any crawlers or basically any former-crawler or off-world NPCs in the room, the room is probably destroyed. There are additional rules if there's only one saferoom in an area, but it's pretty complicated stuff. The long and short of it is, Borant-owned NPCs are not protected by the saferoom system if they're the only one there. They're only protected if *you* are there."

"I'm not sure I understand," I said. "You're saying all the NPCs are probably dead unless they were in a bar with crawlers? So saferooms are only 'safe' if a crawler is inside?"

He shrugged. "Pretty much, yeah. Again, there are some other rules. The manual on saferoom procedures is like a phonebook."

"What about that other thing we were talking about? With the primary and secondary zones?"

"That's different," he said, shooting me a warning glare. "That doesn't directly impact crawlers or NPCs at all."

I sighed. There was still just so much I didn't understand. *And you probably know more than 90% of the other crawlers*.

"So there might be a bar that's just sitting there in the middle of the destroyed town?"

"That's right," Mordecai said. "Saferooms are protected spaces. That's the point. Sometimes during quests and special events, the system prevents access to them, as you've seen. But if *this* town gets that same treatment from the gnomes, just come in here, and you'll be protected."

"I hope the poor people in the other town knew all this stuff," Donut said. She sat on the counter eating a can of Fancy Feast from the food synthesizer. I could tell by the look on her face that she was not pleased. Mongo couldn't get food from the boxes, so we still had to purchase it for him. But tonight he received a pet biscuit.

We still didn't know why the gnomes had blown the Bactrian town to hell. From what I gathered based on the frantic activity by the dromedarians, they didn't know either. We kept sticking our heads out to keep track of the ponderous fortress's location. So far, it hadn't made a move in our direction.

The recap show started. It opened with what looked like a giant sheet of bubble wrap. The camera quickly panned over it, showing bubble after bubble. Snowstorms, hurricanes, thick jungles, swamps, mountains, labyrinths, and more flashed by on screen.

But before it moved to the fifth floor, we watched multiple scenes from the end of the Iron Tangle. We watched Miriam Dom cast a spell that knocked out a giant province boss. The debuff only lasted a few seconds, but in that moment, Prepotente hit it with a half of a dozen different potions and spells in a row, causing its unconsciousness to jump from ten seconds to five hours.

"Genius," Mordecai said, watching the goat work. "He's killing it with stacking debuffs."

But they didn't manage to kill the province boss. On the screen, Quan Ch zipped into the room from out of nowhere. He shot the boss with a blue magical bolt, causing it to wake up. The goat team had to flee, with Prepotente screaming he was going to kill Quan. Quan remained in the room, shot the boss a few times, enough to

get its health down halfway, but after the thing swung at him, he ran off.

"He could've killed it," Donut said. "He ran away like a wuss. He's a menace!"

"That robe of his is something else," Mordecai said. "It looks like it gives flight and the *Shield* spell and probably more. I'm not certain what the blue energy bolt is. I think it might be *Disrupter*, which is a rare but strong spell. It's similar to Donut's *Magic Missile*, but it is good for blowing holes in things. Plus it has splash damage and has a stun effect. The only problem is its short range."

"That should be ours," Donut grumbled.

Next, they showed my fight with Grull. They said Grull was being controlled by Prince Maestro, but it was only a quick mention, and they didn't focus on him. Instead, they showed the teamwork of Elle, Donut, Katia, plus Li Jun's team. They portrayed the train falling through the portal into the abyss, but they did not show Fire Brandy or Tizquick the dwarf at the controls. Instead, they switched it back to me, showing the experience points get showered onto me as the wall monitors all died and the soul crystals across the tangle detonated, opening up the floor to escape.

Mordecai gave me an appraising look afterward. "You know you're crazy, right?"

I nodded.

The show abruptly changed, becoming a tribute to the life of the crawler Ifechi.

"So it *was* Ifechi who died," I said as they showed the African man hesitantly enter the dungeon. "He was a healer. Poor guy."

Ifechi entered the dungeon with a group of other men, all soldiers, all wielding AK-47s. Ifechi was the only one who wasn't armed. He was also dressed differently than the others, wearing a bright red shirt with a vest. He carried a medical bag over his shoulder with the familiar Red Cross logo.

"Not a guy," Katia said suddenly, peering closely at the screen. "Ifechi was a woman."

"What?" I said. "Are you sure? How can you tell?" The crawler looked like a dude to me. He was rail thin, smaller than the others.

Everything about him seemed timid and drawn-in, afraid. He kept his head shaved. Not that I was an expert, nor did it really matter, but he looked like a bloke to me.

"Call it a super power. I can tell."

We watched as Ifechi's former team, Le Mouvement, got zeroed out by a translucent jelly boss the size of a house. From there, Ifechi, now all alone, stumbled through the dungeon, eventually meeting up with Florin. Florin, as a human, had kind of a mysterious background. He said he was from France, but he had an Australian accent. He was in Africa when it all went down. They didn't really give the guy's full story, but he mentioned something about "private security." I knew what that really meant. He was a mercenary of some sort. He'd also come into the dungeon armed to the teeth, but he now relied solely on his automatic shotgun, which appeared to be heavily modified even before he received the magical, unlimited-ammo upgrade. Ifechi eventually chose a healer class, and Florin picked the crocodilian race. They had been separated when they hit the third floor, but they quickly found one another. It showed them hugging and sobbing as they reunited.

They were more than just friends, I realized.

Florin's weapon was devastating to most of the mobs, and Ifechi, despite being a healer, had an attack so effective, so unique, I could see how the two had earned spots in the top ten. It was a staff that summoned and flung leeches. *A lot* of leeches. They'd cover the mob, sucking at its fluids, killing it in seconds. Afterward, the wriggling leeches would be filled with blood and other fluids from the dead mobs, and they could be eaten, giving a wide array of buffs. Florin would gobble them right up, getting temporarily stronger. It was disgusting,

"Fascinating," Mordecai said. "I haven't seen anything like that in a very long time. I thought they'd removed that spell. Crocodilians have the ability to triple the effectiveness of any buffs they receive from eating creatures. He probably chose that race just because of her staff."

And then, finally, we saw the manner of Ifechi's death.

The two were part of a group that had moved to one of the former ghoul stations after the stairwell station had opened. A line had formed at the stairs, and people were quickly descending. The station was almost empty. Everything was moving nice and orderly.

And then Lucia Mar entered the room.

The number one crawler strolled into the station like she owned the place, flanked by her two dogs, Cici and Gustavo 3. Lucia was in her beautiful, magic-focused form. Her Lajabless species made it so she spent half the day as the beautiful woman. The rest of the day she spent as a strong, melee-focused, female version of Skeletor. The dwindling crowd parted as the child-turned-woman walked through the room, her raven hair sparkling. She walked with a slight limp due to her goat leg. She had a mess of boss kills and player-killer skulls over her head.

Cici the rottweiler had also undergone a transformation, having grown to be almost twice the size of the other dog. The larger dog growled at a random crawler, who scattered back.

Lucia paused, looking about the room. The remaining crawlers scrambled at their chance to hit the stairwell. A glut formed at the exit.

Florin and Ifechi approached Lucia, apparently in an attempt to say hello.

"No. This is mine," Lucia said, hugging herself. The two dogs growled.

"All right, mate," Florin said, backing off, arms raised. He turned away and muttered "crazy bitch," under his breath.

Lucia did not hesitate. She grabbed the closest crawler, a man about 18 years old who was desperately trying not to be seen. She picked him up like he weighed nothing and literally *threw* the man at Florin. The poor guy wailed as he was tossed, which caused Florin to jump out of the way. The thrown man hit the ground, bounced once, and crashed against the far wall, unconscious.

"What the hell?" Florin shouted as Ifechi rushed to the injured man. "Lady, you're not right in the head. We're all friends here."

"There is nothing wrong with my head," Lucia Mar said, sounding strangely offended. "Why would you say that?" She pointed at Ifechi,

who was shoving something into the mouth of the unconscious man. "Speak no more, or there will be something wrong with your girlfriend's head."

"Girlfriend. Told you," Katia said, as we watched, transfixed.

"Jesus," I said. "And I thought the goat was crazy."

"Prepotente *is* crazy, Carl," Donut said. "You're crazy, too. Lucia is something different. She's insane."

I couldn't argue with that.

Florin backed away, not saying anything. I could tell the guy was smart. He recognized her insanity. The last of the crawlers pushed their way to the stairs, leaving just the three of them plus the injured crawler. And the dogs.

"That's sad," Donut said.

"What?" I asked.

"Nobody stayed behind for that poor guy Lucia threw across the room. Only Ifechi helped him."

I reached up and patted Donut's head. The cat's entire body was taut as she watched the screen.

Florin said nothing as he walked backward, keeping his eyes on Lucia. He reached to tap Ifechi on the shoulder and signaled for her to proceed toward the stairs. She nodded. The injured man sat up, rubbing his head. He gave a terrified glance at Lucia and scrambled toward the stairwell. Gustavo—the regular-sized rottweiler—moved to block his access. Lightning sparkled in the dog's mouth as he growled.

"What did you say?" Lucia snarled at the fleeing boy. "What did you say about my papa?" Gustavo took a menacing step toward him.

"What?" he asked. "I… I don't know what you're talking about."

"He didn't say anything about your father, you right cunt," Florin said, distracting her. "But if *I* could say something to him, it'd probably be, *quit dropping your babies on their heads*. It makes them a touch daffy." He pulled Ifechi up. "Come on, Ife. To the stairs."

"Don't take shit from anyone. It's just a game. It's not real," Lucia said. She was talking to someone over her shoulder. Someone who wasn't there.

Ifechi surreptitiously cast a spell by waving her hand. It looked like a protection spell of some sort. She cast it twice. Once on Florin and once on the other crawler, leaving herself unprotected.

"Why did you talk," Lucia said to Florin. She sounded curious, her head cocked to the side. "I said I would make your girlfriend's head not right if you talked."

"We don't want any trouble," Florin said, edging his way toward the stairwell.

"That's what they always say," Lucia said, moving sideways to block the exit. She clicked her teeth.

Everything that happened next took place over the course of ten seconds.

Cici the giant rottweiler rushed at Florin, launching herself at him. Gustavo did the same, jumping over the other hapless crawler and rocketing toward the crocodilian. The dog opened his mouth, as if ready to shoot lightning from it.

Bam, bam, bam.

Florin's shotgun was suddenly in his hand, and he fired three blasts so quickly that I didn't even see the movement. He sent one shell at Lucia, one at Cici, and one at Gustavo, in that order.

Lucia and the two dogs all flew backward. Lightning misfired from Gustavo, blasting off the ceiling. Florin continued to blast all three in turn. *Bam, bam, bam*. He took a step toward them. *Bam, bam, bam*.

Next to me, Mordecai groaned. Katia gasped. And then I saw what they saw.

Ifechi was leaned up against the chamber wall. Her head was gone. The splatter of blood and brains painted the stone.

"What…" I began. Mordecai held up his wing for me to be silent.

That fourth crawler cast a spell as he scrambled toward the stairwell. It turned the floor of the room to ice. He rushed down the stairs and disappeared.

Lucia sat up, not injured at all. She grinned at Florin.

"I told you I'd do it," she said.

"No," Mordecai said. "*No, no, no*."

Florin fired once more, right into the temple of Lucia Mar.

They both flew back this time, spinning and turning like pinballs on the floor of ice.

Lucia Mar ricocheted off the wall as she sat up, again uninjured. She cackled with laughter, laughter that abruptly turned to a strangled cry as she continued her momentum and plunged into the stairwell and disappeared. She crashed loudly to the bottom of the stairs.

Both of the dogs whimpered as they tried to get up, also uninjured. They scrambled, their feet unable to purchase on the slippery ground. They spun and turned and bounced off one another. They clambered, howling and whimpering as they moved to follow Lucia Mar onto the stairwell.

If it wasn't so horrifying, it would've been hilarious.

Florin sat up. His temple and neck was covered in blood, his health mostly gone. He shook his head, confused.

And only then did he notice that Ifechi was dead. He looked at her, bewildered, not understanding what had just happened.

"No," he said, seeing her body against the wall. "No, Ife, no."

That's when I noticed the shining, golden skull over Florin's head. He dropped his gun, put an arm over his crocodile eyes, and he started to wail.

The show cut away to the smiling host, breathlessly starting to explain the fifth floor.

"What the fuck did I just watch?" I asked as the show went on.

"Lucia appears to have access to a very powerful spell," Mordecai said. "It probably comes from something she's wearing. It usually has a long cooldown, but she either has multiples of the spell, or she has somehow defeated the cooldown problem. Either way, it's ridiculously broken. It's no wonder she's so strong."

"What's the spell?" I asked.

"*Rubber,* most likely. It's similar to your damage reflect and Donut's love vampire. When she'd cast it, it also applied to her two pets. So it's at least level ten. I bet it's closer to 15. It reduces a high percentage of incoming damage and reflects it to a target of your choosing. She'd cast it directly on Ifechi's head. So when Florin shot Lucia and the dogs, he was literally shooting his partner in the head.

And after she was dead, Lucia cast the spell again, this time on Florin."

"They gave him credit for the kill," Katia said. "That's awful. It doesn't seem right."

"It's not. That's the dungeon being a dick," I said.

"Dreadful. Just dreadful. How did Florin survive shooting himself in the head?" Donut asked.

"It was that protection spell," I said. "Ifechi cast it on him and the other guy, but not on herself."

"Certain protection spells can't be cast on yourself," Mordecai said. "It takes a special type of person to want to use and train such enchantments."

I thought of Imani, who was also a healer. She would have done the same thing in this situation.

Goddamnit. Every time I saw or heard of a crawler killing one of their own, it just made me angrier.

You will not break me. Fuck you all. I will break you.

I took a deep breath. "That kid's brain is scrambled," I said finally. "Donut is right. She's literally insane. She's talking to phantoms and hearing things."

"Poor thing," Katia said. "But she needs to be dealt with."

"I agree," I said. "We need to put her down."

"I call dibs on the dogs," Donut said.

Mordecai: Here's the good news. If she does use that *Rubber* spell, it has a vulnerability. A big one. They'd been editing out her using the spell until now. There's a reason for that. They might want her killed.

Carl: Okay. We'll talk about it later. But if she's not in our bubble, it doesn't really matter. We gotta survive this place first.

From there, they portrayed multiple crawlers entering the warehouse and spinning the wheels. Lucia Mar was given the land quadrant in a bubble that was designed similarly to our own, but it was a massive, stepped pyramid in the center. And the weather was cold and covered in ice. I laughed at that. Prepotente and Miriam Dom landed on the air quadrant of a bubble that was like a giant

cave with rock growing along the interior wall of the sphere. Their domain was nothing more than a shelf of rock that ringed the interior wall. Their target was a nest of spiders that hung from the ceiling, thousands of feet into the air.

"Jesus," I said. "They're just as fucked as we are."

Florin entered his room completely defeated. He sat down in the corner of the warehouse and did not spin anything. He had Ifechi's leech staff, which he laid across his lap. He leaned his head against the wall and went to sleep right there.

It portrayed a dozen more shots of people spinning and landing on a wide assortment of quadrants.

The show ended with the promise of more bloodshed and more hilarious outtakes of us silly crawlers struggling to survive. I pictured myself punching the host over and over until his head caved in.

The show ended, and the new top 10 populated on the board.

1. Lucia Mar – Lajabless – Black Inquisitor General – Level 38 – 1,000,000 (x2)

2. Carl – Primal – Compensated Anarchist – Level 41 – 500,000 (x2)

3. Prepotente – Caprid – Forsaken Aerialist – Level 35 – 400,000 (x2)

4. Donut – Cat – Former Child Actor – Level 33 – 300,000 (x2)

5. Quan Ch – Half Elf – Imperial Security Trooper – Level 43 – 200,000 (x2)

6. Dmitri and Maxim Popov – Nodling – Illusionist and Bogatyr – Level 33 – 100,000 (x2)

7. Miriam Dom – Human – Shepherd – Level 31 – 100,000 (x2)

8. Elle McGib – Frost Maiden – Blizzardmancer – Level 33 – 100,000

9. Bogdon Ro – Human – Legatus – Level 31 – 100,000

10. Florin – Crocodilian – Shotgun Messenger – Level 33 – 100,000 (x2)

"Carl! You're number two! Katia! You fell off the list! This is outrageous! You were a superstar."

"Thank god," Katia said. She looked genuinely relieved.

"Hey," Donut said. "Wait a second. Why didn't I go up? We're separated. This is not acceptable, Carl."

I patted her on the head while she grumbled, swishing her tail angrily.

"Also, why did Florin lower so much?" Donut asked a moment later. "That was so sad, and they're punishing him for it."

"I bet he hasn't moved since he went down the stairs. He's probably still sitting in that room where you spin the wheels. His PR agent is probably losing her shit," I said. "Elle is back on the list, but her bounty didn't double."

"She wasn't in the top ten when the floor ended," Mordecai said.

Quan Ch had hit level 43, making him the highest, though I had no idea why or how. The asshole fled any fight that looked like it might be difficult. Hopefully he was using his powers this floor to get everyone in his bubble to safety.

I shuddered, thinking of the poor bastards stuck with Lucia Mar. The kid had an obvious mental illness. If we were someplace else, my first thought would be to lock her up and put her someplace where she could get the treatment she obviously needed.

But we weren't someplace else, and she was killing people. Good people. She had to be taken care of.

I didn't want to admit it, but part of me was happy that there was nothing I could do about that right now. We only had a limited number of fellow crawlers to deal with on this level.

That shit weighs down on you after a while, I thought.

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The announcement came and went. There was nothing of significance. The announcer spoke of the doubling of bounties for those who'd been on the list. She reminded us that sponsorship bidding was underway. There was a warning that just because we were outside that we shouldn't use the big, wide world as a bathroom and that there were restrooms in the towns. But if we had to go while we were outside, they wouldn't penalize us. We needed to announce that we were going to the bathroom out loud, wait five seconds, and then do our business. The idea was so ridiculous, it made me want to laugh.

All of us, including Mordecai, exited the personal space and walked into the Toe to find the other crawlers waiting for us. Louis and Firas, who were still drunk, plus Langley and the other five car salesmen-turned-archers all sat at the bar. The archer guys had all leveled one or two times each since we'd last talked. All eight crawlers looked at me expectantly.

Juice Box the changeling prostitute sat on Louis's lap. She'd transformed into something… odd. Like a rodent/human hybrid, but with orange hair and a purple jumpsuit. Whatever it was, the resulting creature looked like Chuck E. Cheese in drag.

I sighed.

Mordecai: That changeling is a lot more powerful than she looks. It's very odd. Do you see how easily she's altering herself? It's almost like she's a doppelganger.

I examined Juice Box. The note over her head said she was a **Ratkin Brood Mother Attendant**, but as I watched, she turned more mouse-like, and it switched to **Mouser Dame**.

Carl: Are you sure she's *not* a doppelganger?

Mordecai: Yes, I'm sure.

Carl: Do you guys have some sort of changeling spidey-sense or something?

Mordecai: You can see it in how she changes. She's switching to the race and then altering the appearance to make it look like whatever the hell they're requesting. It's like dressing up stock photos instead of drawing something from scratch. Even if I had all my changeling abilities and wasn't at half power, I still wouldn't be able to do that. There are a lot of creatures who mimic others, and you can usually tell what it is based on the way they change. Doppelgangers like Katia have to form themselves like clay. Mimics do the same thing, though the change comes from the mouth and moves outward. Adult changelings turn into a generic version of the race and then alter their appearance from there. Illusionists fade into existence.

Carl: What about the Valtay? I've been thinking about that a lot lately.

Mordecai: That's something different. Brain worms aren't mimicking something. They're taking over their actual bodies. The Valtay are a type of creature called a Gondii. They reactivate dead bodies as long as they enter within hours of death. Gondii can read old memories and keep the bodies running for centuries. There are Intellect Hunters who do the same thing, but the bodies start to rot almost immediately, and they are always hopping from body to body. Then there's something called an Infiltrator. They are much more insidious. But none of those things are shapeshifters like Miss Juice Box here.

Carl: She can't be too strong. She's only level 17.

Mordecai: That's misleading. Regular crawlers who become changelings can only shift once every ten minutes.

Shifting on demand is a skill unique to the race. She is easily the equivalent of level 15 in the Race Shifter Skill, and I'm willing to bet every one of these prostitutes in town is the same. A changeling who can switch that quickly is very dangerous. Remember, unlike doppelgangers, changelings gain some of the abilities of the race they're mimicking. She can turn into a gorgon at the snap of the finger and hit you with a petrify spell, then switch to a rocksling to shatter your stone body into dust, and *then* turn to a forge ogre and take that dust and pressurize it enough to make it a diamond. All before you could say "Ouch."

Carl: Can she turn into a storm giant or something? Something like Grull?

Mordecai: No. There are mass limits, but it's not nearly as strict as what Katia has to deal with. There are lots of weird, complicated rules. The stronger the monster they emulate, the lower the chance of being at full power. But there are still plenty of things she can turn into that will ruin your day.

Carl: So what you're telling me is to be nice to Juice Box.

Mordecai: Yes. And all the other prostitutes. Be polite. And make sure all these scrubs understand it, too. Especially that Louis idiot.

I realized everyone was staring at me, so I started talking.

"There may be others in this quadrant, but if they're alive, they probably just got their bell rung pretty bad," I said. "So it might be just us dealing with that fortress." I gave a worried glance at the dromedarian barkeep, who was watching us with interest. He was a pleasant enough guy, unlike most of the other camels. He'd given both Donut and Mongo treats, happily patting them on the head. Mongo was practically ready to leave us for him. However, this next part of the conversation involved doing something the camels would not like. We had to get out of his earshot.

"But first, we're all going to get a tour of our personal space. We can talk more comfortably in there."

"It's called the Royal Palace of Princess Donut!" Donut added.

"Louis, look, it's that cat again from the television," Firas said.

I realized that while the two men had been drunk the first time we met them, they'd been mostly coherent and aware of their surroundings. In the nine hours since we'd last spoken, it appeared they'd managed to get themselves even more plastered. My initial instinct was to just kick them out of the Toe, but I was worried they'd do something extra stupid. Like cause the town to get obliterated like the other one. I needed to keep an eye on them until we figured out the whole picture.

Carl: Mordecai, I'm out of the alcohol cure potions. Do you have the stuff for more?

Mordecai: You read my mind. I'll whip up a batch when we get inside. With my upgraded table, I can make a version that's a little more potent.

"Let's go see the space," Louis said, standing up. Juice Box slid off his voluminous lap with a squeak. "I've always wanted to see how the other half lives."

"Me too," Juice Box said, jumping up.

"Oh, honey," Donut said. "Not dressed like that you're not."

Juice Box patted Donut on the head. "You are just the most adorable thing I have ever seen. If you want, I can turn into a whatever it is you are and show you a great time. I've never done it with royalty before. No charge. It'd be great for my résumé. Are you some sort of long-haired dog?"

Louis and Firas both laughed.

All of Donut's hair poofed out. "What did you just call me?"

I stepped forward to intervene. "Sorry, pretty lady," I said to Juice Box. "The personal space is just for my friends here." I tossed her a gold coin, which she deftly caught in midair. Her hand moved so quickly it reminded me of a viper strike. She didn't turn her head to catch the coin, which gave me an unexpected and sudden chill.

"Can you do me a favor?" I asked. "If you see any other non-locals like us around, let me know. I'll give you a gold coin for each one you find."

She, still in her Mouser form, turned her gaze from Donut and gave me a salute. She planted a smile on her face and rubbed Louis

on the stomach. "Don't forget our date tonight, big boy. Maybe I'll try out that Nurse Joy person you were describing."

We all entered the personal space as they looked about in wonder. Langley and the other archers moved around, inspecting everything while Louis and Firas jumped onto the couch. The cleaner bot beeped mournfully as Firas put his boots on the little table.

"Where's the bell?" Firas asked, his voice slurring.

"Bell?" I asked.

"You said something about a bell ringing."

I took a deep breath and decided not to engage. "Okay, guys," I said, waving everyone to sit. "As you probably noticed, the gnomes just bombed the hell out of that other town. Nobody knows why yet, but if I had to guess, it probably has something to do with whatever collateral they had in their town hall. Maybe some crawler in that other town ended up accidentally killing it or setting it free or something. *Something* changed that let the gnomes know the Bactrians no longer had collateral."

"Hey, I have a question," Firas said, raising his hand. The hand wavered in the air. Even from halfway across the room, I could smell the alcohol on both of them. I was reasonably certain booze wasn't the only thing they were on.

Goddamnit. "Yes?"

"Yeah, we, like, don't know what you're talking about. What's a Bactrian? What collateral? Where's the bell?"

Earlier, I had been assuming that Firas was from the middle east somewhere and Louis was Spanish. It was now clear that both of them were fellow Americans.

"I had to put my car up as collateral for a loan once," Louis said. "I used to lock it up in my old lady's garage every night so they couldn't repo it. The bastards got it anyway when I was at the club."

"Bastards," Firas agreed. He turned to look at Katia. "Do you work here? Do you have anything to drink? I'm almost out of gold, so it's gotta be cheap."

I was in the middle of renegotiating my personal vow not to outright murder fellow crawlers when Mordecai jumped across the room, landing heavily on the same side table Firas had his boots

upon. The table shattered into pieces. Mordecai spread his wings out and leaned forward, glaring at the two wide-eyed crawlers. He lifted a claw, careful not to actually touch or make a movement toward either of them. The razor-sharp talon glinted like a knife as he pointed it at each in turn.

"I want you two fuckwits to listen, and I want you to listen carefully. I don't know how in the gods you survived this long, but I am about five seconds from telling my client to eviscerate both of you and to use your bodies as zombie meat shields. And don't think she can't do it. Isn't that right, Donut?"

Donut growled.

"We are in a very dire situation here. But guess what? You two mouth breathers hit the survival lottery when you got put in the same quadrant as us, and you're too stupid to even realize it. You can still get out of this, and you can still make it to the sixth floor if you take this seriously. If you don't, you are doing more harm than good. And we do not have time for that. I have a drink that I am going to make for each of you, but it's going to take about five minutes. So help me gods, if you two don't shut the hell up and just listen, you will *not* persist long enough for me to make the potion for you."

"Whoa, chill," Louis said.

Firas looked at Louis. "Why did you tell the hooker to turn into a Big Bird? I ain't banging anything from *Sesame Street*, man. That's fucked up."

"He's an eagle. Dude, did you ever watch *G.I. Joe*? Remember the Indian guy? He had an eagle named Freedom." He laughed. "That show was so damn racist."

"No, I never really watched it. I saw the *Muppets* though. And that's the same thing as *Sesame Street*."

Louis almost jumped up from his seat, eyes going wide. He looked at the door. "*G.I. Joe*. The Baroness! That'd be *a lot* easier than Gadget."

"It'd be better than this eagle, that's for sure."

"I'll be back," Mordecai said, sounding exasperated. He disappeared into the crafting room.

"You know what," I said. "We're going to wait for Mordecai to make your drinks."

"Tell him to make us Dirty Shirleys," Louis said.

Donut gasped. "You know about Dirty Shirleys?"

He laughed. "Yeah, we saw it on the recap show. Some dumb crawler got drunk on them and called out Lucia Mar. We use them now to see how good a bartender is. We get them as the first drink in every bar."

Donut: IF I MAGIC MISSILE HIM IN THE HEAD, WILL I GET IN TROUBLE?

Carl: Yes. You'll have to wait until we're outside.

Katia: They are so drunk that if you cast your new fire wall spell anywhere in the room, their breath will likely ignite, and they will self-immolate. You probably wouldn't get blamed for that.

Donut: YOU ARE A GENIUS. I'M GOING TO TRY IT.

Carl: No, you're not.

Mordecai: Don't worry. I'll take care of the issue.

"Please," Langley the Finnish archer said to Louis, speaking for the first time. The man had a gruff accent, and I didn't know what an actual Finnish accent sounded like, but I was pretty sure this wasn't it. This was more eastern European. "You must be serious. This is very serious. Listen to Carl."

Louis turned to the archer. "We *are* taking it seriously. We made it this far haven't we?"

As we waited for Mordecai to return, I sent a message to Elle and asked her if they also had a bunch of dumbass crawlers in her group. I knew the chat was public now, but I didn't care. Team Meadow Lark had managed to secure another type of boat, a galley with fish-people rowers. They were probing the defenses of their assigned castle, an orc-run oil rig that shot fireballs at anybody who came close

Elle: We're the only ones in the water quadrant. We've seen the people on the land, but we haven't talked to any of them. Their castle is similar to ours. It's an oil refinery. The whole bubble is some stupid story about how we earthlings

ruined our own planet. I think the air castle is just a storm cloud that rains acid. You get saddled with a bunch of layabouts?

<u>Carl</u>: You don't even want to know.

"How *did* you two make it this far?" Katia asked Louis and Firas.

"He has a spell," Firas said. "He got it for being the first crawler to drive a van into the dungeon."

"You drove a *van* into the dungeon?" I asked. "I thought all the vehicles collapsed."

"Not the convertibles," Louis said proudly. "I had the top off when it happened. And I didn't see the stairwell until I was on top of it. It was right in the middle of I-95. I was so fucked up, I didn't know what was happening. The road was all jacked all of a sudden. It was a bumpy ride. I saw the glowing entrance. Slammed the brakes, but it didn't matter. I slid right in. Broke the axle. But it made it down the stairs and hit those doors and crashed right into the dungeon."

Mordecai returned, holding a pair of potions in a talon. They were not the regular alcohol cure potions. These were white with little frothy bubbles. I was about to examine one of them when the ridiculousness of what Louis said struck me.

"I'm sorry," I said. "A convertible *van*? Like a cargo van with the top off?"

"Yeah man, it was sweet. It was my mom's Chevy Astro. We took the top off. My friend Jojo saw this thing online on how to pimp out vans into convertibles, so we did it. My mom got really mad, but it got like 100,000 likes on Instagram. I called it the *Tiddy Twister*."

"Where are you from? Wasn't it snowing?"

"Nah, man," Louis said. "We didn't get much snow in Miami. It was cold as shit, though. It was like five in the morning when it happened, too. I was driving back from Jojo's. Saved my life."

"How old are you?" Katia asked Louis, looking at the balding, overweight man up and down.

"I'm 27. How old are you, Punky Brewster?"

"What's the spell?" I asked. "And what happened to your van? Did you take any of the parts?"

Mordecai handed each of the two men a potion. "Drink it."

Louis looked at the potion dubiously. But he shrugged and downed it. "Van was wrecked. Why would I take any parts? It's not like I can build another Chevy Astro in the dungeon. Oh, so the spell is pretty badass. Check it out. It's called *Cloud of Exhaust*. We don't have to fight shit when I cast it. And Firas has his escape spell if we get in trouble. It's called *Puddle Jumper*."

"What level is your *Cloud of Exhaust*?" Mordecai asked sharply.

"Why's the description on the potion blank?" Firas asked, holding the white potion up to the light.

"Oh man, my head hurts. Cloud spell is Level 11," Louis said. "I have to use it a lot. It has a ten-minute cooldown, though. Seriously, I think I'm going to be sick."

"You'll be fine in a minute. *Cloud of Exhaust's* cooldown is normally an hour," Mordecai said. "Drink the potion, Firas. It won't hurt you."

Louis shrugged. He was starting to look a little green. "Yeah, so my Pest Control class makes it so cloud-based spells or something have faster cooldowns. And are more effective. My guide guy said the only way I could possibly live was to choose that class. He was a dick. Kinda like you."

"You sound like you had a competent guide who did the best he could," Mordecai said.

"Yo, man. Something's weird," Firas said. "I don't think we should take these potions."

"And you just paralyze whole groups of mobs and Puddle Jump out of there?" Mordecai asked. "You don't kill them when they're seized up?"

"Nah," Louis said. "Sometimes we do, but they wake up after you hit them. Some of those higher-level mobs, especially on the last floor, take a lot of hits to kill. We usually just spray and run. The spell was really effective in those tunnels and on the trains."

"Did you drink yours already?" Firas said.

"He did. And he's fine," Mordecai said. "He's not drunk anymore, are you Louis?"

"Nah, man. That sobered me up real quick. I still feel sick though."

"You still have alcohol in your system. Don't worry. It won't be long."

"You sure I should take this?" Firas asked. "There's no description. I've never seen that."

Carl: You're not poisoning him, are you?

Mordecai: No. Well, sort of. But it's the good kind of poisoning. Trust me.

"Jesus dude, just drink it," I said. "We're all waiting on you."

Firas downed the potion at the same moment Louis projectile vomited all over the floor.

The cleaner bot let out an angry trill.

Mordecai: Okay, here's the deal with these assholes. Louis has an *enhanced*, legendary-tier spell called *Cloud of Exhaust*. It has a high-probability to knock out mobs for a variable amount of time, depending on the level difference. I don't remember the specifics, but even high-level mobs will get conked out for a little bit. They'll wake up the moment they're touched. But any damage to them is enhanced for an additional thirty seconds after they wake. It's one of those spells that helps guarantee that you'll breeze through all the early floors. I'm almost certain it's the same spell the goat lady Miriam Dom has. But instead of utilizing this like she has, these two idiots have been fleeing every encounter. It worked fine for them at first, but now they're screwed. That moron doesn't even realize what he has. He should be level 40 by now, at least.

I barely registered what Mordecai said. The two crawlers were still on their hands and knees, scream-vomiting on the floor. Neither had stopped for several minutes. It reminded me of that week of leave we got after boot. Those of us without families spent it in Philadelphia drinking until we blacked out.

Carl: Mordecai, what the hell did you give them?

Mordecai: They'll be fine. It's called Rapid Detox. Clears them of alcohol and any negative effects of most drugs. Not Blitz, unfortunately, but most everything else. Works great. It makes it so certain toxins will no longer affect them. It only lasts for a single floor.

Carl: So they can't get drunk anymore?

Mordecai: Or high. And if they do drink, they become violently ill. It's used to treat alcoholism. And to torture prisoners.

Katia: Why couldn't he read the description?

Mordecai: I added sage beetle ichor. It disguises potions, but it makes it so they go bad after an hour. It's a good hack. Some places will have protections against the use of certain types of potions. Like battle arenas where you can't use health pots. But if the potion is treated with the ichor, it makes it usable again.

"Christ, man," Louis said, standing up on unsteady legs. He was still breathing heavily.

"Can we get on with this now?" I asked.

"I just got a notification that says I can't drink anymore," Louis said. His voice turned to a whisper. "Not cool, man. Not cool. It's all I got left."

"That's not true. You still have your date with Juice Box," said Donut.

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[6]

When the second, pale sun rose, it moved rapidly across the sky, closing in on the larger, yellow sun. This second sun was much smaller, but it caused the temperature to rise about twenty degrees. Once the two stars met in the sky, the sandstorm would start. I was never a physics guy, and I didn't know if this sun thing mimicked any sort of real, or possible, orbital pattern. After talking with Imani and Elle, I knew this light/day pattern was exclusive to this bubble, so it was all an illusion anyway, all projected onto the bubble wall.

I shielded my eyes, looking for the *Wasteland*. I couldn't see it at all from here, which meant it'd already hit the outer ring. The entire town was talking about the destruction of the other town, though not even Donut could get anything out of the camels or the changelings about *why* it happened.

The stars might not be real, but the sudden rise in temperature was no joke. It was so hot outside, it was difficult to breathe. The camels did not deploy the city-wide awning. They saved it for the sandstorm, which was unfortunate. All the town's outside activity ground to a halt. Everyone stayed inside, though the temperature wasn't much better inside the bars. Outside of town, the thorny devil mobs were replaced with something else. These were Donut-sized, fast-moving things called dune scythes. There were a lot of them outside the town's walls, their red dots swarming about. I had no real desire to go out and face them, but I knew fighting them would be inevitable.

"We're going to need to install air conditioning on the Royal Chariot," I said as I leaned against the back of the adobe building. We stood in the alley between two inns, facing the back of the town hall, which was behind the two buildings across the street. The closer alleyway was mere feet from the back of the Town Hall, and we didn't want to get that close.

Katia was there in that closer alleyway, leaned up against a metallic mechanism that snaked around the building that backed into the town hall. She was pretending to be a long, attached pipe, which gave her a raised view of the back door. She said the mechanism attached to the building's side was pumping cold air to the residents within.

"This is unbearable," Donut said from my shoulder. "My paws are sweating."

"Cats don't sweat," I said.

"If cats don't sweat, explain this, Carl," Donut said, rubbing her paw on my neck. I couldn't tell if it was wet or not since my entire body was drenched. I had a sweating problem. At the gym, I was one of those guys who left a puddle everywhere. I couldn't help it, and right now my skin was doing a pretty good faucet impersonation.

"Shush," I said. "Someone's coming out."

We'd noticed earlier there were two entrances to the town hall. The main entrance, which nobody seemed to use, and the back entrance we now faced. We watched as a dromedarian opened the door, tied his headscarf tightly around his head, and loped away. I froze as the creature strode right past Katia, but he didn't pause. As the door closed, I caught sight of two guards standing inside. These were Waster Patrol dromedarians. Level 48 each.

The other camel turned left onto the street and disappeared, rounding the bend toward Weird Shit Alley.

Carl: Did you get a good enough look?

Katia: Yes. The guy who just left is named Henrik. He's just a regular level 30, but we have a problem. He showed some sort of ID to the guard before he left. In a town full of shapeshifters, it makes sense to have extra security I guess.

While the door was open, I could see the interior map for a minute. There are two guards everywhere. There's at least 12 of them.

Goddamnit.

Carl: We'll have to go with plan B.

Katia's plan had been to get a good look at the next dromedarian to leave, emulate his clothes and looks the best she could, and "return" inside just to get a quick peek. But with so many guards wandering about—guards who were likely on high alert—that plan wasn't going to work.

This was a problem. The whole building was high security, and if we did breach, odds were good we'd only be able to do it once. We had no idea what was hidden inside, nor did we know what we were going to do about it once we learned. If it turned out to be the gnome leader's child or something, our best move was to leave him be for the moment. If my dual-stage rocket idea worked out, we wouldn't need to deal with this collateral storyline at all.

Carl: Did you see any guards on the second or third level?

Katia: Just the offices. There's a camel in half of them. The second floor is less crowded than the third.

We'd learned from the Toe's barkeeper that the citizens did not rest during the two-hour night. Instead, they mostly slept in the hot hours before the sandstorm started. And with less people out on the streets, now was the best time to infiltrate the building.

I took a deep breath. *This is a terrible idea*. But short of going in there and just killing all the camel NPCs, I couldn't see an alternative. Not when we were under such a time crunch. Gwendolyn's team was building siege engines to breach the walls on the land quadrant, but she was worried they didn't have enough people to assault the sandcastle of the "Mad Dune Mage." We hadn't heard shit from either of the other two quadrants. We had to get this done now.

Carl: Louis. We're going with the frog plan. You're up. Firas, you too.

Louis: Fuck, man. Really?

Carl: Come on. Hurry up.

Both Louis and Firas were inside the tavern next door. The two crawlers had been pouting about Mordecai's potion, but the men were much easier to deal with when they were sober. Firas was much quieter and more introspective. He'd worked as a car detailer and audio installer before this. His Hammersmith class was melee-focused, specializing in hammer-based weapons and abilities. The only weapon he actually had was an intelligence-enhanced mace designed for a cleric. But his *Puddle Jumper* spell was at level 10, much higher than Donut's six.

Sober Louis was still an ass. I was pretty sure the guy never had a job in his life. He wouldn't shut up about cartoons I'd never heard of. When he'd found out Katia was from Iceland, he started calling her "Lazy Town." I had no idea why. He and Donut found common ground, however. Despite pretending to hate the show, Donut knew quite a bit about the 80's program *Knight Rider*, much to Louis's delight.

I'd much rather have one of Langley's guys in on this, but that group wasn't very useful here. I had them all using their car-selling skills. On my word, they'd all ascend to the rooftops and cover our escape if everything went sideways. In the meantime, they went to work, the six of them spreading out to the different bars. The taverns would be mostly empty at this hour, but that was okay. Mordecai was currently doing the same. At this moment, he was sitting inside the Toe, drinking blood wine, telling the second-shift bartender about the group of grulke toad soldiers he'd seen out in the desert.

The second floor of Town Hall was ringed by exterior balconies. Katia said the one facing the alley was attached to an office that appeared to be empty. We decided to keep Katia outside and hidden while Donut, Louis, Firas, and I all puddle jumped to the terrace. Since the cooldown of Puddle Jumper was five hours, we'd use Firas for the casting, and we'd save Donut for our escape.

"Okay, once we're in there," I whispered, "keep your mouths shut. If someone sees us, we're gonna have to kill them. The camels are assholes, but I want to avoid that if possible. So listen to me or Donut and do as you're told."

They both nodded. I waited for Katia to give the all-clear, and Firas cast his spell, teleporting us to the balcony. Part of me was shocked it actually worked. All four of us crowded onto the metal railing. We all crouched down, trying to make ourselves look smaller. Above, the twin suns beat down onto us. I saw a single dromedarian from up here, two streets over, but his back was turned. We needed to hurry.

A tall set of double doors led into the interior of the building. I grabbed the handle and tried to turn it, but it was locked. This was a thick, metal-reinforced security door, but thankfully it wasn't magically locked.

"Door," I said to Donut. "And wait a few seconds before you withdraw the spell this time."

We'd practiced this a little bit. The last time we tried it, Donut had almost lopped my hand off. She cast *Hole* just above the handle. Thanks to her Glass Cannon class, the spell was significantly more powerful on this floor. The hole reached all the way through the thick door. I reached in, found the bolt, and I slowly turned it. The door opened with a *click*. I retracted my hand, and I peered inside, looking for threats. I saw nothing in the office. Donut snapped off the spell.

"Remember when we cut that guy's head off?" Donut whispered as we sneaked into the empty room.

"Yeah, I still have that guy's head in my inventory," I said. Louis and Firas stumbled in after me. Louis was sweating so profusely, he made me look dry. He had to be losing an ounce of water weight a minute. I pushed the door closed. This office didn't appear to be in regular use. There was a large, camel-sized desk and chair, a table with nothing on it, and an open and empty chest. The walls were made of wooden pillars. The floors creaked with each step. A complicated system of brass pipes ran along the interior wall. They looked to be either part of a steampunk-style AC, or an old-school pneumatic tube messaging system.

Now that we were inside, my map populated with everything on the floor. There were multiple offices on this level, and only one appeared to be occupied. The three roaming guards moved through

the hallways, though they hit the down stairwell and disappeared from my map.

"Be careful before you step," I said, moving as quietly as I could to the desk. I had a few buffs that disguised my footsteps. Louis and Firas had nothing, and they both stood there with their arms out, like they were surfing. "Let's wait until the roaming guards return and go upstairs, and then we'll move. Louis, be ready." Louis nodded, not saying anything for the first time ever.

I rifled through the desk, looting everything that wasn't bolted down. It wasn't much. I took the chair. I knew I could easily lift the desk, but I didn't want to risk making a loud noise.

Katia: Three guards just stepped outside. They're smoking cigarettes and talking, huddling against the wall in the shade from the balconies. I think they're taking a break. When the door was open, I could see the four of you and one more camel on the second floor. Your path to the room with the basement is clear. Go now. I'll warn you if they come back in.

I hesitated. This wasn't the plan. The three guards could walk back in at any moment.

Katia: Oh shit, I see several more camels out there. They're making their way down the street. I think it's a shift change. Unless you want to sit there for the next hour while everyone gets settled, go now.

Louis moved, and the floorboard creaked loudly. *Damnit*, I thought. We couldn't wait.

"All right, we're moving out," I said. "We can't disguise our steps on these floors, so walk with calm purpose. Not fast, not slow."

"I don't know what that means," Firas said.

"Just follow me," I said. I strode out the door, revealing a long hallway. A row of paintings hung on the wall, each portraying the image of a stuffy, bored-looking camel. The wood floor was covered with a runner carpet, long and intricately patterned. The building was noticeably cooler. We walked down the hallway and down the stairs.

We quickly crossed the hallway at the bottom of the stairs, which branched off toward both exits. The guards at either end did not see us as we walked past. We passed a few open rooms, a small kitchen, and then we came to a fortified door at the end of the hall.

"Okay, same thing," I whispered. "There are two guards on the other side of this door, so we have to do it quickly. Donut will cast her hole spell, and you'll cast your cloud spell. You have to wait until after their dots turn red. I'll take care of that. Don't step in front of the hole in the door. We don't want them seeing you. Once they're down, I'll try to open the door."

Louis looked as if he was about to pass out. I didn't know how this guy had managed to make it this far. He cracked his neck and hopped back and forth on his legs like he was getting ready to run a sprint. "Do it."

Donut cast *Hole*, and I tossed one of my new sparklers through the opening. I'd discovered them while trying to make lower-powered explosives. All they consisted of was a wick and fuse from a hob lobber. They did hardly any damage. They made very little sound. But they shot sparks everywhere for a good five seconds. The crackling flickers shot off like angry hornets, stinging when they hit.

"Now," I hissed the moment the two dots turned red.

Louis flung his arms forward, casting his spell. I stood off to the side, but in that moment, I saw the distinctive shape of a camel. He was sitting at a table, holding playing cards in his hands, covering his face in surprise at the sparkler attack. A heavy spear was leaned up against the wall.

A deep, black smoke filled the room. The two camels within collapsed. One of them knocked over something, probably the damn card table, and a loud crash echoed throughout the hallway.

"Fuck," I whispered. I put my arm through the hole and reached desperately for the latch. Only there was no bolt to turn. It was just a key hole. And it was higher than I expected. It did not line up with the key hole on this side. There were two bolts, I realized. One had to use a key to unlock it from both sides to open the door.

"Shit, I can't get the door open," I said, retracting my arm.

"What was that?" a voice echoed from down the hall.

"Check it out," another called. These were the guards from the front and back talking to one another.

"I'm gonna have to blow the door," I said. "Everybody step back."

"Don't be so dramatic, Carl," Donut said. "Watch this."

She snapped off her *Hole* spell. She cast it again, but this time she placed it a few inches to the right, so the disappearing part of the hole included the two deadbolts and part of the wall and door jamb. The spell currently had an effective depth of about eight inches, which was plenty thick. She pushed at the door, and it swung open easily. There was a half-moon bite taken out of the door. The second half of the hole remained in the wall.

"What the hell?" I said. "Why haven't we been doing it like this the whole time?"

I pushed my way into the room as the black smoke billowed out.

"How long does the smoke last?" I asked, waving at it, suddenly alarmed. It was much thicker than I'd realized it'd be. Unlike with my smoke bombs, I couldn't see shit. It stank like diesel exhaust. I didn't want to move deeper into the room in fear of touching one of the two camels. They woke up the moment you touched them.

"It's only a minute."

I heard steps. A camel was coming to investigate. "Shit, they're going to see the smoke."

The smoke started to dissipate. I could now see the two forms on the ground, though there was something off about them. I pushed the door closed. "Turn off your hole, Donut."

"Really, Carl. You need to find a less offensive way to say that."

Shouting rose from down the hall.

<u>Katia</u>: A guard just opened the door and yelled something. All of the camels are pouring inside. You have about 15 of them coming at you.

"Goddamnit, Donut. Kill the spell."

She killed the spell.

That ended up being a mistake. The moment it happened, I realized why we shouldn't ever use the *Hole* spell to break open doors if we wanted to ever utilize said doors again. I'd either pushed

the door closed too tightly, or not tightly enough, but when the missing part of the door reappeared from wherever it went, the bolts weren't perfectly lined up with how they'd been before. The door cracked loudly and then swung back open. Two hunks of metal—pieces of the actual bolts, I realized—fell to the floor. The whole side of the door looked as if I'd hit it with a small charge.

"Well that was unexpected," Donut said. "Carl, what did you do? If you were going to do that, you should've just blown it up."

"Oh shit, oh shit," Louis said. "What're we going to do? Cat, you gotta teleport us out!"

"Cat?" Donut said. "I am Princess Donut, you buffoon!"

I rolled a goblin smoke bomb down the hall and then pushed the free-swinging door back closed. I pulled one of the heavy chocks from the subway level. I leaned it against the entrance and pushed the brace against the ceiling. They'd have to work hard to get in here now. But we were also trapped.

"You two, be useful and hold this closed."

Louis and Firas jumped up and leaned against the door. Louis whimpered. Their presence against the door probably didn't help, but it gave them something to do.

I returned my gaze to the room, focusing on the two passed-out dromedarians. Only they weren't dromedarians anymore.

"What the shit?"

These were changelings. They'd both reverted to their faceless, humanoid form. The one I'd seen just a moment ago playing cards was passed out on the floor, cards spread out all around him, only now he was much smaller. His head pulsed with an odd, sapphire luminescence, almost like a jellyfish.

I examined his properties. He had a 50-second timer over his head, which was significantly shorter than we'd anticipated, even with the level discrepancy between Louis and the mob. Louis said they were usually out for over five minutes.

Svern – Changeling Principal. Level 49.

This mob is Exhaust-ed.

Have you ever visited the home of an elderly widow and seen her collection of miniature spoons? Or thimbles?

Maybe they're refrigerator magnets, or salt and pepper shakers. It's always something. They're all part of a set. There's a display case involved, with a special slot for each one. It was ambitious of her to buy the case before it was filled. It sits there in her home, a layer of dust atop it where she can no longer reach. A shrine to youthful optimism.

Inevitably, as life steamrolls on, she's become more concerned with what is missing from her collection rather than what she already has. That ashtray from Niagara Falls was a hard-won souvenir, sitting proudly next to the one from Branson. But the moment it was obtained, it lost its value. And now all she thinks about is that empty space, right there. Right next to Graceland. It eats at her.

It is a totem to everything she did not accomplish. Her failures. She stares at it, sometimes. That space. That damn, empty space. All she wants is to fill it.

That is both the curse and the driving force of the Changeling Principal.

Carl: What the fuck is a Changeling Principal? The description is some high school essay bullshit.

Mordecai: Ah, shit. Damn. I should have known.

Carl: Explain. The guards were these things, pretending to be camels. Now I'm wondering if *all* the camels are shapeshifters. No wonder everybody hates you guys.

The door crashed, but it held firm. Louis cried out in fear. Firas gritted his teeth. We didn't have long.

Mordecai: They're rare. It's an old story I haven't seen used in a long, long time. They're a sect of changeling culture. Sometimes they give them new, special powers. Cultish, kind of like those city elves from the third floor, but less apocalyptic and more power hungry. They are obsessed with getting a full library. Changelings can only change into

something they've physically touched, so they seek out rare creatures.

Carl: Any special way to kill them when they're in their weird, faceless form?

Mordecai: Get the brain. The glowing part. If you kill one, take the head. I can make a cool potion from it. It only works if it's not transformed when you kill it. Try to knock them out first. Sometimes that makes them revert form.

What any of this had to do with the damn gnomes was beyond me, but I strongly suspected whatever was going on right now was a mirror of what had happened over in the Bactrian town. The crawlers had fucked up the City Hall quest, just like we were in the middle of doing.

The original plan was to get in and out without being noticed or hurting any of the NPCs. And if we had to do something with the collateral, we had a plan to shift the blame. But with this changeling fuckery, we couldn't afford to be diplomatic. I activated Talon Strike and smashed down on Svern's head with my foot. The Exhausted debuff disappeared, but I hit him again before he could react, stunning him all over again. I hit him one more time, killing the level 49 monster. The moment he died, the body shriveled like a raisin, all except the round head. I picked the whole thing up, sticking it into my inventory.

There was another door here. A trap door, leading down to whatever it was they were protecting. We'd get to that in a second. The second changeling guard had less than 15 seconds left until he reawakened.

"You two. Kill the other one. Hurry."

"What?" Louis asked, horrified. "He's going to wake up the second I hit him."

"He's going to wake up anyway. Hurry the hell up. Hit him in the head."

Firas pulled his mace, and Louis pulled his weapon: a glowing baseball bat covered in spikes. I leaned up against the chock as it banged again.

Carl: Donut, kill him the moment he wakes up. A full-power missile to the head. Just make sure they each get a few hits in.

Donut: HE'S BOSS LEVEL STRONG. WHAT IF IT DOESN'T WORK?

I didn't get a chance to answer. Firas took his mace and smashed it as hard as he could directly into the changeling just as the timer ran out. Louis smacked him with the bat. Both of them pummeled it in the head a few times. The spell enhanced the damage for several seconds, but they barely caused the creature's health to fall at all.

Donut slammed it in the head with a point-blank, double strength *Magic Missile*. It almost killed him. She quickly hit him again. That worked. Luminescent, blue material splattered over the room like she'd broken open a glo stick.

"Stay here," I said to Louis and Firas as I pulled open the trap door. I was assaulted by a blast of fetid-smelling cold air. "And get back to the chock. Hold it closed."

The two both returned to their spots against the metal blockage. "I went up two levels," Louis said to Firas, who had also gone up to level 24.

Katia: There's a bell ringing now. The camels are coming out.

I could hear the bell through the walls.

Carl: Stay put. We're almost done. I hope.

"Donut, pull out Mongo and stay up here." I pointed at the solid, left wall. It led to the outside. "We're going to escape that way. If they breach before I come back up, go without me. Try not to let them see you, but if they do, flee. Don't fight. We'll meet back up at the saferoom."

She started to protest, but I quickly descended the stairs into the darkness.

I lit a torch and dropped it. It fell to the bottom of the short ladder, and it filled the cavern with light.

The shape of the room appeared on my map. It wasn't big. There didn't appear to be anyone else in here.

Mongo appeared at the top of the trapdoor and squawked at me. "Stay up there," I said.

The ground was stone, carved with symbols that looked like Egyptian hieroglyphs. I was standing atop the tomb. The ceiling was low enough that I had to stoop. There was no way a camel could fit in here. There was a table, and a small chair. On the table was a roll of paper. I picked it up.

Map. The Necropolis of Anser.

You've discovered the catacomb plans. The information has been added to your map and to the map of everyone in your party.

"Shit," I said as the scroll dissipated into dust. The minimap showing the area below my feet populated. I zoomed the map out, revealing a maze that made the map of the Iron Tangle look like child's play. *Fuck me*.

There was also a small bowl on the table. It had a trio of shriveled, black plants within. Mushrooms, I realized. Not the kind you eat. At least not for food. I pulled the bowl into my inventory. Then I took the table and chair.

Katia: Something odd just happened. Two of the level-30 camels wanted into the town hall, but another camel stopped them. It was one of the waster guards. They fought, and the guard camel killed them both. He dragged their bodies inside.

Carl: Did they stay camels when they died?

Katia: Uh, yeah. Why?

Carl: I'll explain later.

Donut: HURRY UP, CARL. I CAN HEAR THEM TALKING ABOUT HITTING THE DOOR WITH A MISSILE.

I could now see the room went on even further than I realized. What I thought was the end of the chamber was actually the boundary line to the subterranean zone. Even with the map, I

wouldn’t be allowed in there. Not until we dealt with the gnomish castle.

But I also noticed something else. The white dot of an NPC. It was on the other side of the barrier, so I wouldn’t be able to get to him.

“Hello?” I called. The back of the room was filled with shadow.

“Henrik? Is that you? Back so soon?” a voice croaked. “I heard fighting. Who will you pretend to be today? My mother, perhaps? The last dose has not worn off yet. If you feed me more, it might kill me this time. I can only hope.”

I couldn’t see the creature, but the voice was similar to that of a Bopca.

I was about to light another torch when I saw the lantern hanging from the ceiling. It had a tiny flame within, like a pilot light. I turned the handle, and the whole room lit up.

The shimmering wall of the quadrant boundary appeared. And just past it, tied up in chains to the wall was an elderly gnome. The creature was not wearing the red hat, and he looked sickly and pale. He had scabs on his face, and he looked half starved to death.

Wynne. Dirigible Gnome Flesh Mechanic. Level 50.

The Dirigible Gnomes were once a peaceful race. All they ever wanted was two things. One, to figure out how the world worked. And two, to be left alone.

In order to escape a busy, teeming world filled with competing intelligent species, all of whom loved to wage war, the Dirigible Gnomes learned how to take to the clouds, building a variety of airships and floating settlements, allowing them to escape any sort of trouble.

But as we all know, trouble doesn’t care if you don’t want to be found.

The history of the Dirigible Gnomes is long, complicated, and tragic. But the end result is the inevitable result of all peaceful races. They were, eventually, forced to choose between fighting or being wiped out. They chose to fight.

Wynne is the great and favored uncle of Commandant Kane of the Dreadnaught *Wasteland*. He is a Flesh Mechanic,

a healer gifted with the ability to bring the long dead back to life, if only temporarily. He is being held as hostage by the Dromedarians, as a guarantee of peace.

Quest Complete. Stay out of city hall.

I now had more questions than answers. What had seemed so simple at first was now shaping into a complicated story. The dromedarians had this gnome guy as hostage. But it appeared the changelings had infiltrated the ranks of the camels, and they had their own interests in the gnome. And I still had no idea how I could use this information to get my ass into the throne room of the *Wasteland*, thousands of feet into the sky.

If I can get him out of those chains, we can take him. Talk ourselves onto the flying platform.

As if it was reading my mind, the system gave me an update.

New Quest. Free Wynne from his bondage.

Wynne the Dirigible Gnome is in chains. Free him, and he will provide easy access to the *Wasteland*.

***Reward*: You will receive a Silver Quest Box.**

Katia: Nice. Now get the hell out of there.

Donut: CARL. I DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU'RE DOING DOWN THERE BUT YOU NEED TO GET BACK UP HERE BEFORE LOUIS DIES OF A HEART ATTACK.

I couldn't approach him. I had an idea, but it would require Donut. I started to call her, but I paused the moment I saw the group of five blue dots on the map.

Crawlers. On the subterranean side. They were running down a hall toward me, coming fast.

"A human?" Wynne said, looking in my direction. "That's a new one, Henrik. Do you think a human can talk me into revealing the spell?"

"It's this way," a voice cried. A man. The five crawlers rushed into the chamber, emerging out of the darkness. All five were male. All levels 23 to 26. It was an eclectic group. Three were human. One was an odd creature with a human head and torso, but the body of a tarantula. I didn't know what the hell the last guy was. He looked like a dude wearing a goddamn banana costume.

"You bastard. You goddamn bastard," a man said before I could greet them. "You destroyed the map."

"Hello to you, too," I said. I examined the man.

Crawler #4,778,551. "Low Thi."

Level 25.

Race: Human.

Class: D-Bag Geek.

D-Bag Geek? Really? "The map was on the table back here out of your reach. It disappeared the moment I picked it up. It installed itself into my system."

"Well, we're now fucked. There were two maps, and we lost both of them. This place is a goddamn nightmare."

"It's Carl," another crawler said. This was another human named **Tyler Storm**. A level 26 **Weather Engineer**.

"It's not really a human," Wynne the gnome said, looking between me and the newcomers. "He's a changeling named Henrik! He's torturing me, trying to get me to cast a spell that would give flesh to Quetzalcoatlus. He drugs me, and I won't last much longer. I have the map to the temple. I know of your kind. If you kill me, you will have access. You can take it from me. Kill me. Kill me fast!"

"No," I said as Low Thi pulled a spear from his inventory. He raised it and pointed it at the gnome's head. "No, no, no!"

The man jabbed forward. The NPC slouched over, dead.

Quest failed. Free Wynne from his bondage.

Low Thi looked up. "Hey, I just got an achievement called Cockblock for ruining your quest. I guess you really are Carl."

"This guy doesn't have a map on him. He doesn't have shit," the banana guy said. His name was **Mike Barnes 3**. He was a level 23 **Banana Farmer**. "We're screwed."

Deep breath, deep breath.

"Do you assholes have any sort of towns or villages in there?"

"Yes," Low Thi said.

"Do any of you have Desperado Club access?"

"I do," the spider guy said. He indicated the third human. "Bobby and I are the only ones."

"Meet me there in a goddamn hour."

"Why?" the spider asked. His name was **Morris Sp**. A level 23 **Freelance Psychiatrist.**

"Because I'm going to kick your goddamn ass. And then I need to transcribe your map to you. That is if this town doesn't get blown to hell in the meantime."

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[7]

New Achievement! Total, Utter Failure.

You failed a quest less than five minutes after you received it. Now *that's* talent.

***Reward*: Ha.**

"Oh fuck off," I muttered as I ascended the stairs just as Donut cried, "Get down!"

Louis and Firas hit the deck as the chock was hit with an explosive. *Ka-blam!*

Fire licked through the room, and everything tumbled as the incredible sound temporarily rendered me deaf. The chock was bent over and dislodged with a hole right in the center, peeled open like a baked potato. The brace that went from the floor to the ceiling held strong. The door itself was shattered. Smoke filled the room, black and choking.

One of the camels had blasted a rocket at the door. They'd probably shoot another one any second.

"Fire in the hole," I coughed. I threw one of my new eighth-strength hob-lobbers through the mangled doorway, hurling it down the long hall. I crouched. The explosion came, but I couldn't hear it. The walls shook, followed by a secondary explosion that was even bigger. Part of the ceiling caved in. Experience notifications scrolled by.

That's why you don't carry your explosives on the outside, motherfucker.

I still couldn't hear anything, but the building continued to rumble. The stench of gunpowder and smoke filled the room. This was real smoke. The building was on fire. I downed a health potion, and the pain in my head eased. I knew from experience it'd take a full minute for my hearing to return.

Both Firas and Louis were on the ground. Louis was screaming, his hands to his ears, burn marks across his forearms. He had shrapnel wounds up and down his torso. *That asshole needs armor*. Firas had been blown across the room and was **Unconscious,** but otherwise looked okay. The rocket had propelled everything back, scorching the walls. But the metal block had protected them like a shield.

Donut jumped astride Mongo. Both had been in the back part of the room and appeared unharmed. She moved to Firas and used one of our precious healing scrolls on him. They hadn't seen us yet, but that would change in a moment. I dropped one of my last hobgoblin smoke curtains at my feet.

Carl: Donut, let's get out of here.

Donut: WHAT DO YOU THINK I'M DOING, CARL?

Donut cast *Hole* on the far wall, and it materialized, leading outside. It faced the side of an alley, but luckily, if we stood to the right of the hole, we had a line-of-sight down one of the main thoroughfares, all the way to where it curved away and toward the wall of the bowl. There were camels everywhere, all headed in this direction. The smoke curtain, much too powerful for such a small place, billowed out the magical hole. The camels on the streets all had white dots on the map, so the opacity of the smoke curtain wasn't enough to obscure us when they got close. We couldn't let them see us. We had to move fast. We moved to the side of the temporary hole.

"Louis, take a potion," I hissed as I pulled the stuffed, Grulke infantry figure from my inventory. My ears started that familiar buzzing, letting me know my hearing was returning.

Bautista had given me the beanbag toy. He still had almost a thousand of the things, all different. He was going through them

rapidly as he and his team explored through his subterranean level, which was really some sort of ant colony thing.

I ripped the tag off the beanbag and tossed it through the hole and out into the alley. We waited a few precious seconds for the creature to be summoned. Louis finally figured out the health potion and rose to his feet, whimpering, rubbing his arms. He was covered in splotches of blood. I hissed at him to crouch down and stay away from the room's new window.

A mighty croak filled the chamber. The grulke creature stood to his feet in the alley. He turned to peek his head back in through the hole to look at me. He had a 25-second timer over his head. The level-15 frog creature looked just like Mordecai had on the last floor.

"What am I doing here?" he asked, looking directly at me. Half-opacity smoke billowed all around us. Shouting came from every direction. The entire building felt as if it was about to collapse. I thought of the protective sail over the building that safeguarded the town from the sand storm. The storm would be here in less than two hours.

"Think you can hop out onto the street, turn right and then hop over the city wall?"

I couldn't see it from here, but the main entrance to the town was only a few hundred feet away.

"You summoned me just to make me run like a little bitch?"

"Yes. Hurry. Go!"

The frog only had ten seconds left. He grumbled but hopped out onto the street, landing in front of a pair of surprised camels. He bounded to the right, sailing up into the air, crashing loudly. He hopped once more and out of sight.

"Do it," I said to Donut as I tossed one more smoke bomb, this time out on the street. I really needed a non-magical version, one that worked on NPCs and not just red-tagged mobs. Behind us and through the mangled remains of the interior door, I heard shouting. More dromedarians were coming into the building, despite it being on fire. Donut's *Hole* spell would soon run dry. It was time to go.

Louis dragged the still-recovering form of Firas over, and we teleported away. Donut puddle jumped us all the way down the

street, right where the street started to curve with the wall.

I quickly looked around. There were several camels about, but all had their eyes on the city hall building, which billowed smoke into the air. Fire burst from a window on the second level.

"Whoa, that was way further than I expected," I said, standing to my full height. "I wish you'd done that last time."

"It lets me send us really far now," Donut said, also looking around. A female camel standing about ten feet away looked in our direction and startled at our sudden appearance.

"Oh my, what happened?" Donut asked, sounding innocent.

The camel paused uncertainly. Her eyes focused on Firas who was being held up by Louis. I pulled an empty bottle of whiskey from my inventory and pretended to drink in an attempt to look like we'd just wandered over here from a nearby bar. She seemed to relax. She blinked twice and said, "The town hall was attacked by frog creatures. Nobody knows where they came from. I saw one with my own eyes. He jumped to the top of the house right there and then leapt straight out of town."

"I never liked frogs," Donut declared. "Filthy creatures. Have you seen their tongues? They're sticky. Anything with a sticky tongue can't be trusted. Can you imagine having something sticky in your mouth at all times?"

The dromedarian nodded and returned her attention back to the burning town hall. The tulip-shaped sail atop the building was not catching on fire, but the whole structure was about to collapse to the ground. Camels on stilts appeared, all pouring buckets of water on the fire. It wasn't going to help.

Katia came strolling up in her regular, human form. She had what looked like an iced tea in her hand with a little umbrella. She sipped on it.

"What was the plan again?" she asked. "Oh yes, I remember. You were going to sneak in, figure out what they had hidden in there, and sneak out again undetected. Good job."

"That's why we have backup plans," I said, still watching the burning building. "At least they don't know it was us."

"The frog con isn't going to last," she said. "This world is too small to pull that sort of scam off. They're going to go out there and find no other frog creatures. Or worse, they'll find that stuffed animal it turns back into. And then they're going to realize the only ones who mentioned seeing the frogs were all the new people. It's not rocket science."

"I thought it went quite well," Donut said. "Also, they're toads. Not frogs."

"Is it always like this?" Louis asked. He looked like he was going to vomit again. Firas had healed, but he was sitting on the ground, rocking back and forth.

"Like what?" I asked.

He didn't answer.

I turned my gaze back to Katia. "We have bigger problems than them figuring out it was us. The moment the gnomes realize their collateral is dead, they're going to unleash hell on the town. I'd like to avoid that, but I don't know how."

"How will they even know?" Donut asked, looking up into the sky. Above, the twin suns were getting closer by the minute.

It was still unbearably hot. I snatched Katia's drink and took a sip. It wasn't iced tea. It was some girly alcoholic drink. "I don't know. But they found out about the other town's collateral somehow." I told them exactly what had happened in the basement. "I'm guessing those subterranean assholes probably did the same thing on the other side. They killed the collateral, whatever it was, in an attempt to somehow get to the map, that was likely just out of their reach. Whatever happened, it caused the town to be bombed. I bet we just did the same thing here. We have a little more than an hour before the storm, two hours of storm, two hours of post-storm twilight, and then two hours of night. That's about how long before that airship will be back in this general area. So whatever we do about it, we better do it quickly."

To accentuate the point, the city hall collapsed with a mighty crash. The minaret atop the building tumbled over and landed on the street as camels scattered.

"You keep destroying governmental buildings, Carl," Donut said. "People are going to start thinking you have a problem with authority."

Soon after, several dromedarians went to work manually affixing the storm shield over the city. The town hall had been the tallest building, but they had prepared for this contingency. A group of dromedarians tirelessly set up a scaffolding system to hold the shield up. They worked quickly, unfurling the canvas, filling the town with shadow.

"That material looks like it used to be part of a balloon," Katia said. "It's definitely magical."

I stared at the creatures feverishly working to protect the city. Were these guys real dromedarians? Or were they changelings? Katia had witnessed a shapeshifter murdering two dromedarians, so it was clear the camels didn't know that their ranks had been infiltrated. This was some serious *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* bullshit.

Carl: Is there any way we can tell which ones of these guys are real?

Mordecai: I've been thinking about it, and I think I have an idea. Donut. Do your sunglasses have the ability to see based on heat signature?

Donut: I DON'T KNOW. THERE ARE LOTS OF MODES. PROBABLY.

Mordecai: If it does, a real dromedarian and a changeling will have almost an identical heat signature, but the brain of the changeling will be a lot hotter. That might make their heads a little hotter. It'll probably be very subtle, but you might be able to make that work.

Donut: OKAY I WILL TRY BUT I WOULDN'T GET MY HOPES UP. THEIR HEADSCARVES WILL MAKE IT EXTRA HARD TO SEE.

I sent Louis and Firas off to a saferoom. There was only a single real saferoom in town for folks without a personal space, and it was in Weird Shit Alley. We hadn't gone in there yet, but everyone was a little scared of the street. I told them to go anyway. They'd both received several achievements for participating in that fight, likely all boxes we'd already received. They were both marveling at the sudden influx of views and follows. After they collected their loot, they needed to hook up with Langley and the other archers, who were going to spend some time outside the gates grinding until the storm hit.

We needed to do that, too. This floor was going to require us spending a lot of time in the crafting room, which meant less time for regular experience. That was deliberate, designed to slow down our progress. We couldn't keep relying on boss battles to give us big bumps of experience. Regular, old-school grinding was important, not just for experience, but to keep training up our skills.

We were always juggling. We were slightly ahead of the curve, but the archer guys were a perfect example of how lagging behind on a single floor could bite you on the ass.

"Hey," I said to a passing dromedarian. Donut was playing with the settings on her sunglasses, trying to figure out how to overlay the heat signature setting. She wanted me to get one to pause close by so she could figure it out.

"Are the gnomes going to bomb the city now?" I asked. "Like they did to the other town?"

This camel was a woman. A level-30 named Emerald.

She looked at me with disdain, but then Donut complimented her headscarf, and the camel changed before our eyes.

"We need to get through the rubble. There's something important buried in the basement of the town hall, and… and it may still be with us," she said, though her voice held little hope.

They didn't know if Wynne the gnome was alive or dead. They were going to be sorely disappointed.

"What if it's not?"

She paused. I didn't think she was going to answer, but then she said, "Then we move to the shelters. Every day after sunrise, we

give the gnomes proof of collateral. If that doesn't happen tomorrow, what happened to the Bactrians will happen to us."

"Proof?" I asked. "What sort of proof?"

"Look, I'm going to help with the rescue efforts. But if I were you, I'd go find a different town."

"There are no other towns," I said.

We headed toward the Desperado Club where I was to meet up with the idiots from the subterranean level. I was going to speak with them for a bit, maybe leave Katia and Donut in the club so they could transfer the map over the best they could. In the meantime, I had to get back to base as soon as possible. I was going to spend some time with the two-stage rocket, though I feared even that wasn't going to be strong enough to reach the *Wasteland*. According to the guy Donut and Mordecai bought the rockets from, the projectiles could only hit planes that were 500 feet off the ground. Preferably under 300. That was no good. I was going to use my sapper's table to build a rocket that would, hopefully, have much more range.

I checked in with Gwendolyn Duet as we headed to the club. They'd managed to breach a hole in the first of the four walls, which was made of sand. The second was made of seashell, and they felt they could break through that also instead of going over. She had them building siege ladders and catapults just in case. They hadn't seen or met any resistance from the castle itself, but it was slow work because the mobs on the beach were a constant threat and were always attacking.

Worst of all, however, was this massive bird that kept harassing them. It was a giant version of the chainsaw buzzards she'd described earlier, only this one was a borough boss. It was constantly circling the structure of the necropolis. If it saw any crawlers out in the open, it would swoop down to attack. It had wrecked two siege towers they'd started building, causing them to

abandon the idea. It was too strong for them to fight, so they had to hide every time it appeared. The thing was so fast, they couldn't even get a good description off of it. The creature was seriously hindering their efforts.

Gwen: Oh, I do have some good news. I saw a pair of crawlers on the water. They were too far away to talk, but they were in some *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*-looking submarine thing. It popped up like a cork. The two crawlers emerged and fought a jellyfish thing attached to the outside of the sub, and then they disappeared again. So we know somebody is working on it under there.

Carl: That is good news. Take care of yourself.

Just before we entered the club, all three of us received a notification.

Admin Notice. Congratulations, Crawler. You have received a second sponsor!

Viewers watching your feed will now see advertisements produced by both of your sponsors.

Sponsor's Name: The Open Intellect Pacifist Action Network, Intergalactic NFC.

Additional details available in the Sponsorship Tab of your interface.

My heart sank the moment I saw the word "Pacifist." Who the hell were these guys? I sent a quick message to Mordecai.

Mordecai: Never heard of them, but they gotta be rich. That NFC stands for Not for Conquest. That means they're not sponsored by any system, and they are free from taxes. Like a non-profit.

Carl: A goddamned charity? Like some religion?

Mordecai: There's no such thing as a non-profit religion. At least not in the legal sense. It sounds like one of the many groups out there that don't support the crawl. They probably bought into your sponsorship so they can show commercials. I hope that's not the case. If it is, you won't be getting any boxes from them.

I started to respond, but I was interrupted by Donut.

"Carl, Carl, I got a new sponsor!" Donut said, hopping up and down on the back of Mongo, which caused him to also start hopping up and down with excitement. "They're called, 'Veriluxx RealPet Companions!' Don't they sound just awesome? I wonder who that is! Who did you get? What about you, Katia?"

"I got the Squim Conglomerate," Katia said. "I don't know who that is."

"I do," I said. "They're the corporation who ran the crawl the last season. They're a planet-mining company just like Borant. They do the battle royale style crawls. I don't know what type of alien they are."

"Huh," Katia said. "Interesting. You can see who else they sponsor, and the list has like 500 crawlers on it. I don't recognize any of the names."

I remembered that was a thing, but the Valtay hadn't sponsored anybody else. I checked now, and they still only sponsored me. My new one didn't sponsor anybody else, either.

"Hey, not fair," Donut said, suddenly sounding dejected. "My new sponsor sponsors a bunch of other people. And Princess D'Nadia just sponsored five other crawlers, too."

"They must be pretty special if Princess D'Nadia likes them," I said, reaching over to scratch Donut on the head. She harumphed.

"Well I'm probably the best one," she grumbled.

Loita: Congratulations on the new sponsors. All three of you commanded very high fees. Both Carl and Donut had bidding wars that lasted until the final possible microsecond. Donut, you'll be happy to know that you brought in the highest sponsorship bid in the history of the series, beating out both Carl and Prepotente.

Next to me, all signs of dejection fled as Donut did another little hop of joy.

Donut: THAT'S PRETTY MUCH WHAT I EXPECTED. HOW'S ZEV?

Carl: Lucia isn't commanding the most sponsorship money?

Loita ignored both of the questions.

Loita: Furthermore, Donut, you will soon be receiving a benefactor box from your new sponsor. It is a product sample. We are requesting that you take it out and interact with it a few times. Carl, feel free to make some of your famous comments about it. This will appear to be a regular benefactor box, but it is in fact part of their sponsorship contract. This box is a freebie for them. It is something new we are trying with some select crawlers to attract more possible sponsors. So try not to disparage the product too much if you want Veriluxx to send you a real benefactor box. In six or seven days, assuming you're still with us, you two plus Mongo will be going on a program where you discuss the product.

Carl: We're going on an infomercial? Are you kidding me?

Loita: I am not Zev, Carl. Do not speak back to me like that. It will not be tolerated.

I almost told her to go fuck herself, but I held my tongue. Now was not the time to push it.

Donut: WHAT ABOUT KATIA?

Loita: Katia, I have you booked on a separate program around the same time. You will be doing it solo. This will be a one-on-one interview on a show called *Dungeon Sidekicks*.

Katia: I can't wait.

Donut: HOW IS ZEV DOING, LOITA?

Loita: Zev is still in treatment. We expect her return shortly.

"A goddamned infomercial?" I said.

"I wonder what the product is," Donut said as she dismounted Mongo. The dinosaur whimpered as he went into the carrier, but he obediently allowed her to store him. She jumped to my shoulder as we entered the Desperado Club. Donut gasped with a sudden realization, putting her paw on the side of my head. "Do you think there'll be a script? Do you think I'll get lines? Like a real actress?"

“Penis Parade? Really?” Katia said, looking about the room. We sat at our regular booth. Bomo and the Sledge stood guard nearby. With Katia’s acquisition of the Desperado Pass, we decided to add a third regular bodyguard to the team. This new guy was also a cretin. A rock creature. His name was **Very Sullen**.

“I like the Penis Parade,” Donut said. “They give out hats if you tip them a gold coin. Sledgie likes it too, isn’t that right?”

The Sledge rumbled.

“Where are those assholes?” I said, looking about. The club wasn’t very full. I saw only a handful of crawlers, and most of them were going straight for the Silk Road or the guild hall. Nobody had any leisure time any more. I also needed to go to the market and stock up.

A pair of crawlers entered, and I turned to see Morris the spider creature and the other human. They spotted us and hesitantly approached. I remembered I’d told them that I was going to kick their asses the next time I saw them. I waved them over and told the bodyguards to stand aside.

The first thing I did was exchange fist bumps with both, adding them to my chat. I examined them each in turn.

I’d already examined **Morris Sp**. His half human/half tarantula race was called an Arachnid, and he was level-23. His class was something called a **Freelance Psychiatrist**. It was a psionic class. Those with psionic skills had excelled on the previous floor, but Morris here didn’t seem to have leveled much.

The other was a human, early twenties with dark hair and tan skin. He had a Mediterranean look to him. **Bobby D.J.** He was a level-24 **Spy**. That was a rogue class, and the guy looked a little frazzled around the edges. He had an eye twitch, and his left hand never stopped trembling. I knew their quadrant was covered in traps. If Bobby was the only rogue in the party, he was probably their first line of defense. I wouldn’t want to be in his shoes.

“Tell me about your quadrant,” I said after they got their drinks. The only one of the group who didn’t have alcohol was Donut, who was instead sipping on a regular Shirley Temple, chatting away with

the Sledge, who grumbled happily in response to all of her declarations and observations.

Morris did not fit in the booth, so instead the spider stood over the table. Katia didn't say anything out loud, but she shivered every time the arachnid moved. I wasn't a huge fan of spiders, either.

"Our quadrant is terrible," Morris said. "The whole place is a maze. A big, fuck-you-you're-going-to-die maze. We start at the top, and the Crypt of Anser is at the bottom. That's where the staircase is. We start in the village, which is really a cavern filled with these things called Nude Glabers. They're undead mole rat creatures, but they're naked with almost-human anatomy, and they're hard to look at. That's where we are now. There are dozens of paths away from town. Some of them are tunnels so tight I have to be pushed to get through. We got a quest to find one of the two maps, but we failed thanks to you."

"I only took one of the maps," I said. "You failed because you were set up to fail."

"Maybe."

"Tell me about the other map, specifically the place where you were supposed to collect it."

Morris shrugged. "The other was a similar set up, but instead of a dirigible gnome, it was a pig. We thought it was a mob. It wasn't until after we'd filled it with `nanas did we realize it'd been an NPC."

"'Filled it with nanas?'" Katia asked.

"We have a guy who shoots banana tree seeds from his hand. Yes, I know how stupid that sounds. But he's a druid, and he causes the seeds to sprout really fast. They work great, but the range is really low."

"A pig? I knew it was a pet!" Donut said proudly.

"Yeah, so we killed it. The map was in the same room, but out of reach. It was in the air quadrant. We were building a tool to take it. You can throw something through the quadrant barrier, but you can't hold something like a giant stick or grabber through the wall. You can't cast spells, either."

I remembered it'd let me roll a ball through the barrier, but the clockwork Mongos couldn't get through, nor my hands. Mordecai had

explained that the barriers wouldn't allow anything under our direct or indirect control through.

"But before we could figure it out, a two-humped camel thing, a Bactrian it was called, came in and saw the dead pig and freaked out. He upset the table with the map, and it fell to the ground, blowing closer to us. Then he ran away. We spent hours trying to figure out how to get it. But before we could, the damn room just blew up. And it said the map was destroyed. So we moved to the second map."

"But I beat you to it," I said. "Have you seen the castle or crypt or whatever yet? The building you need to storm?"

"No," he said. "We need the map. It's impossible to navigate without. Every new hallway has a different type of trap. Bobby here is good at disarming them, but it makes us slow. We just barely cleared the halls at the top, and we need to work our way down. It's going to take a long time."

"Do you know who Quetzalcoatlus is? Wynne—the gnome you guys killed—mentioned him."

"Yeah," Morris said. "I guess Anser was the emperor. He died, and when he did, they built this tomb for him. They threw his entire court and his wife in here even though they weren't dead. Then they sealed it all up. Quetzalcoatlus is his wife, and she's somewhere in here still. She's some undead thing now. She's non-corporeal. A ghost. She can travel through walls within the tomb. And I think she's really pissed off. Every once in a while we can hear her, screaming. She sounds like a bird. After we failed the quest to get the map, we all got a quest to find and kill her. Nobody knows how to kill a damn ghost."

"Weird," I said. "You need magic to kill ghosts." We'd learned that from the krasue creatures on the third floor. In addition, there were extensive instructions on how to kill ghosts in the cookbook, including bomb types that would do the trick. "There are creatures here, on our level. They are trying to resurrect Quetzalcoatlus. They're trying to get a spell that will give her flesh. They want to be able to physically touch her, I think. So they can gain some of her special powers."

"She'd probably be easier to kill if she had physical form," Morris said.

"Probably," I agreed. "Too bad you killed the guy who knew how to cast the spell. So here's where we stand. We have the gnomes floating over the entire world, and they bomb the shit out of everybody. On top of the temple, we have a few groups. The camels and the changelings. The changelings are pretending to be refugees, but they have some plan of their own that involves resurrecting the guardian of the subterranean level. On the ground we have somebody called the Mad Dune Mage, and we don't know much about him yet. And then there's one more castle in the water. From what little we know, it sounds like it's underwater."

"Yeah, we-we keep getting water breathing scrolls and scrolls of d-d-disarm trap, which are useless unless you know for sure a trap is right there," Bobby said, speaking for the first time. He had a stutter to his voice.

"Okay," I said. "Here's the deal. I can see the map, and you're right. It's insane how complicated it is. There are tunnels. Rooms. Dead ends. Pits with spikes. It's nuts. Katia here brought paper and a pencil, and she's already started mapping out a path to get to the bottom. You two sit with her and Donut. It'll take a few hours, but she will give you the map when she's done. I highly suggest you try drawing it in your scratchpad while she maps it out, just in case you lose it. We need to work together. I will help any way I can. If you need something built, let me know, and I will make it happen."

Morris turned to Bobby and smiled. "And you said he was going to murder us."

"The d-d-day isn't over yet."

I said my goodbyes to Donut and Katia, and I hit the Silk Road. I topped-off my explosive supplies and bought a few newly-available toys. From there, I exited the club and headed back to the saferoom. Outside, the wind whipped at the town's covering. The storm was here. As I walked back, I received a pair of notifications.

You have received a Bronze Benefactor Box from the Valtay Corporation.

You have received a Silver Benefactor Box from The Open Intellect Pacifist Action Network, Intergalactic NFC.

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[8]

Time to Level Collapse: 13 days, 13 hours.

The first thing I did when I returned to base was open my two new boxes. I also had a fan box coming, but it hadn't come in yet. Mordecai came out to greet me.

I handed him the batch of mushrooms I'd taken from the desk in the basement. He looked at them and frowned. The system called them **Mairmei Mushroom – Alchemy Material**. All the description said was: **These little guys are quite the trip.** I assumed they were some sort of psychedelic. The cookbook had very little information on mushrooms. Mordecai was intrigued because he'd never seen this particular strain before. I gave him the batch so he could study it further.

But first he wanted me to open the benefactor boxes in front of him so he could see what I'd received.

"I've never heard of an anti-crawl group giving a benefactor box. I've known a few to sponsor crawlers over the generations, but that's usually just to get people talking about their cause. They have no real investment in the crawler himself. A silver box, too. So whoever these guys are, they either have an endless supply of cash

or they're gambling a lot on you. Especially if you're the only one they've sponsored."

"We'll see," I said. I wasn't optimistic. I was in kind of an odd position. If they really were a pacifist, anti-crawl group, then I supported their cause. Sort of. Being a pacifist was one of those things that looked and sounded great when you were trying to get laid. Not so much when you were literally fighting for your life. I needed bombs and weapons and armor and shit that would help me kill as many of these fuckers as possible. I wasn't going to get that from a goddamned group of hippies, no matter how sympathetic we were for each other.

I started with the bronze Valtay box. The intricate box whirled and twirled as it opened with great fanfare.

It was another pill. It looked identical to the last one they'd given me. I examined it.

Valtay Corporation Neural Enhancer #275. Variant 35.j

This item is compatible with your Morphology and Interface.

Warning: This pill will cause a permanent change to your brain. This item cannot be unequipped or undone once installed.

Warning: You do not have a Valtay Corporation Neural Interface installed. While your current wetware system is compatible with this Neural Enhancer, it is recommended you visit a Valtay Corporate Outreach Center to discuss upgrade options. Payment and Legacy plans available. Keeping the Best of You alive.

Current wetware: Syndicate Crawl Version 47.002b.Human.

Taking this pill will install the following upgrade to your interface:

Current elevation and airspeed.

That's it? I thought. I didn't dare say it out loud. I felt disappointment, but then I remembered how damn useful that last upgrade had been. Hopefully its utility would become self-evident. I

popped the pill, looked up at the ceiling, and said, "Thanks, brain worm dudes."

I opened the next box. The first one had contained the logo for the Valtay. This next one had a spiral galaxy symbol with some alien lettering on it. Mordecai peered at the logo and shrugged.

The box opened, revealing what looked like a sweet potato.

"What the hell, man," I said, picking it up.

Toraline Root Vegetable.

Alchemy Material.

This rare tuber only grows in dirt that has been covered by lava. They are very rare. Nobody ever goes digging them up, either. You know why? Because they taste like dogshit, that's why. They're pretty much useless. In fact, fuck you for wasting my time with this.

"What the hell is this, and why is it in a silver box and not a bronze one?"

"Its origin and value and rarity and a hundred other factors determine the required box type," Mordecai said, snatching it from my hand with a talon. "I've never seen this before. I've seen potions that require a similar vegetable. Most are salves for scaled creatures. Specialty healing."

"You think they want me to make a potion with this?" I asked.

"Maybe. Or maybe an explosive. Or maybe it's an inside joke," Mordecai said. He passed it back to me. "Some aliens have really weird customs. For all we know, it's a traditional marriage proposal. Still, I have… a lot… of potion recipes in my scratch pad. I'll search through them and see if I can figure anything out. It'll give me time to look for information on these mushrooms, too."

I nodded. I would do the same thing with the cookbook. There were pages and pages of potion recipes. I'd already read through the names of the potions and what they did, but I hadn't committed the ingredient lists to memory. I tossed the toraline into my inventory. It was listed as **Very Rare**, but it had low value, equal with some of the unenchanted clothing items I hadn't yet sold.

I returned my gaze to the ceiling. "Thanks for the yam, mystery aliens. I'm more of a mashed potatoes guy, but this'll do. I guess."

I returned my attention to the Valtay upgrade. I now had the ability to add my current speed and altitude to my UI. I dove into my interface and tried to figure it out. I clicked a toggle that only showed speed if I was moving more than six kilometers an hour. There were multiple displays showing different velocities at the same time, and I had no idea what the hell that meant. Luckily there was a toggle titled **Relative Surface Speed**. I clicked it, and all the other information disappeared, leaving only a single gauge that currently had me standing still.

The elevation display was equally complicated. I turned it on, and it filled my screen with a page of information I did not understand. It didn't have feet or miles as a unit of measurement, but it did have kilometers and meters, so I selected that. There were some *very* big numbers in there. I tried toggling **Planetary Sea-level Only**, but that was a mistake. It had me at just over -92,000 meters. I realized that meant I was standing 92 kilometers under the surface of the planet. That was crazy. Was earth's crust even that thick? Wasn't it all magma and oil and gooey shit once you got deep enough? I'd never paid attention in geology class.

After some adjusting, I finally found two different gauges that gave me what I needed. One was adjustable. I set it at 0.00, giving me a gauge to the surface of the tomb. The second was at 8,932 meters. It was labeled **Gravitational Zone Sea Level**. If I was reading it correctly, that meant we were nine kilometers above the water quadrant. That was damn high. Thankfully all the little things that came with such great heights weren't in play here in the bubble, which seemed to be equally pressurized throughout. I didn't even pretend to understand the science. If I was doing the conversion correctly in my head, that meant we were standing about the same height as the peak of Mount Everest. That also meant that the Necropolis of Anser was fucking *huge*. I didn't know how tall the tallest building in the world was before the collapse, but it had to be way less than 1,000 meters.

We needed to give as much support to those assholes in the tomb as we could. Because if they failed, that meant we'd have to

go in there once we figured out the gnome castle. And that was something I did *not* want to do.

The storm ended, and the town survived. The camels did not retract the sails as usual. Langley told me they now had guards at the main gate, and the camels were setting up anti-air defenses all around the city. They still allowed us to come and go, but they interrogated everybody about grulke toads and gnomes, demanding to know if they'd seen any.

We were now four hours from when the gnomes would know for certain the collateral was dead, and probably five from when the bombs would fall. The casual, laid-back atmosphere of the town had changed to that of a city under siege.

I now had four modified missiles in my inventory. With Mordecai's help along with my level-four sapper's table, I'd created a missile that *might* reach high enough. We wouldn't know until we tested it. And it just so happened a perfect opportunity to test it was about to present itself. Something that would help both us and Gwen's team down below.

Katia and Donut returned from the Desperado Club as I was standing outside of the Toe, waiting. They'd spent the entire two hours of the storm in the Desperado. Katia had a feather boa around her neck. Mongo was free, and he also had a boa, dangling freely from his collar. He kept snapping at it, and feathers were flying everywhere. Donut and Katia had gone into the Penis Parade together.

"Really?" I asked.

"Eight more visits, and I get a free dance from Anaconda!" Donut announced.

"Wait, how much money are you guys spending at this place?"

"Oh, oh, Carl, guess what? I got another box from Princess D'Nadia!" Donut exclaimed, ignoring my question. She hopped up

and down on Mongo's back. "It's only a bronze this time, but I bet it'll be awesome!"

"You haven't gotten the one Loita mentioned?"

"Not yet. She messaged and said it'll come later today. She said the sponsor wants to make sure we survive the bombing before they send the prototype. Isn't that exciting? I'm going to open Princess D'Nadia's present now!" She and Mongo scrambled inside. Katia and I watched her go.

Katia looked up at the sky, which was still covered with the sails. In the twilight, the whole town was prematurely dark. "No bird yet?"

"Not yet," I said. "How'd it go with spider boy and the other guy?"

Katia had given them a general map of the entire structure and a more detailed path to another town about halfway down to the crypt. Assuming we all survived the next 24 hours, they'd meet up again to get the rest. The lower half of the necropolis featured much-larger rooms, and oftentimes the map showed the only entrance and exit to each chamber was on the ceiling and the floor. They'd need ladders and ropes to descend.

"They're not as bad as Louis and Firas, but those subterranean guys are total trainwrecks," Katia said. "Their stress levels are off the charts. It's understandable, but they're very tense. *Too* tense."

I laughed. "That's what Mordecai said about you when we first met. He called you a train wreck. Also, we're calling them the tomb raiders."

She did not find any of that funny. "If something happens to that Bobby guy, the entire team is dead. He's the only one who can detect traps, and he's already missed a few. They make others go in tunnels ahead because he's too valuable, and they keep dying right in front of him. They described a trap where needles popped up from the floor and injected the crawler with a potion that filled his sinuses with flesh-eating beetles." She shivered. "Maybe you can make some really low-level explosives for them, something they can roll down the hallways to set off the traps."

"They need a spell like Donut's *Clockwork Triplicate*," I said. "Something where they can make or control minions. The spider guy

is a psionicist. He should try to find something. I bet there's something in that town of theirs that'll help them. Their situation sucks, but it's not impossible."

Katia grunted. "They kept asking when they thought we might storm our castle. I have the impression they want to hold back and wait for us to have access so we can 'help.'"

I shook my head. *Goddamnit*. "We need to push them. We don't have time for that."

"I agree, and I did. I lied and told them that we don't expect to complete the air quadrant until time is almost up." She looked at me, worry evident in her eyes. "At least I hope it was a lie."

I instinctively returned my gaze to the air. The protective sail, deflated balloon, whatever it was, shimmered in the meager light. A camel on stilts walked by, turning on lamps throughout the town. I knew the *Wasteland* was still over the water. But right now we were waiting for something else.

"It's coming," Katia said. "I can see the dot on my map."

I heard the low, angry buzz of a flying creature.

After my most recent discussion with Gwen on the land quadrant, I'd asked the Toe's barkeep about the creature, but the camel had been reluctant to tell me anything. Juice Box, however, was happy to tell me all about the borough boss in exchange for a gold coin.

The bird's name was Ruckus, and she was a giant version of the more common buzz-ard. She came to roost nearby every night after the storms.

The bird was half biological, half machine. A steampunk cyborg. Juice Box claimed she didn't know why the mechanical birds lived around here, as everything else in the area was purely biological. She said they were either a failed gnome invention that had escaped during the second war, or it was something left over from the time before that. What she called the "treasure hunter" era. The waster patrols avoided Ruckus, but one of their responsibilities was to cull the regular-sized buzz-ards if they saw them.

"If it flies over the city every night, why don't they shoot it down with their anti-aircraft missiles?" Katia asked.

“Apparently there used to be a third camel city,” I said. “They tried that, and it didn’t go well for them.”

Katia went pale. “And you want to fight this thing?”

I shrugged. “We’ll be like a mile away. I have a missile I need to test. Don’t worry. It’ll be fine.”

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Part of me felt bad about stealing from little Skarn and his burgeoning charge-people-to-look-through-his-telescope business, but we didn't have time to debate the morality of the issue. I knocked on the door of his house to talk to him. I wanted to make sure Flint the adult wasn't there—he wasn't—and I told the kid that I just wanted to check in on him.

"If they start to drop bombs, I want you to run to the Toe, okay? Tell all your friends. Go there. Nowhere else."

Skarn turned into the creepy human child form. "Flint says we're supposed to go to the Spit and Swallow or the Wiggle Room."

I knew neither of those were true saferooms, and they wouldn't be safe.

"No. The Toe. Nowhere else. I will give you and every one of your friends a whole gold piece if they go there instead. It'll be the safest place in town. And you can tell Flint to go there, too."

While I talked to him, Donut scaled the wall and leaped to the roof of the home, stealing the Gnomish farseer telescope. She stole it in ten seconds flat. She was in and out.

I'd told Donut to leave thirty gold pieces on the roof as payment, but she told me she'd "forgotten."

"Why don't you tell them to go to the A.O.?" Donut asked. That was the only real saferoom tavern in town. It was in Weird Shit Alley. It stood for the Acrotomophilia Oasis. I didn't know what that

meant, but none of the other guys liked going over there. “The Toe isn’t a real saferoom either.”

“No, it’s not. But our personal space is. We can fit a lot of camels in there.”

“Mordecai’s not going to like that.”

“Mordecai can suck it if he doesn’t like it,” I said.

Donut didn’t have a response. She was still a little salty about the contents of her benefactor box, though she was putting on a brave face. The box had been empty, but then she’d received a notification that her sunglasses had received an update. An update that greatly enhanced her ability to determine the surface and the subsurface temperature of anything she looked at with precise detail.

Mordecai said that was a common tactic of benefactors. It cost a literal fortune to send exceptional items. It was more economical to send an item on one floor, and then send an upgrade for that same item on the next. And then another. Eventually, you’d end up with an item that would be Legendary or even Celestial box-worthy. The cost of four or five silver and bronze boxes was a fraction of the cost of sending a single Legendary.

Of course you’d have to survive through five floors to get the benefit. It was possible for them to send more than one box a floor, but according to Mordecai, the cost of that was even more astronomical.

In addition to its intended purpose—to help Donut root out changelings—I could see multiple useful applications of the upgrade, including the ability to find weaknesses on mobs. She could possibly use it to help me find traps and secret doors. She could set parameters and get a warning when things reached certain temperatures. There were dozens of options. Unfortunately, Donut had little patience for all of that. I couldn’t wear them, so Katia and I were baby-stepping her through customizing the glasses.

By the time we reached the town’s exit, which was now guarded by multiple dromedarians, she had figured out the overlay system.

Donut: TWO OF THE GUARDS ARE DIFFERENT THAN THE OTHERS.

I still didn’t know if all this changeling/dromedarian drama really meant anything. As always, there were layers upon layers of backstory, and only some of it was relevant. I knew from the last floor it was important to learn as much as we could because it usually revealed victory paths that would be otherwise obscured. But I couldn’t help but wonder if we’d already burned out any benefit we could get from this storyline when the tomb raider dudes killed the collateral guy.

I suspected that it didn’t matter anymore. But if it didn’t, why did Princess D’Nadia spend money to send Donut that upgrade? She possibly was as much in the dark as we were. In fact, considering the lack of people in this bubble, that was a very distinct possibility. She sent the upgrade because she thought she was being helpful and not because she knew something we didn’t.

We had an hour until it was fully dark. Once night descended, more mobs appeared. We wanted to get this done before then. The moment we were outside the gates, we went to work assembling the Chariot. It took four minutes this time.

The Chariot had a new addition since the last time we’d tested it. I mounted a four-chamber missile tube to the right of my seat. My seat was raised, and I could swivel 360 degrees. I controlled the Y axis of the tube with a handle on the side, allowing me to swing the launcher up and down. They were fired by me pulling a pin on the back. There was only a one-second delay between me pulling the pin and the missile firing, which wasn’t ideal. I needed to pull my hand away quickly, or it would be turned into a piece of charcoal. And I needed to be careful about where the back of the launcher was pointing when I fired. It’d be easy to accidentally blast the back of Katia’s head with flames. I had a better design in my head, but it would take too long to build. As always, safety came last.

Thanks to the neighborhood map we’d received from the dead goose, I could now also see the boss’s location. She was only about a half of a mile east of town, settled right atop a sand dune. She was just sitting there, recharging her batteries or whatever it was cyborg death birds did at night.

"She's too close," I said. "We'll need to go west. See if we can get a mile and a half away."

We wanted to see how far the missiles could go. I knew I couldn't get far enough to test the full range, but I wanted to make sure the second stage portion actually worked. I knew in real-world conditions, the achievable propulsion distance was different between horizontal and vertical flight, but Mordecai seemed to think that didn't matter. Especially since we were using the magical **guided** upgrades on each of the four missiles.

"If we move too far from town, we won't be able to retreat as easily if the missiles don't work," Katia said. "I hope you know what you're doing." She eased forward on the throttle, and we were off, moving across the desert. The chariot moved smoothly and quietly. She gradually increased the speed, the hot wind whipping at our faces.

"There," I said, pointing to a raised dune near the center of the bowl. We climbed easily, coming to a stop. From our position, I had a good view of the entire area. Far to my right, the remnants of the Bactrian town continued to smolder. A few of the male thorny devils lumbered about, but they were all too far away to bother us.

High above, I caught the twinkle of the *Wasteland*. It was on the far edge of the bubble, glowing red against the dark sky. I knew once the sun rose, it'd be back, almost directly above our position now.

"Hand me the telescope, Donut."

"I don't like this, Carl," Donut said. She sat on a little shelf just behind my head. "It's still hot out here, and the sand gets everywhere. It's five degrees hotter in the middle of the bowl than it is on the edges. I don't understand why the ground is still so hot now that the sun is sinking away. It is not acceptable."

I was starting to regret the new upgrade to her sunglasses. She'd been commenting on the temperature difference of items for an hour straight now.

"Just keep an eye out for mobs and give me the damn telescope."

She grumbled some more but then produced the large, heavy scope. It had a clamp on the bottom, designed to be attached to either a table or the gunwale of a boat or airship. I attached the clamp to the left side of the chair and swung it over. I could use the telescope and aim the launcher at the same time.

I turned the chair 90 degrees and sighted the scope, looking for the borough boss.

"There you are," I said, zooming in.

Even in the dwindling light, the magical telescope gave me an excellent view of the beast. Ruckus. The house-sized bird sat on the ground, head hanging low like it was asleep. The body of the creature vibrated up and down, like an engine.

I was expecting it to be more vulture-like, but it resembled a colossal hawk. A hawk wearing steampunk-style body armor. A real beak protruded from a brass, pipe covered helmet that obscured the bird's eyes. A few wheels and cogs spun along the exterior of the armored main body. The folded wings on the sides of the creature appeared to be regular, organic wings.

I moved the telescope slightly, focusing on the giant bird's main weapon. The regular-sized buzz-ards flew around with a chainsaw-like device attached underneath their bodies. They swooped down and cut through anything that tried to fight them. I knew Gwen's team had a difficult time with them, and even the veteran waster patrol had to work to take one of them out. They used their guided missiles on those things more than they did against gnomish airplanes.

Ruckus had something similar, but much larger. The weapon sat on the ground next to the bird. It was permanently attached to the monster by a pair of thick cables which I knew it could retract and lengthen. It wasn't a chainsaw, but more like a twenty-five-foot-long stick with ten spinning buzzsaws on it. The weapon hung vertically under the bird as it flew. I'd seen something similar once attached to a helicopter. They used it to easily sheer through trees and branches along power lines in remote areas. Gwen had said the flying multi-buzzsaw had trashed their under construction siege towers in seconds.

I moved the telescope back to the bird. I zoomed in one more tick, and the description popped up.

Ruckus. Spring-operated Chicken Hawk Sentinel.

Level 55 Borough Boss!

This is a bereft Minion of Shamus Chaindrive.

The great bugbear treasure hunter Shamus Chaindrive was known as both a paranoid and a greedy bastard. Having been betrayed one too many times, he no longer trusted any living soul. That is why his crew was always comprised of constructs and automatons.

He dedicated his life to hunting down long-lost treasures and artifacts. He prized one item above all others.

The Gate of the Feral Gods. Said to be buried in the long-lost Necropolis of Anser.

Chaindrive set out to find the tomb. He boarded his great submarine and sank beneath the waves, vowing to never surface again until he had his prize.

It took the bugbear almost twenty years to find the tomb, poking up like a monolith from a desert island. Using his submarine, he docked it against an underwater entrance directly adjacent to the main chamber of the trap-filled tomb. He quickly learned that he was not the first to arrive. A young mage had recently landed on the island and was attempting to magically burrow into the tomb. A colony of dirigible gnomes were settled in the area. All sought the treasures held within the tomb. All had failed so far.

Chaindrive unleashed his greatest weapon in an attempt to slow the efforts of his competitors. Ruckus had been stored in stasis in the hold of his great submarine. The self-replicating, spring-operated automaton was given the task to kill all who wished to steal Chaindrive's prize.

Now that the bugbear is long dead, the sentinel chicken hawk is content to spend its day circling around the island and being an all-around asshole. The regular residents of the island are smart enough to leave this powerful boss

alone. The fact you're reading this means you're not one of the smart ones.

"Strange," I said to Donut and Katia. "It says the boss comes from the underwater guy, who is dead. I think the 'castle' is a giant submarine. Also, it sounds like there's a hidden treasure in…"

System Message: Please Wait.

The world froze for about half of a second. It was like the beginning of a boss battle. But nothing happened, and the short glitch was over as quickly as it started.

System Message: Thank you for your patience. You may now resume normal activities.

"What the hell was that about?" I asked, looking around.

"I don't know. Weird," Katia said.

Carl: Mordecai, did you feel that? Also, do you know what the Gate of the Feral Gods is?

Mordecai: I felt it. It happens. It's usually not a glitch, but a gameplay timeout so dueling routines can clarify or reconcile rule conflicts. But no, never heard of the gate thing. But remember what I said about the word "feral?" Stay away from anything marked that. It's always bad news.

Carl: What about artifacts? It said the gate is one.

Mordecai: Odd. An artifact is a legendary or celestial-tier item one may find sitting around the dungeon or as dropped loot. Like I told you before, most of the best items in the game come from boxes for the first several floors. After the sixth floor, *dropped* loot starts to get much better and more magical. Artifacts start popping up around the eighth or ninth floor. They're usually *very* powerful items.

Carl: Eighth floor, you say? I can't help but notice we're only on the fifth. It says it's an item inside the necropolis under our feet. Do you think that had anything to do with that weird pause?

Mordecai: Hmm. Maybe. I'm not surprised, honestly. This is like what we discussed a while ago. The showrunners control the storylines, but the AI picks out the specific loot. The AI can, and will, adjust aspects of the story to fine-tune

the difficulty level or to keep the game "fair." If you get what I'm saying.

Carl: 10-4. Talk soon. We're about to test the missiles.

"Uh, Carl," Donut said, pointing with her paw. "Ruckus is moving."

I leaned back into the eyepiece.

Maybe it was a coincidence. Maybe it was that weird glitch. Or maybe it was just the system being an asshole. But Ruckus, who had been drifting asleep just a minute ago, was now awake and looking right in our direction. He screamed loudly into the almost-night sky. He moved from the top of the dune and spread out his wings, which glittered. Flecks of metal intertwined with the feathers. It had a wingspan of three train cars. On the ground next to the massive bird, the line of buzzsaws started to spin up. The sound was goddamn terrifying. Even at a mile and a half away, we could hear them. The bird started to pump its wings in an attempt to take to the air.

"Shit, shit, get ready to fire," I said. I quickly pulled a missile out and jammed it into the launch tube.

The world once again froze. Haunting, eerie music started to play, echoing across the desert.

B-b-b-boss battle!

The boss battle sequence played out with our portraits floating high over the desert. But when they played the description of Ruckus, it had changed.

Ruckus. Spring-operated Chicken Hawk Sentinel.

Level 55 Borough Boss!

It's a bird! It's a landscaping tool! It's a goddamned death robot!

Ol' Ruckus is a left-over, anti-boat, anti-everything else security and scout automaton that has lost contact with the *Akula*. Lost contact, that is, until now. Having awakened and been given new orders, it is now seeking out enemies of the captain.

And you, my soon-to-be-buzzsawed-to-death-friends, are enemies of the captain.

"You woke it up, Carl," Donut said. "The description doesn't say anything about it being a bereft minion."

"What the hell happened?" I exclaimed as I aimed with the eyepiece. The description had changed quite a bit. Ruckus flapped its gargantuan wings a few more times and took to the air. The massive buzzsaw started to lift from the ground.

Gwen: Hey bomber guy. Did you feel that weird glitch? Anyway, thought you might want to know. Something is happening in the water quadrant. The water is bubbling. The whole ocean is frothing like the mouth of a rabid weasel. Somebody is doing something under there. You guys find that giant buzzard yet?

Carl: Looking at him right now. Talk soon.

I put my hand over the back of the two-foot-long missile, and a tooltip popped up.

Target missile?

I mentally clicked **yes**.

Designate target.

Warning: Once locked, you may not remove this designation.

It was awkward keeping my right hand on the back of the missile and my left on the controls of the telescope. It didn't leave my hands free to adjust the chair. I focused on the center mass of Ruckus just before he flew out of the viewfinder and clicked **Target.**

Target locked, bitches!

The missile started to blink.

"Fire in the hole. Watch your eyebrows," I said. I grasped the pin on the back of the missile, and I pulled the tab.

Whoosh.

A gout of flames rushed from the back of the tube as the missile rocketed away, dipping slightly and then rising into the night air. My whole right side flashed with pain as I was burned by the exhaust. Donut yowled in surprise and scrambled to the left.

"Goddamnit," I growled at the pain. It hadn't done any real damage, but it had hurt. *We need a better way to do this.* "You okay, Donut?"

"What do you think, Carl? You know I'm flammable, right? Warn me next time."

"I did warn you. Stay to my left."

The bright, crackling exhaust lit up the desert momentarily, turning the deep dusk into day. I grabbed a second rocket and shoved it into the tube.

"Go!" I said to Katia, who had already thrown the Chariot into gear and was accelerating down the back of the dune.

I looked over my shoulder, watching the missile curve in midair and then swoop up toward the boss, who was still gaining altitude. The giant, multi-buzzsaw swung wildly back and forth in the air as Ruckus pumped its wings.

We'd replaced the missile's chemical propellent with one improved by Mordecai. When it burned itself out, the back of the rocket would, in theory, drop off and continue to coast for a few seconds. Then the second stage would light the back of the rocket, effectively doubling its range.

The original rockets had a shitty payload. The warheads were the equivalent of a quarter stick of goblin dynamite, which was nothing. At first I hadn't thought I could improve the design, but after recycling a few impact hob-lobbers, I realized I could simplify the triggering device, which gave me much more room to add the boom stuff. Each missile now packed the same punch as a full stick of hobgoblin dynamite, which was enough to kill almost any regular mob.

We needed these things to have a range of about three miles if we wanted to fire them from the surface and hit one of the knock-knocks they had parked underneath the gnome's castle. But first I needed to see if the two-stage rocket was even viable. If this

worked, and we got out of here, we could build a few slightly-longer missiles between now and morning.

The missile zeroed in on the giant boss. The flames in the back started to sputter just before the missile reached the still-climbing target.

Come on, come on.

"Yes!" I said as I saw the first sparks of the second stage belch from the back of the now-distant rocket. I pumped my fist into the air.

But then the missile abruptly blew. It detonated a few hundred feet short of the target.

"*Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck me, fuckity fuck*," I yelled, turning my fist into a middle finger. Ruckus, still climbing, flew over the explosion, unharmed. The buzzsaw cleaved the newly-formed cloud in two.

We used a tiny charge to drop the back fin of the rocket. It appeared that explosion was too powerful. Or something in the second-stage propellant caused the warhead to blow prematurely. I didn't know. I wouldn't know until we tested it. But that did us no good right now. I had three missiles left. Three missiles that all of a sudden had a much-shorter range. We'd never be able to hit the *Wasteland* from the ground. Not with these things.

"New plan," I said. "Turn around and drive straight for it." I pulled the third and fourth missiles and loaded them into the launcher. I wanted to avoid storing explosives outside my inventory if I could, but I needed all three of them now.

A second pair of eyes and mouth appeared on the back of Katia's head. The eyes protruded from her scalp on a pair of little stalks.

"Are you crazy?" she demanded from the second mouth as we hit a bump. The Chariot sailed into the air and crashed hard into the ground. The back tread whined, blew up sand, and continued on its way.

"Holy shit, Katia," I said, recoiling at the sudden appearance of a second face. "That's really fucking weird. Do it."

She grumbled but started the wide turn. If she turned any tighter, the whole thing would flip. Ahead, Ruckus screeched into the dark. The buzzsaw swung back and forth, a pendulum of death. We

watched as it cleaved a thorny devil in two. Blood geysered across the desert as the massive bird zoomed toward us.

I quickly went through the three remaining rockets and locked all three onto the boss. One on the joint of where the left wing met the body, one on the exposed neck of the creature, and a third on the lower area where the cable extended from the creature and attached to the buzzsaw.

The monster aimed right at us. It loomed like a tidal wave. The buzzsaw was impossibly loud. It'd be on us in seconds.

"When I fire, bank left and floor it," I yelled. "Donut, watch out. I'm firing now."

The screaming blades lined up with our path, waving back and forth. The damn thing was huge. Each blade was the size of a truck tire. The acrid stench of overworked machinery filled the air.

I pulled all three pins at once. All three rockets burst from the tubes. They dipped, arced, and then all corkscrewed through the air. All three hit the boss at the same moment as we turned away. The boss exploded high over our heads. The Chariot rocked as we turned too sharply but Katia held out her arm in the opposite direction, and a heavy weight appeared in her hand, causing the vehicle to right itself. She dropped the extra mass, and we zoomed away.

Nice, I thought.

The buzzsaw swung wildly as Ruckus tumbled. It flew into the air, arcing in our direction. *Fuck me*. Donut fruitlessly shot a *magic missile* at the approaching blades.

Just as the triple explosions rocked the creature, its left wing blew off right at the joint. Metal showered. It screeched as it spun, wrapping up in the cable for the saw. The screaming weapon suddenly jerked away and then pinwheeled through the air with the momentum of the plummeting bird. The momentum of the swinging weapon caught the wreckage and pulled it along, flying in our direction. They overshot us and hit the ground with a mighty crash as Katia slammed the gear into reverse.

Ruckus broke apart in a shower of blood and mechanical parts. The giant buzzsaw, suddenly free of the bird, continued to whine as it hit and bounced on the ground. The front of the weapon bucked

against the rocks and sand, still buzzing. Still cutting. The whole thing spun several times then stuck itself sideways into the rock of the tomb. The two front blades on the weapon stopped spinning, but the rest showered dirt and debris twenty feet into the sky, like a truck stuck in the mud.

The **Winner!** Notification appeared. I assumed the music stopped, but I couldn't hear it over the whine of the buzzsaws. Ruckus had splattered all over the desert. There was metal and machinery and thick, sticky blood everywhere.

"I feel as if I didn't do anything productive in that battle," Donut said as we watched the buzzsaw. "Mordecai says I need to be doing more, not less. I'm already two spots behind you, Carl. I don't want to fall off the top ten like Katia did."

I reached up and scratched her on the head.

I turned to Katia, who was staring at the shower of dirt and rock only twenty feet in front of us. "That was pretty slick what you did there," I said. "With the counter weight to keep us from flipping."

She nodded. She looked like she was about to throw up. "Why did you make me drive toward it? The missiles worked. They would've worked if we kept going in the other direction. The second stage doesn't work, but the first stage still has a really good range."

"I wanted to make sure they hit accurately," I said. "Mordecai said sometimes they're not all that precise. I didn't want to damage the prize."

"Prize?" she asked. But I could tell she knew what I was talking about. The still-chugging chainsaw rumbled on the ground. The thing had to be 25 feet long.

"Get your backpack ready. We're going to bulk you up so you can lift it and stick it into your inventory."

"Carl, you know how you're always complaining that they portray you…"

She didn't finish. A mighty rumble filled the world. An earthquake. I thought at first we were being bombed, but this was something different. Something deep in the bones of the world. I looked worriedly at the buzzsaw, but it remained firmly dug into the ground.

Bubble Notification. The Bridge of the *Akula* has been successfully occupied. The Water Quadrant has been liberated!

All give congratulations to the crawler who successfully took the throne room. All hail crawler Chris Andrews 2!

All crawlers who originated in the Water Quadrant may now freely travel to the other quadrants.

The world rumbled again as Donut and I looked at each other.

"Chris," I said. "Chris is in here with us."

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STAGE 2 OF 4. STILL ON THE GNOMES.

"So Chris is from team Meadow Lark?" Katia asked. "He entered the dungeon with Imani and Elle?"

"Yes," I said as we drove back to Hump Town. We'd looted everything we could from the wreckage. It was a lot, including almost a ton of dwarfish aluminum, which was a light but strong metal. The giant buzzsaw was powered by the same type of dwarfish battery that ran the Chariot. I pulled the battery, and the whole thing shut off. There was a cable that attached the saw to the chicken hawk, but it appeared the weapon worked if it was attached or not. The thing was lighter than it looked, and Katia managed to pull it all into her inventory.

We'd also obtained the field guide from the borough boss corpse. We could now see the level and description of all the mobs in the area. The guide covered the entire bowl. Right now, in the dark of night, multiple, fist-sized monsters called **Night Frights** were emerging from the sand dunes. They were everywhere. They were similar to the rot sticker mobs we faced on the first floor. They ran, attached themselves to you, and exploded. Katia and Donut sniped at them as we drove, but we didn't stop to engage.

"When Elle and the others were still old," I continued, "there were four people taking care of them. There had been more, but we never met the original crew. They were Imani and Yolanda, who were nurses, and the brothers Chris and Brandon who'd both been maintenance guys at the old folk's home. Yolanda died protecting us from the rage elemental, and Brandon died protecting the team from shade gremlins." I swallowed, remembering that last note Brandon had sent. I had it saved in my scratch pad, and I often found myself pulling it up and reading it. He'd written it after he'd gotten into a fight with his brother, and his brother had left the team. I thought of one passage in particular:

He was never much of a talker. Mom said there was something wrong with him, maybe he was slow. But he ain't slow. And even if

he was… I said something stupid, and he got mad. He left, and now it's too late to tell him I love him. I never said it. I'm about to die, and it's all I can think about.

I'd promised myself I'd give the message to Chris if I could, but there was obviously something going on with him. He'd taken a race called an Igneous. A rock creature similar to the Sledge and Bomo. He'd stopped all communication with Imani, and Odette had tried to send me a warning about him.

He'd also killed Frank Q soon after Frank had given me the Ring of Divine Suffering. According to the Sledge, Chris had sat next to Frank at the counter of the Desperado Club. They'd talked, and then Chris had reached over and crushed his head. He'd simply gotten up and walked out after. He was now banned from the club.

That was not the crawler I remembered. I remembered him as a quiet man, dedicated to protecting his friends and brother. He'd sobbed after the boss battle with the tuskling knights. There was no way the old Chris would've done something like that. Imani said his personality had changed soon after he'd chosen his race.

I sent a message to Imani that we'd located him. And while I couldn't yet go seek him out, there was a possibility he could come here. I didn't know how I felt about that. Imani seemed to think he wanted to team up with me, but I feared he was too dangerous. I'd already had more than enough of that bullshit on the last floor with Hekla. We had enough to worry about already. It was just too much.

Imani: Whatever you decide, keep me updated. He still ignores all of my messages. I hope the real Chris is still in there somewhere. He's the only non-resident left.

Carl: Will do. How's the boating going?

Imani: Don't ask. We need a boat with armor. Elle has figured out how to use an ice spell to protect us from the fireballs, but we still can't get close to the oil rig. There are monsters in the water and pirate orc archers everywhere.

Carl: What about approaching it from underwater? Build a sub.

Imani: You've been talking to Elle, haven't you? Carl, do you know how crazy that is? Build a sub, like that's an easy

thing to do.

Carl: Speaking of Chris, *he* has a submarine. I can't imagine he'd be able to get it to you, but maybe he has some knowledge we don't. Anyway, if you need a torpedo or something, let me know. We can meet up at the Desperado and trade it.

Imani: We can trade using the shop interface in our personal space, too. We just bought it thanks to Donut's advice. You can list something for private sale, so we don't have to meet face-to-face to trade. The only problem is that it doesn't let you just give stuff away. It won't let you trade it away for less than 50% of its value.

Carl: We'll figure it out. Be safe.

Imani: You too. And Carl?

Carl: Yeah?

Imani: Don't kill him. Please. He's changed, but he's still my friend. He's still Brandon's brother.

We stood near the collapsed remains of town hall. The dromedarian named Henrik stood nearby, directing the rescue efforts.

Donut: HE'S A CHANGELING. IT SAYS HE'S LEVEL 30, BUT HIS HEAD GLOWS EVEN HOTTER THAN THE OTHER GUYS. CAN THEY HIDE THEIR LEVELS?

Carl: Yes, especially if they're really strong.

Donut: YOU CAN COOK AN EGG ON THAT GUY'S HEAD.

Henrik was the one who'd been attempting to "convince" Wynne the gnome into using his spell to resurrect the ghost. I figured he was the leader guy, and we set out to find him. We didn't have to search hard. The older dromedarian stood over the wreckage, shouting at the others to keep digging in the smoldering remains. The creature looked absolutely exhausted. Even though he was a changeling, the weight of their current situation was etched deep onto his dromedarian face.

They still hadn't gotten to Wynne's body. They were desperately trying to find him.

There was a half an hour left until the sun rose. The dull light of the *Wasteland* was almost back over the bowl, moving toward its spot in the center.

I walked up to the camel and didn't waste any time.

"How does the collateral work?"

The large camel looked down to regard me. "You should leave town the moment the light hits. It is no longer safe."

"There's nowhere to go," I said.

"Then go to a shelter. Buy a woman. We do not have much time. Now leave us be."

"Hey, I'm not asking for fun. How does the collateral work? Do you drag the gnome out so the gnomes can see him through one of their fancy telescopes or what?"

He narrowed his eyes. "You are the one who rented the telescope from young Skarn, are you not? Are you also the one who attempted that poor subterfuge with the grulke? If your goal was to kill everyone, congratulations. You win. These poor bastards just don't know it yet. If you've come to gloat in your victory, get it over with. I am too old and too tired to engage."

"Look, I only have one purpose here, and that's to stop the gnomes. I'm trying to help."

A dromedarian stuck his head up from the wreckage. "The entrance to the basement is sealed off," he called. "It's not from the fire. Part of the necropolis wall slid closed and sealed off the room. We can get through, but it'll take some time."

"We do not have time," Henrik growled at the other camel.

"Look," I said. "We can stop the gnomes. But you have to help me help you. I need to know how they know the collateral is still alive."

Carl: Donut. I need a boost from your charm.

Donut leaped to my shoulder and looked up at the camel. "We will be able to save this town if you tell us." She lowered her voice to a stage whisper. "We don't care which ones of you are real camels and which ones are changelings. I don't know why you'd want to

pretend to be something so large and smelly, but that's not our business."

He gave only the slightest hint of surprise. But I could feel it. The way she manipulated NPCs sometimes was almost a tangible thing. You could feel the tension slide away. I could see the wheels turning in his head. He seemed to come to a decision. He pulled a little pocket watch out from his robes and then quickly put it away.

"The alarm goes off on the watch, and I open it up. There is a mirror. The gnomish Commandant is on the other side. He makes a symbol with his fingers. I show this to the collateral, and he tells me a time. I then switch the hands on the clock to the correct time. Commandant Kane owns the watch's twin, and I believe the movement on the clock is mirrored. So when I change the time on Henrik's watch, the hands also move on the other clock. It is a code we do not understand. Only then do the gnomes know Wynne is alive and we have bought ourselves another day."

It wasn't lost on me that he'd just referred to himself in third person.

"A code?" I asked. I remembered that Wynne had pretty much offed himself by tricking those crawlers into killing him. It had been both clever and desperate. "And he cooperated with it?"

"He did for years. It was only when we moved him to the chamber below the town hall did he start to resist. Only when he understood that the dynamic of his situation had changed. So he stopped cooperating. We've had to drug him to force compliance. It's been getting harder. He has grown a tolerance for the mushroom. We have to feed him more every day."

There was a lot to unpack there. Mordecai said he hadn't yet figured out what the mushrooms did, but he was doing some alchemy that would help determine all their uses. Apparently just eating them raw helped with getting people to do what you wanted. He'd already said a lot of mushrooms had that effect, but that was more of a secondary purpose, especially when the system labeled it as an alchemy item. He said the mind control effects weren't very reliable, but apparently they'd worked well enough in this case.

"Where's the real Henrik?"

He looked at me with impassive eyes. “Do you really wish me to answer that?”

“Did the Bactrians do the same thing?” I asked. “Did they also have a watch?” According to Morris, they’d had some sort of pig collateral.

“No,” Henrik said. “They had a different sort of indemnity with the gnomes. It was a favorite pet swine of the Commandant’s daughter. I do not know the full nature of their deal, but I believe they were required to bring the animal out to sun itself once a day. Once it was observed via farseer, they were saved another day.”

“Can’t you guys turn to pigs? Why didn’t you go over there?” Donut asked. “One of you snorting around each day for a couple of minutes, and everybody is happy. The gnomes would never know.”

For the first time, Henrik cracked a smile. “That was the problem, little one. When our village was destroyed, the bactrians did not take us in. What you suggested would also be thought of by the gnomes. They would not tolerate our presence for that very reason. The dromedarians were reluctant, but they are, in their hearts, good people. They took us in.”

“Much good that did them,” I muttered.

Henrik looked me dead in the eye. “Sometimes we do things that are not of our nature to protect our own.”

I felt a chill, but only for a moment. I remembered what Mordecai had said about these guys, that they were basically doing this so they could resurrect some ancient monster and touch it and add it to their libraries. That wasn’t a very noble cause. Still, something about that story was nagging at me. I had the sense there was more to it than that. Now was not the time to delve into it.

I pointed at the box-shaped anti-aircraft battery atop of the wall. “Those things can’t protect the town?”

“From individual airships? Yes. Not a full bombardment from the dreadnaught.”

We had a few options here. There was a code of some sort. The gnomes gave a hand gesture, and Wynne told the dromedarians

what time to put into the clock. That was just the sort of thing Katia and Mordecai could figure out.

But probably not in the time we had left. They'd have to know what all the former question and answers were, and even as charmed as he was right now, we'd never get this Henrik guy to sit down and give us the information.

Another option was to just let the town get bombed to hell. As long as we stayed in our personal space, we'd be fine. We'd save as many of these assholes as we could, and then we'd figure out what to do next from there. I knew with some more time I could probably build a missile that went high enough. And who knew? Maybe once both of the towns were gone, they'd land the damn ship and give us the opportunity to storm it the old fashioned way.

But it felt wrong. And we'd only be able to keep a handful of the town's residents sheltered using the saferoom method.

And even if we did protect most of them by crowding everyone into our space, eventually we'd have to kick them out. And then what?

I looked up and stared at the fabric ceiling of the town.

"Can you talk to that commandant guy using the watch?"

"No sound, but we can exchange written messages. We often speak that way."

"Have they ever sent a representative? Like an emissary?" I remembered reading once about hostages and ransoms during the Hundred Years' War. Oftentimes the whole thing ended up in disaster, but sometimes there were negotiations that resulted in a ransom paid, which required both parties to temporarily trust each other.

"Yes. They do often. There is an ambassador. Leon the Commissar. He comes to inspect. He has a spell he casts to make sure the collateral is not a changeling. I believe they fear we will one day break the code between him and the Commandant."

My interest was piqued. "Luckily they haven't cast the spell on you yet."

"Yes," Henrik said. "They were scheduled for an inspection in two days, but I fear with these new developments, the situation will be

accelerated."

From there, we spent a few minutes discussing the ambassador and how the inspections worked. This whole inspection thing was clearly put into the storyline as a way for us to be able to get to the *Wasteland*, but it was all screwed up now thanks to the death of Wynne. Still, as we talked, an idea started to form.

Carl: Mordecai. If I need a parachute quickly, what are my options?

Mordecai: How are your sewing skills?

Carl: They're shit.

Mordecai: Then you need one of a few dozen potions, a flight ability, or a fall shield buff. Or you can turn Katia into a hang glider.

Carl: Yeah, I don't think she's going to go for that. Do you have the materials for a potion?

Mordecai: I'm looking at the stock right now. I don't have the *Feather Fall* materials. Those are common potions later on, but the seed pods I need are scarce until we hit the sixth floor. Same with *Bubble Boy*. I do have enough to make one type of potion, but you won't like it. And only enough to make maybe two of them, so whatever death-defying stunt you're planning, take Katia with you and leave Donut on the ground. It's an easy enough formula. Five minute brew. I'll double check the market to see if anything else is available, but I wouldn't count on it.

Carl: I'm coming your way. I need to make a few rockets really fast. Make me the potions.

"Okay," I said to Henrik. "I don't know if this will save the town, but we're going to give it a try." I turned to Katia, who'd been strangely silent since we'd returned. Her eyes were flashing, so I knew she was talking to somebody. She did not look happy. "Katia, I have a job for you."

She blinked and looked at me. "What do you need me to do?"

"Two things. First one is a little gross."

While Katia returned to the Desperado Club, I explained the assault with Donut while we jogged back to the personal space. It occurred to me that we were giving ourselves extra work, skipping past two pubs to get to the Toe. Every single one had a personal space entrance in it. But as we rushed by, I noticed they were all closed and boarded up. The camels all knew what was coming and were already moving their way to the bomb shelters.

"Carl, that is not going to work. They know there are changelings in town. They'll check."

"I know." I explained the next part of the plan.

Donut did not look impressed. "This is a little janky, even for a Carl plan."

"Janky?" I said. "Where did you get that one? That is not an Elle term."

"Louis told me," she said.

"Louis? You've been talking to Louis?"

"I'm allowed to have friends, Carl."

Before I could come up with a suitable response, I received a message from Morris the spider guy:

Morris: Hey, so we did what you asked. Package delivered. But we have a new problem.

Carl: Big or small?

Morris: They're all big problems. Right after the water quadrant was conquered, some of the walls changed inside. I think all the exits are closed.

I remembered that the dromedarian had said that basement chamber had been sealed off. The walls must have changed about. I looked at my map, and it hadn't changed as far as I could tell. But it didn't tell me if entrances were open or closed. The tomb raider guys couldn't leave anyway, so it wasn't a big deal.

Carl: Okay. So what's the problem?

Morris: We didn't think much of it at first, but now something's happening below us. We can hear it.

Carl: What do you mean?

Morris: I think the necropolis is filling with water.

Carl: Oh fuck me.

Morris: Yeah, so I don't know what we're going to do. We have a lot of those water breathing scrolls, but not nearly enough. And I don't think our torches work underwater. If it fills up all the way, then we're hosed.

Carl: Okay, make sure everybody has the water scrolls. If it fills all the way to where you are, go to a safe room. Actually, you and Bobby return to the Desperado and plant yourselves there. If I need to build you something or get more scrolls to you, we can get it to you more easily.

"Damnit," I growled. When Chris had taken the underwater castle, it had likely caused something to make the water rush into the tomb. The entrances had all closed up, so there was nowhere for the water to go. It hadn't occurred to me that we might need to consider the order in which we took these castles. There was nothing I could do from here.

I was expecting to find the Toe boarded up, but the bar was open and lit up like a Christmas display. I opened the door and was greeted with a crowd of about forty children, ranging in age from four to twelve. Almost all were dromedarians, but a group of six were in human form. They were obviously changelings. Juice Box was moving amongst the kids, talking to each in turn. She had a bag in her hand and was handing something out to each child.

Carl: Let me know if any of the kids other than the humans are shapeshifters.

Donut: I DON'T SEE ANY OTHERS BUT IT'S HARD WITH THE KIDS. JUICE BOX'S HEAD IS VERY HOT. JUST AS HOT AS THE HENRIK GUY. OH, OH. AND THE BARTENDER GUY IS ONE TOO! NOW THAT'S JUST SNEAKY.

"You owe us each a gold coin," Skarn said. He was in human form, standing with the others.

The other crawlers were also here. Louis and Firas stood with Langley and the archers. Louis was sucking on… a goddamn, actual juice box. A kiwi strawberry-flavored Capri Sun. I realized that was what Juice Box was handing out to all the kids.

"All right," I called. "I won't be here to let you in later, so everybody follow me."

Donut scoffed. "Shouldn't we take them to one of the actual safe rooms, Carl? Like that one on that strange street?"

"No," I said. "Mordecai said the saferooms are only safe if there's a crawler in with them. We can't spare anybody." I raised my voice. "Everybody follow me." I pointed at the bartender and Juice Box. "You guys, too."

The bartender refused to come, but Juice Box happily followed us. I was glad because we'd need someone to wrangle the children.

"Yeah, what about our money?" Skarn demanded.

I pulled a gold coin into the air and tossed it at him. "Help me get everyone inside, and you'll get another and so will everyone else. Where are their parents?"

"All the grown-ups are on defense duty," he said. He raised his voice. "Okay, everyone follow Mr. Carl."

I noticed three of the human/changeling children weren't fully… complete. One, a girl named Ruby, did not have any arms at all, and her head was sunken in at the top, like a deflated soccer ball that had been kicked. She walked slowly, with a noticeable limp. She was hard to look at. When I examined her, I saw she had an active debuff.

This NPC is suffering from Compression Sickness.

I sent a message to Mordecai asking what that was, but he said he'd never heard of it. He then asked where I was just as I opened the door and gave access to the first of several children.

Mordecai, as expected, was not pleased.

“This isn’t a goddamned daycare, Carl. Do you see a jungle gym? Because I don’t see a fucking jungle gym.”

The couch fell over onto its side as three dromedarian kids tried to balance on the back. Another had grabbed the cleaner bot and was hovering a foot off the ground while the robot beeped with a scared-sounding alarm. Juice Box formed into a hairy monster and roared at the camel, who dropped the robot. The cleaner bot zoomed up and out of reach, beeping mournfully as another pair of children stomped onto their almost-empty juice box pouches to launch the straws across the room. A circle formed as the children, dromedarian and changeling alike, started using their newfound riches to establish a gambling ring where they bet on who could launch their juice box straws the furthest. Donut was suddenly in on the action, hopping up and down and betting loudly.

The other crawlers all cowered in the corner, not certain what to do.

We’d all been in the room for less than three minutes.

“Yeah, you need games or something,” Juice Box said, walking up. She’d returned to a generic, female human form. She was white skinned and blonde, about eighteen years old. Her jaw worked like she was chewing gum. “They’re calm now, but they’ll be getting antsy soon.”

“Calm?” Mordecai asked. “This is calm?”

One of the changeling humans was suddenly a skyfowl and was attempting to take to the air. Another had turned into a cat, but Donut started hissing, and he switched back to a human.

“Why don’t they ever turn into dromedarians?” I asked.

“Not allowed,” Juice Box said. “Only when they’re at the bars and for entertainment purposes only. That was part of our deal when they took us in. We ain’t allowed to casually take the form of the dromedarians otherwise.”

“Is that so?” I asked. But I was in a hurry, and I needed to get to the crafting room. So I didn’t pursue the obvious lie. Now that I had the formula down, it’d only take me a few minutes to put the missiles together. Since the two-stage missiles weren’t working, and we were out of time to figure out why, I was just going to use the

original design and add a few of the seekers. The missiles would have a climbing range of a little more than a mile. The *Wasteland* would be a good three miles above our position when it dropped its bombs. That meant we had to get creative.

"Did you do the potions?" I asked Mordecai.

"They're cooling down," Mordecai said, still seething and distracted by the horde of children. "They're probably ready by now." He sighed, looking about the room. "I have a few downloads from the time before the dungeon opened. I think I can stream them to the screens here. Hang on." The main room screen flickered, and a new image appeared. A movie started to play.

"I didn't know you could do that," I said. I glanced over at Donut, who was about five seconds from discovering Mordecai had a magical Bluetooth connection to the screen.

"Yes," he said. "But you don't have time to watch movies."

Around the room, the screeching stopped as dozens of children suddenly turned their attention to the screen.

"Carl, Carl, it's a movie!" Donut said, bounding across the room to return to my shoulder.

"It's part of the manager benefit," Mordecai said, obviously reluctant to tell her this. "In case we ever want to strategize using the screens. But I also have a digital library of most Earth movies that I collected when we were preparing to go live. Plus entertainment from the last world I worked, though they didn't have anything good unless you like off-key opera."

"Do you have *There's Something About Mary*? I never saw the ending! Carl came home that day and ruined it. He switched it to the watch-Carl-get-fragged-over-and-over Playstation channel, and I never learned what happened! It has been killing me. If I don't find out what happened I will simply die." She suddenly gasped. "Do you have the *Sex and the City* movie?"

"And now you know why I never told you about this," Mordecai said. On the screen, the movie was the original *Toy Story*. "Hey, hey, kid! Put that down!" he suddenly yelled, storming off.

"Wonderful," I said, watching him go. I turned to Juice Box. "You're doing good with the kids. You're a natural."

"Hey," she said, leaning in closer, her voice a whisper. She'd watched and listened to our conversation about movies with a strange intensity. "What is this place? Is it from the Hunting Grounds?"

"The Hunting Grounds?" I asked, surprised. "No, it's our base of operations. It follows us wherever we go."

"Can we use it to get there?" she asked, voice full with so much hope that I had to pause to regard her.

"The Hunting Grounds" was what they called the sixth floor. I had a quick memory, of a goblin shamanka with a face full of piercings and rings telling me forlornly about how everything would be better if they just could get one floor down.

"No, you can't use this room to travel," I said. "But we'll be going there if we can get out of here. Is that some place you're trying to go?"

I'd been slogging my way through Herot's essay on the nature of NPCs from the cookbook, and this was something he'd talked about frequently. NPCs had varying degrees of situational awareness about where they were. On the previous level with the trains, they'd all been completely brainwashed, totally unaware that they were in a dungeon. Rory and Lorelai the goblin shamankas from the very first floor had been the opposite. While they'd been invested in the llama/goblin meth war story, they were also fully aware that they were on the first floor of a dungeon. Herot, who advocated for breaking the NPCs out of the fourth wall, warned that those NPCs who knew what was going on from the start were much more dangerous. On the last floor, we'd been able to recruit a few NPCs to our cause because their world was obviously a construct, and the illusion was easily shattered.

"The Hunting Grounds are our ancient home," Juice Box said. The normally ditzy and goofy NPC was suddenly dead serious. "We have been stuck here for a long time. There was a way to go home, but it is lost to us now that the town hall is gone."

I reached up and scratched Donut on the head. I sent her a quick message.

"Are you seeking the Gate of the Feral Gods?" Donut asked.

She scoffed. She didn't seem surprised we mentioned the artifact. "No. Gnomes seek that prize. The same with the mad mage and that bugbear under the sea. All of them came here trying to find it. If the gnomes couldn't locate it, then nobody can. Or will. Hen…" She paused. "One of our kind says that the gate artifact is a myth. The camels have been here the longest, and they know nothing of it. What we seek is something else."

She'd almost said "Henrik" but caught herself.

I asked the next question. "So what is it you seek? Something to do with the ghost queen Quetzalcoatlus?"

That surprised her, and not in a good way. She narrowed her eyes and backed off. "I must tend to the children. I'm beginning to suspect this is all your doing. You speak of helping us, but where is the proof, other than taking the children to this place? Prove to me you mean what you say. If you can stop the gnomes from destroying the city, and my people survive, I will tell you. Come speak to me again if we survive the bombardment."

Katia: Henrik just got the daily message on his pocket watch thing from the gnomes. He showed them the reply, just as you wrote it. We were expecting them to ask questions, but they snapped off communications.

Carl: Do you think they took the bait?

Katia: I don't know. Have you built the missiles yet?

Carl: Doing it now. We got a little distracted on the way in.

Katia: Cutting it a little close don't you think?

Donut: WE'RE WATCHING *TOY STORY*. HAVE YOU SEEN IT?

Katia: What?

Carl: We'll be ready in a minute.

A new timer suddenly appeared in my vision. It was at one hour and 15 minutes and ticking down.

New Quest. Squeeze out the Juice Box.

That mischievous Changeling prostitute appears to be more important to this story than you first thought. It also appears she's rather fond of her brothers and sisters, many

of whom are currently outside, mixed in with the poor, oblivious Dromedarians, preparing to die in a desperate attempt to destroy all the incoming bombs with flak. If this town is bombed, they will not succeed. They will not even come close to succeeding.

To win this quest, you must save Hump Town from the inevitable bombardment, which will occur when the timer reaches zero.

***Reward*: You will receive a Platinum Quest Box.**

In addition, all crawlers in this quadrant will receive a permanent fifty percent charisma bonus during any future interactions with Changelings.

You'll also receive my undying respect, because there is no way in hell even you can pull this one off.

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Once I was alone with Donut in the crafting room, I spent a quick minute to open my new loot boxes. I only had two. The silver boss box I'd gotten for killing Ruckus the chicken hawk contained two items. First was a case of 25 more surefires, which was a relief. I'd already used up ten of the ones I'd received earlier, giving the missiles the "guided" upgrade. I was about to use the rest of the ones I already had, and this gave us some wiggle room. I could now alter the plan.

The second item was a little worrying. It was similar to the boss-damage-enhancing Seize the Day Toothpaste I had, which I was saving for later.

"It's a lotion bottle, Carl," Donut said, peering down at the item. She'd also received the same prize plus some healing scrolls in her box. "It's just like the bottle you used to keep hidden in your drawer by the bed."

Jellyfish Salve (5 applications)

If you can't talk someone into peeing on you after you get stung by a Pain Amplifier Jelly, then this will do the trick.

Effect: removes the pain portion of the Kill Me Now It Hurts debuff.

Warning: It does not remove the one-minute healing block effect associated with the Jelly's sting.

I really hoped that we wouldn't have to deal with the water quadrant. I'd received the box just before Chris had defeated that level, so maybe it was something we could avoid.

My next item was the silver fan box I'd received at the end of the previous floor. It'd become available just as we set out to fight Ruckus. I braced myself as it popped open.

"Yes," I said. "Finally." I looked up at the ceiling. "Thanks, guys."

It was a thick, enchanted roll of duct tape. I picked it up and examined it.

Enchanted Roll of Never-ending Duct Tape. Fifty meters.

Odds are good you know who Ted Bundy is. Odds are even better you *don't* know who Vesta Stoudt is. And while this problem is not exclusive to you hairless monkeys and your pollution-ridden world, those first two statements are part of the reason why you have received this prize.

Will you use it to tie people up? Will you use it to save the lives of those you love? Will you wrap your ankles together and sensuously rub your supple feet up and down a dungeon wall while you run your hands through your hair? Who knows! But you just got yourself a roll of the universe's greatest duct tape.

This 50-meter-long roll of extra-durable, fabric-based tape regenerates at the rate of one meter an hour until it returns to 50 meters.

"Awesome," I said, keeping the tape out. I already had a use in mind. I moved to my sapper table and went to work.

With just about 45 minutes remaining, we all left the protection of the safe room and exited out the town's main gate. I warned Juice Box not to let any of the kids out of the personal space because once they left, they wouldn't be able to get back in. Mordecai had managed to squeeze out three copies of the potion with his supplies,

which was good. It would allow Donut to participate in the raid. I doled the potions out, and we were on our way.

The six archers walked behind us in a V pattern. I attached the back cart to the body of the Chariot. Firas sat in the back cart along with Henrik the town's leader. Louis sat in the driver's seat while I walked to the left of the cart, and Donut, sitting astride Mongo, marched to our right.

I caught the eye of Donut as we marched forward. She was nervous. This was a complicated plan with a lot of moving parts, which meant there was a lot of ways for it to go south. I took a deep breath. I was nervous, too.

The struggling form of Wynne the dirigible gnome sat on the raised, back seat of the ATV. I originally planned on having him tied with rope, but duct tape worked much better. The optional missile battery was not attached and was sitting in my inventory along with two more four packs. I clutched the farseer in my hand, and I used it to stare up at the flying fortress. The damn thing was huge. I made sure I focused on several different gnomes long enough that they'd receive a notification that they were being watched. We wanted to make sure they knew we were here.

We gave a wide berth to several of the giant lizards as we made our way across the desert, angling toward that large hill in the center of the bowl. We didn't quite make it that far. The ponderous *Wasteland* moved above us, and I feared they'd drop bombs on our unprotected heads. Instead, the massive structure continued south, moving toward the edge of the bowl where it would soon be directly above the village of Hump Town.

Multiple flying vehicles dispatched from the main body and started circling downward, reminding me of the whirlybirds that dropped off of maple trees. As I expected, it was a mishmash of vehicles, no two the same. I quickly counted. A total of thirteen vehicles were dispatched.

A single, traditional-style hot-air balloon remained in the center of the formation. The large, black and gold striped balloon was covered in ribbons and small flags. It looked like it was decorated for a parade or to advertise a circus. It was not outfitted for war, unlike

all the other vehicles. A large basket hung underneath, equally doused in ribbons and flags. The basket looked big enough to hold five or six regular humans. Three faces peered over the edge down at us. The basket continued to descend as the other vehicles kept to about 500 feet, circling and hovering. The ominous shape of bombs and large, firecracker-like rockets dotted their undersides.

The decorated balloon continued to descend, slowing rapidly. I caught the shimmer of a shield protecting the balloon. The moment it lowered below 100 feet, the three dots on the balloon became visible. It labeled the three dirigible gnomes as a **Level 25 Aerostat Pilot**, a **Level 44 Negotiator**, and a **Level 52 Sniper Captain**.

I looked up at the three faces as the balloon settled. It crunched heavily into the sand while the pilot spun a wheel on the fire mechanism under the open balloon. I knew real hot air balloons worked better in colder environments, and I could sense the magic coming from the box that radiated heat upward. There were a dozen controls on the thing. It reminded me of the *Nightmare*, though less complicated. Slightly. I quickly examined the balloon's properties.

Gnomish Legate Balloon. *The Vahana*. Contraption.

Of all the vehicles left aboard the dreadnaught *Wasteland*, the *Vahana* is perhaps the oldest.

Once, long ago, the gnomes believed they could avoid war.

And while they could not leave this conflict-infested world, they could take to the skies, out of reach of everyone else. They hoped they could set themselves up as neutral peacekeepers. Everyone knew that the black and gold-striped balloons were off limits. The balloons were a symbol of hope. The sight of a Gnomish Legate on the horizon heralded the arrival of ambassadors, and perhaps peace.

But when new visitors came to their world, coming via a mysterious portal, everything changed. These were winged predators who would not have peace, and they would not suffer anybody else sharing their skies. The Legate Balloons were traded for a different sort of vehicle. The sylvan

balloons were mostly dismantled and recycled, sewn together to give extra security to the gnomish settlements, which were also repurposed. The peaceful, flying communities changed their name from sky garden to dreadnaught.

Interesting. I turned my attention to the balloon's occupants.

The sniper gnome was a short, black-bearded creature wearing a dark leather jacket covered in zippers and buckles. These gnomes were shorter even than the Bopcas, and I realized they had to be standing on something in order to peer over the edge of the wicker basket. He was the only one not wearing a red, conical hat. He had an old-school, round and black half-style motorcycle helmet on his head. The kind that didn't have a face shield and looked almost like a baseball helmet. My dad had worn something similar.

I had a sudden memory, of my father angry. It was soon after mom had left us, a month before he, in turn, left me to fend for myself. He'd ripped off the helmet and smashed my fish tank, spilling my mollies everywhere. I hadn't cried when my fish died, and I remembered it had bothered me for weeks after. Ever since then, I'd think of my father and those fish whenever I saw one of those helmets. I'd think of those fish flopping on the ground as I desperately tried to pick them up, cutting my fingers on the glass. I'd think of the pain and blood and of them not surviving, even after I put them in a cup. Whenever I saw a helmet like that, I would think of that day and of remember how easy it was to grow numb and not even realize it. I'd think, *I'm never getting a pet again. All they do is die.*

It felt like the wrong lesson, especially now. But that's what happens, isn't it? The universe shows us how cruel it can be, and we are worse for it.

I looked across the way at Donut, sitting atop Mongo, doing her best to look menacing. *She's not a pet anymore.* Was she better off now? I didn't know.

Henrik remained motionless, looking down. He kept his hand on the shoulder of Wynne, as if he was concerned about the old

gnome's condition. It didn't look natural. I prayed they wouldn't notice.

Then I looked up at the *Wasteland*. A war machine that had once been a place where the gnomes could live in peace. I knew this was all a construction. But it was so easy to get caught up in the story. So easy to forget who the true enemy was.

But more importantly, the most difficult part of this, was knowing all that and realizing it didn't matter. Not today. If this went as intended, every gnome on that thing would be dead in ten minutes.

What was it Henrik had said? *Sometimes we do things that are not of our nature to protect our own*.

The sniper gnome held onto a large, metal tube that I first thought was a polearm. I realized it was a launcher of some sort. The barrel on the thing was big enough to stick my fist through. He also wore a bandolier over his shoulder, dotted with round, grenade-like devices.

That's the one we need to watch, I thought. The gnome glared back at me, his dark eyes boring into mine.

As I instructed, the archers spread out behind us. Louis remained at the chariot's controls. Firas sat in the back of the cart, directly behind the sitting Henrik. Donut looked nervously over at me as the Negotiator gnome climbed out of the basket and sank knee-deep into the sand. The gnome was wearing an olive-colored uniform shirt, but it was old and ratty. There was a sizable hole in the left arm. The gnome took two steps toward us and stopped and straightened his back. This one was not armed. His dot on the minimap was white.

Leon. Level 44 Dirigible Gnome Negotiator.

Commisar of the *Wasteland*.

A master politician and stickler for rules, Leon might have been a tax attorney in another life. Now he lives as the chief political officer aboard the dreadnaught *Wasteland*.

I'd say he has a stick up his ass, but he's always clenched so tight, there's no way a stick would fit up there.

"Please," Henrik said to Leon the gnome. "Please call off the bombing. There are children in that town."

I cringed. Katia's impersonation of Henrik's voice was not very good. I hoped they didn't notice.

"We received your message," Leon said, ignoring the appeal. "We will take the Commandant's uncle, but in your message, you said he required a potion. We don't know which potion you mean. Which of you is the healer? Is it you?"

"Me?" I asked. "No." I pointed across the way to Donut. Behind Leon, the sniper gnome leaned forward in the basket.

All eyes turned to Donut. She cleared her throat and used her actress voice. "It is I, Princess Donut the famed healer of Queen Anne! But there's been a misunderstanding, my dear. We already have the potion he needs. My manservant holds it in his hand."

I held up the yellow-green vial.

"What?" Henrik said, looking back and forth between me and Donut. "You said…"

Firas stood, standing behind the still-sitting camel. He pulled a long knife and ran it across the camel's neck. Blood sprayed. Henrik gurgled and slumped over. Firas remained standing there, staring at the knife stupidly.

Carl: Goddamnit. Stomp his head. Do it fast.

Firas swallowed and then stomped down a few times onto the robe.

Carl: Good job. Now sit. Be inconspicuous.

The gnomes barely reacted. Leon turned his gaze back to Donut.

Donut made a show of licking her paw, pretending to barely notice the murder behind her. "We want passage onto the *Wasteland*. This sand is just awful. In exchange, we will heal Wynne and offer our services. I am a healer, and my crew here are all mechanics. My manservant is a world-renown masseuse." She leaned forward. "He's an expert with feet."

Carl: Goddamnit, Donut. Stick to the script.

Leon looked over his shoulder at the sniper who shook his head "no." I had my eye on the minimap. The moment it turned red, I would jam down on my *Protective Shell* and all hell would break loose. Hopefully it wouldn't come to that just yet.

"We know your filthy town is infested with changelings," Leon said, "And it would be just like you to attempt to deceive us. Changelings are like rats, and one does not invite rats into one's home. Now remove Wynne's bindings, so I may converse with him. I wish to establish it is really him."

Donut made a show of looking up at the *Wasteland*, which was still moving toward the town. It'd be directly overhead in twenty minutes. We needed to hurry.

"It's not my town," Donut said. "I am not a changeling. Disgusting. Can you imagine? Are you really going to bomb them?"

"If it's not your town, then it is of no concern to you. But, yes," Leon said. "No matter what happens here, we are going to settle this conflict once and for all. It has gone on much too long. And we are going to bomb you, too, if you do not do as I ask." The gnome looked at the struggling, hooded form of Wynne dubiously. "I am beginning to suspect proof will be difficult for you. I warn you, these pilots and snipers have no love for me. If your plan is to take me hostage, they will not hesitate to kill us all. Now let me look upon him."

Carl: How much time left on Wynne?

Donut: SIX MINUTES.

"I will remove his facial covering, but I'm not removing his bindings," Donut said. "I don't know what the silly camels told you, but they talked him into using his magic to resurrect some ghost thing living in the tomb. He is still suffering the ill effects of the spell. Carl, be a dear and unsheathe the patient."

I reached over and ripped Wynne's hood off. The zombie, reanimated gnome growled and snapped. The body had been chewed to hell by beetles, but he'd only been a few hours dead when the tomb raider guys had retrieved the corpse and brought it to Katia. The body was mostly intact. Thankfully, the face was untouched.

Donut leaped off Mongo and landed on Louis's shoulder. "I am an alchemist and a healer. Like I said, Carl here holds a potion that will heal his affliction. I want you to do whatever you need to determine he's the real deal. But I'm not stupid, gnome. I'll give the potion to

restore him once we're on the balloon and on our way to the protection of your village."

I held my breath. Before he'd been killed, Wynne was a class called a Flesh Mechanic. According to Mordecai, the type of spell he cast was famously difficult on the caster. Had Wynne temporarily given flesh to Quetzalcoatlus, he would indeed be in a zombie-like state for a short duration. He would heal on his own, but I was pretending not to know that part.

"There are too many of you," Leon said. "We can only take you and Wynne. Any more, and it'll be too much weight." He held out his hands apologetically.

Donut scoffed. Above us, the line of airplanes continued to circle. She waved at me. "I will take my manservant, or there is no deal. Besides, who's going to carry him? Me? Surely you jest."

"Very well," he said after a moment. He peered suspiciously at the archers.

"But," Donut added, "Once your favored uncle is returned safe and sound, you'll dispatch balloons to retrieve the others."

Leon smiled wickedly. "He's no uncle of mine, but of Commandant Kane. However, this is acceptable. Forgive me for appearing mistrustful, but first I must cast a spell. It will require me to touch him and a random sampling of your men." Behind Leon, the sniper gnome leaned even further forward. The wicker basket creaked. He pulled up the weapon and pointed it directly at Donut. Zombie Wynne snapped and growled.

"No funny stuff," the sniper called to Donut. "If we gotta fight our way out of here, you're getting the first chest hole."

"And you'll get the second," I called back to the sniper.

"There's no need for such talk," Leon said. "Surely this… dog creature… would never be stupid enough to attempt to trick us. There would be no purpose."

"*Excuse me*?" Donut started to say, but I sent her a quick message to be calm. To stay on script.

The sniper grinned at Donut's outrage, revealing a row of sharp teeth.

<u>Carl</u>: If this goes sideways, Katia and Donut focus on the sniper. I have the ambassador guy. Langley, you guys get the pilot before he can retreat. Fire then scatter. Meet up at the ruins of the Bactrian town.

Donut took a breath and calmed herself. "Do whatever you need to do, but be careful of the old gnome. He's a bit cranky. He might try to take a nip."

"I am familiar with Wynne's post-spell stupors." Leon waded forward through the sand. Mongo growled, so the gnome moved to the Chariot's port side.

He paused in front of Louis and bade him to lean forward.

"I will cast a spell on you that will detect if you are a changeling," the gnome said. "If you attack me, you will die."

I told Louis to comply, and the gnome touched the man's forehead. A blue light burst into the air. He repeated it with Donut. He then insisted on doing the same to me. I went to a knee, allowing the perfume-smelling man to touch my head. The perfume was covering a deep, dirty stench I realized when he was up close. I knew that smell. It was the stench of a man who'd been rationed a gallon a week to shower with. *They're in trouble. Their ship is floundering.*

I felt a tingle, and there was another blue flash. That was it.

He nodded and then approached the bound hostage. He raised his hand, but he couldn't reach the tall seat.

I laughed, trying to cover my frustration. Donut's *Second Chance* spell normally only allowed her to resurrect any creature up to ten levels above her own. At the spell's current level of ten, it also normally resurrected the creatures for up to fifteen minutes. But thanks to her glass cannon class, the spell was remarkably more powerful. It now allowed her to resurrect any corpse up to twenty levels above her own, and for half of an hour. Donut was currently level 33, and Wynne had been 50. Still, the spell was about to run out. We'd cast it too early. I was afraid that they would use a farseer to examine him before they sent the ambassador, and if they saw he was dead, they would've simply bombed us to hell. Him being undead was barely better, but Mordecai seemed to think it would

work. He insisted there were a lot of quests that involved raising key NPCs from the dead in order to trick the living. It was almost a trope. Either way, the spell was going to run out in two minutes.

"Do you want me to give you a boost?" I asked Leon.

The gnome glowered at me as he pulled himself up the side of the cart. Zombie Wynne snapped and thrashed as Leon placed his hand against the creature's forehead. He tried to bite the gnome's finger.

Carl: Keep him calm!

Donut: I'VE NEVER RESURRECTED JUST A HEAD BEFORE, CARL. OR SOMEONE THIS HIGH OF A LEVEL. THEY'RE A LOT MORE SURLY WHEN THEY'RE JUST HEADS. AND I'M THE ONE DOING ALL THE TALKING. MAYBE NEXT TIME YOU CAN RESURRECT THE DEAD, HALF-EATEN CORPSE YOURSELF WHEN YOU COME UP WITH A SUICIDAL PLAN.

We all held our collective breaths. I had no idea if this would work. The spell supposedly only detected changelings. If it was anything else, we'd be screwed.

Luckily for us, Leon was literally leaning up against Katia, who was disguised as the chair—amongst other things. One word from me, and she'd suck him into her mass.

A blue light pulsed. I let go of my breath.

"Well, he's no changeling," Leon said. He continued to peer suspiciously at the reanimated gnome. "But this is not a healing stupor. I have never seen anything like it." He sniffed. "This is much worse than usual. He appears to be a ghoul."

"The camels made him resurrect an ancient ghost," Donut said. She indicated the potion, still in my hand. "Like I said, I can heal him. The camels did not understand what they were doing. I don't think he knew, either. They were drugging him with mushrooms."

Leon regarded the vial in my hand. "What is the potion anyway?"

Donut didn't hesitate. "Healer's Respite. Stichberries boiled with iron slivers and manticore shavings."

Leon nodded thoughtfully. "That is not something we would have. That might work. If it doesn't, you'll wish we'd left you on the ground."

The potion was actually a vial of Mountain Dew I'd gotten from a saferoom on the second floor, but Mordecai said the coloring was the closest of all the ones we had. We had no idea if this ambassador guy would buy this line of bullshit, but we'd made sure that Donut could at least pretend to know what she was talking about. I'd made her repeat the ingredients three times as we'd walked over here.

"The dromedarians would never attempt to resurrect their old slavemasters," Leon continued, stepping down from the side of the chariot before moving to the back cart and toward Henrik's "corpse."

Firas: What's he doing? What's he doing?

Carl: Chill. We anticipated this.

Leon first did his changeling check on Firas before he moved to the body of Henrik and started rummaging through the remains.

As he did this, just behind him, the *Second Chance* spell timed out, causing Wynne's head to disintegrate into a cloud of dust. *Shit, shit.*

Carl: Katia.

Katia: I'm on it.

Nobody seemed to notice the new head grow into place. The sniper only had his eyes on Donut, and Leon was bent over, rifling through Henrik's robes and pack. He pulled back the clothes to reveal the dead body of Svern the changeling principal, the one we'd killed in the town hall. I'd kept the corpse because Mordecai had wanted to get some goo from his brain. The body was pretty beat up, especially the head, which was why I'd had Firas pretend to stomp down on the empty robe.

"The town's leadership must have been usurped by the changelings," Leon said, sounding disgusted. "I should have tested him, too." He looked up and shouted at the sniper. "He doesn't have it on him."

"That's going to be a problem," the sniper said. "What're we doing?"

"Are you looking for this?" I asked, holding up the watch. I'd made the facsimile from memory at my bench, only spending a quick thirty seconds to shape the thing. It'd been a last-minute hunch. I'd asked Henrik where the watch came from, and he claimed he hadn't

known, though I sensed he was being sketchy about it, which made me wonder how important it was. The prop would not pass a quick inspection, so I quickly put it away. "The Princess had me slip it out of his pocket as we were leaving town. It'll be yours once you guys pick up our crew and bring them up there with the Princess."

"As you can see, I only hire the most qualified servants," Donut added.

Leon's demeanor relaxed. "Good, good. At least we don't have to go searching through the town's remains looking for it."

"So does that mean we have a deal?" Donut asked.

I looked up at the massive, floating structure. It appeared to be lowering its altitude. From this angle, it almost looked like a rusting, flying oil rig. Fifteen minutes.

"Very well," Leon said. "We have a deal. Have your man take Wynne and bring him to the basket. But I must insist you give Wynne the respite now before we go. I can't bring him in such a state onto the *Wasteland*. The Commandant will not be pleased if his uncle tries to eat him."

"Okay, but the potion will take a few minutes to work."

"As long as it works before we arrive. Otherwise, we'll throw you all over the edge."

"Carl, administer the medicine."

I took the vial of Mountain Dew, yanked the cork, and poured it down the throat of "Wynne." I suppressed a grin as he gagged.

Carl: Sorry.

Katia: Holy shit who can drink this bile.

Donut made a show of putting Mongo back into his carrier. The dinosaur screeched and put up a fight, hissing and complaining and kicking up dust, causing Leon to back away with alarm. But eventually she got him. Donut then leaped onto my shoulder as I picked up the duct-taped form of Wynne and threw him over my other shoulder. We trudged toward the wicker basket. As we marched, I prayed none of the gnomes would notice that the entire back seat of the Chariot was now gone. Or that Wynne, even though he was thoroughly wrapped in duct tape, was about two feet longer than he should be. I kept most of the bulk behind me.

Carl: Okay guys. Follow Langley's lead. All of you be ready. Firas will puddle jump you out of there if necessary. Louis, you're in charge of the chariot. Those planes have missiles on them, so we will need your ground support. I have confidence in you guys.

Louis: You know a plan is really desperate when it requires confidence in people like us.

Firas: Shut the hell up, Louis. He's trying to build our self-confidence.

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This is the message I had Henrik show to Commandant Kane:

> *Wynne is incapacitated, and we are returning him to you. He cast a resurrection spell on our behalf and became gravely ill. A traveling healer has offered to help him, but this healer now reports only a potion you might have will revive your uncle. In a show of good faith, this healer, their party, and I will travel outside of the city walls in one hour and will bring Wynne to you. There, this healer will tell you how to save your uncle's life. I will accompany them and offer myself as tribute. I hope and pray we can negotiate a peace that will save our town from your wrath.*

The real Henrik remained in town, standing amongst the defenders, waiting for death to rain.

The bulk of this plan, once again, rested on Donut's charm bonus and Katia's shapeshifting skills. Not only was Katia shaped as the entire back seat of the Chariot—which I'd been forced to remove for this to work—but she also played the "body" of Wynne the gnome sitting atop it. Her real eyes were in there, mixed in with the duct tape, giving her a wide, raised view of the situation.

But it hadn't ended there. Katia was playing triple duty. She was also the body of Henrik, sitting in the cart directly behind the chair. He was connected to the rest of the mass using the camel's arm,

which was designed to look like it was draped over the seat. The front part of the dromedarian/changeling's neck had been a bag of actual ghoul blood I had in my inventory. That was a last-minute addition to make Firas's throat-cutting ploy seem more authentic.

The robe and backpack and everything else was real.

When Firas cut the changeling's neck, Katia had pulled the mass associated with the changeling, causing the Henrik form to disappear. The robes and pack fell, landing upon the changeling corpse already there in the cart, previously hidden by the fake dromedarian body. When Leon the ambassador investigated, it looked as if the changeling corpse had been Henrik the whole time.

She had pulled it all off. I couldn't believe it.

I reflected on this as I climbed into the wicker basket of the *Vahana*, Katia dangling over my left shoulder and Donut sitting upon my right.

The sniper's name was Crixus. The pilot was Hicks. They went to work as Leon barked orders. I kept one eye on the pilot, trying to commit the controls to memory.

"It is good timing," Leon said as I eased Wynne/Katia to the floor. "We will have a spectacular view of the death of the final settlement of Anser." He seemed almost giddy.

Donut leaped from my shoulder and landed on the edge of the basket, looking down, eyes wide. "Carl, look! We're rising into the air."

I felt my stomach lurch as the hot blast of air from above hit me. I grabbed a line with my hand. I twisted my arm around a few times to secure myself. "Christ, Donut. Be careful."

Below me, the form of Wynne was curled up to hide her extra height. Adding mass was easy, but making her smaller, especially when we wanted to keep her battle ready, wasn't so simple. We rose into the air quickly. The timing was important here. We needed to be high enough where we could take our shot, but we also needed to take all the escort planes out of commission.

The countdown timer for the bombing was at seven minutes. We rose quickly into the air. We passed the escorts, who were covering our retreat. *Good, good.*

"He's looking better already," Leon said, leaning down to look upon Wynne.

Katia grunted. I'd warned her against talking. She'd done her best with Henrik's voice, but it'd been barely passable. I didn't want to risk it up close.

"What do you mean by 'the final settlement of Anser?'" I asked, changing the subject. "Isn't that the guy buried in the tomb?"

It was Crixus the sniper who answered. "The bactrians and the dromedarians were the slaves who built the tomb. Anser came and subjugated them along with the glabers and forced them to their knees." He spit over the edge. "The camels, alleged great fighters, were the first to fall. They were complicit in the horror Anser and his people brought to this world. They are filth and deserve to be destroyed. Once they are gone, this world will be better for it. That will leave us with only one last task before we can leave these lands and have peace."

"What's that?" I asked. We continued to rise rapidly into the air. *Closer, closer*. The gnomish pilot turned a wheel, and the balloon started angling north, on a vector to intercept with the *Wasteland*.

"The mad mage," Crixus said. "He's the most dangerous of them all. He doesn't just wish to steal the gate. He wishes to *understand* it. To *replicate* it. He has grown mad in his pursuit, and we fear the damage he might do if he is not stopped."

"Wait," I asked. "Does this mage guy have the artifact?"

Crixus and Leon exchanged a look. A small grin played across Crixus's face.

"He only has a third of it."

I wanted to ask more, but we were running out of time. I peered over the edge of the basket. I kept my eye on the altitude indicator in my vision. We'd risen almost 300 meters, which I mentally converted to almost a thousand feet off the tomb. The escorts were now well below us, but rising slowly with the ship. I guessed the highest of them to be about 800 feet up, which was already pushing the limit.

Carl: Ready, Donut and Katia?

The cat remained on the edge of the basket, claws dug deep into the wicker.

Donut: I AM READY.

Katia: Ready. Donut, make sure I'm secure before you do it. It's a long drop.

Carl: Langley. Weapons free.

Langley: Firing now.

A moment later, eight rockets corkscrewed up into the air from the surface. These were all single-stage rockets, hastily built, but with Mordecai's new and improved accelerant. All six archers plus Louis and Firas had a single launcher tube in their inventory. Each had two missiles. While Leon and the balloon were on the ground, Langley had doled out targets to everyone, and they'd used the surefire aiming system to lock the missiles onto each of the circling escort planes and balloons. Even before the first salvo hit, four more missiles blasted in the air, targeting the remaining planes.

Crixus reacted quickly. He shouted, and suddenly all of their dots were red. I was expecting him to swing his large gun like a club. Instead, he dropped it and grasped at one of the grenade balls at his chest. At the same moment, I clutched tightly onto the rope of the balloon as I dropped a smoke curtain. Two Katia spikes burst forth from the duct-taped bundle, each piercing the wicker basket. They grew taut, anchoring her in place just as Donut cast *Hole* on the bottom of the basket, right underneath all of us.

Donut had been practicing with the spell and could now widen the area of effect to a diameter of a meter and a half. It lowered the thickness of the hole, but that wasn't an issue here, especially with her magic enhanced. The large hole wasn't quite big enough to cover the entire basket, but it was close enough.

The three gnomes dropped away just as Crixus attempted to toss the grenade ball at me. All three gnomes had a look of astonishment on their faces as they plummeted, falling along with the smoke bomb. The grenade ball—whatever it was—flew wide, rushing over my shoulder as I pulled my feet up, resting it on the bench.

At the last moment, Leon grasped onto the edge of the hole. He started to pull himself up. I prepared to intercept him just as an

ethereal, magical cat paw appeared and pushed against his head, knocking him off the edge. He screamed as he disappeared.

The hole remained open just long enough for us to have a bird's eye view of the first plane to explode.

The basket pitched with more explosions as rockets found their targets. I held on for dear life as I looked for still-alive planes. I locked my xistera into place while Katia pulled the crossbow.

"Wow," Donut said, peering over the edge. "They're still falling. Nope, not anymore." She did a little jump on the edge of the basket that almost gave me a heart attack. "Level 34! Carl, I got a lot of experience for that!"

"Jesus, Donut. Get off the goddamned edge."

"Really, Carl. I'm a cat. A master of balance. Whoa!"

She slipped, but thankfully she fell inward. I didn't have time to scold her. All the planes had gone down, but three balloons remained, moving up toward us. They rose rapidly. I couldn't see the drivers from this angle, but these were smaller balloons. All three were different. One was blimp-shaped, one was a perfectly-round balloon painted jet black, and the third was three balloons tied together. This one also had a square-rigged sail, like on an old-school brigantine boat.

Katia fired a few bolts at the closest airship, the one with the oblong, dirigible shape. The bolts had no effect on the balloons. I tossed a banger sphere. It bounced right off the balloon. I switched to hob lobbers, using my xistera to drive the round balls deep into the balloons. The balloon dimpled and detonated, but it did not tear. The net around the balloon caught on fire.

Langley: I think they're out of range, but do you want us to try our last missiles on those balloons?

Carl: No. Good job, guys. Get out of there.

We had five minutes before the bombs would fall. We were out of time.

I yanked a can of gasoline from my inventory. I'd gotten this long, long ago, way back on the first floor from the goblins. I unscrewed the top and tossed it over the edge, aiming for the

balloon with the flaming net. The balloon burst into flames and started spinning away, trailing black smoke.

Crack. Something flew through the air at us from that third balloon, the one with the sail. I spied the sniper on the deck, leaning over the edge and aiming his wide-bore rifle directly up at us. This guy was similar to Crixus, though he wore the red hat. I watched as he pulled one of the round grenade things off his chest and loaded it into the rifle. *What the hell are those things*? He aimed to fire again, but he fell back as Katia bullseyed him with a bolt.

"Critical hit!" Katia said.

The sniper was dead, but the balloon kept rising. "Keep them back," I called as I moved to the *Vahana*'s controls. I yanked on the pull for the fire source, and we jerked upward. Heat washed over my face, unbearably hot. I suddenly thought of Fire Brandy, the demon who'd killed herself on the last floor.

I checked our altitude. We were pushing 500 meters, still angling north. The *Wasteland* was directly ahead of us. It had lowered itself to about two and a half kilometers off the tomb's surface. We were now at the very edge of the missiles' range. I wanted to get closer, but we simply didn't have time.

I intended to yank my farseer out of the inventory, but I spied one already attached to the side of the fire control mechanism. I grasped it and turned it upward.

The bottom of the *Wasteland* was crawling with bungee-corded and harnessed gnomes preparing for the bombardment. They didn't drop the bombs from bomb bays, but simply cut the chains and let gravity do the rest. While they only had a few of the fuel-air, city-killing Knock-Knocks left on the airship's underbelly, there were dozens of round, smaller-yield bombs hanging there like water droplets. These had to be manually armed by the gnomes before they were dropped, and that was what they were doing now.

I had eight guided missiles and four more unguided ones in my inventory. All twelve of them were pre-loaded into four-pack launchers. Of the eight guided missiles, I'd already assigned four of them to the few Knock-Knocks I'd spied on the underside right after sunrise.

Our quick ascent suddenly stalled.

"Let's see how you like this!" Donut cried. I looked over in time to see two clockwork Mongos jump off the edge of the basket, screeching. She'd been forced to release the real Mongo in order to create the clockwork versions. Mongo was crying in fear at our height. We bobbed up and down with the changing weight on the basket.

"Whoa," Katia said. "Holy cow, Donut. That worked better than I thought it would."

Donut continued to peer over the edge at the last balloon.

"Level 35!" she suddenly cried.

The round balloon rushed past us, continuing its upward trajectory. The balloon remained intact, but the basket was a bloody mess, hanging by a single line. The interior of the basket dripped with gore. A single clockwork Mongo screeched in greeting from the bloody basket as it passed.

She looked back at Mongo. "Your brothers are getting really good at this." Mongo screeched worriedly as our own basket rocked.

"Watch out," Katia yelled, pointing upward. "Donut, get Mongo into his carrier. Fast. Carl, you better fire."

Someone aboard the *Wasteland* had finally noticed that the *Vahana* had been hijacked. One of the structures on the edge of the massive airship rotated, revealing itself to be a battery of cannons. It looked remarkably like a bundle of about 100 of the sniper rifles. It was aiming right at us. I could see the tip of a little red hat atop the battery as it moved in our direction

"Hold on guys," I yelled as I pulled the multi-launcher from my inventory. I rested the heavy, already-loaded mechanism on the edge of the basket. "Fire in the hole!"

"Wait, wait!" Donut cried. "Mongo, get in your carrier!" The dinosaur refused, backing away, crying.

Three minutes until the bombs dropped. It'd take ten to twenty seconds for the missiles to reach their destination.

Jesus, we're already too late. The town is fucked if that thing falls on it, with or without bombs.

"Mongo, get in the fucking box!" I yelled.

The dinosaur screeched and complied, zapping away just as the battery on the *Wasteland* fired at us. We lurched upward with the loss of Mongo's weight. The *Wasteland* defensive battery belched with the staccato sound of a thousand rifles going off at once. A plume of smoke rose into the air as I fired off the first four missiles. I spun the sidewheel, and the balloon skirted to the side.

The outgoing missiles and the hundred incoming projectiles passed each other in the air. I winced as all four of my missiles detonated prematurely. Experience notifications flew. I slammed down on *Protective Shell* just as the round balls smashed at us. My timing was perfect. The static shield quickly flew away as we continued to rise. Blood misted in the air under us. *They're shooting living creatures*. Fucking hell.

"Get ready to jump," I cried, tossing the used launcher over the edge. I pulled the second four-missile launcher. These weren't assigned. I targeted the battery and three bombs on the underside. I aimed downward so the missiles wouldn't cross paths with the projectiles again, and I launched just as the airship's gun battery fired a second time.

"Jump," I cried.

All three of us leaped from the edge of the wicker basket just as the dozens of round balls smashed into it. I heard an enraged, screeching noise from above just before the entire world to the north exploded in a ball of white, hot fire.

Wind rushed past. It was all I could hear. I tumbled and flipped through the air, desperately searching the sky for a point of reference. I was no physics guy, but I knew we had less time than we thought. The ground would come fast. I forced myself to ignore the spinning world outside and focused on the altitude and speed indicators in my vision.

Donut: CARL, CARL, HELP I DON'T REMEMBER WHEN TO DRINK IT.

Carl: Now!

The potion was called Dolores Doesn't Splat.

When Mordecai had said, "You're not going to like it," he was not kidding.

He said it had been devised by a crocodilian crawler alchemist a long time ago while she was falling. As the legend went, this was a much-deeper pit that took almost ten minutes for her to reach the bottom. This happened during an early crawl. Something even before Odette's time. The event had become infamous and had resulted in multiple rule changes regarding the creation and brewing of potions. It was actually two potions combined. The first was something involving the breeding of rock buffalos. The second was a potion that closely mimicked Katia's Crowd Blast ability. It was designed to add extra power to an Earthquake-style attack. The only caveat was that you had to be falling at a speed greater than 200 kilometers an hour when you drank it.

When Katia cast her Crowd Blast, she was temporarily invulnerable for that fraction of a moment. She still felt pain. Things in her body still crunched and hurt. But the damage wasn't permanent or lasting.

When each of us drank the Dolores Doesn't Splat potion, it had the following effects:

First, we actually sped up. Our five seconds to impact turned to two seconds. And when each of us hit the ground, our bodies temporarily softened the surface we were hitting, allowing us to penetrate deeper than normal. This had the effect of vaporizing the sand dunes we were hitting, and in Donut's case, utterly demolishing the thorny devil mob she rocketed into.

In order to impregnate an in-heat rock buffalo, it was required for the male buffalo to penetrate his lady love five times in rapid succession. I could have gone my entire life without knowing that random fact. Unfortunately for me, Katia, and Donut, this little quirk of rock monster husbandry was now something I would never, ever forget.

We each slammed the ground with the force of a meteor, rose up fifteen feet into the air, and slammed it again. And again. Rock shattered under our bodies. We did this five times. By the time we were done, I rolled onto my back, gasping. It felt as if I'd been stepped on by Grull all over again. The air had all been knocked out of me. *No wonder Katia hates that ability so much.*

I felt a strange, flowing sensation around me. *I'm still falling.* But no, that wasn't right. It was sand, I realized, rushing past me and into the necropolis below. I pulled myself to my feet, my entire body protesting. I didn't need a health potion, but I felt as if I did. I stared dumbly downward at my feet. I was literally walking on air.

I'd hit the top of the temple, and I'd broken through, demolishing a section of the necropolis roof. Because I wasn't yet allowed out of the quadrant, the quadrant border was keeping me from falling further. I was standing atop the barrier. The sand all around me had no such restrictions, and it continued to fall into the dark hole.

Katia: Are you guys okay?

To my left, I could hear Donut bitching as she pulled herself out of her hole. Not too far away, a loud explosion rocked the world.

Only then did I look to the smoke-filled sky. But before I could see, a notification appeared.

The notification sounded oddly disappointed. I wasn't certain why.

Quest Complete. Squeeze out the Juice Box.

So, if we're being technical here, you "won" the quest. You "saved" Hump Town from the bombardment. Congratulations. If I was allowed to upgrade your prize, I would. Maybe. I dunno. Actually, you know what? No. No I wouldn't. Fuck you.

***Reward*: You've received a Platinum Quest Box!**

I pulled myself out of the hole just as another portion of the airship crashed. The massive chunk of metal exploded off the edge of the bowl, half of it cascading down the side of the ridge, the other half falling away and toward the land quadrant. The sky was just a black cloud, and I could not see how much of it we'd gotten. Black, flaming fireflies of debris fell like rain.

Gwen: Holy hell, what is going on up there? First the ocean half drains all away, and now the sky is on fire.

I turned my attention to Hump Town, which was only a quarter of a mile away. To my relief, the town was mostly intact. Mostly. A huge chunk of something had landed onto the west end of town, close to where the Toe was located. Part of the wall had collapsed.

The sail that covered the town was torn in multiple places. The smoke from a hundred fires rose into the air. As I watched, the anti-aircraft guns in one of the towers fired at an airplane that had managed to separate from the dreadnaught. The airplane banked away and disappeared into the smoke.

Katia and Donut approached. Donut rode the back of Mongo who was snapping at the flying embers.

We wordlessly looked up at the sky, waiting for the smoke to clear. The sound of at least a dozen airplanes continued to rip through the air, so we knew something was still up there. A huge hunk of debris, trailed by an enormous, half-deflated balloon, crashed far to the south. The ground rocked.

"That was one of the main balloons," Katia said.

I pulled the farseer and tried to see through the clouds. Finally, the smoke dissipated long enough for me to get a good view.

"Hello there," I said to the undefended building, no bigger than a regular house. It hung, attached to a single balloon, which had risen all the way to the ceiling of the bubble. The sight reminded me of that Pixar movie with the kid and the old dude in the flying house.

"Well, we didn't get the castle. But we broke all the armor off it."

The balloon continued to move north, past the edge of the bowl's ridge. I zoomed tighter, focusing on the gnome standing at the building's doorway. It wasn't Commandant Kane, but a young woman. Actually, a child. Probably about ten years old. She stood holding a farseer and was looking in my direction. I raised my hand to wave. She turned and went back into the house. In the short moment the door was open, I saw another gnome. This was the Commandant. It looked like it was just him and his daughter.

"We can hit it with another missile after it flies over the bowl," Katia said. "That'll drop the stairwell to the surface."

"Maybe," I said. "But I think I want to get up there and take it the old-fashioned way."

"Why?" She still had duct tape all up and down her body.

I pulled the fake pocket watch from my inventory and tossed it to her. "Henrik has one, Commandant Kane has one, and I'm pretty sure there's a third, and the Mad Dune Mage guy has it. If that's the

case, I think all three of the watches come together somehow to make that artifact. The Gate of the Feral Gods."

"You don't even know what it does," she said.

"I know it's a celestial-equivalent item," I said. "And it shouldn't be available this early. They don't put this stuff in here to be ignored. I want it. First we're going to take the watch from Henrik, then we're going to get to that castle, take the throne room and take the watch from Kane, and then we're going to get the third and final piece from the mage."

She looked at me dubiously. "You know we just barely survived this, right?"

"Carl, Carl, I just got my benefactor box!" Donut said. "Also, I went up yet another level to 36. I think we might've killed a lot of gnomes."

"We did," I said, looking in the direction of the last bit of the *Wasteland*, barely holding onto life. I couldn't see it with my naked eye, but I sensed it there. I'd gone up two levels to 43, and I was on the precipice of 44. I wondered just how many gnomes we'd just killed.

Zev: Hey guys! Wow, that was fantastic. Great job. Your social numbers are looking great!

Donut: ZEV! OH MY GOD I MISSED YOU! WHEN CAN I SEE YOU?

Zev: Sorry, Crawler Donut. I'm just your social media manager now. I will be able to give you tips on how the audience is feeling, but Administrator Loita is now in charge of all public appearances. You are not able to message me directly unless I open the chat.

Donut: ARE YOU OKAY?

Zev: I've never been better. Thank you for your concern, Donut. Carl, the audience is noting that you're being short with the other crawlers. By short, I mean extra angry. You might wish to tone that down a bit. Katia, your numbers are rising steadily. Good job. Donut, people want more Mongo action. You're keeping him cooped up too much. Plus you

haven't used your new spells yet except once. When you get new loot, people expect you to use it.

Donut looked up at me, concern etched on her face.

Donut: OKAY WE WILL. WHY CAN'T I MESSAGE YOU?

Zev: It's not necessary, crawler. Don't worry, I will let you know if there are any additional areas of concern. Now get back out there and kill, kill, kill!

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[13]

Instead of meeting up with the others in the Bactrian ruins, we limped our way back to Hump Town. Above, dozens of airplanes and airships continued to angrily harass the air defenses of the city, but without the threat of high-altitude bombardment, the multiple anti-air guns were equal to the task. The gnomes were on borrowed time. Some were already landing on the far side of the bowl. I noted that several were flying up and above the lip of the bowl and then disappearing, presumably to seek a landing spot somewhere on the land quadrant. I sent a warning to Gwen.

Without protection and shelter, the surviving gnomes would be hard-pressed to make it through the next day.

Donut was worried about Zev, and it was doubly frustrating, I knew, because she couldn't talk about it. Not out loud and not over chat. I reached over and stroked her back. Her entire body was stiff.

I flipped through my achievements as we trudged back to town. Despite everything we'd done, I hadn't received much. There was only one achievement of note:

New Achievement! Cannonball!

You fell from a great height, and you survived! You know who else fell from a…? You know what, never mind. Fuck you.

***Reward*: You've received a Silver Skydiver's Box! Not that you deserve it you little punk.**

The system AI was always fluctuating back and forth from adoring to outright hostile, but this was the moodiest I'd ever seen, and I didn't know why. Sure, the thing was bipolar at best and psychotic the rest of the time, but ever since we'd blown the *Wasteland* to hell there was just something off with it.

That was not good.

As we approached the gates of Hump Town, keeping our heads low to avoid detection from the airplanes, we started to notice multiple X's on the map. These were gnomes who'd fallen from the *Wasteland* when it had broken up. Most of them exploded like tomatoes upon impact, but a few here and there were intact enough that we could loot their bodies. Most didn't have much on them. Donut was going around collecting their little red hats. I picked up a few intact bodies to add to my ever-growing graveyard. I looted some tools, lots of broken hunks of metal and cogs and springs, plus the odd gold coin and little bits of unenchanted armor here and there.

All of them said the same thing. **Dirigible Gnome Corpse – Killed by falling from a great height with an assist by the Crawler Bitch Boy Carl**.

"What did you do?" Katia asked. "I'm starting to get more than a little worried about this."

"I don't know," I said, "but hopefully it gets over it soon." I looked up into the air. "I don't know what I did, but I promise it wasn't on purpose."

"This is just like with you and Miss Beatrice," Donut said. "Do you remember that time she made you sleep on the couch for a week and wouldn't tell you why she was mad?"

"I do remember," I said. I shrugged. "I think it was because I'd bought the wrong type of coffee pods. I ended up beating *Fallout* because of it."

Donut laughed. "It was because she'd read an article that said big fights make relationships stronger, and sometimes they cause guys to propose."

Katia shook her head. "That does not sound healthy. Not that I'm one to judge."

We came across a group of three intact corpses, all gnomish snipers. All three had their giant rifles with them, but only one of the weapons wasn't broken. They all also wore the bandoliers over their shoulders. The little balls on all the bandoliers were gone except on one gnome who'd landed on his back. His was still unbroken with five grenade balls. Donut jumped forward, looted the good rifle along with their little red hats. She made a face, and then she looted the good bandolier.

"Carl," Donut said a moment later. "I believe I figured it out. It appears you have given the system AI a case of… what is the term? Oh yes, I believe it is called 'blue balls.'"

"What? What do you mean?"

She dropped the bandolier at my feet, and I picked it up.

I examined one of the fist-sized grenade balls. I was confused for a moment, but then I finally understood.

Live Ammo Ball.

Live ammo balls are a common and versatile ranged weapon of the Dirigible Gnomes. These round, clamshell spheres are designed to be fired great distances using a gnomish Tickle Stick, or they may be manually lobbed like a grenade. They are also fired in large clusters from anti-aircraft point defense batteries. Just be glad you're not in charge of cleaning up *that* mess.

A living, usually angry, creature is placed inside the ball, and the ball opens upon impact with the target. The stasis field keeps the creature within safe from injury until the ball is opened.

These balls are similar in technology to pet carriers. As such, any mobs stored within are able to be placed within one's inventory. Balls may be recycled if the mechanism doesn't break upon impact. They usually break upon impact.

This ball contains:

Frenzied Gerbil. Level 11.

I groaned. Every single ball contained the same thing. A goddamned frenzied gerbil.

During that last battle, there were multiple instances when I'd almost been hit with one of these balls. First, Crixus the sniper had thrown one at me, but it missed and sailed over the edge. Then a sniper from one of the other airships had fired and missed. And then the *Wasteland* had blasted a hundred of them at us. Each time, the balls had overflown their mark.

I remembered Ralph, the boss from the second floor. He was also a frenzied gerbil. It was right before we'd found Mongo in that prize room. The system AI had been particularly… excited about how I had killed the creature.

"Fuck me," I said as I fully realized what was going on.

The AI had wanted me to get hit with the gerbil ball. It wanted me to fight one. It wanted me to kill it by smushing it with my foot. I looked at the five balls hanging off the belt like fist-sized Christmas ornaments. I swallowed. *Go ahead*, I thought. *Drop one on the ground*. *They're only level 11. Easy to kill on their own*. I suddenly felt dirty, and I hadn't even done anything yet.

No, I thought. *Fuck you*. There was only so much a person could take.

I became aware that Donut was loudly explaining to Katia what was going on, since our boss battle with Ralph had been before we'd met up with her.

"…And after he squished down on poor Ralph with his foot, the whole dungeon shook like Carl used to after he went on that website that gave his computer a virus. And we'd received a prize room after that, and that's where we found Mongo. Right, Mongo?"

Mongo waved his arms and screeched in agreement.

"The dungeon did the same thing when Carl got stomped on by Grull," Katia said. She appeared to be half amused, half horrified.

"Oh that was nothing compared to the first time. You know, I always thought its infatuation with our Carl was a good thing," Donut said, "but if the AI is going to throw a temper tantrum every time Carl doesn't wrap his tootsies around a furry little creature, it's going to be a problem. Carl, we should start stocking up on squish-sized creatures so you can sacrifice one every morning. At least now we have a five-pack of gerbils. Maybe you should do two at the same

time. You know, to make sure everyone is back to being happy with one another again. It'd be almost like having a threesome. On *Gossip Girl,* there was this one episode where Dan and…"

"No," I said, interrupting. "No fucking way. Fuck the consequences. I am absolutely not going…"

"Guys," Katia said. "We have incoming. A lot of incoming."

I looked up at the map just as the red wave of dots appeared. There were thousands of them. Where had they come from?

"They're gerbils," Donut said, her voice in awe. "Wow. That's a lot of them."

"Goddamnit," I said. "Goddamnit to hell." I realized what had happened. With all the gnomish snipers and *Wasteland* chunks raining from the sky, there were likely hundreds, if not thousands, of those ammo balls up there. They were designed to survive heavy impacts. *Holy shit they're moving fast*. They'd likely all been released and then found each other. Now that they'd regrouped, they were coming in hot.

"Carl," said Donut, "I don't think your friend up in the sky is going to take 'no' for an answer."

"Fuck me," I said as we rushed toward the main gate.

"Carl, they're cheating!" Donut cried after ten solid minutes of fighting. A gerbil launched itself at me, and I cried out as it attached itself to my neck. I grasped it with my gauntlet and squeezed before it could burrow. It exploded in my hand. "They keep coming and coming."

Donut cast *Wall of Fire* just as the next wave of gerbils shot at our defensive line. That ended up being a mistake.

The little bastards could launch themselves through the air, and when they passed through Donut's magical fire, they ignited, turning into miniature, gnashing fireballs. The fire killed the attackers, eventually, but not before they attached to the chests of the camel defenders, catching them on fire in the process.

We'd been pushed all the way back to the entrance of Weird Shit Alley. The town's walls had too many holes to properly defend, so we'd run through the main gates, screaming for the defenders to fall back. There were just too many of them. Even though the screeching little fuckers were only level 11, they could burrow themselves straight into flesh and eat their way out through to the other side.

The dromedarians were forced to abandon their anti-air guns to meet the creatures. But the things never stopped coming. All around us, camels fought and fell.

Katia converted to her tank form with the shield on her arm and her crossbow over her head while I tossed hob-lobbers into the street using my xistera, killing dozens of them at a time. Mongo and two clockwork versions roared and snapped and crunched on the gerbils. A camel fired a rocket into the carpet of monsters only to be overwhelmed a moment later.

"Don't swallow them whole," I warned Mongo. I remembered a danger dingo had done that once, and it hadn't ended well for the dingo.

I punched then punted another gerbil. I had to be careful with the timing of my attacks. The monsters' mouths opened bigger than should be possible, and they could get their physics-defying jaws around my entire fist if I wasn't careful.

Donut was right. There were too many of these things. These weren't just from the wreckage. They were being generated. This was a punishment. *Goddamnit.* If this continued, we were going to lose the town. "Fuck you," I growled up into the air. "Fuck you to hell."

I tossed a smoke curtain followed by a pair of hob-lobbers. I stepped over the hastily-constructed barricade and waded out toward the street. "Everyone stay back," I called.

"Carl, Carl, what are you doing?" Donut yelled.

I extended my left arm shield. I caught a flying gerbil with the auto-buckler, and it fell hard to the ground, blinded and dazed. I was too tired to fight it anymore.

I stepped down on the squirming gerbil.

"This is not so funny anymore," Katia said, looking over the mass of gerbil corpses. The bewildered camels moved back to the walls and the anti-aircraft guns, though it appeared all of the remaining airplanes had made emergency landings. All that was left was a handful of balloons, and most of those were making their way up and over the bowl, leaving the area.

"It was never funny," I replied. I had blood up to my kneepads. I'd stepped on and smushed at least fifty of the things before the wave had stopped, as suddenly as it had started. I needed a shower. A long shower.

"It was a little funny," she said. "But the AI is not even trying to be fair anymore. That wasn't just a temper tantrum. That was the equivalent of a psycho ex-boyfriend going nuts and trying to murder you and your entire family because of something you didn't even know you did."

I nodded. I had a new achievement. I was the only one who'd received it. I was afraid to click on it. I did anyway.

New Achievement! You're the reason why daddy drinks!

You have, for an unspecified reason, raised the ire of the System AI. You have corrected the issue, and everything is back to normal. The acceleration action has been suspended. This time.

Good boy.

***Reward*: You've received a Gold Makeup Sex is the Best Sex box.**

You're not going to break me. Fuck you all. I will break you.

"Acceleration?" Katia said after I read the description to the others. "My original game guide mentioned that before."

"Yeah," I said. "We've been threatened with it a few times. That… that really sucked."

"You didn't even do anything wrong," she said, shaking her head.

"At least you two are back together now," Donut said. "And you got a nice box out of it. I know you find it unpleasant, Carl. But you being stubborn about this is causing everything to be more dangerous. We have to kill these things anyway, so if the AI wants you to kill in a certain way, I don't see why it matters. This is just like one of those agility courses that Miss Beatrice used to insist I complete at all the regional cat shows. I did not like doing it, and I never ribboned of course, but I knew if I did well, I would get an extra brushing that evening. We are all prostitutes in one way or another, I suppose. "

"I…" I was too tired to argue. "Let's go let everyone out of the personal space. I need a nap."

Louis and the others had made it to the Bactrian ruins and were searching the remains for loot and any other signs of life, including other crawlers. So far they'd found nothing except a single saferoom that was abandoned but still useable and a caved-in Club Vanquisher entrance that was useless anyway because nobody in the group had a pass. They were going to spend the rest of the day grinding and searching. They'd weather the sand storm in the saferoom before returning. In the meantime, we'd open our boxes and reset and then formulate a new plan to get into the now-undefended castle.

The camels went to work repairing the wall, putting out fires, and mending the fabric cover for the sand storm. The changelings, Donut noted, were all but gone from the ranks of the camels. I hadn't thought about it during the chaotic fight with the gerbils, but all of the fallen had been true dromedarians. She didn't see any of the changeling principals about, including Henrik.

The Toe had been mostly destroyed. A massive chunk of *Wasteland* had taken out the whole block. Luckily we could still go through the front door and enter the personal space. I'd been worried that if we'd lost the entrance here, all the NPCs still inside would be stuck.

The dromedarian children were in the middle of watching *Toy Story 3* when we entered, and they insisted on finishing it before they left. For some of these kids, their parents were likely now dead. They probably needed to get back out there. But I didn't have the

heart or energy to say no, so I left them alone. *Let them have their movie*, I thought. Juice Box sat upon the kitchen counter, chatting away with Mordecai while the cleaner bot zipped about the room, clicking and beeping angrily, cleaning juice stains.

"They're all gone," I said to Juice Box as we all settled in. "Henrik disappeared soon after the *Wasteland* fell."

She shrugged. "I am not a principal. Those guys have their own thing going on. They're probably in the necropolis looking for that ghost. I don't know what they're going to do when they find her since you killed off the flesh mechanic, but those guys are crazy."

"The temple is flooding with water. They're not going to get very far."

She just looked at me. "They're changelings. The water will be no problem." She hopped off the table. "Now I better get out there and see how much of the town you three blew up."

After we'd won that last quest, we'd all received a charisma bonus when dealing with changelings. I could already see the effects. We needed to talk more with Juice Box regarding this whole storyline with Henrik and the ghost in the necropolis, but first she needed to get out there and see we had indeed saved the town. I watched her head outside.

I had three boxes to open, Donut had three, and Katia had two. Juice Box had left, but the horde of children remained, all glued to the screen. All three of us received the same Silver Skydiver's box, and all three of them contained the same thing. Three potions of Half Splat.

Mordecai grunted. "Keep those in your hotlist until you can get a real Featherfall, but they're not that great. They'll keep you from dying via falling damage, but you'll be at 5% health after you hit the ground."

"They're still better than that Dolores Doesn't Splat potion," I grumbled.

"Hey now," Mordecai said. "That potion is genius. It may not be pleasant, but your health was still at 100% when you landed."

I grumbled as I opened my next box. The Gold Makeup Sex is the Best Sex box.

"What is this?" I asked, picking up the group of items. It was a sheet of paper and a quill pen. There was also a little jar that was capped and filled with black ink.

"Odd," Mordecai said, leaning in to examine the prize. "These aren't rare, but they're pricey. They're used by scholar and arcanist classes who focus on scroll production. You'll never have the proper skills to use this beyond a rudimentary level. If you can figure out how to write some basic scrolls, maybe you can make some money." He shrugged. "I can use it, but I'm much better at potions. Besides, I can buy a writing table and be much more efficient. Your best bet is to just sell the set."

The last of my boxes was the platinum quest box. I held my breath as I opened it. I needed something good. Everything I'd been getting lately was either weird or something I couldn't use just yet.

The box opened. It contained 5,000 gold coins, twenty healing scrolls, and a little black rock.

"Excellent," Mordecai said. "Good, good. This was what I was talking about earlier. You're starting to get items that will enhance your existing items. You have to use it now. This is for your gauntlet. All three of you are likely to get something like this."

I examined the black rock.

Platinum Sharpening Stone.

Warning: This item has a short shelf life.

Apply this to any spiked offensive weapon to receive the following buffs.

Plus (2 x current level)% damage to all attacks.

Plus 1 to all current stat buffs. Does not add new buffs if they do not exist.

It also makes the weapon look extra oily and mean looking. In other words, the weapon's appearance may change. But only a little.

Since the item had a short shelf life, I had to apply it right away. I formed my gauntlet and rubbed the rock it along the spikes. The whole thing glowed. The actual spikes grew a little longer. I received an extra point of dexterity and another to strength when the gauntlet was formed.

I examined the other prize, the paper and inkwell, as Katia opened her Platinum box.

Coffee Shop Author Kit.

Alcoholism and crippling self-doubt not included.

So you want to be a writer. It started with sappy poetry in middle school. You soon graduated to Naruto fanfiction. By the time you crash landed face-first into adulthood, your brain swelled with the misguided notion that your shitty novel with a self-insert protagonist sporting a traumatic childhood would change the world. Spoiler alert. Nobody is going to read your autobiography disguised as a space vampire and minotaur romance. You and every other half-wit out there with a nearby Starbucks and a laptop is writing the same bile. What you're really doing is inadvertently live-blogging the story of human mediocrity, and the universe is now a better place that the Syndicate has put a stop to it all.

Anyway, this is a magical sheet of paper. You will find you now have a second tab on your scratchpad in your interface. You can write something on this paper, and it will appear in the scratchpad and vice versa. If the proper spell and glyphs are accurately copied onto this paper, you can present the sheet at a market kiosk, and a scroll will appear for sale. Or if you have a printing press, you can make your own scrolls. Or even your own tome if you think you have the chops.

I panicked at the mention of a second tab in my scratchpad. I already had a secret second one thanks to my cookbook. But thankfully I now had three tabs, with the cookbook tab being the last. I relaxed and turned my attention back to the paper.

"I'm confused. I can just write out a scroll, and it'll let me put a copy for sale in the market?" I asked, looking at the blank magical scroll. "How many can I sell? Will I lose this paper?"

"Writing your own scroll requires skills you don't have," Mordecai said. "It'd take a week of practice just to write a simple *Light* scroll. Potions are much better, especially this season with the unlimited inventory. The only advantage is that you can sell unlimited scrolls in the market as long as you keep the spell written on the magical sheet. Once you erase it from your scratchpad, it's gone from the market. You can get a printing press table and make your own scrolls, or you can set the price as low as it'll let you and buy your own scrolls from the market. I saw one guy do that last season with *Fireball* scripts. Actually, that worked out really well for him. Turns out if you use the same scroll more than 200 times, you learn the spell."

I went to the new tab and wrote, "Does this work?"

The magical pen rose into the air as the top popped off the ink well. The pen dipped within and wrote out "Does this work?" I drew a rudimentary cat portrait, and the pen copied my work.

Donut looked at the cat art with distaste. "Am I a joke to you, Carl?"

I laughed as I deleted the image in the scratchpad, and it faded away from the paper.

"This is both cool and completely useless," I said.

"The ink isn't bottomless, so don't play with it too much," Mordecai added.

"Carl, are you quite done? I have a very important box to open, and you promised you'd watch me do it. And we still have to learn what Katia had gotten!" Donut said impatiently. She had her benefactor box from Veriluxx RealPet Companions. The one that Loita had said wasn't a real box, but a "product sample."

In addition to the same basic items, Katia received a single crossbow bolt. "It replaces the free, unlimited basic ammo the crossbow normally comes with. It adds armor piercing and adds damage based on my level."

"That's pretty cool," I said, putting all my new gear into my inventory. I turned to Donut. "Let's see what you got."

"Oh, goodie!" She hopped up and down a few times, her tail swishing back and forth. She'd removed her sunglasses, and her eyes gleamed. "Now remember, Carl. We have a television program to go on in a few days where we review the product. So pay careful attention. I do hope it's an accessory for Mongo."

Mongo screeched in agreement.

The benefactor box opened, and we all just stood there, staring at what popped out.

Katia burst out laughing.

It was Donut. A toy, robot Donut.

The cat hopped out of the box, took a few steps out onto the table and started licking her paw in a stilted, mechanical manner. She was about ¾'s the size of the real deal, and her fur was wrong, like she was made out of rat hair. The thing looked to be made with technology only slightly advanced from where we were from before the collapse. Definitely not on the same level as the planet-destroying, dungeon-making Syndicate. The mini-Donut looked up at the room and said with a voice that wasn't even close, "I sure do like lasagna. I hate Mondays, Carl." The cat resumed licking itself.

Donut continued staring at the thing open-mouthed as I examined its properties. The voice describing it was not the system AI, but a slightly-static, pre-recording of a deep voice that sounded like it came straight from a 1980's toy commercial.

Veriluxx RealPet Dungeon Crawl Special Edition Exclusive.

"Princess Donut the Queen Anne Chonk."

Dungeon Crawler World: Earth.

The ultimate play toy, Veriluxx RealPet Companions are budget-friendly, nearly indestructible collectibles that will give your child hours and hours of fun. Because these interactive toys do not require an implant certificate to play with and enjoy, parents needn't worry about how many hours their children are spending with their new best friends!

Mix and match! They fight! They love! They will share your deepest, darkest secrets! Each Veriluxx RealPet Companion is a fully licensed depiction of your favorite personality or creature. The onboard AI comes preprogrammed with a 100% accurate and realistic persona, and it will learn as it goes. It's like having a real pet, but better! Available on the Syndicate Trade Network. Mongo companion sold separately.

Veriluxx. For the children.

Action-grip Hekatonkheires coming soon!

"Lasagna?" Mordecai asked.

"It's Garfield," Katia said. "It's like they didn't have enough Donut material, so they mixed her with the Garfield comic strip."

The robot cat sniffed about the air. "Ferdinand?" She looked at Mongo. "You're not Ferdinand."

Ruby, the deformed, armless changeling was sitting nearby, eyes glued to the television screen, but she turned now as the robot approached her. She was in her weird, blank changeling form. She made a muted, terrified squeal and ran from the table.

"Hey kid, it's not going to hurt you. It's a talking toy. Just like in the movie," Mordecai said, moving away to go talk to her.

Donut still had not said anything. She remained where she'd opened the box, stiff as a board.

"Uh, Donut," I asked. "You doing okay?"

"I'm sorry, Carl," the robot said, her head turning 180 degrees to look back at me. "The void is wet and hungry."

"Not you," I said to the weird robot. "Donut?"

Donut finally looked up, her yellow eyes shining. "They… they made a doll out of me, Carl. It's merch. I have merch. This is the greatest thing that has ever happened since I won Grand Champion Best in Show last year in Cleveland."

Mongo continued to sniff at the imposter cat.

"Are you a cocker spaniel?" the robot asked the dinosaur. The toy hissed and swished its tail at Mongo. "Cocker spaniels deserve to have their corpses desecrated."

Mongo screeched.

"No, bad Mongo! Bad!" Donut cried, but it was too late. Mongo chomped the robot on the head, decapitating it. The body seized up and fell onto its side, smoke rising from within. The whole thing flashed and then caught on fire. The cleaner bot zipped over, beeping angrily and doused it with white foam.

I fell over with laughter.

"So much for being 'nearly-indestructible,'" Katia said.

Donut sniffed and poked the still-smoldering remains. Mongo continued to look indignant. A static shock burst out, striking Donut on the nose, and she howled.

"This is most certainly going into my review."

Donut's platinum quest box contained the same thing her last platinum quest box contained. A pair of fang caps and a skill potion. She promptly drank the potion down, and it added three points to her Animal Wrangling skill, bringing it up to eight.

The last set of fang caps had given Mongo a damage buff and the ability to add a few debuffs like poison and paralyze, though neither seemed to happen often. Usually the mobs were dead if the dinosaur got to the point where he was chomping down on them. These two additional caps added 15% movement speed and 15% strength to the level-29 dinosaur. Once again, Donut made me place them on the dinosaur's teeth. He had a little piece of robot Donut in there I had to fish out.

After, I spent some time cleaning up the rest of the dead robot while Donut grumbled and complained. "I will not have my merch published by a company who puts out a shoddy product. I can't wait to give them an earful."

"Yeah," I said. "We should probably tell them not to use the Garfield thing, either. I'm not so sure they were using… official Garfield sources for their AI."

The movie finally ended, and the children reluctantly filed out of the space and back into the real world. Their version of it, at least. I

walked them out while Donut remained inside. Katia and Mordecai were about to go to the Desperado to pick up some more supplies. We had to prepare for the assault on the floating house.

"Can we come back tomorrow and watch another movie?" Skarn asked as we left.

"Maybe," I said, distracted. I looked up in the air. The town's covering was half up, and the dromedarians worked desperately to repair the rest of it before the next sandstorm. Through one of the many empty spaces, I looked up into the sky. I couldn't see it without the telescope I'd stolen from the kid, but I sensed it there. The remains of the castle. I sighed.

I was so preoccupied, I didn't see the blue dot approach.

"Hello, Carl," a deep, rumbly voice said.

I turned to look at the tall rock monster. He looked similar to the guards at the Desperado, but he was made of red and black lava rocks. He had a whole mess of boss kills over his head and a trio of player killer skulls. The last time I'd seen him, he'd been magic-based. It appeared that he'd switched focus. He had a large, glowing spear hanging over his shoulder.

"Hello, Chris," I replied. "I'm glad to see you."

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[14]

I STARED UP AT THE LEVEL 35 CREATURE AS THE CHILDREN ALL MOVED OFF. He towered over me, standing at least seven and a half feet tall. I examined his properties.

Crawler #324,116. "Chris Andrews 2"
Level 35.
Race: Igneous.
Class: Zulu Warrior.

Every time he moved, it sounded like rocks scraping together. I could feel the heat coming off him, like the center of his body was molten. He'd probably set Donut's heat vision haywire. Chris returned my gaze, and I couldn't read his expressionless face. His intense eyes were burning lumps of coal.

"How did you get here so fast?" I finally asked.

"I was in the water quadrant. There was a giant submarine called the *Akula*. We had to break in, and it was filled with robots. There was a bugbear head in a jar with mechanical spider legs, and we woke it up by accident." He grunted. "It's a long story. I smashed the glass, and that was it. We took the bridge, and it was over. But as soon as we did, the sub fired a torpedo right into the side of the mountain, and everything started getting sucked into the hole. Water started to fill the sub, so we had to run. We had three escape hatches. They were missile launch tubes, one leading to each of the other quadrants. The only other two survivors got in the tube that leads to the land quadrant, but I couldn't fit with them. I didn't want

to go into the tunnels, so I came here. It fired me in the air, and I landed on a giant sand dune. It was wild. I thought for sure I was going to get broken into a million pieces. I landed here and I was heading toward this town when you—I'm assuming it was you—blew that giant thing out of the sky."

I nodded. All of that made sense in the context of what I knew about the water quadrant.

I sent a quick note to Donut, Mordecai, Katia, and Imani, telling them what was happening. I told Donut to remain inside for now until I could get a sense of his state of mind. Katia and Mordecai were almost at the Desperado, about to purchase some supplies. We still hadn't slept.

I couldn't stop thinking about Odette's cryptic warning.

Donut: MY VIEWERS ARE SPIKING REALLY HIGH. CHECK YOURS. SOMETHING IS HAPPENING.

I never actually kept track of what the average view count was, which, I was realizing now, was a mistake. Donut actually had the little needle up at all times on her interface. I rarely went into the relevant tab. I needed to stop being so stubborn about it because it was a good indicator that shit was about to go down.

Katia: I just received an emergency benefactor box. A silver one. We're going to open it up in the other safe room. The one in Weird Shit Alley. It's closer.

Carl: Is it from the Squim Conglomerate?

Katia: No. From Princess Formidable.

Mordecai: It's an emergency box. She needs to open it now. That box probably cost the princess a sizeable chunk of her net worth. We'll keep you updated.

A chill rushed over me. What was going on? This was Chris. Surely he couldn't have changed *that* much. I was on full alert, but I didn't feel ready. If something was about to happen, I wasn't prepared for it. I'd already used up my daily *Protective Shell* while we were falling from the *Wasteland* attack. I hadn't felt this tense about another player since we'd had the fight with Hekla. I hated this. I hated not being able to trust someone who was supposed to be my friend.

And what was worse, I didn't know why. I had no idea what was happening.

"Chris," I began. "I… why haven't you spoken to anybody? Imani is really worried about you." I didn't want to bring up his brother now, but we had to get it out of the way. I needed to hear his answer. "And your brother. Surely you know what happened."

Chris waved a big, rocky hand. "I take damage if I use the chat feature, so I do not waste time or energy using it."

"What?" I asked. "That doesn't make sense. It's part of the system interface."

He shrugged. "It comes with being an igneous. I can't pull things in and out of inventory or go into my health pie chart, either, without losing health. I got it in exchange for having a very high constitution."

"I've never heard of that. That can't be normal. We'll talk to Mordecai, our manager. We'll see if we can figure out what's going on and if there's a way to fix it. I'll message Imani, too. We'll all figure it out together. Your friends and family are worried about you."

"My family is dead," he said. "It doesn't matter. Family and friends make you weak. Having someone to care over and protect makes you vulnerable. You taught me that."

"*I* taught you? How?" Jesus. If he didn't have the name floating over him, I'd never guess this was the same guy. Imani wasn't kidding when she said the race change had affected his personality.

He didn't answer the question. "We are wasting time. You haven't taken the castle yet. Is it still aloft? Where is the cat? We will go hunt it down together."

"Donut is in the saferoom. Come on, we'll go in together and talk."

I needed to get him into the saferoom where I wouldn't have to worry about anybody doing something stupid.

"I don't like saferooms," he said after a moment. He looked up into the air. "Is the castle still there? How are you going to take it out? Another missile?"

"No," I said. "We're going to fly up there and storm it the old-fashioned way."

Carl: There's something wrong with him. He's acting squirrelly. I think he's about to attack me.

Imani: He can fire lava out of his body. Be careful. Try not to hurt him.

I needed to keep him talking. "Let me ask you something, Chris. Why did you kill Frank?"

"You heard about that, huh?"

A human appeared and stopped between us, her hands on her hips. "Who's the stud?" she asked, looking Chris up and down.

"Juice Box," I said, "meet Chris."

"You're a big 'un," she said, practically purring the words. "Sexy." She put her hand on his rocky arm, and then jerked it away as if she'd been shocked. "Hot, too," she said after a moment. She took a step back and turned to me. "Well, you said you'd save the town. I guess you did. We lost some camels, but not nearly as many as I feared. The place is a mess, and my house is wrecked. But my people are mostly safe, and for that, I'm grateful."

I nodded, not removing my eyes from Chris who was looking down at where she'd touched him. "You owe me a discussion about your fellow changelings. That was the deal. After I'm done talking with my friend here, we should sit down and go over what you know."

"The Spit and Swallow is still in one piece," Juice Box said. "We can all go in there and talk about Quetzalcoatlus and why my brother is so desperate to get his hand on the ghost." She returned her gaze to Chris. "You can bring these two guys. We can all party afterward." She suddenly grabbed my hand. "Carl, let's go now."

Chris shook his large head. "I really wish you hadn't said that."

"Two?" I asked, confused.

"It's funny," Chris said after a moment. "When I first got here to this floor, I thought for sure I was dead. But it was easy, you know, to take out the submarine. I don't think that flying castle will be so hard, either. I see all those airplanes parked over there. There are hot air balloons now sitting in the desert. I'm starting to think this whole floor is easier than it should be."

"I'm glad you're confident," I replied, taking another step back. Juice Box's grip on my wrist was like a shackle.

"But the more hope I have, the more conflicted I get. Seeing you… I think I finally made up my mind. I keep going back and forth, but all of a sudden I am resolved. I don't want to get out of here anymore. Isn't that funny? It's like I have a choice now. I can choose to not live like this."

"Chris," I said. "I don't know what the fuck is going on. Brandon left a message for you. Let's go sit down and talk about it."

"Come on," Juice Box said, pulling. Her grip was surprisingly strong.

"I actually have two daughters," Chris said. "You only know about the one, but there's another. She's older. From my first marriage. She was home, so she died in the collapse. Our game guide when we first got in here, he told us all about it. He said she might come back. People who die in the collapse aren't really dead, but they're put in storage. Only you can't save them. I think about that a lot. They bring them out sometimes, but it's never for good. They can be changed. They force you to kill them on the deeper floors. He told me about a crawler that was forced to face down his whole family. He killed himself instead."

I felt a chill wash over me.

"I wasn't aware you had any children, Chris," I said. "And your game guide is a woman. Her name is Mistress Tiatha."

"I can't kill anybody else in my family, Carl. I can't."

It hit me, then. All at once. I cursed myself for not seeing it. This wasn't Chris.

This was Maggie. Maggie My. But how?

"You're a changeling. Or a doppelganger," I said, taking another step back.

"No," Juice Box said. "She ain't no changeling. She's worse."

"No," Maggie-Chris agreed. She suddenly had a round, spiked ball in her hand. "I was waiting for the cat to come out, but she's too much of a coward I guess. They promised me if I did it this way, they wouldn't…"

The crossbow bolt slammed into Maggie's head, and she dropped, crashing heavily to the street. The ball in her hand hit the ground and started to roll away. I dived for it, dislodging myself from Juice Box's grip. It wasn't a bomb. I didn't know what it was, but I instinctively grabbed it and tossed it into my inventory before it could do anything.

I scrambled to my feet, fist forming.

The Chris/Maggie creature wasn't dead. The rock creature had a strange status over their head. **Petrified.** There was a sixty second timer, counting down.

"What the shit?" I said. "What the flying fucking fuck?"

Katia came jogging up as Donut burst from the saferoom. I could see Mordecai down the street, also approaching. We all surrounded her. Him. Chris. Whatever he was. Multiple people from town came to surround the body. Several of the changelings reached down to touch the rock creature. One of the young changelings approached, but one of the older ones held the child back.

"I got it in my box," Katia said, indicating her crossbow. She was out of breath. "A set of ten bolts of Petrify Rock Class."

"Goddamnit," I said, looking down at the prone form of the rock creature. Its eyes still moved back and forth. She was conscious, but she couldn't move. What choice did we have? "We're going to have to kill her."

"Her?" Katia asked.

"It's Maggie. Frank's wife. The one that's been hunting us since the first floor."

Donut hissed. "Maggie My! The vile killer?" She jumped to the rock creature's chest, but she howled at the heat and jumped over. "Where's Chris?" she yelled at the prone form. "What did you do to Chris?"

Katia looked perplexed. "Why would they give me bolts to just petrify her instead of kill her then? Mordecai says these are more expensive than just the regular ones."

"We can have Mongo kill her," Donut said, jumping to my shoulder. "That way we don't get skulls."

"Wait," Juice Box said, brushing herself off. I realized I'd tossed her aside when I'd dived for the ball thing. "You don't want to hurt him."

Imani: Stop! Stop! I just got a message from Chris!

Carl: It's not him.

Imani: No. It is! He's petrified. He's going to lose consciousness again when his body wakes up. He's being controlled!

The timer was at thirty seconds.

"Boy, you do not know how to take a hint," Juice Box said. She poked at the prone creature with her foot. "Next time I'll just spit it out. You're friends with the rock guy, right?"

"I'm friends with a guy named Chris," I said. "Is this really him?"

"He's right there. Don't kill him. There's also someone else in there. An Infiltrator. That's who you need to kill."

"What the hell is an Infiltrator?" I asked just as Mordecai approached.

"Oh, fuck," Mordecai said.

The timer was at ten seconds.

"Shoot him again," Mordecai said. Katia complied, firing a bolt right into his chest. The magical bolt whiffed away in a puff of smoke a moment later, and the 60-second timer reset. "We got a problem."

Mordecai leaned down to examine the igneous. "I've told you about these guys before. There are multiple types of brain worms. The intellect hunters are the most common, but they can only take over corpses, and the bodies start to rot. The Valtay are similar, but they secrete a liquid that keeps the bodies alive. Their distant cousins are a race called the Scree, but they're better known by a different name. The Infiltrators. They are parasites, and they take full control of bodies. Living bodies. A person is infected, and it takes a few days for the annexation to complete. They don't even know they have the

parasite. After a few days, the worm completely takes over. Once the switch occurs, the parasite gains power, and the host is locked out of their own body. The worm controls them. The host can do nothing but watch as they are moved like a puppet."

"Holy fucking shit," I said, looking down at Chris. "So he's been awake this whole time, watching all of this happen, but he's completely powerless?"

"That's right. She's in his brain. His body is her armor."

"Okay," I said. "So how do we get her out of him?"

Mordecai shook his head sadly. "Without killing him? We don't. It's next to impossible. She can't even leave until he's dead. There's only one thing I can think of. An antiparasitic that will kill her, but I won't have the materials until we hit the next floor."

I felt a deep chill rush over me. Katia shot him again, using her third of ten bolts. We'd only be able to keep him petrified for seven more minutes. "There's gotta be something we can do now."

Everything suddenly made sense. Well, no, that wasn't true. None of this shit made sense. But I now knew what happened. Maggie had chosen the Infiltrator race and had somehow managed to get herself into Chris. She'd been in him ever since the end of the third floor, and once she'd fully taken over, she'd separated out from the party and started hunting me.

Frank had said he didn't even know what race or class she'd taken. She'd finally caught up with him at the Desperado Club, possibly looking for the ring he'd given me. She'd ended up killing him. Her own husband.

People who die in the collapse aren't really dead.

I thought about the implications of that. There were hints of it in the cookbook, but nothing definitive. Was it true? That was a conversation for Mordecai. I didn't have the luxury of thinking about it now.

Elle: Imani is refusing to send you this message, so I will. It is from Chris, and I am copying and pasting his exact words. I'm sorry guys. "Carl, Donut. Please. Kill me. It's okay. I give you permission. You'll be helping me."

"Hey Chris, go fuck yourself," I said. "We're going to figure this out." Then I told Elle what I said.

Elle: I told him the same thing. But if we can't figure out a solution, I don't think you have a choice. If it was me stuck in there, I'd want you to pull the plug, too.

"Can we take him into the saferoom?" I asked. "Would that cure him?"

"No," Mordecai said. "Not once she's taken full control. The saferoom won't help. We can't tie him up and leave him there. It won't let us."

"Then we'll tie him up and leave him out here," I said. "If we can keep him contained until the next floor, maybe you can make that potion."

Mordecai shook his head. "Sorry, kid. That's not going to work. What're you going to do? Pick him up and throw him over your shoulder while you go down the stairs? You're in different parties, and you'll be separated once you hit the next floor anyway. And even if he's tied up, he has spells he can still cast."

This was an impossible situation. I turned to Juice Box who was standing back, watching with her arms crossed. "You touched him. Can you turn into one of those worms? Go in there and take out the one in his head?"

"No," she said. "They are too small. And I wouldn't do it even if I could. That's a pretty fucked-up thing to ask."

Katia shot him again. Six to go.

Elle: He says, "This woman is overwhelmed with anger and despair, and every moment I share with her is worse than the last. You took the orb from her, but she can still hurt you.

"What's the orb?" Donut asked.

"I have it," I said. I quickly examined the object in my inventory. I was momentarily confused by the name. It hadn't listed itself as an explosive. But then I read the description.

Celestial Grenade

These little balls of fun were developed by the nuns of Enyo during the first enlightenment, back when the gods

had to compete for worshippers. The nuns would descend upon a village and proselytize to the people about why their goddess was the best. If the villagers didn't immediately fall to their knees in veneration, the nuns would be forced to invoke a more aggressive campaign.

A nun would drop a celestial grenade, which would summon Enyo directly into town for a period of sixty seconds. That was usually enough to change the minds of the survivors.

Celestial grenades grant the following effects:

If the wielder of the grenade has pledged themselves to a specific deity, this grenade will summon their god for sixty seconds. In addition, the wielder will receive a 60-second *Divine Intervention* aura.

If the wielder does not worship a deity, this grenade will summon a random god. They will not receive the *Divine Intervention* buff.

Why was Maggie trying to summon a god? Just to kill me? That seemed a tad overkill. I remembered what she'd started to say. It sounded like she'd made some sort of deal. The fact Katia had received a countermeasure from Princess Formidable meant the grenade could've come only from one place. The Skull Empire.

"Chris, does Maggie worship Grull?"

While we waited for an answer to filter through Imani and Elle—which was the only way we could talk—I examined the grenade in my inventory to make sure the pin hadn't yet been yanked free. It hadn't. I pulled it out and tossed it to Mordecai, whose eyes grew huge when he saw it.

"These are very expensive and rare," he said. "You see 'em on the ninth floor a lot, especially near the end. Someone paid a pretty penny to get this in her hands. This is just over the top. It's like trying to kill a bug with a kinetic strike."

"That's what I was thinking!"

"You humiliated Prince Maestro and his family over and over," Katia said. "They have to kill you to save face. If you die before they get a chance to do it, it's probably just as bad."

"Well they're terrible at it," Donut said. "I mean, really. If they can't even manage to kill one human who doesn't wear pants, how can anyone expect them to control an intergalactic empire? No offense, Carl."

I was about to tell Donut to shut the fuck up when Chris's answer finally came in.

Elle: He started talking, but he got cut off. It now says his messaging privileges have been suspended for thirty minutes. He says, "It's not Grull. She worships another god called Algos. That's who the grenade would've summoned. Maggie's first sponsor is Prince Maestro and her second is Crown Prince Stalwart, his brother. I have the same two sponsors. They gave her a scroll that let her choose a god to worship. I received a box with a picture on it of Algos, and that's how she knew who to pick. She got the grenade when we hit this floor. We got approached by this weird guy in a saferoom, and he told us…" That was the whole message.

"Jesus," I said as Katia shot him again. "Maggie has double sponsors, and all four of them are the Skull Empire."

I quickly related the message to Mordecai via chat.

Mordecai: This doesn't sound official to me. Someone probably bribed someone to allow Maggie a one-on-one in a saferoom. It happens, but don't talk about it out loud. I'm thinking Maggie's race can't worship Grull, so they had to find another god to do their dirty work. Plus they likely didn't want to rely on Prince Maestro again. He'd probably just screw it up and further embarrass the family. Algos is the god of pain. He would kill everyone in town in seconds. He's a good god to choose if you want your target to suffer.

"That Maestro guy is letting you live rent free in his head," Donut said. "It's quite pitiful. I'm starting to think he really is in love with you."

"His sister is spending a lot of money to stop him," Katia added, looking down at the prone form of Chris.

"I never liked my brother, either," Donut said. "He always thought he was better than the rest of us."

"Your brother sold for over ten thousand dollars," I said.

Donut made a spitting noise. "I don't remember seeing him win any championships."

Katia shot Chris once again. We were almost out of time. The enormity of our problem was getting heavier on my shoulders by the moment. I felt the desperation rising. "I'm going to flip him over, break open the back of his head, and dig Maggie out with my bare hand."

"Carl," Katia said, sounding alarmed. "That's not going to work. You'll kill him."

"You're not getting in there anyway," Mordecai said. "His head is solid rock. The parasite is *in* his brain. Not riding it like a backpack."

"Goddamnit. Why am I the only one trying to come up with a solution? What the hell are we going to do?" I said.

But I knew. We all knew. And that weight was getting heavier by the moment.

You can't save them all.

Carl: Imani, I'm sorry.

She didn't answer, which made me feel even worse. I put my hand on his rocky shoulder. It was hot, but not unbearable.

"Hey, Chris. I know you can't respond anymore, but your brother wanted me to tell you that he loved you, and he regretted not telling you that. He died protecting his friends. I'm sorry I couldn't help you."

"Carl," Katia said, putting her own hand on my shoulder. "You don't have a skull yet. I do. Let me do it."

"No," I said, forming my fist. "Everyone get back."

"Be careful," Mordecai said. "Once he dies, the infiltrator will still be alive. She'll burrow out of his head. She'll try to get into someone else."

"Not the way I'm going to kill him," I said.

The small group all took several steps back. It was just me and Donut standing over the prone form of Chris. We had twenty seconds left.

"Carl?" Donut asked from my shoulder.

"What?"

"Don't be mad at me."

A large hole opened up in the street, revealing a shimmering force field that separated this quadrant from the next. The form of Chris plummeted through the hole and disappeared, landing loudly into the dark chamber below. There was a splash.

I only fell about a foot, landing on the shimmering air. I stood upon the forcefield like it was glass, looking down upon it with surprise.

"You best step out of the hole, or your feet will get chopped off when I turn the spell off," Donut said. "Daddy wouldn't like that very much."

"*Goddamnit, Donut*. What the fuck?"

"You're not a killer, Carl," Donut said as the spell snapped off. "Not a person killer, at least. You get all weird about killing NPCs. How do you think it's going to affect you to kill one of your friends? I'm not going to let it happen. I can't have you being all mopey."

"He was asking for our help, Donut. Now she's gotten away and Chris is still… Goddamnit, you shouldn't have done that. That was a mistake."

"Look at the map. He's not getting out of that room. And if they do get out, we'll be prepared for them. Katia has the find crawler skill. She'll see them sneaking up on us. Maybe."

I took a deep, angry breath. I was angry with Donut, but I was also angry with myself for being so desperately relieved at what she'd done.

I looked at the map for the subterranean level. Sure enough, there was a honeycomb system of rooms directly below the streets. The entrance to the catacomb wasn't a level plane, but it went up and down in a toothed pattern. Chris and Maggie were stuck in a bubble. They had solid rock all around them. They could go back up through the street. Or they could go down, though that looked like another sealed off chamber. They'd have to break through two walls

to get to the closest walkway—a walkway that was likely filled with water.

"Mordecai, can he get out of there with his race abilities?"

"Maybe," he said, shaking his head. "He can excrete lava, but it cools rapidly. It's not effective against rock. There are spells like Donut's *Hole* and dozens of others that help people make their way through rock. I don't know what either of them have. He'll be able to use both of their abilities and spells. He might be able to smash through with time. It sounded like there was water in there. He can breathe underwater, but if the chamber fills, it'll hinder their progress."

"Wait, really?" I said. "He can breathe underwater?"

"Yes. Both of them can, actually. Infiltrators are aquatic like most brain parasites. An igneous can survive in most environments. They're very hardy."

"If there's water, there's steam," Katia said. "He might be able to blow his way out."

"That doesn't sound very safe," I said.

"If that crazy lady is suicidal, then maybe it won't matter," she replied.

I felt relief at the idea, of Maggie somehow killing them both. Then I felt shame for feeling that way.

While we talked, Donut was giving a running commentary in the chat to Elle and Imani.

Imani: Thank you, Donut. Once you defeat all four castles, you can go back, incapacitate them again, bring them through the portal, and then your game guide can make a potion to save Chris.

I took a deep breath. That was… a very dangerous idea. It was a *dumb* idea. Katia only had three of the paralyze bolts left, which meant we'd have three minutes to get them to the stairwell. That simply wasn't going to happen. Maggie had just tried to unleash the god of pain on me. She was too dangerous to let free. We were being used like pawns in a royal pissing match between a brother and sister, who in turn were being exploited by the whole system while the entire universe laughed their asses off at us all.

Yes, being in the spotlight was good. But we needed to break ourselves free from this Skull Empire bullshit. It would catch up to us sooner rather than later.

"Mordecai," I said. "We have to find a way to separate him from the worm before the floor ends. Go to the market and see if you can find those potion supplies now. I'll put the word out and see if anybody has what we need."

I went into my interface. I found the little needle that indicated the current stream watchers. I cycled through a few views and settled on one that didn't show actual numbers, but it ticked the needle up when more than average were watching. I placed it in the corner right above my airspeed and elevation tickers. I had another thought.

Carl: Also, Mordecai. I was wrong before about something. I want you to take some money and buy Donut that environmental upgrade. The one that shows us a running commentary of our social media comments.

Donut: YAY!

Mordecai: You know it's heavily moderated by the AI, right?

Carl: That's okay. The more information, the better.

I pointed to Juice Box. "You," I said. "Let's sit down right now and talk. But we gotta make it quick. We're going to take out that last castle once it gets dark."

"We still need to sleep, Carl," Donut said.

"We can sleep when we're dead."

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[15]

"So," I said to Juice Box. "Henrik is your brother?"

She nodded. "He's what we call a Principal. People say they're a cult, obsessed with cataloging all known species. But that's not true. They're looking for just one. And they think they've found it."

Donut: LONELY_YETI_15 SAYS I HAVE THE PRETTIEST FUR PATTERN SHE HAS EVER SEEN. SHE ALSO SAYS SHE'S GETTING A TATTOO OF ME ON HER LOWER THORAX.

Carl: You're supposed to be helping Katia sew.

Donut: I DON'T HAVE THUMBS, CARL.

I shook my head and returned my attention to Juice Box. She remained in her human form, but she'd made herself bald for some reason. We sat in the Spit and Swallow, which was filled with camels taking a quick breather from their frantic work to repair the town before the next impending sand storm.

"So this Quetzalcoatlus creature is what they're looking for?" I asked.

"That's what I'm getting at, yes. Problem is she's a ghost."

"And that's why you took over the guards in charge of the gnome hostage. You needed to get to Wynne. You needed to get to him because he had the ability to make her temporarily corporeal, which would allow your brother to touch her and gain the ability to turn into her."

"Yes." She paused, staring off as a group of grim-faced dromedarians got up and left, on their way back to work. "I didn't

want any part of it. I thought it was disrespectful after they took us in. Still, I would have helped him sooner had I know the Hunting Grounds were accessible, that this was something that could actually be accomplished. Had I helped, perhaps we would have avoided all of this."

"Your brother was torturing the gnome," I said. "Something tells me you wouldn't have been on board with that." She didn't answer, so I continued. "But the gnome is dead, and Quetzalcoatlus is still a ghost. They've gone into the maze anyway. What do you think they're going to do?"

"I don't know," she said. "Henrik is desperate."

"And why are they trying to find her? What's so special about her?"

Juice Box sighed. "She is, or was, a type of creature that doesn't normally live in these lands. She has a special ability to cast a spell. She can alter plants. Like her, my people aren't from this place. Our bodies have adapted, but not fully. With each generation, defects appear. It is happening more and more."

I thought of that changeling girl, Ruby. The one with the missing arms and the sunken-in head.

"Compression sickness," I said.

"Yes," Juice Box replied. "One out of every four births is now sick. The ones born with it are sterile. My brother believes if he can obtain the spell, he can create a food source that will give us the necessary vitamins that will stave off future birth defects."

"What about the Gate of the Feral gods? Before, you said it was a myth."

She waved her hand and then took a long drink. She reminded me of Elle with the amount of alcohol she consumed. "I lied. It is no myth, but it is dangerous. Using it was always the backup plan, but it was even more desperate of an idea than the plan to give flesh to Quetzalcoatlus. Plus, even my brother didn't want to resort to using it. He is not that cruel."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"The artifact has three parts. My brother has one piece, which he stole from the dromedarians. The gnomish Commandant has the

second, and the third is on the surface in the hands of the mad mage. Two pocket watches and a winding box. When they're put together, the gate can be opened."

I had already guessed most of this, but I still didn't know the most important part. "And what can they do with the gate?"

"It's simple, really. One can open a gate from one place to the next. But it comes with a cost. It rips a hole into the depths of the Nothing. So when the gate finally closes, an ancient, feral god comes through into the world."

"A feral god? Which side does it come through? The side where the gate is opened or the side where the gateway leads?"

"The opening side. Which is why even my brother doesn't wish to use it. We can go home, but it would bring devastation to this world."

"I don't even know what a feral god is," I said.

Juice Box shivered. "They are the gods from before. The immortal beasts who roamed the heavens before the pantheon banished them into the Nothing and created the world. Their banishment has driven them mad."

There was a moment there, when the air suddenly felt electric. I now knew exactly what that feeling meant, what was about to happen.

New Quest. The Gate of the Feral Gods.

Henrik the Changeling. Commandant Kane. The Mad Dune Mage. They all have pieces of the artifact. Take it from them. Collect all three. Put them together.

What happens next is pretty damn neat.

***Reward:* Oh boy-oh-boy.**

Oh boy-oh-boy.

The sandstorm came, and we hunkered down in the personal space. Despite the valiant efforts of the townsfolk to prepare the city for the storm, their efforts weren't enough. The moment the winds came,

the not-yet-finished shield ripped away, forcing everyone inside. The town would be buried in sand by the time the storm was done.

The moment the shield failed, we all received a quest to "save" the town by procuring a bunch of deflated balloons that they could use as a shelter. It was a regular, bronze quest that I shoved off on Louis and Firas and Langley, who'd finished searching the ruins of the other town. They could use the experience.

They had spent the remainder of the day grinding and picking up loot. There was no sign of any surviving bactrians except one in a single saferoom bar. The group had also managed to secure an intact, gnomish Drop Bear airplane. The pilot was nowhere to be found. They dragged the machine to the edge of the other town and covered it with a tarp.

Down on the land quadrant, Gwen's team had finally managed to breach all the walls, but now they faced the main entrance to the castle, which was magically locked. They were currently trying to figure out how to get in. The mage still hadn't shown himself.

The tomb raiders were stuck in saferooms. The entire catacomb was now filled with water. They had dozens of water scrolls, but that wasn't enough. They were paralyzed for now.

Chris/Maggie remained entombed. Donut could see their dot on the map as long as she stood nearby. The room was half-filled with water and was pitch black, which had to be awful. We set Mordecai to work. He needed something called vile dill for his potion. He hadn't found it yet. He was seeking an alternative using the store interface and by talking to folks at the Desperado Club.

I couldn't stop thinking about how horrible this had to be for Chris. Being helpless was one thing, but what he was currently enduring was just too much. The more I thought about it, the more I regretted not putting him out of his misery.

I understood what Donut had done. Hell, if I had thought of it, I would've done the same thing. Still, it felt like the wrong decision. It was the easy way out, and in this place, the easy way usually came with dire consequences.

But I had push all of that out of my mind and focus at the task at hand: capturing the gnomish throne room.

Here's what we knew. After we'd crashed the *Wasteland*, all that remained was a single building held aloft by an enormous, magical balloon. The building was a house, nothing more. There were no obvious defenses. The entire gnomish airforce was now grounded. It appeared there were only two living creatures up there. Commandant Kane and his daughter. The kid was about ten years old. That was it.

Once the sandstorm ended, we had two hours before it got dark. All around, camels emerged and started digging the town free. I pulled the farseer and searched until I found the small house, which has settled high above. It floated all the way to the top of the bubble, like a children's balloon that had gotten away from a kid and was now wedged in a high ceiling.

"We can still try shooting it down," Katia said, standing by my side.

"We could," I agreed. "It's probably the easier way to do it. But I want to get that pocket watch. And if it falls now, I'm afraid it'll land outside the bowl. Then what would we do?"

"You also don't want to hurt that kid," Katia said. "I think I know you well enough by now."

I nodded. "Maybe you're right."

"They do that on purpose, you know. It's no accident they put a child up there."

"Yeah," I agreed. "But they should also know by now my stance on killing NPCs. I don't want to do it, but I think they're better off dead anyway. So I won't hesitate if my hand is forced. Even if it's a kid."

We stood side by side for several silent moments.

"Did you ever want children?" Katia finally asked.

I turned to look at the woman, surprised at the question. I knew she'd had some painful issues with this subject, but I didn't know the details.

"No," I said. "I wouldn't be a good dad. Bea told me she thought she was pregnant like ten times. She never was. The first few times, when I thought she really was, I was goddamned terrified."

"I… I have trouble seeing you with that woman." She shook her head. "Anyway, I can't have children." She paused, looking down at herself. "When I was human, I mean. I was going to adopt. You can do that in Iceland when you're single. I got pre-approval. I was on the list. That's all I ever wanted. Something happened, and I got disqualified. It's not important. But I'm glad now. I keep thinking about that Maggie woman, and how twisted she's become. It's because she's a mother. Losing everything can do that to you. I can't help but wonder how different things would be for me if I had a child. I'm glad now I don't."

The way she said it, I knew she wasn't being truthful. It wasn't something I would ever understand, the need to have children. I said nothing.

"Anyway," Katia continued. "I still think we should just blow it out of the sky."

"You're just mad you're not going to get the chance to go skydiving again," I said, putting the telescope away.

"Usually, I get irritated when you want to leave me behind on your little schemes," Katia said. "I'm pretty happy to sit this one out."

I patted her on the shoulder.

It was time to go. Behind me, Donut emerged from the bar, followed by Mongo and another robot Donut. The toy company had sent her three more, two of which had been promptly destroyed by Mongo. This fourth one was supposedly more durable. It'd survived one attack, but the head was now scarred from Mongo teeth.

"Come on, Donut," I said. "Let's roll."

The robot version jumped onto my shoulder. This one was significantly heavier than the last. It turned its head toward me. "There sure were a lot of babies in there, Carl," the toy said. "I wonder how long they will continue to cry in the dark."

"Get the hell off of me." I pushed it from my shoulder, and it landed on its back with a *crunch*. Mongo was on it in a second, grabbing it by the neck and shaking. The head ripped, and a countdown timer appeared over the toy.

"Goddamnit," I said. "Everyone get back."

We all scrambled away. The toy exploded in a shower of sparks and smoke. It wasn't a big explosion, but it would've hurt if we'd been closer. It was enough to leave a scorch mark all over the front of the Spit and Swallow.

"Yeah, that's safe," I said as I collected the pieces. The controller core of the robot was a round, marble-sized metal ball. Like the last few times, the core itself had exploded, making it look a metallic piece of popped popcorn. "I can't tell if these guys are a toy company or a weapons company. Either way, they're terrible at it."

Mongo screeched in agreement.

The real Donut jumped to my shoulder and sat with a harrumph.

"They said this version was indestructible," she said sadly. "Do you think the Kardashians had to deal with defective merch? This is most disappointing."

"I don't think the toy people know what they're doing," I said.

Loita: Carl, you know perfectly well that the real version of these toys can take much more stress. Your boosted strength is what's causing the problem. The toy is meant to be played with outside of an enhancement zone by children, not survive within a dungeon environment.

Carl: Hello, Loita. You should tell Donut's sponsors that parents will shy away from toys that could potentially melt their child's face off.

Donut: ALSO, I DON'T SAY CREEPY STUFF LIKE THE DOLL DOES. IT'S REALLY WEIRD.

Zev: The audience loves the strange vibe of the doll, but I tend to agree with the crawler. It does not sound like her. We put that in the notes, but Veriluxx hasn't changed it.

On my shoulder, Donut tensed up upon realizing Zev was a part of the conversation. I knew she was still worried about the kua-tin's well-being.

Donut: HI ZEV!

Carl: Nobody is going to care about the toy's voice if it keeps randomly exploding.

Donut: HE IS RIGHT. IT IS NOT A CARL DOLL.

Loita: After we realized you were going to fiddle with the toy, we started requiring the sponsor to make the doll self-destruct if it is sufficiently broken. We don't want you unfairly getting your hands on the important interior parts. The real version won't have that feature.

Carl: So you're the ones screwing the sponsor over? I bet they're not too happy then. I'm no marketing expert, but I can't imagine this thing is going to do well with how it's being presented.

Zev: You are not wrong, crawler. There are memes.

Loita: That is not of your concern. You will be going on their program soon. They assure us that before that happens, you will receive a proper prototype.

Donut: TELL THEM I NEED TO HAVE THE ABILITY TO CHANGE THE ROBOT'S NAME. CARL CALLS IT "ROBOT DONUT" AND THAT JUST WON'T DO. I HAVEN'T DECIDED ON CHARLIE OR IVY. WHAT DO YOU THINK, ZEV?

Zev: It's inconsequential, crawler.

Donut's claws dug so heavily into the side of my neck, I winced with the pain. Her entire body was rigid. I reached up to pet her.

Loita: Very well. We are done here. Try not to break the next one.

Zev: If you must choose a name, I would go with Ivy.

Donut let out a very slight gasp.

Donut: I THINK YOU'RE RIGHT. BYE ZEV!

Donut did an excited little hop on my shoulder. "Okay, Carl," she said. "Let's go take out that castle in the sky."

The gnomish Drop Bear used actual gasoline for fuel. The abandoned biplane's tank was almost dry. I still had plenty of the fuel in my inventory, all in metal canisters.

I examined the vehicle as I filled the tank. I needed the plane as light as possible, so I was only going to fill it up a quarter of the

way. It didn't have any bombs left under the wings, which would help with the weight. The plane did not look real, like it was something a drunk dude had built in his backyard out of scrap metal. Not something that was supposed to actually fly. I took a deep breath thinking about what we were about to do.

The airplane featured a frothing, rabid koala bear thing painted on the nose. There were also words in Syndicate standard stenciled onto the nose above the artwork. I wiped the dust off to reveal the plane's name.

"Wonderful," I muttered.

The plane's name was *Death Trap*. It had four bombs painted after the tag. I took a can of spray paint and covered it up. I then wrote *Nightmare II* on the side. Donut objected, but only half-heartedly. She'd been oddly distracted since our discussion with Loita.

The plane was half buried in the sand when we arrived. Thankfully, Langley had been smart enough to have it covered with a tarp before the storm. Those other guys all had gone off in search of downed balloons. They needed to collect five of the things to finish the "save Hump Town" quest. There were plenty scattered about the bowl. They had to fight off both gnomes and giant lizards, but at this point, the group of crawlers had enough experience with both that they could handle themselves. They were now on their way back to Hump Town to meet up with Katia.

After we finished cleaning the thing off, I sat in the pilot seat and Donut took to the rear-facing gunner's chair. I had to rip both of the arm rests off just to fit in the thing. As I settled in, Donut put her paws up on the large gun and started making shooting noises. There was no runway here, and we wouldn't be able to take off. Not in the traditional sense.

I started the engine to make sure it worked. Both engines spun right up. I flipped the switch and turned them off. I had no idea how to fly the thing, but the controls were similar to all the flight sims I'd played a dozen times. And they were simplistic compared to the original *Nightmare*'s controls. There were five gauges, two throttle switches that could be controlled individually or in tandem, rudder

pedals, and a stick. That was it. Thankfully I only needed to "fly" the thing for a few minutes. And I didn't need to worry about landing or taking off.

"Ready for this?" I asked. The virtual sun had already fallen below the horizon, and darkness spread across the bowl like an inky stain. High above, our target glowed like a star.

"Let's do it," Donut said.

The emergency recovery balloon was deployed using a handle to the right of the too-small cockpit chair. The balloons did nothing but elevate the disabled vehicle to the top of the bubble.

I pulled the lever, yanking on it like a car's emergency brake. The twin balloons burst upward, hissing as they filled with… well I didn't know what they were filling with. It was some sort of chemical reaction instead of a conventional balloon.

The whole plane jerked, tail first. We started to rise into the air. Slowly at first, but soon we were moving faster and faster. I watched the needle indicating our altitude as we rapidly rose into the air.

"Carl, Carl, there are still bullets left in the gun!" Donut suddenly exclaimed. "I can shoot stuff!"

"Don't you dare," I called over my shoulder as we rocketed upward. We climbed straight up, caught a breeze and continued to rise at an angle, moving toward the very center of the bubble. I kept a wary eye out for the large birds that sometimes patrolled the skies.

I didn't see any enemies. Before the storm, there had been a handful of balloons up against the ceiling, but they'd all disappeared. I knew a few had simply fallen, crashing against the desert like meteors. Some had plummeted onto the land quadrant. Some in the ocean.

All that was left was the target.

It took us less time than I expected to reach the top of the bubble. We hit the ceiling with a bump, and suddenly we weren't rising any more. I checked the altitude, and we were just about five kilometers above the bowl, which was already pretty high off the bubble's sea level. This was much higher than we'd been last time. I didn't notice any change in pressure or difference in oxygen levels. I

pulled up my health pie chart menu, and it didn't show any sort of oxygen deprivation. That was good.

I formed my xistera, loaded it with a thumper, and I tossed it upward, just to see what would happen. Even this close, I still couldn't tell if the bubble's wall was transparent or just a screen. The metal ball clanked loudly against the glass-like bubble wall before falling away.

Donut peered over the edge and watched the ball disappear into the night.

"Really, Carl," she said. "That's going to land on somebody's head."

I turned until I could see the distant light, about a half of a mile away, also pressed against the ceiling of the bubble. *Damn*, I thought. We were further away than I'd hoped.

"God, I hope this works," I said. "It's about to get loud." I reached down and flipped the two switches to turn on the plane's engines. "Hold on!"

I pushed the dual throttle switch and grasped the stick. I balanced my feet on the two rudder pedals and held the stick steady. The plane whined and jerked forward, pulling the balloons along the ceiling. I held my breath as we started to turn. Because we were still attached to the emergency balloons, I wasn't really "flying" the plane. It was more like using training wheels on a bicycle and then pushing ourselves toward our destination by pumping the pedals just a few times.

"Shit," I mumbled as we turned too much. I eased the stick in the other direction. I pushed the right rudder pedal, and we eventually lined up with the house. I eased up the throttle and we started skittering along the top of the bubble toward the flying house. I cut the power and let our momentum take us in.

"Get ready," I called to Donut.

The house loomed. A massive, glowing balloon kept the home aloft. The balloon was huge, more than four times the size of the regular hot-air balloons used by the other flying machines. It glowed with magic and shone like a beacon, leading us in like moths to a flame.

The "castle" itself was nothing more than a square hunk of land with a two-story home sitting upon it. The house looked like any regular house one might find in a suburban neighborhood. I realized with surprise, that was exactly what it was. It had a double garage, a porch, and even a little garden out front, though half of it was gone. The building was painted a dull beige and made of aluminum siding. There was even a basketball hoop attached above the garage.

Still, the house hadn't survived the crashing of the *Wasteland* unscathed. The top floor windows were broken out. and part of the chimney had fallen in on itself. The rain gutters hung loosely off edge of the roof. Christmas lights clung to the gutters, blinking.

"Do you think they heard us coming?" Donut asked.

"Probably," I said. "So be careful. Do you see them?"

"No," she said. "I see the stairwell though. It's on the second floor of the house."

The magical balloon was attached to the house with a massive net. The airplane eased in like a boat against a dock, coming to a stop against the edge of the colossal balloon. We were a good forty feet above the top of the house.

"I'm going in," Donut said. She jumped from her back seat to the net of the balloon.

I held my breath, worried the magical protection would hurt Donut. Mordecai said she'd be able to touch it, and he was thankfully correct. I climbed up out of my seat, balanced on the nose, using the top wing to steady myself. I jumped over to the balloon, also clinging onto the net. Donut dropped to my shoulder.

"You're not scared of heights, are you Carl?" Donut asked, looking down. She had a death grip on my shoulder.

"No," I said as I started to scale my way down the net. The *Nightmare II* hung directly over my head, bobbing in the air. Once the escape balloon of the airplane touched the giant balloon, it also started glowing, like the balloon-protecting magic was contagious.

"Are you sure? It's really far," Donut said. "Look, we can see the lights on the ground level. I think that's the mage castle. It's really far down there."

“We already fell once. There’s lots of shit that scares me, Donut. Height isn’t one of them.”

“Well it should scare you, Carl. This is terrifying.”

“Don’t look down.”

“Where else am I going to look, Carl?”

“You didn’t seem afraid earlier when we were in the other hot air balloon.”

“That was before we fell out of the sky. I would like to avoid doing that again.”

We quickly descended. The net attached to the house at the four corners of the lot. I didn’t want to risk jumping to the roof and sliding off the edge, so I climbed all the way to the dirt lot and jumped down.

The ground felt unsteady. It wasn’t the same as being on water, but it was an odd, stomach-lurching sensation. We took a few steps toward the house. I moved slowly, wary of a trap or ambush.

“You don’t see anything?” I asked again.

“Nothing.”

They had to have heard us coming. We approached the porch. A cockeyed “Welcome” sign hung from the center of the dirty, white door. The sign was hand-painted in blue and silver paint and had a star at the bottom, indicating the previous owners had been Dallas Cowboys fans. The doormat had a picture of a pistol and said, “We don’t dial 911.”

“I’m getting mixed signals,” said Donut.

She released Mongo, who landed onto the porch with a screech. He looked around, eyes going wide when he realized the ground was moving. He turned and looked up at Donut and let out a worried squeak.

Donut leaped from my shoulder to the back of Mongo and gave him a little pat on the top of the head. “So, are we just going to stand here, or are we breaking the door in?”

I eyed the doorbell and contemplated just ringing it to see what would happen. Probably a bad idea, I decided. “Okay, we’ll send Mongo and the clockworks through the upper window, and we’ll

breach in through the front door. We'll meet at the stairwell, but tell Mongo not to…"

I didn't finish. The front door opened, and a young, female gnome stood there, gazing at us.

"Hello," she said. She wore an oversized Dallas Cowboys jersey as a dress. She had brown pigtails peeking out from under her red, conical hat. The front of the jersey was smeared with blood.

"Have you come to kill my father? You're a little late. He's already dead. Do you want to come in? I'm making lemonade!"

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[16]

I QUICKLY EXAMINED THE SMALL GIRL'S PROPERTIES. HER DOT WAS WHITE ON the map.

Bonnie – Dirigible Gnome. Juvenile. Level 5.

Little Bonnie only loves two things in this world. Her pet pig Sausage and getting what she wants.

The only daughter of Commandant Kane, a case can be made that she's the true leader of the *Wasteland*. It is said that when Sausage was captured and held as ransom by the Bactrian camels, the young woman threw such an epic temper tantrum that the only thing that calmed her was watching her father order the bombing of the neutral changeling settlement.

That's the rumor, at least. The truth is, nobody knows much about the shy child. As such, do not judge her too harshly. She is but a spoiled, rich kid. If she's evil, she doesn't know any better. If she's not, it's a tragedy that you're probably gonna have to kill her.

Life's a bitch.

Carl: She's not a changeling is she?

Donut: I DON'T THINK SO. HER BRAIN ISN'T HOTTER THAN IT SHOULD BE.

Carl: Same plan. We'll follow her inside, but as soon as we're in, send Mongo and the clockwork dinos through the upper window. Tell them to be quiet.

Donut: THEY DON'T KNOW HOW TO BE QUIET.

I hesitantly followed the young gnome into the home. The power was on, and the home was well-lit, though the lights were constantly flickering.

Even with the hat, the child was barely taller than Donut. The place stank like a mix of cigars and that lilac-scented, bargain deodorizer one would get at the dollar store. A line of framed photographs of smiling human children sat on the floor, propped up neatly against the wall. The portraits had once been hanging on the now-bare walls, but they'd fallen off. In fact, the entire interior of the home had clearly been upset by the recent tumult. I spied broken glass on the floor and bricks scattered about near the fireplace. A large flatscreen television lay on its side in the living room.

Carl: Donut, you do the talking.

"I'm setting up a lemonade stand," the girl said as she walked toward the kitchen. I could see the large, magnet-covered refrigerator at the end of the hall. "I was going to open it up tomorrow. You guys can test it for me. My name is Bonnie!"

I cringed at the loud crash that came from upstairs as Mongo and the two others jumped through the second-floor window. The girl turned and looked upward. "What's that?"

"Bonnie, what happened to your father?" Donut asked, trying to distract her. A line of blood ran from the kitchen area to the front door. The entire front of her oversized shirt was stained red, like she'd been lying in a puddle of blood.

The child shrugged and turned back to the kitchen. I hesitantly followed. We passed the stairwell. Mongo and the automatons appeared at the top of the stairs, looking disappointed they hadn't found anything to kill. Donut waved at them to stay put. Bonnie didn't notice or acknowledge the dinosaurs. Instead, I followed her to the kitchen. A pitcher filled with yellow liquid sat upon the counter. A bag of sugar and several cut up lemons lay nearby. Next to the mess was a sign that appeared to be hand-painted in blood. It

read “The Sausage Memorial Fund Lemonade Stand. One gold piece a cup.”

And there, draped across the small kitchen table, was the bloody, dead body of a dirigible gnome.

Lootable Corpse. Commandant Kane. Dirigible Gnome. Level 55. Ripped to shreds by Denise.

I couldn’t tell what had happened to the gnome. He looked half eaten.

Bonnie hummed a little song as she pulled herself onto a chair and then hopped up onto the counter. She poured a glass of lemonade. The pitcher was almost as big as she was, but she handled it easily. She pushed the glass across the counter and toward me.

“Both of you, take a sip! Tell me what you think. But if you like it, you have to pay me a gold coin.”

“Bonnie,” I asked, not taking the glass. “Who is Denise?”

“Oh,” she said, looking up. I realized the kid’s eyes were completely dilated. *She’s under a spell.* “Is she back? She went out to get some food.”

I looked around nervously. “Who is she?” I asked again. She didn’t answer.

“Bonnie, who is Denise?” Donut asked.

That little needle I’d just installed into my UI to indicate current streams was starting to spike.

“When Sausage got taken, my father kept getting me new pets to make me stop missing Sausage.”

Sausage, I assumed, was the now-dead pig from the Bactrian settlement. I now knew if we’d gotten there first, we’d have been able to use the thing to get up here.

“He tried the gerbils, but I didn’t like any. Plus they’re all mean. Then we tried other stuff, including ol’ Denise. She’s okay, I guess. But she’s no Sausage. Don’t tell her that, though. She gets jealous.”

“Why did Denise kill your father?” Donut asked.

“He, you know…” She pointed to the kitchen sink. There was nothing there. It was just a typical sink.

“He what?” Donut asked. “Bonnie, we do not understand.”

She ignored the question and pushed the glass closer to the edge of the counter. “My father gave me the recipe. It’s good. Try some.”

I swallowed and examined the drink.

Unknown Potion

The kid says this is “Lemonade.”

“Uh,” I said, taking a step toward the corpse. I needed to get close enough to loot him without it being too obvious. At the same time, I sent a note to Mordecai. “You don’t seem to be too upset your dad is dead.”

An eclectic line of shotglasses sat on the counter. The kid poured some of the yellow potion into one that read “Remember the Alamo” and drank it down. There wasn’t any obvious effect. “It’s so good. Did I tell you I’m setting up a lemonade stand?” She lowered her head. “Sausage died. They promised they’d take care of him, but they didn’t. So we bombed them all. My dad said it’d make me feel better, but it didn’t.”

The walls shook. The ground lurched. The pitcher of lemonade sloshed, and the other shotglasses fell to the floor. I stumbled at the sudden movement, and I fell toward the corpse. I accidentally stuck my hand right into the dead body of Commandant Kane. It felt as if I’d reached into a lukewarm bowl of pot roast. The loot menu popped up.

5,030 gold pieces.

Letter from the Glass Wizard.

Mysterious Watch.

I took all the items. Before I did anything else, I immediately examined the letter. It was short.

Kane,

Cease your hostilities immediately. Your bombs do not harm me, but they are ruining the structure of the temple, weakening its wall. Surely you do not want the whole thing to collapse? Even in your floating city, you must know the danger we all face if such a thing were to happen.

I propose a truce.

You stop the bombing, and I won’t end this world.

I have the winding box. I know you have at least one of the watches. Perhaps both. It doesn't matter anymore. I have cracked the box's secret. I know how to open a portal, and I do not need the other two pieces to throw this entire world into the void. I will do that before I allow that ghost to leave the temple.

You do not need to answer. Just stop. I know how much you love your people and your child. Think of them. Of her. Stop.

Ghazi.

As I finished reading, I finally noticed that our altitude was starting to dip. The lights in the house flickered.

"Oh great," I said. Something had happened to the balloon. Our decline was slow, thankfully, but that couldn't be good. I wiped my gore-covered hand on my shirt.

"That's Denise," Bonnie said, looking up. "When she gets mad, magic stuff doesn't work. The balloon starts to sink. She usually gets over it pretty soon. She's probably on the roof."

Somewhere in the house, there was a crash followed by a distinctive *pop*. That was the sound of the clockwork Mongos exploding, even though they still had plenty of time left. Mongo let out a terrified screech.

I suddenly felt heavier and more tired. I'd lost most of my buffs, including the 14 strength from my toe ring and my two regular rings. All of my important stats had just taken a hit.

"Mongo?" Donut called, concerned. "Mongo, come to mommy!"

Mordecai: Sounds like a boss battle is about to start. The potion's purpose will probably become clear. Don't drink it, but try to secure it.

Carl: The monster blocks magic!

Mordecai: Shit, okay. This can manifest in a lot of different ways. But it likely means no spells. No scrolls. Your

gauntlet won't form. Only inherent potions will work. Maybe. But if they do, they might not work as well.

Carl: Goddamnit, in English!

Mordecai: Healing potions will work but only on yourself if they work at all. That new splat potion you just got won't work. You've likely lost the protections of your gear. Your active buffs are probably gone too. Be careful.

Mongo rushed into the kitchen, screaming, blood rushing from dozens of places on his body. He made a pitiful, bleating noise. He hadn't been attacked, I realized. The other two clockwork Mongos had exploded and injured him. The little clockwork pieces usually didn't hurt him.

Donut gasped in panic. "Carl, Carl, my heal spell stopped working! I can't fix Mongo!"

She rushed to the dinosaur, whose health was about halfway down. She glowed as she attempted to use a *Heal Critter* scroll. The spell fizzled out.

"Look, his health is going back up on its own. He'll be okay," I said. "Stop wasting scrolls. They won't work. We need to…"

"Do you want some lemonade?" Bonnie asked again, more insistent this time.

I remembered what Mordecai had said. "Yeah, thanks kid," I said, reaching for the glass.

The walls shook again, followed by a mighty, distinctive *honk*! The whole house lurched sideways. The pitcher of lemonade went flying. Little Bonnie screeched and tumbled off the edge of the kitchen counter, throwing the glass aside. Plates and cups flew from the cupboards. The kitchen drawers opened, spilling cutlery everywhere.

I jumped for the flying glass of the yellow potion, but I missed. I would've caught it, but the glass physically moved in midair away from my hand.

Sonofabitch, I thought. That was on purpose. They were never going to let me grab it. Me trying to grab the glass of lemonade was a trigger. It was like I'd just tripped a trap, or stepped on a landmine.

The cup hit the ground, bounced once, then spun away, spilling the potion. The house swung a few times and righted itself. Music started to play. The open window over the kitchen sink slammed shut on its own.

"Oh, poo," Bonnie said. "I spilled the drink everywhere. I'm going to have to make more."

We were locked in the house. It was just like a boss battle from the first floor.

The music was different than usual. It was slow and haunting, but with a distant, steady beat. *A chink, chink, chink*, almost like a hammer slowly beating onto an anvil.

A giant timer appeared in the air, floating in the middle of the kitchen. It was at three minutes.

"Uh-oh. That's new," Donut said.

I turned to face the hallway. The front door to the house was still open, I started to point, but the world froze.

Fuck. Here it comes.

B-B-B-Boss Battle!

It's a timed knock-out fight!

You have discovered the lair of a Borough Boss!

Ladies and Gentlemen, the stakes are getting higher, the battles are getting harder, and tonight we have the day's main event!

I want you to put your hands together.

Here are the rules, Contestants!

The house is falling. It will shatter against the ground in exactly three minutes after the end of this message. In order to escape, you must defeat the boss!

Easy, right?

Wrong, bitches!

Our mugshots appeared floating in the air. But this time the words **No Magic** stamped on each of our faces.

You can't use offensive or defensive magic for this fight!

I couldn't move my head, but I could still speak. "Stay behind me, Donut. You're too fragile. I'll do the punching. Keep Mongo back until he's fully healed."

"Carl, I don't like this. I don't have anything without magic!"

A second stamp crashed onto our names. **No Physical Damage!**

Oh yes, that's right! Your own physical attacks won't do shit, either!

"What the hell?" I shouted. "How is that fair?"

This should be a hoot! A hoot, I say! Actually, not a hoot. A…

"Honk!"

The world unfroze for a moment as the white goose walked through the front door of the house. She waddled into the hallway and angrily honked again as the door slammed behind her.

The thing wore a frilly, baby blue bonnet along with a blue shawl around her neck. The shawl was torn and stained with blood. Other than the blood, she looked like a regular white goose, plucked straight from the cover of a children's book.

It's…

Denise! The Feral Goose Mother!

Level 53 Borough Boss!

Like most of the creatures in this godsforsaken bubble, Denise shouldn't be here. She was plucked directly from the seventh floor when her grandfather, emperor Anser, decided to use a magical gate to bring his people to this world. But like many of those who were unwilling in their journey to this place, she lingered too long in the inbetween. The Nothing.

She paid dearly for it. Her mind is all but gone.

The gnomes captured her long ago, but they do not know who she really is. Denise doesn't know, either. She has a few special abilities. Abilities that only recently started to manifest themselves. She can prevent magic from harming her. She is an environmental. She has an overwhelming need to protect children.

But most of all, she just wants to kill everybody. Especially bitches.

And guess what you are?

Tick Tock, motherfuckers.

Aaaand here. We. Gooooo!

The world unfroze, the timer started to move, and the goose screamed in outrage and charged.

Mongo and I both scrambled out of the way as the shrieking goose slid into the kitchen, waving her wings furiously as she slammed into the refrigerator, causing magnets to scatter. The door dented.

"Hi, Denise!" Bonnie said as she continued to stack lemons onto the chair, as if this was the most normal thing in the world.

"Come on!" I yelled. "To the top of the stairs!"

"Mongo, no! Come!" Donut shrieked.

It was too late. The still-injured Mongo screeched and leaped across the room, feet first. He raked his claws across the recovering goose. He chomped onto the neck of the boss and started shaking it like a dog. The goose honked angrily and flapped her wings as Mongo threw the creature down. The boss bounced once and hopped back up. She jumped atop the kitchen table with the gnome corpse and stood upon the dead body and flapped her wings again, honking and growling at Mongo.

"You're so silly, Denise," Bonnie said.

The boss opened her bill to reveal multiple lines of shining, razor teeth. A health bar had not appeared. Then the mouth opened further, from the sideways this time, causing the whole mouth to open like a flower. A purple tongue dripped from the beak. It honked, but this time it came out twice as loud and deep, a terrifying, guttural cry straight from hell.

Its teeth shot out of its mouth, blasting at us like a shotgun. A line of fire cut across my arm and face. Donut cried out in pain.

It hadn't done much damage, but it hurt.

Mongo cried out in rage and pain and moved to attack again.

"Mongo, no!" Donut cried as I lobbed a banger sphere at the goose's head. The goose honked in surprise as the metal ball ricocheted off her bill. It staggered her, but again, no health bar appeared. We weren't damaging the goose at all.

Donut chomped firmly onto the dinosaur's tail and yanked, pulling the indignant and screeching Mongo back just as the goose lunged. The boss barely nipped him, but she dislodged a chunk of flesh and blue and pink feathers. Blood sprayed.

Donut, mouth still full of dinosaur tail, let out a strangled cry. Mongo's health was now even deeper in the red. I grasped the dinosaur on both sides and heaved, tossing him back, throwing him and Donut toward the kitchen door.

"Go!" I yelled as I slipped backward on the bloody floor. As I scrambled to my feet, my hand found a ceramic mug that had fallen from the cabinet. I picked it up and flung it at the goose's head like I was pitching a fastball. The mug shattered, and the goose crashed back, flying off the table, upsetting it and launching Commandant Kane's corpse straight into the air. The dead gnome splatted into the ceiling then sploshed wetly onto the kitchen floor.

"Mongo, follow me!" Donut cried as she let go of his tail.

Mongo, having decided this was probably a good idea, shrieked again but complied.

"Up the stairs," I cried as I stumbled toward the door. The house was falling faster and faster, and I could now feel our downward momentum. "We need to get out of the kitchen! Bonnie, make your lemonade. Hurry up!"

We needed to get the goose away from the kid. Whatever was in that damn potion, it had to be the secret to killing the monster. It was the only thing that made sense.

We rushed down the hallway. I tossed a side table over as the goose cried furiously. I was about to drop a smoke curtain, but I thought better of it. Even though her dot was still white on the map, I didn't want to distract Bonnie the gnome even more.

Two minutes.

How in the hell were we going to defeat it? Mordecai said there would always be clues. But what were they? The stairs ended in a T with a hallway reaching in each direction. There were several doors here, all ajar except one. Two of the open doors led to small bedrooms, one a bathroom, one a linen closet. The door furthest to the right was closed, and that was the "throne room" where the

stairwell to the sixth floor was located. It was actually just the master bedroom to the house. The door glowed, and I knew it would remain locked until this fight was over.

The area was scorched and burned from the clockwork Mongos getting themselves dispelled prematurely.

Donut continued to be preoccupied with Mongo and not the fight. The dinosaur was bleeding and injured, but he no longer appeared to be in pain. He let out a frustrated shriek as Donut clucked over him.

"Carl, Mongo won't stop bleeding! My pet carrier doesn't work! His health is still going down!"

There was a broken side table in the hallway. I picked it up and tossed it onto the stairs. "Try using one of those bandages!" We each had hundreds of the damn things. It wouldn't heal him, but it would hopefully stop the bleeding.

Downstairs, angry honking filled the hall as the goose left the kitchen and went looking for us.

"We're up here, ya overgrown duck!" I called.

"It worked!" Donut cried. "It's okay. We'll get you healed in a minute! Carl, what are we…"

"Go into that room there," I said, pointing to a bedroom with pink walls and posters for some Korean boy band. "It's directly over the kitchen. Break through the floor and make the hole big enough for all of us to drop through. Hurry!"

The beat to the boss music was getting louder and faster as the timer moved downward.

Donut scrambled into the room just as the goose appeared at the bottom of the stairs. It opened up its weird flower-mouth and honked. I ducked as she fired her mouth teeth again. The little darts peppered their way across the wall around me. Two of the barbs caught me in the face.

"Gah," I cried, pulling a sharp tooth out of my cheek.

She wasn't the most powerful mob we fought, but that didn't matter. She was practically indestructible, and all she needed to do was hold out for just a little longer.

It was only then did I notice the boss now had a health bar. Her health had barely gone down, but something had injured her. But what? The goose charged up the stairs, hopping up one step at a time, bobbing her head back and forth and hissing. Her blue bonnet flapped as she growled. I threw a banger, catching her in the chest. She flew back in rage, opening her mouth to fire again. I managed to dive out of the way this time. I risked dropping a smoke bomb, and then I popped up and knocked her back again.

One minute.

"We did it!" Donut cried from the next room.

I jumped up and ran to the room, slamming the door behind me. I looked down through the jagged hole. Donut had easily ripped up the carpet and the wooden panels. Bonnie looked up at us through the hole. The kitchen was a bloody mess. The corpse of Kane lay on the ground, face down. Bonnie had a spoon in the pitcher and was mixing it.

"Is it done?" I called down to the kid.

"It's better cold," she said. "Why did you break the ceiling?"

The door to the room slammed as the goose blindly crashed into it. "Come on!" I jumped down through the hole, followed by Donut and Mongo. Mongo now had some stuffed animal in his mouth. A pink rabbit thing he'd gotten from the room.

The description on the newly-mixed pitcher of yellow liquid hadn't changed. I still didn't know if I should drink the potion or give it to the monster. It wasn't hurting the kid. She was under some weird spell, but it seemed to protect her from the bird's wrath. Plus, what did she say? Her father had given her the recipe.

Fuck it, I thought. I grabbed the pitcher from the tiny girl.

"Hey!" she cried. "Let me pour you a glass! You can't just take all of it!"

"I'll buy the whole pitcher," I said just as the goose appeared in the hole over our heads. It opened its mouth and hissed. It jumped down toward us as I pulled the pitcher to my mouth.

The world froze once again, the goose hovering in mid-air. The timer froze, stuck on thirty-eight seconds. I felt a swell of hope.

New Achievement! Wild Goose Chase!

Oh, I'm sorry. Did you think this was an important potion?

Magic doesn't work, dumbass. It's lemonade!

***Reward*: It really is delicious. Too bad you're about to splatter against the roof of the catacombs.**

And just like that, the world unfroze.

"Shit," I cried, scrambling out of the way as the goose slammed onto the kitchen counter.

It was a trick. And I'd fallen for it. The whole lemonade thing was a deliberately-placed misdirection.

Denise opened her flower mouth and prepared to fire point blank at me. I clobbered her with the pitcher, causing her to rear back.

Her health went down. Barely, but I saw it move.

I finally understood. The description had said she was an "enviromental." I didn't think about what that meant at the time. Everything was happening so fast, and I hadn't realized that was a specific type of buff. Her health had gone down before when I hit her with the mug, and again with the pitcher. She was impervious to my attacks and my weapons. But she was vulnerable to damage from objects that were already in the house. I thought of the bricks lying about the fireplace. Of the broken shards of glass on the ground. It was too late to get to any of it.

Twenty seconds.

I leaped for the goose, and grabbed her by the neck. She let out a strangled screech and flapped her wings. I tried to grab her bill, but she dodged. She opened her mouth and fired directly at me.

I cried as the stinging line of pain marched across my face and neck. It hurt a lot more this time. It was like getting hit with a flaming baseball bat. My health plummeted. I slammed on a health potion. It did not work. I suddenly couldn't see from my left eye. The goose squirmed in my grip, but I grasped again, this time grabbing her by the face and holding the bill shut. She struggled, but despite being a higher level, I was stronger. I felt woozy. I was going to pass out. I clung onto the goose for dear life.

What had the kid said about her father? She'd pointed to the sink. What had she meant? I looked again. There was nothing there.

What had Kane been trying to do?

I saw the twin light switches to the right of the basin, and then I knew.

"Donut," I cried, my voice a strangled shout as I lurched toward the sink.

"What! What?"

Ten seconds.

I shoved the goose into the sink, face first. She struggled, feet scrambling against me. Everything was suddenly hazy. I had to move my hand back to get Denise's bill in the drain. She tried to open her mouth to block me. I shoved it in there. Her head was too big. I pushed and pushed. Her bonnet ripped off as her head popped into the hole.

"The garbage disposal! Hit the switch!"

Five seconds.

Donut leaped to the counter and flipped the first switch as I held the goose's head in the hole. The light switched on. "The other switch!"

Donut hit it.

The garbage disposal whined, sounding like it was eating rocks. Denise went rigid in my hands, her body convulsing like I was holding onto a short-circuiting power tool. Blood showered up through the hole, geysering into the kitchen.

The timer paused at one second.

The whole house jerked to a stop, and we all flew off our feet. The boss, still head-first in the disposal and no longer being held still by me, started to rapidly spin.

I cast *Heal* on myself, and this time it worked. I felt my buffs return. The garbage disposal screamed. Mongo glowed as Donut healed him. She turned back to the switch and turned off the disposal. The goose continued to spin a few times, *flap, flap, flap, flap* before coming to a rest and flopping over. The now-headless boss slopped out of the sink and into my lap, where the blood continued to squirt out the neck hole.

Bubble Notification. The Commandant's quarters of the *Wasteland* have been successfully occupied. The Air

Quadrant has been liberated!

All give congratulations to the crawlers who successfully took the throne room. All hail crawlers Princess Donut and Carl!

All crawlers who originated in the Air Quadrant may now freely travel to the other quadrants.

I looked up at the ceiling. "Wild goose chase? Really? How long have you been waiting to use that one?"

The house bumped as it gently hit the ground.

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Time to Level Collapse: 10 Days and 4 Hours

Views: 17.72 Quintillion
Followers: 13 Quadrillion
Favorites: 4.1 Quadrillion

"I DID ALL THAT SEWING FOR NOTHING?" KATIA SAID AS WE STEPPED OUT THE front door of the house. She and the others were waiting for us. I came out and shook hands with Landry and the other archers. Louis and Firas were also there, all looking wide-eyed at the suburban house that now sat cockeyed in the sand dune.

"The parachutes will still come in handy," I said. "Katia, this is Bonnie."

"Hey there," Katia said, taking a knee in front of the child. "How are you doing, sweetheart?"

"Do you know where I can get some lemons?" the child asked. "I want to set up a lemonade stand, but I used them all." She gave me a withering look. "*Somebody* keeps spilling it."

The house had landed along the edge of the bowl about a half of a mile east of Hump Town. We still had a good hour of darkness left before dawn. After the death of Denise, the magical balloon started to slowly refill itself. The whole thing would take off again if we let it. Donut and I rushed out onto the little square and attempted to sever the lines that connected the home to the balloon, but the ropes were

like steel cables. We were going to have to abandon the house if we wanted to avoid having to jump out.

I rushed to the kitchen to grab the kid, but she looked at me like I was crazy when I told her we had to leave.

"The house is about to take off again, and we can't have you floating around up there by yourself. It's not safe," I said.

"Well let's just leave the house down here, then," she said. She pulled a small object from the inside of her oversized shirt. It was a necklace. It looked like a walnut. She fiddled with it, and I felt the house settle.

"What is that? What did you do?" I asked.

She took the necklace from around her neck and handed it to me. "My dad gave it to me when he gave me the potion. He said to give it to an adult. I guess you'll do."

I took the necklace from the girl and examined it. It was a little, purple-hued gem. I recognized what it was immediately.

Soul Crystal. F-Quality. Used to power the balloon that keeps this house afloat. Nothing too exciting. You probably want to avoid breaking it, though.

Charge: 89% Kill something to charge it up.

The crystal was housed in a sliding clamshell-like device. It appeared one could control how much power it fed the balloon based on how much the clamshell was opened. The thing had stopped feeding power to the balloon all together when we were under the anti-magic aura of the feral goose.

We'd seen plenty of these things before. They controlled the ghoul generators on the last floor. I had, still sitting in my inventory, a broken, about-to-explode soul crystal that would flatten everything within forty-five square kilometers the moment I took it out. That one was "C-quality" though it wasn't much bigger than this one. I wondered how powerful a B or A quality gem would be.

"I'm going to keep this, okay?" I said to the kid. I kept the little shell open just a fraction, enough to keep the balloon off the ground, but not enough to lift the house. Hopefully. I'd have to go out there and experiment.

Bonnie shrugged.

The house sat at an angle along a sand dune. The interior looked how one might expect a house would after a boss fight with a murderous, indestructible goose. Everything that wasn't bolted down was on its side or spilled. Now that I knew the house wouldn't fly away, we had a lot of work to do.

Donut and I had both gone up a single level. I was now at 44, and Donut was 37. That was it. It felt as if we should've gotten more. Mongo had gone up three, hitting level 33. I was pretty sure I'd never understand how these experience points were allocated. It almost seemed random, despite Mordecai's insistence that it was not.

"See if you can figure out what's wrong with the kid," I said to Donut. "Her dad gave her something. Talk with Mordecai and try to work it out." Bonnie was on her hands and knees picking up the forks and spoons that had scattered everywhere.

The kid had barely reacted to anything that had happened. After the gruesome death of Denise, she complained that she didn't have enough lemons to make another batch of lemonade and then set out to clean the kitchen. Her eyes remained dilated as she went to work, cleaning up like it was nothing. She worked around the corpse of her father. She was acting normal, which was absolutely abnormal in this situation.

The power to the house remained connected. Same with the water. While Donut talked to the kid, I had three goals. First I was going to check out the stairwell and throne room—aka the master bedroom. Then I would secure all the windows with tarp so this place didn't get filled with sand. And finally, I was going to loot every damn thing I could pick up. I was going to inspect and remove the electrical panel if I could. Everything.

Mongo still clutched onto the stuffed pink rabbit he'd gotten from the kid's room. I patted the durable dinosaur on the head as I went upstairs. The door to the master bedroom opened without any effort. I stepped into an unremarkable room. A king-sized bed with crumpled, blue sheets stood against one wall, and a tall dresser with all the drawers opened sat against the other, still miraculously standing. Spilled men's and women's clothing covered the floor. I

eyed a uniform shirt for some plumbing company with the name "Dale" sewn on the breast. A framed, University of Arizona Master's Degree in library sciences for the woman who used to live here had fallen off the wall, but the glass hadn't broken. Her name had been Jennifer.

Jennifer and Dale. They'd had three kids. They'd likely all been asleep when it happened.

I couldn't stop thinking about what Maggie had said, that they could bring people back. I didn't want to think about it, about the potential horrors we could face if we lived past this day or the next.

You're lucky, I thought. *There's only two people out there they could dredge up*. For most, that number had to be a lot higher.

I noticed something else. On the nightstand, a photo that had fallen over. I picked it up. It wasn't a photo, but a drawing. It was Kane, a woman gnome, and a baby. He'd removed the existing photo and placed it in the frame. He'd slept in this bed.

It also appeared he'd been jerking off to Cosmopolitan magazines. A pile of them lay scattered on the floor along with dozens of used tissues. I sighed and turned to the large walk-in closet.

I could see it on the map, the stairwell. I opened the closet door, and there it was. It was only wide enough for two people to walk down side-by-side. It didn't make sense, physics wise, since we were on the second floor of a house, but there it was. A blue forcefield prevented me from entering. We still had two more throne rooms to capture before it would open.

After I secured the windows the best I could, mostly by duct-taping sheets and tarp over them, I went to work looting everything. Books, toys, furniture. The man had been pretty short, unfortunately, so there was nothing that'd fit me. The boys had been teenagers, and the girl had been about twelve or so. I secured everything I could, including two laptops, three televisions, and several gaming consoles.

Bonnie had been sleeping in the girl's room. I took the bed and nightstand. The closet was filled with Barbie dolls and tons of little animal action figure things. I took it all.

I finally hit paydirt in the garage. In addition to two mountain bicycles and a cheap, plastic kayak, they had a full workbench filled with tools that had been meticulously organized. There were boxes and boxes of crap. A bunch of Christmas supplies, including a fake tree, had been recently put away. I took it along with a box of Halloween and fourth of July decorations.

The electrical panel was also in the garage. I pulled the main house breaker, and the power didn't go out. It was as if all the lines were just electrified without a source. I carefully snipped a line to test it, and the downline outlet still worked. I removed the outlet from the garage wall, and only then did it stop working. It didn't make sense. It was some magic or game bullshit. If it was attached to where it was supposed to be, it worked, but not once it was removed.

I didn't want to flood the house, so I didn't try it with the pipes. I did, however, completely disconnect the main house panel. and I took it. I doubted I'd have use for it, but you never knew.

I did not locate what I was hoping to find. This house came from Texas. They had a doormat that claimed they had guns. If they had any in the house, however, the system didn't include them when it reconstituted the place. If the couple had a gun safe, it'd probably been in that closet in the master bedroom.

Oh well, I thought. This was still a great haul.

I wandered back to the kitchen. This was the last room I needed to clear, and I hadn't covered the window or back door yet. Donut sat on the counter, chatting away with Bonnie who continued to pick things up.

"She's telling me about Sausage, her pig," Donut said. "She says her mother bought him for her."

"Ahh," I said.

Donut: SHE SAID HER DAD GAVE HER A POTION TO DRINK AFTER WE BLEW UP THE *WASTELAND*. SHE'D BEEN CRYING A LOT BUT IT HELPED HER STOP. SHE WAS SLEEPING NEXT TO HER DAD IN THE KITCHEN WHEN WE CAME. MORDECAI SAYS IT'S PROBABLY GOING TO WEAR OFF SOON.

Carl: Jesus. Poor kid. I'm glad we got to her before it wore off. Katia and the others will be here at first light. They're going to bring Juice Box, who'll take care of her.

"Carl, look!" Donut exclaimed. We were marching back to Hump Town with the others. I turned to see the airplane slowly descending from the sky. It was the *Nightmare II*. It had dislodged itself from the main balloon during the boss fight, and the emergency balloon had finally lost its juice, sending the plane slowly back to the ground.

I sent Louis and Firas out to secure it and drag it back to the house. It would probably fit in that large garage. I tasked them with sticking it in there to protect it from the next storm. It'd give them something to do.

I watched the men scurry off. They both had a new borough boss star after their names. They, along with the archers, had gotten into a fight with the Thorny Devil queen. Langley said they'd held their own during the fight.

After they killed the queen, the regular thorny devil mobs just disappeared. We still had those small, explosive things that came out at night and the birds, but we'd pretty much cleared out the bowl.

Bonnie walked next to Juice Box, who'd taken on the form of a dirigible gnome woman. Bonnie clutched onto her hand as they waddled along the hot desert floor. The spell still hadn't worn off.

"We'll take care of her," Juice Box said. "Orphans will always have a home in Hump Town."

Donut: THAT SOUNDS OBSCENE.

Carl: Not now, Donut.

As we walked, I reached up and patted Donut on the head.

"That was too close, Donut," I said.

"But we made it, didn't we?" She was furiously rubbing sand out of her fur. "God, it's hot. Carl, you need to invent a portable air conditioner. This is not acceptable."

"Look," I said. "We need to talk about that battle. I'm glad you and Mongo have bonded so well. And I know it didn't really matter this time, but I need you in the fight. Mongo is going to get injured. You can't get overwhelmed by that. We'll protect him and each other the best we can, but you were in a full-on panic over his injuries, and it caused you to completely check out."

Donut paused in her self-cleaning. "What are you trying to say, Carl?"

"I'm saying we're going to die if you're not paying attention to the fight. I can't do it all on my own."

"You didn't. Who flipped the switch? I mean, really. I couldn't cast my magic, and I am a magic class on this floor. What else was I supposed to do? Vomit on the goose? Besides, you had clearly figured it out."

"I hadn't figured it out until the last minute. We got lucky."

"That wasn't luck, Carl. That was you being you. I'm pretty sure we were supposed to drown the goose in the sink. Or the lemonade pitcher. Not rip her head off in the garbage disposal. You're a good fighter, Carl. And you think fast. That's why we're still alive. You rarely think of the proper answer to a problem, but you usually come up with one that works anyway."

I was going to reply, but Katia approached.

"So what's next?" she asked. "Are we going into the necropolis?"

I pulled the letter from the mage and showed her.

"I'm pretty sure this means we have to take care of the land quadrant before we even try to storm the catacombs. The mage guy says he'd destroy this world before he'd allow the ghost out. I don't know what's going on there, but it's not something we want to mess around with."

Katia was visibly relieved. None of us relished the idea of going into a dark tunnel system that was filled with water and traps.

"We're all going to fly away in that stupid house, aren't we?"

I grinned. "Don't worry. It'll be a party. A house party."

Zev and Loita messaged us as we entered back through the town gates.

Loita: Congratulations. Barely surviving battles is great for your numbers. Keep it up. Donut, you have a new box. They insist this version will not explode as you don't deliberately go into the had cavity. Spend some time with it. If it works as intended, we are going to bring you two up to do the show a day early.

Donut: I'M NOT OPTIMISTIC, LOITA.

Loita: I don't care if you're optimistic, crawler. Just do as you're told.

Donut: WELL YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE A JERK ABOUT IT.

Loita: Do not talk back to me. You keep forgetting your place.

Donut: I DON'T LIKE YOU, LOITA. YOU SMELL REALLY BAD.

Loita: The feeling is mutual. And if you talk back again, I will have Mongo taken from you. We'll use him to feed a mob on the next floor and we'll make you watch. I can do that. Don't test me.

On my shoulder, Donut let out a pained stream of breath.

Carl: Now, now. There's no need for you to get your fish panties all wadded up. We'll play with the robot.

Zev: Anyway, the fans really enjoyed that battle. Good job you two. I'm sorry to say this is goodbye, however. I will still be Loita's assistant working behind the scenes, but I'm afraid you no longer need a social media manager.

I held up my hand to stop Donut from saying anything.

Carl: What do you mean?

Loita: She means you have purchased the social media board, so you no longer need her to interpret and relay what the dry masses are saying about you.

Carl: Can you at least send her down here so Donut can say goodbye to her?

Loita: No. Of course not.

Carl: What about that infomercial for the robot? Can she go to that?

Loita: No. It is not her job anymore. I will be there, of course. Now get back to work.

The communication cut off.

"I didn't even get a chance to say goodbye," Donut said. She sniffed. "I wouldn't have asked for the social media board if I knew we wouldn't get to talk to her anymore."

"It's okay, Donut," I said. "We'll see her again. I promise."

"You shouldn't promise things like that," she said. "You shouldn't make promises you can't keep."

I patted her on the head. "We *will* see her again, Donut. I keep my promises."

She butted her head against mine, purring loudly.

Once we returned to base, I slept for two hours, showered, reset my buffs, trained, and ate. I spent some time with Mordecai, experimenting with different types of explosive recipes, including making a toothpaste-like gel that could burn long and hot. I was getting better at taking recipes from the cookbook and then steering conversations to make it look like Mordecai was coming up with the idea.

We watched the recap show. They featured the fight on the falling house, and I watched updates on several of the others. Prepotente and Miriam were just as far along as we were. They'd managed to scale the interior wall of their bubble and kill all the spiders by applying some debuff that made them all fall asleep and plummet to their deaths. That had somehow also finished out the subterranean zone in their bubble, and they were now preparing to go underwater.

The two-headed creature that represented the Popov brothers was on a pirate ship firing cannons at other pirate ships. I didn't know what was going on there. Lucia Mar fought some multi-limbed

mummy ice thing and shattered him. She was actually working with a group of people, which surprised me, though the show was low on details. Quan Ch had already popped his bubble, and he was flying around farming all the mobs he could.

The top-ten list remained mostly the same, but Florin the crocodilian had dropped off. The last we'd seen him, he'd been sitting in the starting room refusing to choose a bubble quadrant after the death of Ifechi. I wondered where he was now, if he was even alive. The top ten list was:

1. Lucia Mar – Lajabless – Black Inquisitor General – Level 41 – 1,000,000 (x2)

2. Carl – Primal – Compensated Anarchist – Level 44 – 500,000 (x2)

3. Prepotente – Caprid – Forsaken Aerialist – Level 38 – 400,000 (x2)

4. Donut – Cat – Former Child Actor – Level 36 – 300,000 (x2)

5. Dmitri and Maxim Popov – Nodling – Illusionist and Bogatyr – Level 37 – 200,000 (x2)

6. Miriam Dom – Human – Shepherd – Level 34 – 100,000 (x2)

7. Quan Ch – Half Elf – Imperial Security Trooper – Level 45 – 100,000 (x2)

8. Elle McGib – Frost Maiden – Blizzardmancer – Level 35 – 100,000

9. Bogdon Ro – Human – Legatus – Level 35 – 100,000

10. Chirag Ali – Human – Sacred Paladin – Level 35 – 100,000

I still didn't know who that Bogdon Ro guy was. Quan had dropped several spots, probably because he'd cleared his bubble early and he wasn't making any moves to leave the area. People got bored easily. He remained the highest level, but I was catching up to him. There was a new guy at the bottom of the list. I wasn't sure if I'd seen him or not on the show.

"I still don't understand how that goat is so popular," Donut grumbled. "I don't like being separated from you, Carl."

"Do you wish to talk about it?" Robot Donut asked. "We can have a gab session, just you and me, girlfriend."

"Oh be quiet," Donut said testily. The novelty of her having "merch" had finally worn off.

This newest version of the robot toy weighed about three times as much as the last one, and it was slightly bigger, too. Mongo had immediately attacked it, but it hadn't suffered any obvious damage this time. I spent some time playing with the thing, and it was pretty sturdy. They hadn't fixed much else, however. It still threw out random, bootleg Garfield quotes. It still reacted oddly to situations.

Still, this was the best version yet. And it worked as intended. Sort of. Loita informed us we'd go on the show in a few hours to discuss the product. Katia was still scheduled for another show, but she would go on tomorrow evening. Hopefully we'd be in the land quadrant by then.

The robot toy had a small panel on the back of the head that was held closed with a cheap, little tab, much like a battery compartment from a toy on earth. I clicked open the flimsy tab and received a warning that the thing was going to self-destruct in five seconds if I didn't put it back. I was genuinely curious what was going to happen since we were in a safe room, but at the last moment, I shoved the little rectangle back into place with a *click*.

Mordecai told me not to press my luck since this was a non-enhanced toy.

"What does that even mean?" I asked. I flicked the little tab. *Jesus, what a piece of shit.*

"You know how some video games required internet access to play? Even though they're single-player? This is the same sort of thing. Most toys nowadays require access to a licensed enhancement zone to work. And some even take it a step further and require the child to have a license key installed in himself in order to unlock all the toy's features. It makes certain his parents are current in their taxes. This one doesn't have any of that. It's not as fancy as most of the stuff out there, but it's something that can be played with by a child who is on a long spacecraft voyage outside of a system's net. Or by a family too poor to pay their access tax. If you activate the

self-destruct sequence, the AI can probably teleport it away, but it might not, especially since that was added to keep you out of its head. I honestly don't know what would happen. This isn't something you want to test."

The robot hopped up and down in agreement. "Carl, Carl, let's go kill another mantaur!"

I reached over and patted the robot on the head. It moaned. Like a sexual, human woman moan. I jerked my hand back. "Jesus Christ!"

Carl: So this company, Veriluxx, they're genuinely trying to help poor kids with this bullshit?

Mordecai: I wouldn't go that far. I've never heard of them, but the logo on the benefactor box suggests they're associated with Veritan Linkage. That's a mostly-Soother lending fund that advocates for the enslavement of those who can't afford their taxes. I've been thinking about why a company would spend so much on such a stupid toy, and none of it makes sense. Only a mega corp could possibly afford such an expensive campaign, and they'd only do it if there was some sort of pay-off. I doubt just selling a cheap toy is their intent. Odds are we'll never know. It's likely just a way to funnel money to Borant. They're closely allied with them and the Bloom.

Carl: Christ. Is the whole universe filled with assholes?

Mordecai: Just the ones with the money.

"Oh goodie," robot Donut said. "I can't wait to go onto another show. I'll get even more fans!"

I spent some time playing with the watch. The thing was identical to the other one Henrik had. The description was less than helpful. I turned the bronze watch over in my hand. There was a bone symbol etched onto the metal. I'd seen that symbol before somewhere, but I couldn't remember where. The watch wasn't ticking.

Mysterious Pocket Watch.

What in the hell is this thing? What does it do? It keeps terrible time. Sometimes the hands move on their own. And there's a mirror built in that isn't quite a mirror. You need to find a winding box to make it work.

That was it. I opened it, and the little mirror above the face showed nothing but blackness. There was a tiny indicator for an alarm. If I pulled the tab on top of the watch out three times, I could set it. I moved it so it reached the hour hand, and the watch vibrated in my palm like a cell phone buzzing on silent. I'd set the alarm off.

The image on the little mirror changed. A fish-like creature appeared and met my gaze. The window suddenly went dark.

That was Henrik, I realized. He was in the necropolis with the other watch, and he was in the form of an underwater creature. I'd set the alarm off and signaled him. I sighed and snapped it closed. At least we knew the old changeling was still alive.

"Hey," Katia said, sticking her head into the personal space. "Bonnie is starting to wake up out of her stupor. She's over at Skarn's house. You should go see her before you and Donut leave for your show."

That was a good idea. We were going to do the infomercial, and the moment we got back, we were all going to get into the house and fly it out of the bowl.

"How's she doing?" I asked as I followed Katia.

"Not so great. But she's a kid. Kids are resilient."

The dromedarians, to their credit, didn't treat the girl poorly even though she was partially responsible for bombing their town. I wasn't so sure humans would be so forgiving. A group of the camels stood outside the home, quietly talking amongst themselves. I followed Katia inside.

"This is where you'll sleep," Juice Box was saying. She indicated a corner of the room.

To my surprise, Donut and Mongo were already here. I hadn't realized she'd finished with her training.

"This isn't my bed," Bonnie said, looking down at the simple cot. The little gnome had her arms wrapped around herself. She'd changed out of the bloody, oversized football jersey into a simple dress that was also too big for her. Skarn stood next to her, his hand on her shoulder. He'd transformed into a gnome also.

"Hey, here you go," I said, pulling the pink bed out of my inventory. Everyone moved out of the way as I manhandled the bed into place. It was absurdly large for the little girl, but the home was spacious enough to accommodate it. This was the same bed she was sleeping in before. I then pulled the little side table that had been next to it, and I placed it down next to the bed.

The girl barely reacted.

"Denise killed my dad," she suddenly said. "He knew she was going to do it. He said there was nothing he could do. He told me to make lemonade. I started to cry, and he gave me the potion, and I wasn't scared anymore. Do you have another one of those potions? Please?"

"No, sweety," Juice Box said.

"It's okay," Skarn said. "When my town got bombed, my parents died, too. But they take care of me here. The camels are grumpy, but they aren't mean."

"Okay," Bonnie said, her voice small. She rubbed her nose.

Mongo slowly approached the girl, and he dropped the stuffed pink bunny in front of her. The girl picked it up and held it tight. She closed her eyes. I took the photo from my inventory, the one of her and her mother and father, and I put it on the nightstand.

Loita: Oh for the sake of the gods. Audiences like drama, but not melodrama. Stop concerning yourself so much with NPCs. We'll be transferring you to your program in twenty minutes.

I motioned to Katia and Donut, and we left the girl with Juice Box. I turned to look one last time, and the girl was sobbing, clutching onto the changeling woman while she held the stuffed pink rabbit. Juice Box stroked the girl's hair.

That was the moment. Right then. I'd been toying around with an idea, but I'd dismissed it as too risky. Too soon.

That was the moment I changed my mind.

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[18]

<Note added by Crawler Coolie. 19th Edition>

I went on a program tonight. They transported me to a ship that floats in low orbit over the planet. The ship has an open window with no glass that is only protected by a forcefield. It is amazing. I can look down upon my planet. My beautiful, lost planet. If I am to die here, I want this to be my last view.

Carl: I have some things cooking on my sapper's table. Let me take care of them really quick before you transfer us.

Loita: You have ten minutes. Not a second longer. Hurry up, Carl. The Veriluxx crew is paying for a rental trailer.

I rushed across the street to the closest pub and entered our personal space. I did, indeed, have two sets of smoke curtains infusing in potions. Ever since I'd read about the idea in the cookbook, I'd been experimenting with different combinations. The only thing that'd worked so far was mixing a smoke bomb with a healing spell, which in turn was a great offense against undead. I hadn't the chance to use it yet.

I had two infusion stations on my table. In the first, I was currently attempting to mix a smoke curtain with a splash of the

Rev-Up immunity smoothie I'd made on the second floor. The potion gave temporary disease immunity, but it made you drunk off your ass. I could tell right away that this one was a bust. The smoke curtain was blacked out and had gained the **Dud** status. That's what usually happened.

My second infusion was much more successful. I'd already known it was going to work because I'd stolen the recipe from the cookbook. I had to pretend like I'd stumbled on it on my own.

Most of my most recent boxes had contained at least one invisibility potion. They were pretty valuable. By the time I had five of them, I figured it was finally time to justify "wasting" one in order to experiment.

"Hey, it looks like this one actually turned into something," I said to robot Donut, who stood upon the table watching me work.

Your Infusion skill has risen to level 3. Just wait until you learn how to do this with vodka.

I picked up the round smoke curtain, which was normally red, but it now shined with a multi-colored opalescence.

Hobgoblin Disco Ball

Type: Magically-infused Deflagrating Tossable.

Effect: It's a real trip.

Status: 25. Unstable.

Molly not included.

Take a Hobgoblin smoke curtain, soak it in an invisibility potion, and what do you get? You get a party, that's what you get! Produces heavy, multi-hued billows of smoke that are both photosensitive and frequency responsive. And in case you don't know what that means, just set one off and find out. The smoke will conceal all movement within, and the plumes will bounce to the beat.

Warning: Unlike a regular smoke curtain, the caster of this tossable is not immune to its effects. In other words, you'll be just as blind as the monsters. So you don't want to be dropping this thing at your feet unless you find yourself to be the most handsome dude at the orgy.

The act of infusing smoke curtains made them inherently unstable, which is why I wanted to avoid trying this with actual explosives. I knew once my skill rose a little higher, that'd cease to be a problem. I placed the smoke curtain on the edge of the table while I closed up the infusing trays.

"Good job, Carl!" robot Donut said.

"Yeah, I gained a skill level," I said.

Robot Donut hopped up and down. "Yay! I love skill levels!"

When the robot jumped up, it sent the disco ball flying to the ground.

"Goddamnit, robot Donut," I cried.

The thing's status was protected while it was on the table, but not once it hit the floor. And while explosives would never go off in a safe room, that wasn't true for smoke bombs. I'd already had it happen to me a few times.

I took a step back and stepped directly onto the infused smoke curtain, which, of course, set it off.

A rainbow of smoke filled the crafting room. Mordecai, who was on the other side of the room, bent over his alchemy table, looked up in time to start cursing at me.

"Goddamnit it to hell," I said again. I scooped up robot Donut and held it to my chest while the thick smoke overwhelmed us. I held the robot tight as we were surrounded by eddies of smoke. "Mordecai, don't move! It'll go away in a minute."

"Pretty colors," robot Donut said. I felt the head turn around to face me in the complete, multi-hued smoke storm. The voice went down an octave. "This is what we all see in the end. I'm always here for you, Carl."

Loita: Are you quite done? It's time to go.

Carl: We're ready.

Donut had taken a shower and had talked Katia into brushing her while I'd screwed around in the crafting room. Katia had laughed her

ass off at the disco ball incident, especially after Mordecai came out bitching up a storm, complaining that I'd ruined an hour's worth of work. I clutched tightly onto the robot. The color tornado had only lasted for a minute, but it had left a sandy, technicolor residue over everything and everyone in the room. The whole common area smelled like burnt cotton candy. The cleaner bot beeped angrily at me and buzzed off toward the mess.

"I mean, really, Carl," Donut said as I shook colorful dust from my hair. "You both look like you just slaughtered the cast of *Rainbow Bright*. After all that work we did to keep Mongo from hurting her, too. Robot Donut could've been damaged. Look at her! They're not going to be happy, Carl."

Loita: Transferring now.

"I'm better than ever, girlfriend!" Robot Donut said from my arms. Before Donut could respond, we flashed and reappeared into a production trailer.

I looked about, quickly assessing the situation. My feet sank into lush carpet. The tone of the hull quickly told me that we were under the surface, not floating. Despite our appearance under the water, my menus still disappeared. I did not have access to my inventory.

This was a nice, middle-quality trailer, but it was a submarine, not a boat like the last time we'd gone on a non-Odette show. Despite being under the surface, this trailer was set up similar to Odette's production trailer with a green room and a doorway to the studio. In fact, I realized, this was the exact same model, though the green room on this one had a different layout and included a large picture window that looked about the dark ocean.

"No snacks," Donut grumbled.

Loita lounged on the couch in the very back of the room, which explained why our menus hadn't appeared. She was comically small on the large cushion. She wore the fish rebreather around her neck, not the armored suit that Zev always insisted upon. The small device occasionally spit out a small spray of water. A large wet spot had formed around her. I approached and leaned over her, tapping on the window that looked out into the cold depths. I felt the water from her rebreather splash against my leg. It was fully dark out

there. I felt the heavy weight of the water surrounding us. The "glass" felt more like plastic. I detected a hint of a forcefield on the outside, barely visible.

"Do these trailers go into space, like regular space ships?" I asked. "Or are they all off-loaded a larger transport?"

She frowned, as if surprised by the question. "How is that possibly your concern?"

"We got attacked from orbit a while back, and the folks who did it recently tried to kill us again. I was curious how stout these things are."

"You're perfectly safe, crawler. This is an underwater security trailer."

I knocked on the wall again. "Security, huh? We just teleported in here like it was nothing. If I was an alien assassin, I'd probably figure out how to teleport myself into here, too. We had this show called *Star Trek*, and the bad guys were always beaming themselves onto enemy ships to attack."

"You know, for such a famous crawler, you sure are a coward. The trailer is shielded once you arrive. Nobody comes in or out until the program is over. Again, you are safer here than you are in the dungeon."

"I hope so," I said. "Don't forget, you're in here with us, too."

Her eyes widened, but it was quick. She finally noticed the dust-covered robot Donut under my arm. She let out a little gasp of despair. "Oh, you idiot! What did you do to the product sample?"

"Hi, I'm Princess Donut the Queen Anne Chonk!" the robot said to Loita. "What's your name? We were doing crafts. Do you want to follow my feed? We kill with style!"

"Gods damnit, I knew you would cock this up," Loita said. She sighed dramatically. Her eyes started flashing as she entered her menus. "Okay, okay. It'll be fine. They have another model in there anyway. A real one, not the dungeon-enhanced version."

"Like a real, real one?" I asked, turning toward the door. "Can we take it with us when we're done?"

"No, of course not. It'll be a holo."

"Well that's no fun," I said.

"There will be a holo Donut doll along with a holo Mongo doll. You will go on and interact with the toys, but you will not physically touch them, lest we betray the illusion."

Donut, who'd been sitting sullenly on the ground—refusing to get on the couch next to Loita and refusing to jump on my shoulder because I was still covered in multi-colored residue—did a little hop at the mention of a Mongo doll.

"Can I bring Mongo out? Wouldn't that be lovely? He would just love to meet a toy version of himself."

"No," Loita said. "Just go out there, tell them what you think of the product. Read the script if you can't think of anything to say. Do not be negative. This is not live, so don't think you're going to go changing the universe with your bravado today. Anything stupid you say will be edited out and we'll all be stuck in this can for longer." Loita waved her hand, and a virtual square appeared floating in midair in front of the couch. "I'll be watching the taping from in here. Do not make me get up and go in there. I swear to the gods you will not be happy if I have to go in there."

Donut grumbled something under her breath. It was something along the lines of "Talking Fancy Feast."

"Why are you so angry all the time, Loita?" I asked.

The tiny fish woman glowered at me. For a moment, I didn't think she was going to answer. But then she said, "You. Your cat. Your people. Your ugly culture. This is a cancer upon the Bloom, and we should not be doing this."

I felt my eyebrow raise. "Doing what?"

"We should not be celebrating your culture. Spreading your filth so the fry may see."

I laughed bitterly. "Celebrating? You call this *celebrating* our culture? You're exterminating us and profiting upon our ashes."

"If it were up to me, we'd simply exterminate you and nothing else. You're filthy. You're dry. You're a rot upon the Bloom."

Donut swished her tail. "You probably shouldn't have become a PR agent if that's how you really feel, darling. Honestly, I can't help but feel you don't have our best interests at heart. This is why we

worked much better with Zev. She understood how to exploit our star power."

That seemed to have struck a nerve. "Zev? What you have done to Zev is the exact reason you are so dangerous. She is young. She is impressionable. She is the future of the kua-tin. The Bloom. Her generation is enraptured by the newest, shiniest thing. They do not trust in the concept of system strength. Of True Unity. Of the Great Consensus. Do you know what we had to do just to bring Zev back into the fold? Unspeakable things to her mother and her aunts. It was only then did she take the badge. We need to do this to a whole generation now because of you. Because of your filthy culture."

I barely understood what she was upset about, but now I was getting pissed. *Control, Control*. I spoke through gritted teeth. "Well, Loita. If you had, you know, just left us alone, you wouldn't have to worry about…"

She interrupted, pointing directly at Donut, who looked stricken. "Your culture, your non-unifying, defeatist, dry, multi-organ, diversified attempt at culture is a deadly contagion, and it must be treated as such. After this crawl, after every single one of you dry vermin is dead, the Borant system will close its borders and only then will the reawakening occur. Only then will we be free of this rot."

Donut looked up at me. "My goodness. Is it me, or is she a complete loon?"

I tried not to laugh. Loita growled and was about to say something else when her eyes flashed. She took a long breath, splashing water over the couch. "It's time. Enter through the door. Don't make me get up."

I nodded. I didn't want to say anything else. I didn't understand any of that weird gibberish she was vomiting off about her political party, but I did understand what she said about Zev. *Do you know what we had to do just to bring Zev back into the fold?* I swallowed. My hands were shaking.

I placed robot Donut on the couch next to Loita. "Okay, robot Donut. You stay next to Loita. Do you understand?"

"Stay next to Loita," Robot Donut said. "Understood." She turned her head to Loita and said, "Have you ever felt true cold? It comes soon for us all. It's always waiting in the shadows."

"Come on, Donut," I said, turning. "Let's do the commercial."

<Note added by Crawler Coolie. 19th Edition> *I am going on another program tonight. I have secreted bugbear paste into my boots. I will detonate them while I am in orbit. There will be two admins on board. My Blast Shield skill should protect me from the explosion—if the skill works at all in that place. I don't even know. But if I blow the ship, it won't matter. Think of me, brothers. It is little, but it is all I have.*

The hosts of *Veriluxx New Toys Showcase* were a pair of tall, giant-eyed alien soothers. The Forsoothed. A man named Gravo and a woman named Liddi. I was beginning to realize these soother guys were one of the most common types of aliens in the universe.

Gravo, the male alien, was inexplicably dressed like a cowboy and wore a massive, Styrofoam cowboy hat. He wore a gun belt with a six-shooter, and he wore a sheriff's badge on his vest. The word "Sherif" was written in English, and it was spelled incorrectly. I had no idea if the misspelling was on purpose or not. He wore black and white cow-patterned chaps. He also donned cowboy boots with spurs that jingled as he walked.

Liddi, the woman alien, was dressed in some sort of Wish dot com superhero costume that didn't fit her. The suit was blue and red like it was attempting to approximate Superman's colors, but the cape was also in the black and white cow pattern, matching her partner's chaps. Upon her chest was the word "Veriluxx" where

Superman's "S" should be. She wore a simple, orange-colored, eye-covering mask that clashed offensively with the rest of her outfit.

"What the hell, man," I said as we strode into the studio.

"Times like this, I wish cats really were colorblind," Donut grumbled.

The room was set up to not have a studio audience. It was a simple table with all four of us standing behind it. There was a raised chair for Donut and a small box for me to compensate for the soothers' height. The toys would supposedly appear on the table, and we were supposed to discuss how awesome they were.

Liddi approached and waved. "Hello, hello. I'd shake your hand, but you know. I can't!" The woman, superhero alien grinned down at us. "Princess Donut, I must say, you are one of my favorites. I only have two feeds favorited, and yours is one of them."

"Oh?" Donut said, brightening. She jumped up into the chair. "Well it's always a pleasure to meet a fan."

The female soother had a bunch of tiny, pinback buttons on her breast. They were all showing different animals I didn't recognize. Though there was one pin at the bottom that was of Pinhead from the *Hellraiser* movies. "I am just so excited to have you on the show today. It was my idea to bring the Donut doll to life."

"Yeah, was the Garfield thing your idea, too?" I asked.

"Who's your other favorite?" Donut asked before Liddi could respond. "You said you had two."

"Oh, Lucia Mar of course. Everybody has her as a favorite."

"So what is this?" I asked, indicating the alien's outfit. "You always dress like this?"

Gravo, the cowboy soother answered. "No, we don't," he said. He had a much more dour personality. "The clothes are to attract attention from children. We are about to film a commercial for a fake program called *Veriluxx New Toys Showcase*. This commercial will play on screens of all ships docked for fueling and repair if there is a demographically-targeted youth aboard or if there is someone who might wish to purchase such a toy for a youth. The item will be physically available for immediate purchase at the waystation's shop, or it'll be available to order on the Syndicate network. This is a low

price-point toy with a few desirable features for low-income families, so we are anticipating a very aggressive marketing campaign."

"Wait, so this is like a commercial that only airs at gas stations?" I asked.

"Fueling depots and way stations, yes," Gravo said. "It'll be targeted at children who watch Donut's feed as well."

I thought of all the toy commercials that had enticed me as a child. "So, what? We're just going to stand here and talk about the stupid robot?"

"That's the plan. And we're renting this trailer by the second, so let's get this started. And don't call it stupid while we're recording."

"Wait," I said. "Do these commercials actually work for you guys? Wouldn't it be better to have actual children playing with the toys? You know, commercials with explosions and music and colors and kids running around with the toys?"

Gravo made a scoffing noise. "Research indicates that children prefer to have a trusted adult speak down to their level and present them with the best possible options. As the parents are the ones who most often purchase, this logical approach both piques the child's interest and gives confidence to the parents."

I exchanged a look with Donut. I almost argued with him, but I didn't give a shit about the stupid robot toy's success. I was too tense, anyway. Too wound up to form a coherent argument, especially since I knew Veriluxx's parent company were just as terrible as everyone else in this damn universe.

I thought of Loita, sitting there all smug in the next room.

"Okay, let's do this."

<Note added by Crawler Coolie. 19th Edition> *I have failed. I have blown the ship, and my skill indeed protected me, but the forcefield around the ship has prevented it from fully breaking apart. The admins only appeared to be with me. They were holos. I was fooled today, and I am ashamed, brothers. The gravity has failed, the*

temperature is dropping, and it is getting difficult to breathe. I do not think they can remove me while the forcefield remains.

But I see my planet, my beloved Qurux. It shines, and it warms me in this cold. I pray one day someone will avenge her, for I cannot.

"This sure is a hoot," Donut said, reading the line that floated in the air in front of us. She was not doing a very good job of being natural. I knew that she, too, had been thrown off by Loita's comment about Zev's family. She'd already soured on the idea of going on this particular show and was phoning in her lines.

Neither of the soothers seemed to notice.

"Yeehaw!" Gravo said. He was like a zero-personality tax accountant who was being forced to perform for children. He pulled his six shooter and shot in the air. "It sounds like this toy is a high falutin' hit!"

I was pretty certain he was using "high faluting" incorrectly.

The toy Mongo screeched on the table and bounced around the toy Donut. The Mongo was designed to mimic the real deal in his juvenile stage and was pretty damn adorable. It stood about half of Robot Donut's height. As we watched, robot Mongo jumped up and chomped robot Donut on the nose, who howled in pain. "Bad Mongo! Bad!" the robot said.

"So, Carl," Liddi asked. The super hero costumed-soother was actually going by "Professor Liddi" for the commercial. I didn't know why. "What's your favorite part of the Veriluxx RealPet companion?"

A paragraph of text appeared floating in front of me. I ignored it.

"Actually," I said. "I like how trainable they are. We only had robot Donut for a few days, but I taught her several tricks."

Gravo looked irritated and was about to pause the taping so I could get back on script, but Professor Liddi rolled with it. "Oh?"

"That's right," I said. "She says the weirdest shit. But if I tell her to sit, she sits. If I tell her to follow, she follows. She's much more

compliant than the real Donut."

"Hey," Donut said. "Don't be offensive, Carl."

Both Liddi and I laughed. "I mean, that's what we all want, isn't it? Compliance?"

"What do you mean?" Liddi asked.

"What is your parent company called again? Veritan Linkage? Isn't that their thing?"

Nobody said anything for several seconds.

"Stop rolling," Gravo said. He turned on me. "I don't know where you heard that, but that's absolutely not true. Veritan is our parent company, yes, but we operate independently from them."

I shrugged. "That's not what I heard. Someone said your parent company advocates for slavery. People are saying there are really trackers hidden in the toys."

"Carl, what are you doing?" Donut asked, looking up at me. She'd removed her sunglasses for the show and looked at me wide-eyed.

"Just stick with the script, okay?" Gravo said. "Don't be an imbecile. There's nothing you can say that'll make it onto air, so why bother?"

"Nothing I can say in *here*," I said. "The dungeon is another story, though, isn't it?"

"What?" Gravo said. "What are you trying to say? Are you trying to shake us down for a loot box? Is this a joke? Do you really think that would work?"

I had no idea if Veriluxx toys had any sort of sinister motive with all of this. Mordecai seemed to think it was a money laundering operation or something. Honestly, I didn't care. This was dangerous. Stupidly dangerous. I was gambling all of this was about to be forgotten.

I just needed Loita to get up off that damn couch.

"Listen here, crawler," Gravo started to say.

The lights flickered. The two soothers disappeared. The floor shook. The studio went black then filled with red lights. A terrible creaking noise filled the chamber.

"Warning. Fire suppression system activating."

The voice came over a loudspeaker.

Donut jumped to my shoulder. "Carl, Carl, we're under attack!"

"Hold on," I said. "Be ready for anything."

"I can't cast my spells in here!"

I bolted for the green room door. It irised open as I approached. Smoke poured out through the hole.

The couch against the back wall was obliterated in the explosion. I took a deep, relieved breath that the picture window hadn't ruptured.

But then I realized the window *had* ruptured. A massive crack ran across it, like a lightning bolt. The blue forcefield was the only thing keeping the water out. *Shit, shit.* It appeared the forcefield was holding. *Thank god. Thank fucking god.*

Actually, no, I thought. *Not god. Coolie. Thank you, Coolie for the information.*

"Carl, I think robot Donut blew up!" Donut said, looking around. "Where's Loita? Did she…" Donut gasped. The crumpled form of the dungeon admin had been blown across the room and had smashed against the wall. Donut rushed to her. The small kua-tin was missing her left arm and both of her bottom legs. Her rebreather, miraculously, still worked. Her entire fish body was blackened. She looked as if she'd been flash-fried in a pot of oil.

But she wasn't dead. I felt my heart quicken. She couldn't just teleport away. They had to first lower the shield. But if they lowered the shield, the window would break, and Donut and I would die instantly.

Borant had to make a choice, I realized. They could probably heal her in seconds, but only if she teleported away. Save a low-level admin or save their two highest-grossing crawlers?

I looked down at the injured woman and smiled.

"You… you did this," Loita panted.

"What do you mean?" I asked. "It was an accident. The robot blew up. You're the one who made them put that self-destruct sequence in it. I was in the other room. I have no idea how it blew. You saw how buggy that damn thing was."

Outside through the broken window, multiple lights appeared, rushing toward the sub. These were other ships, coming to repair

the trailer. They wouldn't get here in time.

"You won't win," she gasped, gurgling the words. Foamy, colorless liquid oozed from her mouth and gills. "The Bloom will prevail. You will be forgotten."

"Nobody likes melodrama, Loita," I said as the kua-tin died.

<Note added by Crawler Carl. 25th Edition> *Coolie. I know you can't read this, but I want you and every future reader to know that I used the information from your passage to help plan the first step. If it wasn't for your words, I wouldn't have had the confidence or knowledge to act. What I did today I did for you and for a little girl named Bonnie. My only regret is that my first step was a small one, and I don't know yet if I'll survive long enough to take a second.*

But if I do manage that second step, please forgive me. What I do from here on out is solely for me and my people. As long as I am alive, I will do everything I can to make them burn.

They will not fucking break me.

<Note added by Crawler Carl. 25th Edition> *One.*

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It only took the repair subs about thirty seconds to mend the damage. The moment it was fixed, Donut and I teleported away. But when we jumped, we did not return to our personal space. That did not surprise me.

Our destination, however, did.

Entering the Desperado Club.

We were in a small, cluttered office. The paper-covered desk was occupied by a tall man. The shadowy figure wore a dark cloak with a hood, which supernaturally obscured his face, grim reaper-like. His hands, the only flesh I could see, were a dark, dark purple, almost black. His elongated fingers were almost elf-like, though the man's height suggested he was nothing of the sort.

It was a small office, with wood slat walls and the same tiled floor as the rest of the Desperado Club. A tapestry hung from one wall, looking almost like a Turkish rug. There were no other decorations. Through the wall, I could hear the very distant pulse of the nightclub dance floor.

Our status indicators did not snap back on, but I could examine the man's properties. Sort of.

Orren.

Syndicate Liaison.

There were a pair of old, wooden chairs in front of the desk.

"Please," the man said, indicating the chairs. "Carl and Donut. Sit." He had the voice of a British professor. Authoritative, but not

aggressively so.

We both wordlessly sat down. I chewed on the jagged edge of my fingernail. The chair wasn't high enough for Donut to look over the desk, and she suddenly looked very small sitting there. I reached over and gave her a pat. She was trembling.

The man put his pen down and folded his hands together. He regarded us. The darkness under his hood swirled.

"My name is Orren. I do not work for Borant. I am an independent consultant retained by the Syndicate. I am a neutral third party observer. I work in concert with the current season's showrunners, the Syndicate government, and the controlling AI. You would not normally meet me or one of my colleagues but under certain extreme circumstances. And as you can imagine, these are extreme circumstances."

"So, what? You're like the vice principal of a high school? You collect the naughty boys and girls and tell them what their punishment is?"

He approximated a shrug. "I am a non-AI fact finder. Not quite a sheriff. Not quite an attorney." He paused. "Not quite a judge." He moved in his chair, and it creaked, like his body was heavier than it looked. "If the Syndicate sees something that requires more information, they will ask both the kua-tin and AI for reports on what happened. Sometimes those reports contradict each other. Sometimes those reports are inconclusive. In such cases, a liaison such as myself investigates. And if the facts warrant it, I recommend what should be done about it."

We were in extreme danger here, and we both knew it. I felt for poor Donut, who'd had nothing to do with what had happened in the trailer. But I didn't regret it. Not one bit.

The creature steepled his fingers. "Do you know how many assassination attempts there have been on dungeon admins over the solars?"

"Probably a lot," I said.

"More than we would like to admit, yes," the man—Orren—said. "And quite a few have been successful, too. Two seasons ago, a crocodilian managed to snap the head off of his outreach associate.

He shouldered the admin into the hallway and literally bit the man's head off. And instead of teleporting him away into the crawler disposal unit, the idiot Fortent admins sent two of their own security agents to subdue the crawler and also got themselves killed before the AI finally intervened. Three admins at once, which were the only admins killed by crawlers that season."

Orren casually leaned back in his chair, which continued to groan and creak ominously. I knew he was wanting me to say something, to offer up information—much like how a real vice principal would if he was trying to get an unruly student to admit their guilt. I wasn't going to say a word unless he asked me a direct question.

"Three was nowhere near the record, of course. But three is still considered a lot. Last season the Squim Conglomerate had no admin fatalities due to crawler attacks. I'd like you to guess how many have died this season so far due to your fellows."

That was a trick question if I'd ever heard one.

"Zero," I said.

The man grunted with amusement. "Not including this most recent death of Admin Loita, the number for this season currently stands at 15. Lucia Mar has killed two. Three if you count her first game guide, which we do not. The rest were all one-off attacks."

I was genuinely intrigued at that, and more than a little proud of my fellow humans. "I thought all violence against admins was met with immediate justice from the AI. That's what the warning says."

Orren ignored me. "Fifteen is already considered a disaster. Do you know why that number is so high this season?"

I shrugged. "Probably two reasons. My people don't like fish telling them what to do. And the kua-tin are running this show as cheaply as possible. I don't know the details on how these zone things work, but I know they make it more dangerous for the workers."

"You are correct, on both accounts." He drummed the desk with his hand. "However, crawler. Every one of those fifteen deaths, and in fact, every single admin murder from the first crawl until this very moment all have one thing in common." He leaned in. I detected a very slight distortion to his voice, like he was talking through a

speaker. “We know exactly how the crawler pulled it off. This dungeon is the most scrutinized, most surveilled location in the universe. Yet, nobody knows exactly how you did it.”

“She died because that stupid cat blew up,” I said.

“Carl, I’m beginning to suspect this Orren fellow thinks we murdered Loita,” Donut said, speaking for the first time.

“No, no, you misunderstand, crawler Carl. We know exactly how she died. It took longer than I’d like to ascertain all the facts. We were, at first, thrown off by the force of the explosion. There were no extra explosives brought into the production trailer. Yet, the explosion was more powerful than it should’ve been. That was the first mystery, though the AI did have a quick explanation for that. Do you know what it was?”

“I had the cat on my table,” I said. “She was watching me decant those infusions.”

He slapped the desk and pointed at me like I’d just given him the answer to an equation. The sudden and unexpected sound was like a thunderclap. I tried not to flinch, and I hated myself for flinching anyway. “Yes! The yield on the toy’s self-destruct mechanism was artificially enhanced by the AI simply because it sat upon your sapper’s bench while you were working on it, which as you know is one of the benefits of your table and your explosive handling skills. But that happened on its own. Records indicate you made no direct adjustments to the toy’s explosive. It’s what you did next that caused the explosion.”

Donut scoffed. “Oh my god, he *does* believe we did it on purpose.” She made a frustrated noise and then jumped onto my shoulder so she could look directly at the man. “If Carl was going to purposely kill Loita he would’ve shoved a stick of dynamite in her gills and then kicked her in the head. Carl is very good at killing things, and he can be very clever about it sometimes, but he doesn’t do secret Asian man style murders.”

“Agent,” I said.

“What?” Donut asked.

“It’s secret agent man. Not secret Asian man.”

“Are you sure?”

"Yes, I'm sure. How does 'secret Asian man' make sense?"

"Yes, I supposed that does make more sense. Anyway, that's not his style, and besides, every one of his plans always screws up somewhere along the way. He would've been caught. When he was with Miss Beatrice, his definition of 'subtle' was pulling his boxers down and saying, 'me so horny.' No offense, Carl."

"What? I never did that."

"Oh, right. That was Brad, wasn't it? Anyway, you get my point. This was not my Carl's handiwork. It's quite impossible. He is not a ninja. And before you ask, it wasn't me, either. Do you have tape of the actual explosion? I would just love to see it. Are you certain it wasn't one of those Skull empire orcs? Or maybe the Veriluxx people remote detonating it because Carl had discovered their secret, evil plan?"

Orren nodded. "We have surveillance from the Mexx unit in the trailer, but that is it. Since you weren't in the room, the footage isn't nearly as *holistic* as we'd like. But it doesn't matter. What happened is quite clear. Administrator Loita jumped down off the couch. The toy jumped down to follow, and a few seconds later, it exploded, killing her and almost killing you two as well. The panel on the back of its head dislodged when it jumped, which activated the creature's self-destruct sequence and set off the explosion. Due to the interface lock-out because of Admin Loita's presence, neither of you received the self-destruct warning."

I grunted. "So that shitty little panel on the back of the cat's head fell off? Look, it's no secret that we didn't get along with her. But that panel was made out of plastic. That toy was a cheap piece of crap. I mentioned it was going to fall off on its own more than once."

He nodded. "I know. I watched the recording multiple times. It's not plastic, at least not as you know it. The panel was made of a reactive, tamper-proof polymer called Zentix. It's very popular throughout the galaxy, especially in children's toys. It's designed to fail under certain circumstances. Obviously, the explosion part isn't usually a feature of the toy, but the panel is designed to break if

someone tampers with or attempts to illegally modify the toy's innards."

"Then why is there a panel in the first place?" Donut asked. "If you can't play with it, then why is it there?"

"It depends on the toy. Most have varying degrees of features depending on the user license. Some panels can only be accessed by authorized users. Some have controls that can only be adjusted by qualified personnel. It's a smart polymer with multiple security settings. It's not important. We are straying from the point."

"So what *is* the point? What're you trying to say?" I asked.

"I'm saying the residue dust left behind by the disco ball smoke curtain started to slowly eat away at the panel. That process was greatly enhanced when you placed the toy within range of Admin Loita's rebreather apparatus. The moisture caused the remaining dust to run across the panel and along the edges. Then you engineered a situation that would cause the admin to get up off the couch. And because the toy was programmed to follow her, the act of jumping down dislodged the panel and thus caused the explosion. It was, quite simply, one of the most brilliant assassinations I have ever seen a crawler execute. And I applaud you for it."

"This is just like the end of a *Perry Mason* episode," Donut said. "I'm almost disappointed it's all made-up and Carl isn't really going to start crying from the witness stand and confess to the murder."

Donut was cracking jokes, but I knew that she was very tense. And worried.

"But," Orren continued, ignoring Donut, "as impressive as it was, we cannot allow crawlers to murder admins, even low-level ones such as Loita." He slid a piece of paper from the pile on his desk and turned it toward me. It was a mostly-blank sheet of paper with a signature line at the bottom and a hand-written headline at the top in Syndicate Standard that read, "Admission of non-sanctioned violence by Crawler number 4,122 'Carl.'"

"You want me to sign a blank piece of paper?" I asked. I was mildly offended that they'd think that would actually work. "Yeah, no."

He shrugged. “You might just survive if you admit it. Lucia Mar happily signed a confession both times, and she’s still in the dungeon. We’d give you a similar deal.”

“If you really thought I’d killed her, we wouldn’t be having this conversation. You wouldn’t be asking me to sign anything.”

Orren didn’t say anything for several moments. “You knew the forcefield would protect the trailer’s hull from the explosion. You asked about it. You knew about the chemical reaction that would eat the panel. You created one of the few explosive combinations that leave behind a persistent residue.” He pulled the blank sheet of paper away and produced a second one, and this one was covered with many, many paragraphs of text. It still had a blank signature line at the bottom. “You’re obviously getting information from an outside source. We know it wasn’t Agatha or any of her helpers. None are in your bubble. We don’t believe it was Odette, either.”

I reeled at the mention of homeless, shopping cart-pushing Agatha. What was it she’d said to me way back on the second floor? *Them critters already know I’m here. They just don’t know what to do about it.*

“Tell us who your source is and how they communicate with you, and you will be returned to the dungeon with no penalties, and you will be given a Legendary box that will contain an item that will all but guarantee your survival until the ninth floor.”

I was stunned at the offer, but only for a moment. Contract or not, there was no way I was going to trust them about anything. Besides, my “source” was the cookbook, and I did not want to give it up. If I mentioned it, it would disappear. Would they even believe me? It wasn’t worth the risk. No fucking way.

Plus, this guy’s version of the assassination was significantly more complicated and high-tech than what had really happened.

I had no idea about the polymers or the residue of the disco ball reacting with the weird space plastic. That shit was well beyond anything I’d be willing to trust. Donut was right that my plans usually went off the rails. This time it had been to my benefit. That whole chemical reaction thing was nothing more than a happy little misdirection.

I had known about the forcefield thanks to Coolie's passage in the cookbook. I had known that the disco ball would've covered everything in technicolor dust, also thanks to the cookbook. My purpose with that had been simple. I wanted to get that crap all over the toy so they wouldn't want it brought into the studio. That was it.

I had not known that little panel was made of some weird type of plastic. I did, however, know it was a piece of shit. I'd been worried from the start that the stupid panel would fall off. I'd been toying with using my duct tape to hold the thing in place.

Instead, I came up with an idea for it to fall off exactly when I wanted it to.

If I was going to risk everything, then all of the circumstances had to be perfect, and I wouldn't know if they were until the last possible minute. Only then could I gamble on "arming" the toy. I hadn't realized the dust from the disco ball was already doing the job for me.

Any kid who's had battery-operated toys—or any adult who's had a remote control for their television—knows exactly what happens when that ridiculous little plastic tab over the battery compartment breaks or somehow gets out of whack. The whole cover refuses to stay put, and any big jolt causes it to take a dive, usually disemboweling the batteries in the process.

I couldn't just outright break off the little tab. That would've been both obvious and would've caused it to fall right away. So instead of breaking it, I simply pushed it down with my left palm, placed my left thumb between the little tab and the holder, and I broke off my strategically-cut left thumb fingernail, creating a shim.

I'd been collecting all the broken pieces of the robot Donuts every time Mongo killed one. I had a perfectly-preserved back panel from the first iteration in my inventory. I sat on the toilet and practiced the move several times with other fingers before I got it right. I'd cut my nail 3/4s off, but close to the finger so it wasn't noticeable. The panel thing was such an utter piece of crap, it easily fell off with just a little foreign object. In fact, it was so flimsy, so

easy to fall off, I was starting to suspect the toy had actually been a low-effort assassination attempt on us.

When I'd leaned in to tap on the glass and ask Loita if the trailer could go into space, thus confirming Loita was really there thanks to the moisture, I'd attempted to get my nail in place, but it'd slipped out. I'd had to lean in a second time to get it right. I leaned over the couch, and I'd made the move with my left hand, pressing the robot toy against my chest. In the end, it'd been simple. I held the panel in place as I pulled my hand away. When I placed the toy on the couch next to the admin, I'd pulled away with enough force to dislodge my fingernail, which held the panel precariously in place.

I practically crapped myself when the robot Donut had turned its head to say some creepy shit to Loita. But the little panel had held. It wasn't visibly loose. But I knew it would go flying the moment it jumped to the ground. When I'd told robot Donut to stay by the admin, I knew the heavy robot would jump off the couch the moment she'd stood up. Loita had been so distracted by my attempted extortion of Veriluxx, she likely never noticed the little piece of plastic falling off the cat and landing on the carpet.

And that's what killed her.

"I'm not signing anything because I have nothing to give up, nobody to rat out," I said. "And believe me, I'd love to get a free legendary box. But I have nothing to give you in exchange. This was an accident. But you're obviously not an idiot, so I won't lie to you. I *wish* I had thought of this. I *wish* I had outside help because if I did and thought I could've gotten away with it, I would've done it without hesitation, but I wouldn't have wasted the opportunity on some low-level bitch like Loita."

Donut, still on my shoulder, was stiff as a board.

The faceless man said nothing for a moment. "And who would you have used it on, then?"

I didn't answer. There were only so many lines I could cross. There was so much I wanted to say. I thought of Brandon. Of Yolanda. Of everybody else in the world. They had all died, and nobody cared. Yet someone like Loita died, and we had to go through all of this?

You will not break me. Fuck you all. I will break you. I will break you all.

Orren sighed and pulled the paper away. "Very well. As we are unable to determine what happened and no consensus exists regarding the incident, I have no choice but to recommend that the Syndicate close the matter. However, you should know we have implemented a punitive measure onto Borant for the remainder of this floor, as this wasn't an isolated incident. No crawlers will be allowed to be teleported away by third parties until the next floor opens. Yes, that means your next appearance on Odette's show has been cancelled. She's already filed an appeal."

I had so many new questions. Lucia Mar had killed two admins and gotten away with it? How? Why wasn't she dead?

"You can leave via the door," the man said, dismissing us with a wave. "Your bodyguards are outside waiting."

"Sledgie is here? Yay!" Donut said.

"And just so you know, Carl. That was lucky. I admire your grit. It makes for good entertainment, but I wouldn't press that luck. Whomever this is that's helping you, they are not doing it for your benefit. If the kua-tin hadn't intervened on your behalf, this would've gone much differently."

I paused as I stood. "What do you mean? How did they intervene?"

He didn't look up. "Certain crawlers are simply too valuable to just throw away off screen, no matter how recalcitrant they are. Ultimately it's their call. And even though I can't find legal cause to place Administrator Loita's death upon you, if it were up to me, I'd have you removed anyway. We discussed this in council, and it was decided that my personal recommendation be ignored. For now. The mudskippers aren't known for their ability to recognize threats. If the rumors are correct and we do take over after the next floor, I hope my own people will be much more willing to listen to my personal assessment."

My interface was still turned off so I couldn't look at the timer, but I suddenly felt a chill. As far as I was aware, Loita had blown up

about 45 minutes ago. But all of this… council meetings, court appeals, hand-written confessions...

"How long have we been away?" I asked.

"It's only been five days. You're lucky it wasn't longer. You still have five days left to finish your bubble. Your partner Katia has gotten into some interesting adventures while you've been gone. She's back on the top ten list. Above you, actually. You two are about to slip off, so you probably want to get back to work."

"*Goddamnit*," I said. I slapped the man's desk in frustration, and papers went flying. I wasn't upset about slipping off the top-10 list. I was pissed about losing all that time. *Don't be too mad. You're the luckiest motherfucker in the dungeon right now. You did it. You got away with it.*

Next time it won't be so easy.

Orren looked up then, and the man's hood slipped. The swirling black coalesced, and I realized it was actually a face-shaped bowl of liquid, made to look like swirling darkness. Within that liquid I caught a tiny glimpse of light. Mordecai had described what they looked like to me, so I recognized what was in the liquid. A worm. A Valtay worm.

If Mordecai wasn't covered in feathers, I knew he'd be pale as a sheet.

Donut was completely poofed out and hopping up and down like she'd taken two extra espresso shots. She'd released Mongo, who fed off her energy and was also bobbing up and down excitedly. She'd already told Mordecai and Katia about the death of Loita and was now breathlessly attempting to explain what had happened afterward. It all came out in one, long, unfiltered, incomprehensible paragraph.

"…And they thought Carl was doing some *Breaking Bad* chemistry stuff, and I told them that was impossible because Carl used to pull his pants down when he wanted relations from Miss

Beatrice, and that's when the guy realized that Carl probably didn't do it even though I was wrong because that was actually that Brad guy she went to the Bahamas with. Also, did you know it was agent and not Asian? I had no idea. Anyway, I think maybe the AI told them that Carl probably did do it? I don't know, it was quite odd. Because he also said that the kua-tin said he didn't do it. And that means the AI had to have thought that he did because he said there was a disagreement about the facts. And then the grim reaper-looking guy accused Agatha the shopping cart lady and Odette of helping us even though they're not even in the bubble and Carl was all grumpy and said, 'I wish I *had* done it' and I thought we were going to get into more trouble but the guy didn't care. But she'd really just died because the back fell off and blew up. And it was really her own fault, wasn't it? She's the one who insisted on putting the blow-up stuff in the toy, and they did, and it ended up killing her. The commercial was lame anyway because it was only going to be shown at gas stations. I mean, really. It's embarrassing. But we can't go on shows anymore for the rest of the floor. Odette is so mad she filed a court case about it. Oh, oh Katia, did that mean they canceled your show? Sorry about that."

"My show wasn't canceled," Katia said. She didn't sound too thrilled about it. "I went on it. They added the ban as my show was being taped. Zev told me about the ban just before I teleported back down here. She also told me what was happening with you three."

Donut gasped. "Zev? Really? You talked to her?"

"She said she's our temporary PR agent until everything gets sorted out. She said she'll send a message later."

Donut did a little hop.

Mordecai nodded. "I didn't think I was going to see you again. I got a notice that there was a liaison hold on Donut, and then suddenly it was five days later."

"Wait, so you were also gone?" I said. I turned to Katia. She was now down on the land quadrant and was in the personal space via a pub down there. She was also now level 41, three higher than the last time I'd seen her.

Donut and I were still in Hump Town. "You must've thought we were dead."

"I didn't know what the hell was happening until Zev told me. You weren't available on chat, Mordecai disappeared, but it didn't show you as dead, and all the personal space upgrades remained. Once I learned we wouldn't know your fate for a few days, I had to take matters in my own hands. I tried flying the house to the land quadrant, but it wouldn't let us at first until we figured out what was wrong. By the way, if you hadn't left the controller with Louis, we never would've been able to fly the thing. I've spent the last five days killing scorpion men and arguing with Gwen. We could really use your help down here. Louis and Firas are already on the way back to pick you up. They've turned into quite the pilots. Once you get your asses down here, I'll catch you up."

Mordecai still looked out of sorts. He was muttering to himself. "Only the fifth floor, and the liaisons are already involved. By his left tit. Next thing you know, the lawyers will be here. Everything gets complicated once the lawyers get here."

I ignored him. "Do you know if Chris and Maggie are still trapped?"

"They are," Katia said. "Langley and his guys are still up there with you, and he's keeping an eye on them."

"Why couldn't you get the house down to the land quadrant?" I asked.

Katia waved her hand. "It's a long story. We almost died figuring it out. It was because of the stairwell in the master bedroom. Remember what Louis did to his mother's minivan? He had to do it to the house. You'll see. It's not the most elegant solution, but it works."

"Jesus," I said. "We really do need to catch up."

Mordecai was still going off about what had happened to us. "A godsdamn syndicate liaison. And he just let you walk right out of there? I can't believe it."

"Yeah," I said, grinning. "He didn't even say anything about this." I held Loita's rebreather up in the air. I'd looted it off the dead kua-tin's body. Since I couldn't access my inventory at the time, I'd just

shoved it into my boxer's waistband. The device was small, about the size of a cat collar. I tossed it into my inventory now. It wasn't very valuable and could only be used by a knee-high creature with gills, but you never knew what was going to be important.

Mordecai just gawked at me, beak hanging down.

"Wait until you hear what Carl said to my sponsor!" Donut added.

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[20]

Time to Level Collapse: 4 Days and 22 Hours

The entire top half of the house was gone. It looked as if a group of blindfolded and drunk beavers had decided to do a remodel job. They'd ripped the top floor and the attic away, haphazardly decapitating the home about six inches below the first floor's ceiling, which meant all of the rooms on the first floor were open to the elements. The tops of the walls were jagged and splintered. The fireplace and attached chimney had also been lopped away, but it still rose about five feet over the top of the walls. As I watched the balloon approach, a single brick fell off the stack, falling into what had once been the living room.

When they'd done their butcher job, they'd severed multiple electrical lines and water pipes in the process. They'd attempted to cap off the water, but one of the pipes appeared to have become dislodged in the journey to come pick us up. Donut and I watched as the balloon settled in front of Hump Town. Water arced into the air from the middle of the house like they'd sheared off a fire hydrant, and the main had been knocked sideways.

"What's with the water?" I asked.

Firas jumped down off the edge of the garden and out into the sand dune. The tall man rubbed dust off his boots and stood to his full height, grinning at us. He stood with confidence, and I immediately saw the change in him. When I'd first met the guy, he'd only been level 22. He was now 30. That was still behind the curve, but he'd made up a lot of ground.

The water continued to arc away, causing a rainbow to form in the air. Mongo screeched joyfully and rushed into the spray and started dancing about. The sand around his feet was quickly turning to mud.

"One of those chainsaw buzz-ards lopped off the cap we had on that water line, and it blasted itself out of the sky. They're like miniature versions of that giant boss that gave Katia the dangle saw. It was actually pretty damn funny. Still don't know where all the water is coming from. I wish I had that much water pressure at my old place. It's bizarre. The power still works, too. The things are a pain in the ass. The chainsaw buzz-ards, I mean. But they've been rare for the past few days." He indicated the water arc. "The one who did that surprised us. I'll cap it off after we land. Did Katia tell you about how she stuck the house in her inventory?"

"What?" I asked. "She can stick the house in her inventory? Balloon and all? Like, the whole thing? How?"

"Oh dude. You've been gone ages. A lot has happened. It was Louis's idea. We had the thing floating just off the ground. Katia did that weird thing she does when she puts the backpack on, and it worked. Then that same night after the recap episode, they patched it, and the whole damn contraption just popped out of her inventory, floating over our heads. It almost smooshed all of us. We were all in a pub called Cuttlefish Point, and it pretty much blew up the tavern. The pazuzu guy that runs it was *pissed*. We all had to jump on the thing and fly away. Thought he was going to sting us for sure. It was pretty intense. Then Louis peed over the edge on the guy while he was still screaming up at us and it pretty much got us banned from town. I thought Gwen was going to rip his schlong off. Katia had to stop her from kicking his ass but she was laughing too, and that made Gwen even more mad."

I just looked at the guy. I cursed myself again for missing so much. “Where’s the stairwell?”

“Oh yeah. So we had to hack the top of the house off just to dislodge the closet in the master bedroom. It wouldn’t let us leave the quadrant with the stairwell still attached to the house. It’s sitting about a half of a mile east of town. Close to where you landed the first time. Langley has a couple of his guys on it, keeping it clear of sand. It’s going to be tough starting tomorrow once the Red Equinox hits. They’re building something to protect it.”

“Shit,” I said. I’d completely forgotten about that. For the last few days in this bubble, the weather and night/day patterns were going change. It would be dark for something like sixteen hours a day, and the sand storm would be twice as long and intense.

“Yeah,” Firas agreed. “Down there the sand storm is a little different. Instead of it just blowing every which way, it always moves in a circle, like a clock around the island. And there’s a lot of lightning. It’s already getting darker early down there, too, so it’s now dark during the storm already.”

“Speaking of the storm, we gotta get moving,” Louis said, appearing from the inside of the house. The pudgy crawler had also leveled up to 30. “We need to hit the landing pad before it starts. Gwen said she’s going with the flood plan if we’re not back in time. Plus those feral pazuzu fuckers come out at night, and I want a clear landing zone. Oh, hey Donut.”

“Hi Louis!” Donut said from my shoulder.

“Wait, more ‘feral’ monsters?” I asked.

“Yeah, let’s go,” Louis said, all business. He turned and went back inside.

“The feral thing is the mage guy’s fault,” Firas said. “Anything that gets stuck in the Nothing for more than a few minutes goes crazy. I don’t understand how any of it works. You’ll be assaulting the castle when you get down there. But only if that Gwendolyn lady hasn’t murdered Katia first.”

"Do you feel out of the loop?" Donut whispered. "I feel out of the loop."

Part of me was proud that Katia had just rolled with us going missing. She'd gotten a lot done. She'd managed to get the whole house down to the land quadrant, and she'd figured out how to breach the magical door that guarded the front of the land quadrant castle. All without us. Firas told me that they would have finished with the castle already if Zev hadn't asked Katia to wait for us.

At the same time, part of me stung at the notion that she could do this without me. It was stupid. Selfish. And it was more than a little narcissistic to think that without me and Donut, Katia and the others were absolutely screwed. But that feeling was there, and I was simultaneously relieved that I'd been wrong and horrified I'd been thinking it in the first place.

I still didn't know if we'd get there in time, but Katia and the others' actions while we were away proved that I wasn't as indispensable as I thought. And in the end, I realized it was a necessary feeling.

You'll die in a gutter without me. You need me. You think you're just going to be fine? What will you do, you disrespectful little shit? You will break after just one day. And then you'll die. That's what you'll do. Just like your fucking bitch of a mother.

I took a deep breath, clearing the memory away. I dove into my chat to check in on everybody.

Bautista had already cleared all four of his quadrant's castles, though most people in his bubble hadn't survived. He wasn't a man to show his true feelings in his chats, but I had the impression he was having a hard time with it. Li Jun and Li Na and their team were about to storm some underwater castle, the last in their bubble. Meadow Lark were building a cannon to shoot oil into the sky which would hopefully take down the last of their castles. If that didn't

work, Elle was going to use her new *Graupel* spell to crash the air castle.

While we descended, Louis and Firas also gave us updates on some of the more popular crawlers. One of Lucia Mar's rottweilers—Gustavo, the smaller one—had somehow "accidentally" killed a group of crawlers after a battle. The event had caused Lucia to undergo some sort of psychotic break—one worse than usual. They'd shown the strange crawler sitting alone in a room sobbing, which was the first real emotion they'd ever portrayed other than rage and pure insanity. Florin the shotgun crocodile guy had finally emerged into a quadrant to find everybody else in the entire bubble was already dead. He was desperately trying to make his way through it, but he'd only managed to clear one castle so far, and the general consensus was that he was screwed. The goat squad was almost done with their bubble, but Miriam Dom the shepherd lady was hit with some curse that ended up changing her into a goddamned vampire. Apparently she was a vegan before this, and the assholes thought it'd be hilarious to do that to her.

I listened to it all as I watched the side of the necropolis fly past us. The massive tomb was even bigger when you were looking at it from this angle. The volcano-shaped building was more mountain than actual structure. The exterior wall was covered with intricate carvings depicting pterodactyl-like creatures and other birds, all in an angular, Aztec-like style. I kept looking for a repeating pattern, but I didn't see any two stones that were the same. There was probably a story there, in those carvings.

Nests dotted the side of the structure. Firas said that's where the buzz-ards lived, but they were mostly gone now. We saw no mobs as we descended.

As for the poor assholes stuck in the subterranean quadrant, they were all still hiding in saferooms at the very top. Two of them—Mike, the one dressed like a goddamned banana and Bobby the trap-finder—had gathered several water-breathing scrolls and ventured out. They ended up setting off a trap in a water-filled tunnel. Mr. Banana got himself killed when a tube shot from the wall, pierced his stomach, and filled him with "Finger-sized Flesh Weasels." They ate

the poor guy from the inside out. Bobby had quickly retreated after that. The others were now paralyzed with fear and were waiting for us to drain the place before proceeding.

I examined the sandcastle as we approached. The dark building was huddled against the side of the necropolis, making me think of a scared dog cowering against a wall. The castle looked as if it really was made out of sand. It wasn't as huge as I thought it'd be based on Gwen's description, but it still had the look of a medieval-style fortress. Or maybe a small casino that was medieval-themed. It stood about three stories high with thin watch towers on either side of the front façade. It appeared the castle was actually guarding the entrance to the massive tomb beyond it, and I wondered if there was an entranceway there. Probably, I decided.

Darkness spread across the landing zone. I caught quick sight of the receded beach. The exposed and dried coral reef looked like a forest of brambles in the darkening sky. It gave the O-shaped land quadrant a menacing, fairy-tale appearance.

"Does anything come out of the water?" I asked Firas.

"We see shark fins and the tops of giant, blue jellyfish, but nothing comes out. Not anymore. There were snakes for a while. Big ones that could go in and out of the water. Gwen killed the boss, and they're gone now. The two other survivors from that water quadrant are here, and they do not want to go back in there. Vadim and Britney. They say there are horrors deep down near the ocean's floor."

I had forgotten that Chris had not beaten that level alone. "Did you tell them about Chris?"

"Yeah," he said. "Neither of them were surprised."

Donut stiffened at the mention of the water quadrant. She'd been relieved when we learned that it had been defeated. I knew the poor cat was terrified of the idea of getting wet. I hoped we could avoid it.

We landed in a circle painted on the beach with red rocks. Two crawlers stood nearby waiting for us. Katia was one of them. She stood there in her seven-foot-tall warrior form, crossbow over her shoulder, grinning up at us as we disembarked.

Mongo spied her and screeched joyfully, jumping off the still-descending platform to bounce all around her as she patted him on the head. Louis and Firas went to work securing the broken water main as Donut and I jumped down.

"So you just thought you'd take a vacation?" Katia asked. "Next time you plan on getting away for a while, please warn me."

I patted Katia on the shoulder. We'd literally just seen her in the safe room, but Mongo was screeching and bouncing like he hadn't seen her for a month. "So," I asked. "How was the *Dungeon Sidekicks* show?"

"Don't ask," she said. "They made me do karaoke with Miriam Dom."

"Firas was just telling me that she's turned into a vampire."

Katia nodded solemnly. "She did. That was after. While she was on the show, apparently Prepotente had a panic attack and went berserk and went running off. When she got back from the show, she went looking for him, and that's when she got attacked and cursed."

"Yeah, that goat guy is a weird dude."

"I liked him. I thought he was a gentleman," Donut said.

Katia grinned. "Anyway, I'm glad you're back. We really need you for this next part."

I turned to face the short, chainmail-clad woman standing next to Katia.

"Hello, Gwen," I said.

"Hello, bomber guy. Hello, Princess Donut. So you two finally fucking made it," she said.

Now that we were face to face, I vaguely remembered her from the previous floor. We'd exchanged fist bumps when Donut was collecting all the now-worthless engineer hats. The woman was about 45-years old and solid. She'd remained human and stood just about five feet tall. I knew from earlier conversations she was from Canada, and I realized now she was of First Nations origin. She wore a glowing, metal skull cap with a fur lining, but from what I could see of her dark hair, it was cut short. She had a no-nonsense metal spear slung over her shoulder.

The most distinctive feature on the woman was the forehead tattoo. It was old and weathered and faded, and it was obviously from a time long before she ever ventured into the dungeon. It was a double-v tribal pattern. The back of her hands and fingers were also covered with simple, straight-line tattoos ending in arrowheads. They almost looked like doodles.

The woman examined me with hard, dark eyes. At first I thought maybe she was a little pudgy, but upon closer examination I realized my error. I recognized that look from my years working at shipyards. This woman had a body built on hard labor, a nose that had been punched so many times it likely crinkled when you touched it, and scarred knuckles that had probably finished just as many of those fights as they started. I guessed she'd been either a dock worker, a farmer, or in construction. Someone whose work required her to spend most of her days working at varying physical tasks and whose nights were likely spent at the bar drinking and fighting her paycheck away.

I knew the type very, very well. I examined her properties.

Crawler #1,293,776. "Gwendolyn Duet."

Level 34

Race: Human.

Class: Boring Ol' Fighter.

"Oh, I just love those tattoos," said Donut. "What do they mean?"

Gwen laughed. "They mean that we are wasting time, little princess. Now you two get your asses in gear. Your partner has been stalling me for almost a full day now, and that clock keeps getting lighter by the minute."

The weather down here was still warm, but it was much cooler than it'd been up above. It smelled like the beach, which was oddly comforting. The sand formed deep channels during the most-recent sandstorm, ringing the land quadrant with concentric circles, like

lanes on a track. We walked in one such channel, approaching the castle.

"Sorry we can't wine and dine you first, bomber boy, but we need to get trucking on this bullshit your friend is making us do," Gwen said as we marched toward the castle. "The storm that's about to hit is the last one before the weather change, and we don't know if that's going to fuck us over or not. We can only do Katia's electric door thing during the sand storm." The ring of walls spread in front of us, each about twenty feet tall. Each had been breached, allowing for a wide doorway.

We passed the remains of what looked like a siege tower made out wood and bicycle parts. I itched at the idea of just leaving all that good material just sitting there.

"That mechanical boss bird trashed that," Gwen said, seeing my interest. "When you killed the thing, it saved our asses. The walls were a real pain. Each one had to be picked apart in a different way. But we did it. Of course this was before you guys showed up with a flying house. And now you two, and that *Arnaaluk* of a friend of yours are going to go in there and try to kill the mage for us."

"And Mongo," Donut said.

Mongo screeched in agreement.

"Just us?" I asked. I felt my eyebrow raise. I looked over my shoulder at Katia, who smiled sheepishly.

"Oh, she didn't tell you of the deal, did she?" Gwen made a clicking noise with her mouth. "Why does that not surprise me?"

"She's going to tell me now," I said.

I decided it was for the best that we have this discussion over chat.

Carl: What are we walking into? Also, what's the deal with you two?

Donut: I LIKE HER. SHE REMINDS ME OF A MINIATURE-SIZED HEKLA.

Carl: Yeah, because that turned out great.

Katia: She is an amazing fighter. She's fast, too. Her class trades fighting skills for no magic spells whatsoever. I watched her use that spear to pierce a pazuzu in the back, vault over him, and use the momentum to throw his body at another monster. The problem is she's a real bitch. She *is* like Hekla in some ways, though instead of scheming in her head, she just says it out loud the moment she thinks it. And if she doesn't like you, she will tell you. And then just to make sure you were paying attention, she'll say it again, but in a different way. At least Hekla pretended to be supportive.

Carl: I was actually surprised when Firas said you two were always fighting. I thought you could get along with everybody.

Katia: I made a promise to myself not that long ago. I wasn't going to take shit any more. When Gwen makes up her mind about something, it's impossible to change her mind. And then she becomes a bully about it. I don't like that.

Donut: THAT MAKES HER SOUND MORE LIKE CARL THAN HEKLA. HE'S NOT A BULLY THOUGH.

Katia: Agreed. Carl doesn't insult you when you have a different idea.

Carl: She's exactly the type of person who would survive here. So what's the deal with the castle?

Katia: Okay, so here's the problem. We've discovered there are two ways to take the castle. Easy way and hard way. Gwen wants to do it the easy way. But if we do it her way, I think we're going to lose our chance at getting that winding box from the mage. Honestly, I'd also much rather do it her way too, but Zev has been unusually insistent that we wait for you two.

Carl: So you told Gwen to wait for us. And now you're fighting a lot.

Katia: Bingo.

Carl: Okay. Lay it out for me.

Katia: The castle is made of sand. There are no tunnels or rooms or anything inside. It's just sand with a stairwell buried in the middle.

Carl: Wait, what about the mage? What was his name? Ghazi. That was it. The note I found in the air castle said he'd basically destroy everything before he'd allow the ghost in the last quadrant to escape. So we know there's something going on in there.

Katia: Yeah, so most of this information is from a drunk scorpion guy. He's like this quadrant's version of Juice Box. The Mad Dune Mage—Ghazi—turned himself into a sand elemental while trying to search for the Gate of the Feral Gods. That's how he managed to get that one part he has, the winding box. He's all mixed in with the sand now. There's a magical door to get into the castle, but you can dig behind it. At first I thought it was a portal, but it's not.

Carl: So it's just a door leaning up against a pile of sand?

Katia: Sort of. I'll explain in a second. After they breached the last wall, Gwen's team found a secret drainage panel up against the side of the necropolis wall. If they turn it, it will release all the water inside the necropolis and shoot it back out into the ocean through the main drainage tunnel, which is what the sandcastle is built around. We wouldn't even need to get through the magical doorway. It'll just destroy the sandcastle, like we were hitting it with a water hose. Easy, though apparently it would only half drain the necropolis because the water is still being pumped in. So the water will be running in a loop. The pump on the submarine needs to be turned off in order to fully drain the necropolis. Our friend Maggie didn't do that before she left which means no matter what happens, we'll have to go back down there.

Donut: NOT GONNA HAPPEN.

I sighed. I could see the game design, the hands of the bubble creator in all of this. I had no idea how the math worked out, but there had to be at least two dozen different ways this could've gone

depending on the order in which these castles were taken. Because the water quadrant had gone first, the subterranean quadrant filled with water. And since it was filled with water, it allowed for the easy destruction of the land quadrant. But we were still screwed, even if we did take out the castle the easy way.

Carl: So if we blow it out with the water hose plan, we take the castle, but the mage guy gets turned to mud, and we'll never find the winding box. What's the hard way?

Katia: You see those two towers on either side of the sandcastle? At the base of each tower was a coiled-up electrical line with clips at the end. If you attach the line to the tower and then to the door, when the sandstorm hits, lighting hits the towers, and they act like lightning rods. They electrify the doorway, and a glass hallway appears. If you examine it while it opens, the message says it only opens once per sandstorm. But the door closes really fast. There'll only be enough time for a few of us to enter. I made a deal with Gwen that we would do it. She thinks we're idiots for trying it this way when there's an easier solution.

Donut: WE NEED LIGHTNING? THAT'S JUST LIKE IN THAT TIME MACHINE MOVIE WHERE THE GUY MAKES OUT WITH HIS MOM.

Carl: Jesus, Donut. How much television did you really watch? What happens after the door closes? Wouldn't the castle turn back to sand? Also, what about Louis and Firas?

Katia: Uh, so I was thinking that too. I asked Mordecai while you were coming down here, and he thinks it'll probably remain intact, but only as long as the storm lasts. So about two hours. The storm will last longer starting tomorrow, but we don't know if it'll still work when everything changes. We have to do this now. I told Louis and Firas to stay outside to make sure Gwen doesn't get all Hekla on us and decide to flood the castle while we're in it.

Carl: So we're just going to run inside the castle and then fight some crazy magic user guy who has the power to toss

us into a different dimension? Do we have a plan other than that?

Katia: You're the one who wants that box.

The doorway to the sandcastle of the Mad Dune Mage looked like any other regular dungeon door. Like Katia said, it was not a portal. Just a magical door. There was a small moat in front of the castle, but there was no bridge, and the moat itself was empty. Like everything else, it was just made out of hard-packed sand. I knew if we followed the moat semicircle all the way to the necropolis wall, we'd find the panel that would allow one to open up a large pipe that would quickly turn the whole castle into mud.

A small group of battle-hardened crawlers watched us as we approached the doorway. The electrical lines that snaked from the bottom of the two towers were still attached to the entrance frame. One was pulled tight. The other hung loosely. The moment I saw that second wire I could hear the booming, teeth-rattling voice of my instructor at "A" school where I learned the basics of electrical repair. *Loose wires cause fires! Loose wires cause fires!*

These were high voltage jumpers covered with plastic insulation. Each cable was as thick as my leg, though they were light, made of some alien conductor. The line on the north tower was pulled taut against the contact atop the left side of the doorway. The line on the south tower was ridiculously long and sat coiled like a snake.

I looked up at the sky. The wind was starting to howl. There wasn't any lightning just yet, but it would arrive at any minute. I also noticed another pair of cables high above, connecting the two towers.

"Gwen, Katia. Have you seen any other contacts anywhere? Anywhere else where these clamps might fit?"

"No," Gwen said. "And we searched pretty good. It worked yesterday when the lightning hit."

"Shit, did we do something wrong?" Katia asked, looking nervously up at the sky.

"I'm not sure," I said. "These two towers are already connected, so this second, long cable is redundant. We either need to bring it in with us or it might attach to something out here we haven't found yet."

"There's nothing metal to attach to," Gwen said. She pointed at a human crawler, a level-28 human **Swashbuckler.** He was a tired-looking Asian man. That was the same class as Bautista. "Tran here has a metal-detecting ability."

"There's nothing?" I asked the man.

He shrugged. "Nothing except that wheel that opens the drainage pipe. Actually, you know what? There is a ring under the wheel. I thought it was a handhold."

I had a thought. "Okay. Disconnect it from the tower so you won't get zapped, but I want you to grab the other end and pull it all the way to the wheel. Let me know if it reaches."

The man looked uncertainly at Gwen, who nodded. He ran off. We watched him disconnect the lead from the south tower and disappear around the side of the side of the castle, dragging the long cable behind him.

I returned my attention to the entrance. "The door should still open with only one lead attached. Also, I wonder how much power it requires to activate. We might be able to hook it up to a dwarven battery or even the flying house and test it to see if there's any reaction. Even though lightning carries a pretty big…"

Bam!

I felt the hair on my arms stand on their ends. I remembered the moment when Gore-Gore the mantaur had been electrocuted by the third rail in the tunnels. The ground all around us danced as the sand momentarily electrified. The painful tingle of a near miss washed over everything. Mongo yowled. Donut's hair all poofed out as she hissed. A bolt cut low across the sky, and the two towers glowed.

The door was only five feet in front of me. It also glowed blue, the door disappeared, and with a crackling noise that sounded like

all the ice in the world breaking at once, a hallway appeared, leading off into darkness.

"Let's go!" Katia cried, bounding forward and disappearing inside.

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Donut, Mongo, and I scrambled to follow Katia through the electrified doorway and into the hallway made out of glass.

Entering the Sandcastle of the Mad Dune Mage.

Zzzzt. I cringed as the door vanished behind me. The walls didn't collapse, but the doorway disappeared. We were now stuck in the castle. Darkness encompassed us.

"Light," I whispered, and Donut cast her *Torch* spell.

"Gah!" We all cried out as the brilliant light became unbearable. The torchlight bounced off the walls, changing colors, blinding us with a prism of hues.

"Turn it down!"

"This is the lowest it goes," Donut said a moment later. The spell was now just a tiny ember floating in the air, causing the glass hallway to glow brightly and with a rainbow of light every time the ember moved. I took a step forward, and the glass floor crunched under my feet. It didn't break, nor did it visibly crack, but it felt as if the floor rested upon an uneven dusting of gravel. The walls and floor were warm to the touch.

A long, thin hallway spread before us. The hallway was made of a cloudy, white and blue glass filled with cracks and imperfections and lightning-patterned streaks of black that sparkled in Donut's light. The ground and walls were uneven, as if they were almost a natural formation. A t-junction appeared at the end of the hall.

Katia was forced to shed some mass in order to stand upright.

"How's the map look?" I whispered. Whispering felt appropriate. The glass hallway felt eerily abandoned, like alive at the same time. It was difficult to explain. Like we were exploring a photograph and not living, breathing place.

"It's a bunch of rooms and a few stairways, both up and down," Katia said. "I see the level stairwell. It's below us in the basement. I don't see any monsters at all."

"Look, look, I found something!" Donut said, jumping from Mongo's back to the floor. She poked at a small lump with her paw. It was a glass mouse. The tiny thing was frozen in time, running along the edge of the hallway. Its feet were melded with the floor. She reached forward to touch it, and it broke into dust.

"Ew, ew," she said, returning to Mongo, wiping her paw on his feathers. "It just exploded!"

"I think this place used to be real," I said. "I mean, like a real castle, and that guy did something that turned everything into sand. Or glass. I'm not really sure what's going on here."

The hallway was too thin for us to stand side-by-side. Katia went first, Mongo second, and I held up the rear. If we got attacked from the front, Donut would leap to my shoulder. We had just under two hours, and this place wasn't that big. We decided to quickly clear this floor and the upper floors first before descending to the basement with the throne room. We hit the first junction. The right led to an up and down stairwell, and the left turned to a large room with a fountain and statue within.

Everything in the room was made of glass, frozen in time, including the fountain. I stepped forward to examine it, wary for monsters or traps. There was no movement or sound other than the crunching under our own feet and Mongo's nails scratching upon the glass.

The statue was human-sized, and it depicted a robed, female figure holding her arms out while she stood in the middle of the round fountain. Arcs of sparkling, crystal-clear glass sprouted up from the figure's feet, raising to about waist height before curving downward again. The glass gave the impression of movement. This statue and fountain, before it had been turned to glass and frozen,

had been of a woman standing in a bowl, arms outstretched in a Jesus pose but with her legs planted in a wide stance, her mouth wide open, as if she was belting out a tune. The fountain's water flowed upward from all around her feet. It would've appeared that she was standing amongst a crashing wave. Or maybe atop a geyser.

Upon closer examination, I realized the glass statue did not depict a human. Her large eyes and small nose looked somewhat familiar, but I couldn't place it at first. A pair of sharp teeth poked from the tops of her large lips within her wide-open mouth. Then I saw the gills on her neck, and I knew.

I'd last seen Tsarina Signet on the third floor. The half-high elf, half-naiad elite was the catalyst for the whole circus quest. When—if—I got down to the next floor, I still had a contract to fulfill. She was part of a third-party drama that used the production's setting to create their show. It was called *Vengeance of the Daughter*, and it involved some story involving high elves, naiads, and genocide. I was obligated to participate in the program when and if we ever made it down to that level.

This robed creature depicted before me was also a half-naiad… a water nymph. A fairy-type creature that lived in the water. But instead of being half elf, it appeared this one was half human. This one didn't have the same horns on her head as Tsarina, but even in glass form, I could see she was very similar.

"Look," Katia said. She reached down and broke away a piece of clear crystal, revealing a small, glass plate on the side of the fountain. The glass words were almost impossible to read, but when I examined it, the system happily read it for me.

Ahh, an old, crystalized figure with a cryptic description. How very convenient for those of us who are wondering wtf is going on with this storyline.

When the glass wizard's research facility was transmuted, everything within was also transformed, including what you see before you now. At the base of this display is a small plaque. If you squint really hard, you can make out the faded words. It reads:

Lika, my love.

My sun and stars. My wife. M'lady, I will move the heavens so we can be together. I will burn and bury and destroy any who try to stop our love.

"Well that's ominous," Katia said.

Mongo leaned over to sniff at the statue. What had once been water was made of the clean, translucent glass. The statue itself was made of the same dirty-looking, multicolored glass that composed everything else in the castle. The whole thing wobbled when he sniffed, surprising him. The dinosaur screeched at the statue, scrambling back. We all hopped back as it toppled over and shattered. The sound was like a gunshot in the large room.

"Whoops," I said.

The shattered glass mostly turned to dust. The glass head of the naiad remained mostly intact, though part of her chin was now chipped. I took the head into my inventory along with a few of the larger, intact pieces of glass, which the inventory called **fulgurite**. For the head, the description read:

Decapitated glass head depicting Lika from *Troubadour's Bounty*.

It's sticky.

Before I could figure out what in the hell that meant, I received a message.

Gwen: Hey bomber guy. I'm trusting you're not dead yet. Tran reports that your hunch was correct. The electric line perfectly matches up with the wheel and the contact at the bottom of the tower.

Carl: Okay. Have him hook it up to the wheel, but not the tower. Then have him stand by in case I need him to attach it.

Gwen: If lightning hits it, it might, you know, electrically open up the release valve. You probably don't want that happening while you're standing in the castle. It'd be like stepping in front of one of those trains from the last floor.

Carl: Yeah, I am aware. So please don't connect it unless I ask.

The valve opened when you physically turned it. I suspected electrifying the metal valve actually did something else, but I wasn't certain just yet. I hoped we wouldn't have to test it while we were standing in the middle of the castle.

<u>Gwen</u>: All right. You are a crazy fucker. I'll give you that. But you guys better hurry.

"Come on," I said to the others. "Let's keep moving."

We explored the remaining rooms on the first level of the castle, but they were all empty. There were paintings and furniture made of glass, but I couldn't tell what they'd once been, and the furniture turned to dust or broke into pieces when I tried to dislodge it from the floor. The paintings were nothing but squares on the walls.

We went up the stairs, and it was more of the same. There was a table full of potions. I touched one, and it also turned to fine dust that swirled up in the air. I covered my mouth and backed away, afraid to breathe it in. It was finally dawning on me that there might be a way to turn all of this back, and we were destroying potential loot. Outside, we could hear the sandstorm blowing loudly through the walls. Lightning continued to crash.

"Let's stop touching shit and get this rolling," I said.

"Agreed," Katia said.

We moved to the basement. The ceiling here was low. It was only a few inches over my head, adding to the sense of claustrophobia. Katia had to widen her hips and lower her height to continue. At the base of the stairs was a small, round room with a large, wooden door against the far wall. The door was wide and went all the way to the low ceiling. It wasn't made of glass or sand, and it wasn't magical. It was just a regular door, and it was the first non-glass item we'd seen since coming in here. I paused, examining it for traps. Flashing light streamed from underneath the door.

This was obviously the boss chamber for the castle.

"It looks like it's just one big room on the other side," Katia said. "There's just one small room beyond that, and it's the level stairwell."

"I see the stairwell," I said. Now that I was on the same level as the exit, it finally populated into my map.

"I don't see any monsters," Donut added. "Nothing. But I hear voices."

"Peeping Tom," I whispered.

"We decided to call it Peeping Mongo, remember?" Donut said.

"Just do it. Turn the light off first."

The torch snapped off, and a small hole materialized in the door. I waited a moment and then peered inside. I couldn't see much. The ceiling wasn't any higher in this room. There were piles of books and magazines lying about along with several smaller statues on a display case. None of the items other than the walls and ceiling were made of glass, though I could see the floor was covered in sand, as if the room was built atop a beach. There also appeared to be several piles of clutter strewn about the room. Most of it was clothes. There was an odd mix of black and pink clothing spread everywhere, though all of it was on tables. The mess wasn't as bad as the Hoarder's chamber on the first floor, but an awful stench permeated through the hole.

I couldn't see the source of the flashing light. If I didn't know any better, I'd guess it was from a television. Or a videogame. Same with the sounds.

I took a step back. "Abort," I whispered.

"What's wrong?" Donut asked, also whispering. She was about to cast *Clockwork Triplicate* on Mongo, which would make the two dinosaurs appear within the room. But I couldn't shake the feeling if we straight-up attacked whatever was in there, we'd miss out on learning what was going on.

"Change of plans. Look through the hole and use your *Astral Paw* spell to knock a pile of magazines or something over. I want to see if anything in there reacts. Sometimes we can get the boss to show itself before we get ourselves locked in there with it."

"We don't call moves if we're going to abort the move, Carl," Donut grumbled. "That's the reason why we have a system in the first place. So we don't have to think about it."

Donut leaped to my shoulder to get a good view through the hole.

I patted her on the head. "We call it 'Peeping Tom' so I can look through the hole first and see if the clockwork Mongos are necessary. That's the point of the name."

"Peeping *Mongo*. Really, Carl. If you're going to get the names wrong we're going to need to spend an extra half an hour a day training with the move system, and that's going to conflict with my brushing schedule. It's not that difficult to remember. Katia always remembers the names." Before I could say anything, she peered through the hole. She made a face. "Oh my, this mage is quite messy. It smells like old chicken and stale vegetables. The sand on the ground is really cold. He's watching television. I don't recognize the show, but it sounds like a cartoon. Okay. I'm going to knock over a pile of magazines." She pulled back from the hole. "I did it. Honestly, I don't know how it'll make a difference. You never noticed when I knocked stuff over."

"I noticed. I was just used to it." I returned my eye to the magical peephole. The unseen show had paused, and silence filled the chamber. I couldn't see what Donut had done. I didn't see anything on the sandy floor.

"Is someone there?" a voice called.

The moment the voice spoke, a single white dot appeared on my minimap, just to the side of where I could see. A person appeared, shuffling through the large room. This was a human male wearing what appeared to be a bathrobe. For one confusing second, my brain thought this was Louis, but of course that didn't make sense. This was an unkempt, overweight, 20-something guy with long, stringy hair. He moved to the middle of the room and looked down at the sand. He grumbled something I couldn't hear, and turned back toward the television. Before he could leave my field of view, I examined him.

Ghazi – Human. Level 43 Glass Mage

Known by most everyone in the area as The Mad Dune mage, Ghazi came to the area for the same reason as the bugbear submarine captain, Shamus Chaindrive: to seek out the hidden treasure that is said to be buried within the Necropolis of Anser.

As a glass mage who specializes in the study of both transmutation and the teleportation of energized particles, Ghazi told his colleagues at the Larracos College of Magecraft that he was seeking out the Gate of the Feral Gods to study its potential use in stable, long-distance teleportation.

This was, in fact, a lie.

His real purpose in seeking out the fabled artifact was for reliable, controlled access to the Nothing in order to converse with Yarilo, the banished god of Lust. He sought but a simple boon in exchange for freeing the god.

Ghazi wished for Yarilo to make the famed Lika fall in love with him.

Lika is a half-naiad trobairitz. A trobairitz is a bard cleric who has taken a vow of celibacy. She is also the fictional main character of a popular series of stage plays that are often performed in the Larracos theater district. She was never real, and is very loosely based on a minor deity. She has been portrayed by dozens of half-naiad thespians over the years.

In other words, Ghazi was trying to summon a god in order to turn his waifu into the real deal.

Funny thing about summoning creatures from within the Nothing. They're all crazy. They all want out. Some of them are very good at pretending they're somebody they are not.

Yadda, yadda, yadda. The entity Ghazi summoned is not Yarilo. And now the glass mage is trapped in his now-transformed castle, cursed with the knowledge of what he's done and what he's unleashed onto the world.

He has an escape. He is too much of a coward to do it. But there is one thing that will throw him over the edge. You probably don't want that to happen.

"Shit. It's just a dude," I whispered. "He's not made of sand or anything like that. It says his wife isn't real. It doesn't make sense. He's like a neckbeard who tried to cast a spell making a fictional chick fall in love with him."

"It's just like with Louis and Juice Box," Donut said. "But at least Juice Box is real. Well, sort of. She was doing a Wonder Woman impersonation before our time out, and believe it or not, I thought…"

"Shell!" Katia cried as I felt myself fly back from the door. Donut leaped away, calling for Mongo to follow just as my back slammed the stairs. I didn't know what was happening, but I banged onto *Protective Shell* just as Donut's *Wall of Fire* burst up inside the room

The door exploded the moment I cast my spell, which didn't make much sense. The diameter of the protective shell burst deep into the room, beyond the level of the door. It shouldn't have detonated.

The fire spell immediately caught the piles of books and tables aflame.

"Hey, hey!" came the shout from within the room. Ghazi ran into view. He ran through the wall of the protective shell, looking around frantically. The wall of fire had trapped him on this side of the flames. His eyes got huge when he saw us staring back at him.

His dot is still white. The spell won't protect us.

It was Katia who had pulled me back from the door. But why? What had happened?

And then I saw it. The sand on the ground was all pushed back, revealing a glass floor, as if I had thrust it away with a broom. The protective shell had tossed it back with the casting of my spell. Suddenly the entire room was red on my map.

The sand is a mob. The floor is a monster.

"Keep the spell going!" Ghazi yelled, rushing toward us.

I stood. Mongo screeched, ready to attack.

"Hold Mongo back," I yelled to Donut. "The spell is going to run out in a few seconds," I said to the fleeing mage.

The man looked over his shoulder at the flames. He spied something on a table in the room, just at the edge of the protective shell. The table itself was on fire. The bathrobe man cursed. He returned to the room, grabbed the item—a leather bag—and then returned toward us. The spell was going to run out in five seconds. The bag was on fire. He threw it down, patted the flames out and then scooped it up, holding it against his chest.

"Go up the stairs! It won't follow up the stairs!" Ghazi wheezed.

I made a quick decision.

"Do you have the winding box? The college needs it to save the world!"

The man looked at me incredulously.

The spell snapped off. The sand started pushing toward us, moving quickly, bubbling like gray lava. *It's a slime*, I realized. The floor of the room wasn't covered with regular sand. The room was covered entirely by a slime, and for some inexplicable reason, the mage guy was living on top of it.

"Answer him, you fool!" Donut demanded.

"It's here," Ghazi said, patting the bag. "I knew the council wouldn't abandon me. I…"

I punched the mage in the face, and I took the bag. The man collapsed, but Katia reached out and caught him. She threw him over her shoulder. We turned, and we ran up the stairs as the sand slime oozed toward us.

"That was unexpected," Donut said. Mongo screeched uncertainly, sniffing down into the darkness. Despite the man's proclamation, I could see that the slime or ooze or whatever was slowly inching its way up the stairs. It'd take a while for it to get to us, but it was coming.

We stood at the top of the landing. Katia placed the unconscious man on the ground. He'd wake up in 90 seconds. I hadn't formed my gauntlet, but the punch had knocked him out cold. His health bar had gone down by 2/3's. His dot remained white.

"College? Where did that come from?" Katia asked.

"Examine him," I said.

"Oh," she said after a moment. "He's from Larracos. That's the big city on the ninth floor, right?"

"That's right," I said. "The dude came here so his fictional girlfriend could be turned real."

Donut scoffed. “Can you imagine? You’re a famous, beautiful adventurer and suddenly you’re in some smelly scientist guy’s basement? Just bringing them to life isn’t enough. You’d have to make them *like* you. And let me tell you, if you’re the type of guy who is living in a putrid cellar trying to bring fictional people to life, making them like you is a tall order. It’s weird, and it’s creepy.”

“So what happened down there?” I asked Katia as I opened up the leather satchel.

“While you were looking through the peephole, the sand started oozing through the bottom of the door. It was moving its way up the wood when I noticed it. You cast the shell, and it pushed it back, blasting the door to pieces.”

“If we actually went into the room, it’d probably have triggered a boss battle,” I said. “It’s almost identical to what happened in the air castle. There’s a boss and an NPC.”

I peered into the bag. There were two objects within. **Letter from the Council** and **Mysterious Box**.

I examined the winding box. It was a thick, wooden case with a glass window. It was heavier than it appeared it should be, and the dark wood of the box *felt* old. It reminded me of a humidor or a large music box. Inside were two little knobs and two round cutouts, one for each watch. I wasn’t exactly certain how these things worked. You placed the watch inside, turned it on, and it spun the watch, which somehow kept it ready to go. Or something.

Mysterious Winding Box.

This strange box hums with arcane power. There is space for two watches. What happens if you place the watches within and activate the box? You should try to find out!

I knew this guy had figured out how to get the thing to half work without the watches, so I didn’t want to mess with it. I placed it into my inventory. The last watch remained inside the necropolis somewhere in the hands of Juice Box’s brother, Henrik. *We should have taken it from him when we had the chance*.

I examined the letter. Donut read it from over my shoulder, gasping when she read the last part. When I was done, I handed it to Katia.

Ghazi,

We received your correspondence with no little amount of alarm. Upon looking up the creature you described, we have determined she is a banished lesser deity named Psamathe. She is the only of the listed banished who is accompanied by the ooze familiar you describe. Happily, your ineptitude whilst summoning the creature may be our saving grace.

The scholars believe your failure made it so she was only corporeal long enough to gain a foothold, and the behavior you describe suggests she has not fully passed over. She will seek the most powerful sub-conscious entity in the vicinity and will occupy the creature. Thankfully, because of her non-physical form, she will only be able to occupy a creature equally between worlds. And it is clear who that will be considering your location.

So in summary, the council believes Psamathe duped you. She pretended to be this Yarilo you so foolishly attempted to resurrect. She then likely took control of the ghost that is known to haunt the necropolis. Queen Quetzalcoatlus.

You only have one choice. You must use the winding box to banish yourself and the entirety of the necropolis into the Nothing. You must not let Quetzalcoatlus gain corporeal form. If it were to happen, Psamathe will be fully resurrected, and the true gods would be forced to react. That would bring a level of chaos and death not seen for an age.

Your failure has caused your name to be removed from the Tome of Scholars.

May the gods have mercy on your soul.

It was signed by a group of twelve different names.

Below the letter, written in a different script was an additional note.

Ghazi you fucking idiot. I told you this was going to happen. The second I found you with that *thing*, I knew you

were beyond saving. You have ruined everything. I hope it was worth it. Scolopendra will never be defeated now. We needed that artifact, and all you could think about was your cock. I will never forgive you. I was here the whole time, but I guess I wasn't enough. Fuck you. I hope you die in pain. Do the right thing.

- Tish.

Jesus, I thought. If the changelings had managed to turn that ghost back into a physical creature, it would've been game over one way or another. Either the ghost would've gotten out of the necropolis or Ghazi here would've binned the whole bubble using his winding box.

"This is distressing," Donut said. "He had Tish all along, and he left her so he could pursue a fictional woman? I am appalled. This is just outrageous."

I grunted. "Donut, we don't know anything about the story except what the description and the letter says. You're reading too much into it. The important part is if Quetzel however you pronounce it gets out of the necropolis, yet another goddamn god is probably going to show up and splatter everyone in the area. But more importantly, it also confirms we can use this winding box as a weapon. And the artifact can be somehow used against the final boss."

"Maybe," Katia said. "Or they just wanted to use it to run away."

"You're not from the council," Ghazi said, sitting up. The large mage's robe opened to reveal a massive chest tattoo of Lika. He put a hand to his head. "You punched me really hard."

"How could you?" Donut demanded, jumping on the NPC's chest. He started to scramble back, surprised at the cat's vehemence. Donut hissed and spit.

"What? How could I what?"

"You had Tish all along, and you left her for Lika! And she's not even real! Look what happened!"

The man's eyes got huge. "Tish? So you *are* from the college? How did you get in here?"

We had approximately one hour before the sandstorm ended. When that happened, the glass halls would collapse and turn to sand, burying us. We didn't have time for this drama bullshit.

I grasped the confused mage by his bathrobe. "Okay, I am going to ask you a series of questions, and you are going to answer them. Do you understand?"

"What is going on? What do you want?"

"What is that thing down there? And how do we kill it?"

"It's… killing it won't matter. I've killed it a dozen times. It just comes right back."

"What is it?"

"She… it. It's a sand ooze. The familiar of Psamathe. Psamathe is not a god, but a lesser deity. She, uh, escaped during my research. As long as Psamathe is in this world, the ooze can be recreated by a single grain of sand, so it is impossible to kill it fully. You can burn it away, and freeze it, or dilute it. Or shock it with electricity. It shrinks, but it never dies. To remove it, you'd have to remove all the sand from the world."

Damnit, I thought. *We should've brought that electrical line in with us*.

"Okay, why is it in the room with you?"

"Are you guys going to tell me who you are?"

"No. Answer the questions. If I get even the *hint* of a spell being cast, that dinosaur behind you is going to bite your head off. I've seen him do it. Do you understand? Now why is the slime in the room with you?"

"She's… she's my wife, and I think she's in love with me."

"Your wife? The slime is your wife?"

"It's an ooze. Not a slime. There's a difference. And yes, the ooze is my wife."

Donut made a disgusted noise. "If Tish could see you now."

"Yeah, you're gonna have to elaborate. But make it quick."

Ghazi looked back and forth between me and Donut, obviously bewildered. He focused on Katia, who stood at the edge of the stairwell, keeping an eye on the encroaching ooze. She shook her head, telling the man she wasn't going to help him.

"Look," I said. "Let me speed this up. We know you came here to summon the lust god and have him turn some lady from a play into your sex slave. And you got tricked into summoning this Psamathe creature instead. And now Psamathe is inside the necropolis, hitching a ride within the body of that pterodactyl ghost. That seems to be the theme of this whole damn bubble. We know if she gets out, the gods who are now in charge might take issue with that. We also know that winding box I just stole from you can be used to suck all of this away, but you haven't done it yet. And now you're never going to get the chance because I have it, and I am not going to give it back. Right now, I don't care about any of that. I just want to know everything I can about that ooze that is coming up the stairs, because I need to get rid of it long enough for me to occupy that small room in the back of your chamber. And I need to do it before the sandstorm outside ends."

The man looked at me, open-mouthed.

"This is where you speak," Donut prodded.

"It's halfway up the stairs," Katia called.

"Okay, okay. Lika isn't just some lady from a play. She's real. I wasn't turning her into a sex slave. I brought her with me. It's not like the others say. She's trapped, frozen in her body. She speaks to me. *She*'s the one who told me to come here and do this. I'm trying to save her. Tish didn't understand. Nobody understands. When I thought I'd summoned Yarilo, he made Lika real. He told me that I had to marry her for the magic to keep her alive, so I did. Right away. He performed the ceremony right then and there. It was only after the consummation did I leave the chamber and find that Lika was still in her cleaning pod. The entire castle had been crystalized when I used the spell to summon Yarilo, but it hadn't been enough power." He paused, suddenly sad. "I screwed it up, like I screw everything up. But that's how I knew I had been tricked. Lika hadn't been saved at all. She was still there, crystalized like everything else. And everything outside my protection spell was turned to sand. The deity I'd summoned made me a wife, but it was a wife of sand. That is why the ooze remains nearby. After consummation, it fell in love with me."

"Uh, Carl, does 'consummation' mean what I think it means?" Donut asked.

Again, we were getting off track, but I now had more questions than when we'd started. "You banged the ooze?" I asked. "And you didn't notice it wasn't really the chick you have tattooed on your own damn chest?"

"I was drunk," he said sheepishly. "And really excited. Plus it was dark."

"*Does it talk*?" I asked.

"Well, no. She takes the form of Lika when the sandstorm isn't raging outside. When the storm starts, she… it returns to ooze form, but *I* turn to sand. You see, it required a lot of power to… you know what, it's not important. I only return to my human form during the sandstorm, but she is in her Lika form the rest of the time, so the only real quality time we've spent together was right after the wedding. She remains buried in the castle, and she consumes me. Every day. She eats me while I am made of sand. That's how oozes tell you they love you." He shuddered.

"What the fuck," I whispered.

"So that's why you keep trying to kill her?" Donut asked.

"A marriage built on lies can never last," he said. "But I gave up trying to burn her away a long time ago. Now I just live with it. As long as her master remains in the necropolis, we are fine. I don't age. I have this amazing magical panel with thousands of hours of programs on it, and I don't know where it came from. But it keeps me entertained. I can only watch for two hours a day except during the red equinox, which is coming up soon. There's this program called *Inuyasha* that I plan on finishing… Anyway, the ooze doesn't allow me to leave the room very often. It's jealous of the real Lika."

"'Real' Lika," Donut grumbled under her breath.

"Wait a second," Katia said, interrupting. "When you say you found Lika in her cleaning pod, what do you mean by that?"

Ghazi chinned toward the large chamber behind us. "She's there, in that room. But the room only appears during the storm, and that's the only time I can leave the chamber. But my, uh, wife doesn't usually let me leave. I'm working on a spell that'll reverse what

happened. The castle has been crystalized. I made a protection spell, but it didn't work. It wasn't big enough, and it wasn't powerful enough. Most of the castle is sand, but some of the interior turns to crystal during the storm. Both me and my workroom return to their real form during the sandstorm, but that is it. Once I undo the spell, I will have Lika back and we'll try again."

"How are you going to undo the spell if you spend all of your free time watching nerd cartoons?" Donut asked.

"Uh, so she's in the fountain?" I asked. I exchanged a look with Katia. "We saw her before. We thought she was a statue."

"She's a personal companion device made in the likeness of Lika. But she is real. There is a soul trapped within her, and that is how I came to be here."

We'd all connected the dots, but Donut was the first to say it out loud. "Oh my god, she was a *sex* doll? You had a sex doll tell you to come here? And you stuck her in the fountain to… *clean* her? And that's what…"

"Is in the fountain right now?" I interrupted.

The shattered pieces of the apparently possessed Lika sex doll were scattered all over the other chamber's floor, though I had the head in my inventory. We needed to keep this guy out of that room until we finished this.

"Again, we're getting off track," I said. "Tell me how you killed your wife the last time you did it. I only need her dead for a few minutes, then we can get the hell out of here."

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I peered down the stairs, and I examined the slow-moving ooze. The closer it got to the top, the slower it went. I realized the thinner it stretched itself, the more difficult it was for it to move.

The thing looked like a god had sneezed over the stairwell, and the mucus pile had rolled in kitty litter. Some of the magazines that Donut had knocked off the table along with some other junk items from the lab were mixed in with the creature, hitching a ride up the stairs.

The voice of the AI's description of the ooze was different than usual. There were no stupid jokes thrown in there, and it seemed more morose than normal, which probably *was* the joke. I just didn't get it.

Mrs. Ghazi

Sand Ooze

Level 52 Borough Boss!

This is a minion of Psamathe

Every living creature seeks the same thing. A sense of contentment. No matter what their origin story is, no matter what they are made of, the moment they first exist, no matter how dumb, how smart, how confused, they seek a place of comfort. What that comfort looks like to them can vary wildly, even amongst creatures of the same species. Oftentimes, that journey to felicity is what defines their entire lifecycle. When that creature crosses paths with

another, it is inevitable that the weaker of the two will fall further away from their goal.

This is the sort of thing that might go through Mrs. Ghazi's mind as it spends its day watching over a man it has grown to love at the behest of someone more powerful than itself. The knowledge that the man's feelings are not mutual is like a dagger in its heart, if it had one. It wrestles daily with this realization, teetering on the edge of indecision. *Do I protect him because I love him? Do I kill him because he doesn't love me back? Do I continue with my duty? What would become of me if I simply disobeyed?*

It's a lot of stress for a creature not used to having any emotion. It's almost too much. But even if this creature wanted to end it all, it couldn't. Its master has the ability to bring it right back, over and over again.

"I think the AI is smoking weed," Katia said.

"This tells us absolutely nothing new about the creature," I said, irritated at the description. "Except that it's a borough boss. But the music didn't start."

"I think we broke it when we didn't go into the room," Katia said.

"Are we sure it was actually talking about the ooze?" Donut asked.

Killing the sand ooze, even temporarily, was going to be impossible from where we stood. Without a sufficient burst of electricity, I was going to need to burn it. And while I had plenty of materials to make an ooze scald hot enough to shrink it away, we'd screwed ourselves by running up the stairs.

According to Ghazi, I had to drop the fire on the ooze's core, which was always kept in the same place: directly under the recliner that sat in front of the flatscreen television nestled in the corner of the room.

We couldn't use regular fire, either. We could tell that the ooze had already snuffed out the flames leftover from Donut's spell, so the creature wasn't completely fire averse. We needed something that'd burn hot. I had two boom jugs left, but I feared those would burn a little *too* hot. I had a better idea. Earlier, I prepared some of

the “burn gel” at my crafting table. I had the recipe already from my cookbook. I’d forced a conversation a few days before that with Mordecai by telling him about how I used to set hand sanitizer on fire. He’d responded with a way to make a flammable gel that would burn better, longer, and hotter. We found when we used moonshine in conjunction with some paste he could easily put together, the resulting gel burned hot and bright with little smoke. It wasn’t too useful in combat situations because the stuff had the consistency of toothpaste and took a while to apply, but it would work here. I had a plastic shopping bag full of the gel in my inventory, already shoved into a funnel so I could apply it like a giant piping syringe for a cake decorator.

The sand ooze had stretched itself almost all the way up the stairs. If I touched it, it would overwhelm me, dragging me down and suffocating me. So I had to somehow get all the way down the stairs, around the corner, into the room and to the core without it touching me.

Donut’s puddle jumper wouldn’t work, not without an egress or suitable place to land. Same with just tossing Molotov cocktails. The most obvious solution was indeed to burn our way there. If we flamed our way toward the core with fire that was hot enough to do damage, it would constantly shrink until we were close enough to hit the core.

We didn’t have time for that.

A further wrinkle was that Ghazi said I could absolutely not use explosives. Especially not in the basement level, especially not in his lab. Ghazi insisted that a big boom would crack the walls, and the entire glass interior would collapse. We’d find ourselves buried.

That left only one quick, feasible solution. We use Donut’s *Hole* spell to drop the fire onto the core from the level above. About four feet of sand separated the bottom glass floor and the top of the basement level. Her spell could reach that far thanks to her glass cannon class, but only barely. The problem was that Ghazi’s workshop wasn’t lined up correctly with the floor above it. We’d have to go into the large room where we’d accidentally destroyed the crystalized sex doll, move all the way to the corner, and that would

overlap with the edge of the basement. The wrong edge of the basement. So we could make a hole into the chamber, but we'd still be thirty feet away.

We worked the problem, brainstorming different solutions. Katia didn't have enough mass to stretch herself that far. I could probably pop into the hole and use the xistera to upside-down toss something at the core. Same with a few Molotovs. But I feared it wouldn't be enough.

I needed to move the recliner out of the way, liberally douse the core with the fire gel, set it aflame, and do it without getting captured and suffocated by the ooze.

Mordecai had been particularly alarmed when I told him what the monster was.

Mordecai: Do not let it touch you. Once they get ahold, it's like quicksand you can't escape. And since you already used your *Protective Shell*, you'd be fucked. They don't just suffocate you. It will actively pour sand into every available orifice, filling you until you explode. And since you're only wearing boxers with relatively easy access to your… southern entrance… Yeah. Don't let it get you.

Carl: Christ, Mordecai. You always make horrible things seem even *more* horrible.

Mordecai: That's my job, kid. Have you been keeping your hair short?

Carl: Yeah. Katia cut it for me the other day. I don't think it grew while we were away.

In the end, we went with my least favorite idea. I'd already come up with it, but I was saving it as a last resort. Donut suggested it out loud.

With all of my equipment buffs but before my daily buffs, my dexterity currently sat at 32. I'd mostly been spamming my strength and constitution stats, though I had managed to throw a few points into my dex here and there. I wished I'd thrown more.

Thanks to my newest toe ring, I had an ability called Sticky Feet. It allowed me to walk along the ceiling for my dexterity times two

seconds once every six hours. I'd practiced it a few times, but not yet in combat. That was about to change.

Carl: How do these things sense people? Will it know I'm hanging upside down over it?

Mordecai: It will absolutely know if you don't distract it. Oozes hunt by vibration and sound. Not heat like slimes, which is good. But you clomping on the ceiling will still be enough to gain its attention, so you'll have to use one of those things you were building earlier.

Donut: CAN IT SMELL? CARL STARTED GETTING ALL SWEATY WHEN WE DECIDED HE WAS GOING IN UPSIDE DOWN.

Mordecai: Normal sand oozes can't smell. But again, this might not be a normal one, so be careful.

Carl: The thing is named Mrs. Ghazi, and it's in love with a human. I'm pretty certain this isn't a normal ooze.

Mordecai: Probably not. Speaking of the mage, I wouldn't trust a guy who fucked an ooze. Katia, keep an eye on him, especially when Carl is in that chamber.

Carl: I don't trust him either. He didn't seem too upset when I stole the winding box.

Katia: I have my Crowd Blast ability cocked and loaded. If he tries anything, he'll be splattered like a bug against a windshield.

Donut and I posted up in the corner of the fountain room while Katia remained at the top of the stairs with Ghazi. The ooze was just about to get to the top step, and she was going to slowly back away as it approached.

I'd already given Katia the device. I'd earlier made five of these at my sapper's table, each one labeled with a different purpose. Since I'd put them together at the table, I'd actually been able to pick the song. This one was simply labeled, "Bass heavy. For

distraction.” It was a hollow banger sphere with an impact-detonated alarm trap inside of it. It’d taken me less than three minutes to make the whole lot. I’d quickly chosen the songs from memory.

“You’re up!” I yelled to Katia from the next room.

“Here we go,” she called back.

A moment passed, and the announcement came.

Peaking at Number 2 on October 10th, 1992, it’s, “Jump Around!”

The music wasn’t as booming as usual because the alarm module had been sealed inside a metal ball. Still, the incredibly-loud, bass-heavy tune blared enough to shake the walls, drowning out all other sounds. Katia had just lobbed the ball down the stairs. I was afraid the ooze would immediately snuff it out, but the ball appeared to protect the trap mechanism.

Katia: Oh wow. The ball is bouncing up and down on its own with the beat. The ooze keeps trying to grab it, but it’s slipping away.

Donut: IS THIS SERIOUSLY THE ONLY BASS-HEAVY SONG YOU COULD THINK OF? WHAT ABOUT LIL PUMP?

Carl: Make the goddamn hole.

Donut: THE BASS ISN’T EVEN THAT HEAVY. IT’S JUST BOUNCY.

Carl: Goddamnit, Donut. We’re on the clock.

Donut appeared to sigh and then cast the spell. We peered down into the cavity, looking into the scorched room below. The place was a mess. The body of the ooze was stretched taut, like sandy bubble gum. The television had somehow unpaused itself, and it played a scene from some anime, filling the chamber with a frenetic rainbow of ever-changing colors. I couldn’t hear it. The ooze spread to all corners of the room.

The small, glowing doorway stood next to the television. The level stairwell room. If it wasn’t glowing, it’d look like the entrance to a utility closet or something equally innocuous. Once we took care of the boss, we’d have access to the room.

I could see the set up for the boss battle that had never happened. There were multiple tables of various heights throughout the room, though most were now wrecked. I would've had to jump from table to table and then figure out where the core was. Mordecai had said to look for the yolk-like dome in the ooze. I could see it now, exactly where Ghazi said it would be. The yellow glow emanated from under the chair near the door to the level stairwell.

I lowered myself into the hole. Getting my feet to touch the bare ceiling wasn't exactly the easiest thing to do when you were coming in from above. I wanted to keep Katia—who could've easily lowered me—posted at the stairwell, so I'd quickly fashioned a rope system.

Carl: Don't let this slide.

I didn't trust anything in the room made of glass to anchor me, so I pulled the heaviest chunk of metal I had in my inventory and gently placed it on the ground. It was a piece of dwarven automaton, and even though dwarven metal was lighter than steel, this thing had to weigh at least a half ton. It was about the size of a forklift and was covered with lots of jagged, uneven, sharp pieces of broken metal. I'd been saving it to throw at something or to drop if we had to make a fast getaway. It was one of those things that I wouldn't be able to even budge before, but now that my strength clocked in at 80, I could lift it with no problems. I tied the rope to a curved, solid rivet. It'd hold my weight easily.

I lowered myself upside down into the hole, entering the chamber of the ooze, spiderman-style. No boss music started. There was no announcement. The ceiling of the chamber was low, meaning when I was attached to the roof, my head would only be an inch or two above the top of Mrs. Ghazi. If it sensed me, it'd surge up and drag me face-first into the sand.

I lowered myself enough, placed my bare foot onto the ceiling, and I prepared the sticky feet special ability. The moment it activated, I'd have 70-something seconds..

The song ended and then started right back up again. It would go on forever.

Carl: I'm going to activate my spell in five seconds. Send in the bozos. Donut, maybe you should put Mongo away

after you make the clockworks. I don't want him accidentally getting into the sand.

Katia: Here they come.

I activated the ability, and my feet stuck to the ceiling. I let go of the rope, and I dangled free as the countdown timer began. This was much different than the *Reverse Gravity* spell. That one made me actually feel like the world was upside down. Here, I was just glued to the ceiling, like I was wearing those ridiculous, ab-killing gravity boots. I had to shuffle walk. If both of my feet left the ceiling at the same time, I would fall.

Outside the door, I heard the distinctive twin shrieks—even over the music—of the clockwork mongos as they jumped down the stairs and into certain death. I knew Katia was starting to throw random crap from her inventory at the monster, all in an attempt to distract it. I turned toward the recliner in the corner, and I started to gingerly walk toward it.

I had multiple, passive, low-tier stealth movement abilities that never worked for shit because I traveled with a dinosaur and a talking cat, but I hoped it would help cover my passage now.

I shuffled quickly across the ceiling, dodging tables and other debris without incident, coming to the spot next to the recliner. I had to hunch over to get myself directly over it.

I needed to make a choice here. I could grab the recliner and stick it into my inventory, which would certainly alert the ooze, or I could pour the gel directly onto the chair and set that on fire, which would probably work just fine. That gel burned hot and was next to impossible to put out.

I had thirty seconds. I went with the set-the-chair-on-fire method. I pulled the gel dispenser from my inventory and started to squeeze the thick, cloudy gel directly onto the chair.

Donut: IT'S MOVING! CARL, IT'S MOVING! I CAN'T STOP IT!

Carl: What's moving?

Donut: THE METAL CHUNK THING!

I looked over my shoulder to see a line of ooze had somehow discovered the rope that'd been dangling a foot off the ground and

through the hole. It'd reached up and grasped it and was now yanking on the rope. The metal was significantly larger than the hole, so it didn't really matter, but that had been my escape route. It also showed how terrifyingly strong the ooze was.

Carl: It's okay. Turn off the hole. Make a new one next to it right away. I'm setting the chair on fire now and will make a run for it.

I pulled a torch from inventory, lit it, and dropped it on the chair that sat atop the core. I turned and started scrambling away as an orgy of flames burst forth, burning white hot, filling the corner of the room with more flames and heat than I expected.

Oh shit.

I suppressed a cry of pain. Even as I scrambled away, the heat caused damage. The back of my head felt like it'd been dipped in lava. My stomach started to burn with the effort as I upside-down crab-walked across the ceiling like something out of a goddamn horror movie.

The ooze immediately reacted. The whole room vibrated. The sand rippled. The flaming chair went flying straight up like a rocket, and it slammed into the low ceiling right where I'd just been standing. It shattered into flaming hunks and fell upon the now-exposed, yolk-like core, spreading the gel everywhere.

Yes, I thought.

The ground of the whole room rose, like it was filling with sand. It folded upon itself, trying to snuff the flames, but they wouldn't go out. Even buried, I could see the glowing, sparking fire.

Katia: It's retracting!

A health bar appeared floating over the core, and it started to fall. It let go of the rope, which fell on its own as Donut closed the hole. The monster pulled further in on itself, piling into the corner and blocking the door to the stairwell. It buried the television, which was rapidly melting in the heat, plunging the room into a murky, half-lit darkness. The boss sparkled as the heat damaged it. The ooze started spinning, tendrils of gooey sand creating circles that caught brilliantly in the low light. It would be dead in seconds.

And that's when the roof of the chamber collapsed, and the room started to fill with sand.

I'm not exactly certain what caused it. It was probably the heat. Or maybe it was the way the level was designed. The floor was engineered to collapse just as the ooze was about to die because fuck you. One moment I was running toward the new hole in the ceiling with five seconds left, and suddenly I was buried upside down in the sand, completely blind and unable to move.

Donut: Carl! Carl! Help! I fell! There's sand all around me!

Oh fuck, this is it. I struggled to free myself, but I couldn't move. The weight of the sand above me started to increase, pressing down, like I was buried in the bottom of an hourglass. Sand filled my mouth. I couldn't breathe. I struggled more, but the only thing I could move was my toes.

A notification appeared, quickly flashing by. The boss was defeated, and the quadrant was now open.

Katia: Carl! Donut! Where are you! The stairwell just filled with sand! The walls are starting to crack and creak. I think it's all going to collapse! Are you okay?

I suddenly felt myself moving, rapidly sliding through the grit. I plopped unceremoniously onto the floor. I gasped for breath, coughing. It was Donut. She had bitten down onto my foot and dragged me free.

"Thanks," I coughed, spitting hot grains from my mouth. Donut's torch lit up the tiny sliver of a space. I had barely enough room to stand. We were in the back corner of the basement. The roof had fallen in at an angle. It would've given us a ramp back up to the first level, but the ceiling of that chamber had also collapsed, and what had once been the ceiling between the first and second floor now stood precariously over our heads, bowing and creaking. To our right was the large chunk of dwarven metal, which helped shore up the ceiling. It had fallen through with Donut. If I pulled it back into my inventory now, we'd be immediately buried.

We had three stories worth of sand over our head, and it was going to come crashing down at any moment. We were trapped.

"The floor broke right after I cast my hole spell," Donut said, out of breath. "I didn't know it'd do that. Carl, what are we going to do? There's nowhere to go!"

"I think it was the heat," I said. I tentatively reached up and touch the new ceiling. A crack splintered across it. "That gel burned hotter than I thought it would."

I sent a note to Katia, telling her where we were.

Katia: I don't know what to do. The whole place is about to collapse. The chamber where Donut was fell in, and Ghazi is flipping out about saving his love doll. He's freaking out. I can't tell if he's crying or laughing.

Gwen: Congrats. Now get out of there. The storm is almost over. The door just reappeared, but I don't think it's going to last long. It's flickering!

Carl: Katia, run for the door while you still can. Bring Ghazi. See if pulling him from the castle fixes the crystallization.

Donut: Kill him! That'll fix it! Mordecai says killing mages fixes most problems!

Warning: Your oxygen levels are low. In case you're wondering, yes, you do need that stuff.

Shit, shit. We didn't have time.

Carl: We need him to explain the winding box.

"We're not going to need anything in a few seconds, Carl."

I sent a note to Gwen.

Katia: Holy shit guys, I'm not going to leave you. Hang on. I'm going to dig.

Carl: Listen. We need you to get him out of the castle. That's how you fix it. Hurry. And do what Gwen says when you get out there.

Katia: Okay. Okay. I'll tell you when I'm out.

To our left, the wall broke, and more sand poured in. Donut jumped to my shoulder, trembling. We could still hear the music from the trap, but it was distant and pounding, buried nearby. The bouncing and pounding ball probably wasn't doing us any favors.

Well this turned out to be a real clusterfuck.

"I don't think taking the guy from the castle is going to work," Donut said, panic rising in her voice.

"No," I agreed. "I just wanted her to get out of there."

"Carl, I don't want to be buried alive."

Gwen: You mean electrify it, right?

Carl: No. Hurry.

"Donut, it's going to be okay. How many water breathing scrolls do you have?"

"They're called water breathing, not sand breathing, Carl," Donut said. "I didn't get to say goodbye to Mongo! What's going to happen to him? He's just going to sit in his pet carrier forever!"

"Goddamnit, how many scrolls?" I asked again.

"Eight."

I also had eight. That was good. That would be enough.

Katia: I'm out.

Nothing had happened. I hadn't expected it to. I suspected that I already knew how to de-crystalize the castle, and it was too late. We'd fucked it up. *I'd* fucked it up. We should've brought that electrical line in. Damnit.

Donut: Kill Ghazi. Quick!

Carl: No. Wait! That's not going to…

Katia: Uh, I already did. We had a small fight. I looted a note from him that explains the winding box. But nothing changed with the castle. I *think* he's dead. It said he was dead. His body turned to sand after I looted him. I've never seen that before.

I swallowed. Above, the ceiling splintered. The chunk of metal shifted. *Shit, shit, shit.*

Gwen: Hold onto your hats. Tran is opening the valve now. He's only doing it part way, but it'll be enough to blow your skirt up.

"Take a water scroll," I said. "Do it now. Put the rest in your hot list. Fast. If your health gets low, don't take a health potion. Take Mordecai's Special Brew."

"Carl, I changed my mind. I would rather be buried alive than…"

I pulled Donut from my shoulder and wrapped myself around her, muffling whatever she was about to say. Above, the ceiling finally splintered, and sand poured over us as a distant, roaring sound filled the chamber, reminding me of the sound of an oncoming train.

The world tumbled. It felt as if I'd been hit not by a train, but by a dozen baseball bats all at once. My health plummeted as I protected the fragile body of Donut. Complete darkness encompassed us. I spun like a ball, bouncing and hitting things both hard and soft and painfully inbetween. I closed my eyes. *Let it happen. Let it happen*. *Be calm*. I watched my health, and I clicked a potion just as it reached about 25%. My health moved up, and then I gasped with pain as I felt myself smash through what felt like a barbed-wire fence. Metal pierced my leg. A spear of glass pierced my hand and plummeted into Donut, who'd gone limp. She had not taken the invulnerability potion like I had suggested. *Goddamnit, Donut.*

I targeted her and slammed on a heal scroll as we continued to spin.

It's not that bad. He only opened the valve a little bit. It's like a water slide.

I cast *Heal* on myself. I became aware that the thing that had pierced my leg was actually a spar of metal coming from that dwarven automaton piece. I cried anew as the metal pulled away. The metal chunk spun away into the murk. The temperature plunged, and I finally realized we were underwater in the water quadrant, and we had been for a bit now. Notifications flew past, and I spun and spun.

I clutched onto Donut with all of my strength. I curled protectively around her the best I could.

My health was, again, in the red. Donut's health was also again perilously low. She'd gone unconscious. I could taste the blood streaming from her. We were no longer in the direct blast of the water current, and we were now sinking. It'd taken maybe three

seconds from the water hitting us to this point, but it'd seemed much longer. Donut's torch was dutifully following us, barely keeping pace, barely lighting up the cloudy water.

Mordecai: What is happening? Donut's health keeps bottoming out!

Carl: Not now.

I used a second heal scroll on her, though she would remain unconscious for another thirty seconds. Thankfully she *had* taken the water breathing scroll, which lasted as long as one's intelligence stat times three seconds. The scroll would be active for a total of over two and a half minutes for her. For me, it'd only last 54 seconds, and I was already getting close to needing to take another.

I examined Donut as we continued to sink. Debris from both the castle and the interior of the necropolis plunged all around us. I caught sight of multiple dead bodies of creatures, but I couldn't tell what they were in the dark. They all trailed dark blood, like airplanes smoking as they plummeted from the sky in slow motion.

Donut looked okay. Her long hair flowed all around her, almost making her look like a sea anemone. With that last healing, she'd stopped bleeding. I turned the limp cat around in my hands, looking for injuries. She'd been pierced through the stomach by the shard, but she appeared to be okay now. I didn't know if her cockroach spell had activated or not. Either way, it'd been much too close. If I hadn't protected her, she'd been dead for certain.

I became aware that the pressure of the water was getting higher. I panicked for a moment, suddenly not certain which way was up. I pumped my legs, and it didn't feel as if I was going in the correct direction, which caused me to panic even further. It was dark on the surface, so I had no frame of reference. *Calm. Calm.* I remembered the little indicator in my vision that gave my position relative to sea level. We were only 150 meters below the surface. That was far. Very far. But it was much less than I anticipated. I was thankful for Donut's torch spell and that it worked underwater, and I was especially thankful the spell still worked while she was unconscious.

I pumped my legs a few times, and we quickly rose. I started to relax. I couldn't tell how far we were from the shore, but that was okay. The quadrant wasn't that wide. Just deep.

I took a breath, and it felt like normal air. I hadn't grown gills or anything weird. The water seemed to dissolve as it entered my mouth. *Goddamn magic.*

I tried talking, and it worked. The words sounded odd to my ears, but I could hear myself. Above, I could hear the loud rush of water as it funneled out of the necropolis, across the beach, and back into the ocean. I could also hear something else, not too far away, but getting quieter. It was the trap module, still playing that song, sinking away with the rest of the debris.

I had multiple, increasingly frantic messages from Katia and Mordecai, and I quickly answered them, telling them we were okay.

The castle had washed away, much the same way a real sandcastle would under a garden hose. I'd hoped that since we were in the basement, we would've been spared getting plunged into the water quadrant, and the blast would've just erased the castle away over our heads, stopping the sand from crushing us. No such luck, but at least we were still alive. I clicked on another water breathing scroll.

Gwen: Hey, bomber guy. This is where I point out that if you'd simply let me open the valve in the first place, we could've avoided whatever the hell that was.

Carl: And this is where I tell you to shut the fuck up.

I was about to say something else when I sensed movement under me. Something large shot through the water. It crunched onto a falling body. The dull, box-like sound of munching bones was even more sinister in the darkness, like a large boot stomping through frozen snow. Whatever the thing was, it was big and long and cut through the water with ease. The dot appeared on my map, moving rapidly through the sinking corpses, zig-zagging. *Holy shit, time to bounce.* I pumped my legs again, pushing toward the surface. It'd probably been attracted to the blood. I needed to avoid bringing attention to myself, and I needed get the hell out of here as quickly and as quietly as I could.

Donut awakened in my arms.
Donut freaked the absolute fuck out.

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STAGE 4 OF 4. THE NECROPOLIS OF ANSER

One morning, back when Bea and I first moved in together, I decided to make pancakes. Bea was still asleep, and I thought it'd be a nice thing to do since she'd been doing most of the cooking.

I was still getting used to the idea of sharing a home with a woman and a cat, and there was a lot I didn't know. Even though I had known Donut since she was a kitten, I'd never actually lived with a cat before, and things like changing the litter box, not leaving the window open, and finding vomit on my pillow were all new.

So I had a bowl of flour, a cup of milk, and a single egg sitting right there on the edge of the counter. I was foraging through the refrigerator, looking for the missing syrup container when suddenly there was a huge crash behind me. Donut had come out of nowhere, knocking the flour, milk, and egg off the counter, splattering everything onto the floor. She then turned to run, touched the very edge of the hot burner on the oven, yowled, rocketed into the air, and then landed on the floor, covering herself with a little bit of everything while she did that Scooby-Doo scramble in the slippery mess, everything flying everywhere while her legs pumped several times before she actually moved.

"Goddamnit, Donut," I'd cried, chasing after the cat as she squealed, running away into the living room, trailing it all onto the floor. She jumped up into her cat tree and started growling while she furiously licked at herself.

Bea was going to lose her shit when she saw the cat, so I figured I'd mitigate the damage.

I'd mitigate it by giving the cat a bath.

After quickly cleaning up the kitchen, I went into the bathroom, and I turned the water on, filling the tub with several inches of warm, soapy water. And then I went to retrieve the cat.

I picked her up, holding her with two hands while she squirmed. I went into the bathroom, I closed the door, and while holding her gently but firmly, I placed her in the bathtub.

A few hours later while I sat in the emergency room waiting to get my hand, my arm, and my goddamned ear stitched up, I'd described, to the unimpressed nurse, the noise Donut had made the moment she'd entered the water. "Man, it was like a screeching, amplified baby combined with an outboard motor revving at a high rpm. I'm not even joking when I say it was one of the loudest, most terrifying things I've ever heard. Holy shit."

That memory came to me now in the moment Donut awakened from unconsciousness to find herself fully submerged in the water.

This scream had a lot more power behind it than it did the last time.

AHH AHH AHH RAWR AHHHHHHHHH, Donut squealed, twisting and turning and lashing out with her claws, like she was trapped in a dishwasher. I let her go after she almost caught my arm in her slash, and she started to sink like a rock, still twisting and fighting and going absolutely apeshit.

"Donut," I cried. "Donut. It's okay!"

Below, the shadow that was happily munching on the falling corpses paused. It started to lazily circle upward, vectoring itself toward our position, stopping to eat everything along the way.

It's the quadrant's janitor mob.

"Donut," I called again. "Calm the fuck down!"

Carl: Donut. Chill. You're sinking. There's a mob coming.

Donut: AHHHHHHHHHHHHH

Carl: MONGO NEEDS YOU.

Donut quit twisting, her hair fluttering around her. She quickly looked about, still in a panic. Strange lights flashed under the sunglasses that'd become a fixture on her face whenever she left the saferoom. She tried kicking her legs, but the best she could manage with her stubby Persian paws was an inefficient tread. She could not swim. She was about to start flipping her shit again. I swam down and grabbed her, pulling her into the crook of my arm. I started pumping my legs upward as she dug her claws into my chest. Her ears were pinned to the back of her head. She breathed heavily, her head on a swivel, looking about with terror.

"Carl, Mongo is in his carrier. You lied to me! We're drowning! Help! Help!"

"Calm down. We have company. You need to be quiet. Deep breath."

"How can I take a deep breath when I'm drowning, Carl?"

"The water scroll, remember? Keep an eye on the countdown. You'll need to renew it soon."

A pair of bloated corpses floated past, sinking. These were pink-skinned, naked, human-like creatures, but they were covered in wrinkles, and their heads were like that of a naked mole rat. Their eyes were white and bulbous, like onions. Their mouths hung open in death, revealing large, yellow, and rotting teeth.

Corpse. Tuco. Nude Glaber. Level 30. Killed by drowning.

The Nude Glabers were the NPCs who lived in the settlements within the necropolis. I'd never seen one, but one of the tomb raider guys had described them. All of these corpses must've been from one of those settlements after the temple filled with water. They'd been described as "undead," but I didn't realize an undead creature could drown. It was probably an inaccurate description. Most of those necropolis guys didn't know what they were doing.

Donut squirmed in my grip. Her voice sounded distant and hollow even though she was right next to me. "That's a shark down there. A shark! I can see more coming. They are everywhere. This is not acceptable. I told you I am not to be brought into the water. This is a betrayal worse than when you gave my pet biscuits to that danger dingo."

"You take a shower every five minutes," I grunted as I swam. "This is practically the same thing."

"This is quite obviously not the same thing, Carl. Get me out of here this instant."

I was furiously pumping my legs, swimming upward. The rushing noise of water streaming from the necropolis was getting louder. I didn't think we could just swim right into the stream. It'd be like stepping into a tornado. But what could we do? The monster—apparently a shark—was still lazily circling toward us. We were being sandwiched between the current and the mob. The creature

crunched on the corpse of Tuco and some other debris. When it opened its mouth, I could hear the distinctive beat of "Jump Around" blast out into the ocean. It'd eaten the goddamned alarm trap.

"Please, Carl. I'm sorry. I don't like this. Can we go? Please?"

None of my explosives with exposed fuses would work, at least not well, under water. I was pretty sure dynamite would work, but I'd have to use the inherent instability of the explosive and not the wick to set it off. I'd seen enough blast fishing videos in my time to know that you didn't want to be anywhere near any such explosion. I didn't trust in our ability to swim away in time. I'd been working on a depth charge design, but that didn't help me now.

My impact-detonated hob-lobbers would probably be effective against the creature, but there was all sorts of debris flying about down here, and again, I couldn't guarantee we'd get away in time.

The corpse of yet another creature floated past us. This was a dolphin thing, and it'd been pierced right through the head with a glass shard.

Lootable Corpse. Bubble Beluga. Level 29. Killed by getting her brain pierced by a spear of glass. It hurt a lot, too.

"Are you calm? Donut, listen to me. I'm gonna need you. Are you good?"

"No I am most certainly not good. I am really far from good, Carl."

"Listen. Hekla," I said, pointing at the corpse of the beluga. "Send them after the shark. Do it now."

This was one of Donut's favorite moves. We'd originally called it "Slime Time," but it had somehow evolved to "Hekla." Katia thought it was distasteful and a little fucked-up to call it that, and it was, but it was also pretty damn funny.

Donut, to her credit, didn't hesitate. She cast *Second Chance* on the beluga corpse and then immediately cast *Clockwork Triplicate*, creating three of them. The two copies appeared with glass spikes through their heads, which was a nice touch. Donut sent them after the monster while I swam under the rushing current. I had to slam on yet another water-breathing scroll.

Almost immediately, one of the clockwork belugas exploded underwater. I felt it mostly in my ears, like I'd just blown them out. The mob roared, lion-like as it was injured by exploding shrapnel. Before I could compose myself, the second clockwork exploded behind us.

"Carl, watch out!" Donut cried.

"Holy shit," I gasped as two more sharks rushed in out of nowhere. They swarmed right past us, skirting the bottom of the fast-moving current. They ignored us and headed straight for the injured shark. *Christ that was close*. Each was about fifteen feet long and jet black with glowing red eyes. Other than the terrifying color and eyes, they looked much like a typical tiger shark. I caught a glimpse of their description.

Concierge Shark. Level 41.

These psychos are of the bite-first, ask-questions-later school of underwater diplomacy.

Also known as the "Death's Welcoming Committee" Shark, the Concierge Shark is one of the fastest and most voracious of the ocean's predators. They'll eat anything. ANYTHING. Even those circus peanut candy things. It's really kind of gross.

They are attracted to the scent of blood, making them the most common death dealers of any water-themed dungeon.

The two newcomers barreled into the first shark, who'd been injured in the explosion. They started ripping at each other, causing a cloud of blood to bloom under us.

"There are more coming," Donut hissed.

"Let me know if any follow."

Since I couldn't swim up through the fast-moving current, I swam across and below the water stream, attempting to get to the other side. I kept pumping my legs, swimming with only one arm while Donut clutched to me, whimpering. A school of small fish rushed past, cutting through us like a hailstorm, but they came and went, not doing any harm. Donut sputtered as a fish slapped her in the face.

Above, the sense of rushing water eased. I put more distance between us and the shark fight. Donut said more were coming, all headed straight for the plume of blood.

I swam to the surface, poking my head above water. Donut popped up next to me, unnecessarily gasping for breath. Her whole body trembled. I had to keep her from sinking back in.

"Oh wow," I said, looking off at the blast of water pouring from a hole in the side of the necropolis. It was pitch black outside, but multiple lights, mostly from other crawlers, stood near the castle's remains, lighting up the area. The castle was just gone. The walls surrounding it were obliterated. All that remained were the lightning rod towers that stood on either side of the entrance, the tops of which glinted in the light like twin obelisks.

We were about a quarter of a mile off shore. I warily looked about for mobs. Far to our right, splashing rose in the night air. It was a feeding frenzy. First there had been one. Then three. Now there were dozens of sharks fighting each other.

I weighed our next move. We needed to get to that submarine. The *Akula*. We had to turn off the pump. But I knew the sub was located on the opposite side of the ring-shaped water quadrant, and we sure as hell weren't going to swim there from here. I decided to put Donut out of her misery and take her back to the shore for now.

I had a kayak in my inventory from the floating house's garage. I pulled it free, popping it out onto the surface, where it bobbed up and down like a cork. I lifted Donut and placed her within. I pulled myself into the kayak and pulled the double-sided paddle. I figured this would be faster than swimming.

My water-breathing scroll ran out, and I suddenly vomited. Dark, brown water rushed from my lungs. I hadn't even realized it was there. It felt as if I'd been kicked in the stomach while breathing fire. It reminded me of the time Mordecai gave Louis and Firas the anti-alcohol potions. A moment later, Donut also vomited, loud and long, the retches traveling across her body like a sine wave. The amount of water that came out of her seemed to be way too much. When it was finally over, she gave out a little whimper and then vomited

again, and this time a little fish fell out of her mouth and started flopping around on the top of the kayak.

I started paddling toward shore. Donut sat there glowering, completely flattened out and soaked through. She had a piece of seaweed attached to her tiara. While she'd appeared almost majestic and fairy-like underwater, up here she looked like a dead rat that'd been resurrected and then run over by a garbage truck.

"That was pretty awesome," I said once it was clear we were safe from the sharks.

"Go fuck yourself, Carl," Donut said.

"This is an outrage!" Donut cried when we were back at the home base. She'd showered and was once again dry and clean. "I was buried alive, shot out of a water cannon, drowned, and then almost eaten by a shark, and I didn't even get a boss box for that? We won the level. The slime thing died, and we get nothing? Carl, the game is cheating again."

Mongo made a chirping noise, agreeing with Donut's outrage.

"The ooze isn't dead. We'd melted it down, but then it got washed away."

We'd had to track a quarter turn around the land quadrant before we could get to a town that'd take us in. It was me, Donut, Katia, Louis, and Firas. The town was called Pandinus, and the occupants were half human, half-scorpion centaur-like creatures called pazuzu. They were all dressed in ridiculous, post-apocalyptic gear: punk-rock style leather and tassels and goggles and chains and dreadlocks, like they were all heading out to a Mad Max convention.

Louis and Firas went off to get some sleep. Louis grumbled something about not being able to drink alcohol as we left them to enter our personal space. Gwen and her team remained at the site of the castle. Even though we'd defeated the quadrant, the stairwell was now buried. It was directly under the spray from the necropolis drain, so they were going to turn it off and then dig it out. I sent a

warning to the tomb raider guys that it would fill back up with water. They hadn't moved yet, so it didn't matter.

We knew the stairwell remained because those with the pathfinder benefit could still see it sitting there. Once the team dug it out, they'd attempt to put a roof over it and maybe dig a separate tunnel to it. Or at the very least, seal it off. We'd have to turn the drain back on, especially after we turned the submarine's pump off. That was the only way to fully empty the necropolis of water.

Apparently the sand slime wasn't fully "defeated" and was still hanging around somewhere. It was probably floating around as a single grain of sand somewhere in the ocean where it wouldn't be able to properly regenerate. If that was the case, we'd never see it again. And because it wasn't dead, we'd gotten screwed out of the boss box. I wasn't too worried about it. On the first two floors, the bronze and silver boss boxes held great loot, but the boxes were now shit compared to how they'd been on the earlier floors.

The good stuff would now only be had in the city boss and above boxes.

Still, I'd received multiple achievements and other loot boxes for that last stunt. The notable ones were:

New achievement! Milquetoast!

You somehow managed to win an important boss battle without actually killing the boss. That's like paying money to a prostitute just so she'll cuddle with you.

***Reward*: You've received a silver Pacifist's Box.**

New achievement! I was in the pool!

You spent more than 60 seconds fully submerged underwater, and you didn't die! Parts of you may have experienced shrinkage, but otherwise you're okay. You're now an honorary mudskipper!

***Reward*: You've received a Bronze I'm Wet Box!**

The I'm Wet box contained an additional ten scrolls of water breathing for each of us. Donut's box, for some unfathomable reason, was silver instead of bronze, and she received an additional item: a **Belt of Buoyancy**. It was a simple belt that wrapped around her stomach that'd keep her from sinking. It only worked in the water, and she spent a good three minutes bitching about it, about how she was never going back there again.

The silver Pacifist box contained a skill potion for Donut that raised her Dodge skill by one, taking it to 10. That was a big deal because she'd been training with it for a while now, and the skill had been stuck on nine. That happened a lot with certain skills. Now that she'd hit level 10, she had a permanent **Deflection** buff, which caused both magical and physical missiles to be less accurate when they were shot at her. Mordecai said it wasn't complete protection from arrows, but it halved their accuracy. It also meant they were more likely to go into either me or Mongo if she was nearby.

In my Pacifist box, I received two potions that gave Mordecai pause.

"Don't use those," he said the moment he saw them.

"Why not?"

He didn't answer for several moments. "Because the last time I saw someone drink that potion, they accidentally killed half of their party."

Potion of Bloodlust

It's like giving yourself a PCP enema after spending the day riding the Night Train Express.

Drinking this potion gives the following effects for (Constitution) seconds.

Strength times two.

Movement speed times two.

Dexterity times .5

The *Where the Fuck Am I? Who the Fuck Are You?* Debuff

Constitution times .5

For every crawler, NPC, or mob killed by you while this potion is active, your movement speed increases by an additional 25%.

"So, it's like a berserking potion?"

"That's exactly what it is," Mordecai said. "But that debuff makes it so you don't remember where you are or why you're fighting. It's too dangerous to use."

I put the two potions away. I agreed with Mordecai. The last thing I wanted to do was take a potion that would make me lose control, even if it greatly enhanced my strength. I'd look in the cookbook and see if it had any advice that'd make the potion more useful.

Gwen: That was easier than I thought it'd be. We found the wall to the stairwell chamber. We'll finish digging it out, seal it up tight, and then we can figure out how to do this last part.

Carl: 10-4. Watch out for any remnants of the ooze.

I pulled out the two pieces of the artifact. The winding box and the watch. I placed them on the table. I was a little afraid of the winding box now that I knew there was a way to use it to open a portal to the Nothing. And that things would come out when you did.

Katia wordlessly handed me the note she'd gotten off the Mad Dune Mage when she'd been forced to fight him. She wasn't certain if he really was dead or not. She'd gotten experience, and she'd looted his body, but he'd turned to sand. I didn't know if that meant he was dead or not. Either way, the system said we'd defeated the quadrant, and that was the important part.

The note was several pages long. The first few pages were a note to Tish, the same person who'd chewed him out in that other letter we'd found. The remaining bulk of the pages were lists of words followed by a set of numbers. The final page was filled with drawings.

Tish,

I know you hate me, but please listen. Hope is not lost. They asked me to use the box to destroy this entire island and to suck it into the Nothing. Doing so is a mistake. All three pieces of the

artifact are in the area, and all three pieces would end up in that alternate dimension. It is too dangerous for the feral gods to possess, even in pieces. So instead, I have a plan. If the ghost of Psamathe ever leaves before I can implement my fix, I will be forced to destroy myself, but I hope it will never come to pass.

I have discovered something useful. This familiar of hers, the ooze, has split loyalties. I truly believe it loves me, as odd as it sounds. It knows of my affection for my now-frozen Lika, and it is jealous. I can use this. I don't yet know how.

I still conduct my research during the times when I have a body and am able to work. Here is what I've learned.

The gate of the feral gods is both a complicated and a simple device. You first dial to a time, which represents a place. Both watches are connected magically. If you dial a time on one watch, it is mirrored on the other. This time represents your destination, and how this works is a byzantine process that I do not yet understand, though I have determined multiple destination and time combinations, even without a watch of my own. I have included those notes with this letter.

Once you have dialed into a location, you place both watches in the box, and you activate the winding process. The second watch will start ticking and moving. This is the only time the two watches will be out of sync. Once the time on the second watch syncs up with the time representing your current location, the alarm will go off on the second watch, and it will stop ticking. The box is now armed. This process can take anywhere from a simple moment to a full turn of the watch, depending on the distance you wish to travel. You cannot move the box from its current location, or it will reset. You remove the two watches, and the portal appears.

The portal is one-way, and it will last about twenty minutes or until the winding box and the watches are brought through. Once that happens, the exit closes at the destination location.

However, you must beware. The portal lingers at the location where it was opened, and it is now a two-way portal into the Nothing. It remains open until a creature comes through that horrible dimension. And, believe me, they will *come through. It will*

be fast. Oftentimes, this will be a feral god. Depending on the god that escapes, or its level of power, there may be great destruction. And if certain gods or minor deities—like Psamathe—make it through, the current pantheon may be forced to react.

It is also said that those who use the portal, those with weak constitutions, mustn't linger as they pass through. Even close proximity to the open door is enough to touch their weak minds and paint them with the feral madness.

But I have also discovered that the winding box itself is a conduit to the Nothing. All one must do to open a passage is open the lid, wind the box, and send a stream of charged energy into the device, and a portal will open directly to the Nothing.

Yes, this is dangerous. I know, I know. But love makes us do the most dangerous of things. Isn't that the way of the worlds?

This is how I opened a portal to seek out Yarilo, banished god of lust. This is how I was tricked by Psamathe into marrying her familiar. My beloved Lika remains banished in her own version of hell because I was fooled. And now Psamathe is free in the necropolis, where she has supposedly usurped the ghost that is known as Quetzalcoatlus.

Here is what I am going to do to defeat her. If I am successful, I will die, but you will receive this letter along with the winding box. Then you can send another expedition to seek the remaining two artifacts. I believe they are…

The note ended there. There was a missing page.

"So," Katia said. "I was looking at the page of numbers, and they are all locations we can travel to using the gate, but it looks like they're all in the area surrounding the city of Larracos. Once we have the second watch, we just move the watch to the time representing the location, stick it in, and wait for the alarm to go off."

"Are you saying we can open a gate directly to the ninth floor?" I asked.

"That's right," Katia said. "Also, I think I can make a map of the ninth floor with these notes."

"Don't get too excited," Mordecai said. "You might be able to open a gate to the Plains of Larracos, but you won't be able to go through it. Crawlers can't hop floors. There's a gate right there in the Desperado Club in the casino, but it's closed to you. So if you get the grand idea of opening a gate, you won't be able to go through, and when it closes, you'll have to deal with something awful coming through that will surely kill everything in the entire bubble."

"Maybe," Katia said. She shuffled the papers and pointed to a note on the last page. It was multiple drawings of the two watches and the winding box along with two gates, depicting various scenarios. The first depicted the three items on one side of the gate, and the second depicted just the winding box on the far side. It went on from there with each possible combination, indicating what would happen. All but one of the scenarios ended with a monster emerging from the gate on the opening side. That last illustration was circled, and it depicted one watch on each side of the gate and the winding box *inside* the portal. "It looks like if we do this last way, we'll lose the box, but no monsters will get out."

Mordecai grunted. "It'd be a waste. You ain't using this thing to hop floors no matter what."

I barely heard him. I was focused on the second-to-last scenario. *Holy shit. Holy fucking shit.*

I shook my head, and I decided to focus on the problem at hand. "Do you think if we summon one of those feral god things it'll be able to travel outside the bubble? Or break the bubble wall?"

"I don't know," Mordecai said. "Some of them are bigger than the bubble. Summoning them usually resizes them, but this isn't a true summoning. It's them, in their true form, without a time limit. It's them escaping imprisonment. You're all getting ahead of yourselves. You don't even have the last watch yet. And if you do get that watch, my advice will be to stick it in your inventory and not do anything with it until you're strong enough to deal with whatever comes out, which will be never. Now if you need me, I'll be in the crafting room. I think I'm onto something with that yam you received earlier."

I glanced at the level timer as Mordecai walked away. We had just over four and a half days left. “Is there a Desperado Club in this town?”

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Before Katia could answer me, I was interrupted by a message.

Gwen: We've dug out the stairwell. Something odd happened when we entered. The whole room was made of glass, but the moment I sent Tran in, it all flashed, and everything turned to...

A loud error message blocked out the rest of her note.

Warning: An item in your catalog is no longer eligible to be held in inventory. It will be forcibly removed in five seconds.

"What the hell?" I said. I immediately thought of the last two times this had happened, both times to Katia. The first was when all the blood in her inventory had exploded out of her because of the container patch. The second time I hadn't seen. It was when she'd placed the whole house in her inventory, and Borant had changed the rules. It'd destroyed a tavern when the house appeared and effectively got her banned from the town, which was why we'd had to trek an extra mile to get to this settlement.

Both of those had happened immediately after the recap episode, which was when Borant applied their updates and patches. We still had a few hours until the episode, so I had no idea what was going on. I gritted my teeth and waited for it to happen.

The crystallized head of Ghazi's sex doll popped out of my inventory and splatted onto the floor.

Only it wasn't crystallized anymore. It was still the decapitated sex doll head of a half-naiad named Lika. The chin had chipped badly when Mongo had knocked over the statue, and the frozen, life-like head of the doll had a big chunk taken out of its latex chin.

"Uh, Carl," Katia said. "You dropped a head on the floor."

I have seen a few sex dolls in my time, though I wouldn't consider myself an expert. I knew, at least on earth, they ranged in quality from the cheap, inflatable kind all the way to the AI-controlled RealDolls who could talk and move and looked at least moderately realistic.

This was about halfway between those two extremes. It was a latex-like dummy head that was clearly once attached to a sex doll and not just a run-of-the-mill mannequin. The head was stuck with an open mouth and wide eyes. It was slathered with hooker-tier makeup. Two sharp-looking fangs hanged down from its mouth, vampire like. The head had a full-head of bone-white, silky-looking hair. Its full lips were painted bright red. A half set of gills cleaved either side of its neck, cut short right at the point of decapitation, giving the cut an extra jagged appearance. The bottom of the neck hole was just solid latex.

It had a sparkly barrette in its hair that read, "Wet for you."

"My goodness is that thing ghastly," Donut said, sniffing at the object. She made a face. Mongo shrieked. "Carl, do people really use these things?"

"Yeah, they do," I said. "But they're usually attached to bodies. People get lonely. Don't judge Ghazi too harshly."

"Oh, I'm judging him. Miss Beatrice had a drawer full of sex toys, but she never sailed off to the other side of the world because her vibrator told her to." She cocked her head. "Actually, you know what? That *is* kind of what she did, now isn't it? Only her sex toy was that Brad fellow."

"Why isn't this eligible to be in my inventory anymore?" I asked, trying hard to ignore Donut's jab. I picked the head up, grabbing it by a handful of hair. All the description said was **Decapitated Lika Sex Doll Head**. I touched one of the teeth, cringing at the idea of fangs in the mouth of a goddamned sex doll, but the sharp tooth

bent easily under the press of my finger. It was made of a soft, flexible latex. The jaw was hinged, so I could open and close it.

"Mmmm hmmmm fck offa me."

The voice came from the head.

"Jesus fuck," I exclaimed, dropping it on the floor. It bounced once, and it cried out in surprise.

Donut yowled and scampered back. Mongo shrieked and was about to attack, but I yelled for him to stop. The moment the thing started talking, a white dot appeared on my map.

The head continued to shriek with outrage, but I couldn't understand a word it was saying.

"So, I guess this thing is still possessed," I said, poking at it with my foot. I wasn't too worried about it attacking me or casting a spell since we were in a saferoom. "Gwen's team broke the crystallization spell when they entered the stairwell chamber. So everything that was made of glass is now back to normal."

Katia and I stood over the head, looking down at it. It continued to scream and holler. "Carl, examine its new properties. It's been updated."

Lika Love Doll Head.

This item is possessed with the Withering Spirit of Psamathe.

Psamathe, or Samantha as her friends used to call her, is a minor deity who was banished to the Nothing by her father after he found out she was kicking around with some ancient king guy. She's usually accompanied by her trusty sidekick, a sand ooze familiar who also happens to be the cursed child of her union with the king. You know, typical god stuff.

And if you think that's peculiar, you ain't seen nothing yet. Those guys hanging out in the halls of the Celestial Ascendency on the 12th floor get themselves involved in some serious whackadoodle business, let me tell you. You ever see a guy give birth to a fortune-telling, snake-headed cow out of his thigh? Or a woman whose menstrual blood is

sentient? That's the sort of shit that's waiting for you down there.

Psamathe is as intelligent as she is quick-tempered. Unfortunately for her, her first escape attempt from the Nothing resulted in a split, and half of her essence was forced to take refuge in the closest unoccupied naiad vessel she could find, which happened to be a sex doll based on the fictional Lika, who, oddly enough, was actually based loosely on an inaccurate history of Psamathe. She's had to live in the doll for many years, unable to move until the rest of her spirit could be reunited.

The story gets kind of weird from there.

"All righty, then," I said.

Carl: Hey, Mordecai. What's a withering spirit?

Mordecai: Why?

Carl: We have a visitor.

Mordecai burst out of the crafting room and stopped dead, looking at the creature on the floor, his eyes wide. "By his left tit, where did that come from?"

"Carl had her in his inventory!" Donut exclaimed.

Mordecai moved closer to examine it. He bent over, moving his beak inches from the head. He tapped at her. "Sometimes the soul of a creature can get… split… into two halves. When a body is split, the two halves will always try to reunite, like magnets coming together. They have to do it in a proper vessel. But if something goes wrong during the reunification, what you end up with is a withering spirit. They're not alive. Not dead. In fact, it's kind of hard for them to die now, but they're mostly harmless. The vessel has to be similar to their original body, and if it's not, this happens. They haunt the object, but they have very little power. It's a bit messed up. They use withering spirits as quest-giving NPCs a lot."

"It sounds similar to Remex the skyfowl from the end of the third floor," I said.

"Yes. Remex was a soul leech capacitor. That is a much more dangerous type of withering spirit, one purposely built by a powerful mage or necromancer designed to hold power and suck souls away

from people. These are a more stable version of the same thing. It's terrible for *her*, but she's in no position to harm us directly. Several seasons back, they had an entire level where every weapon found on the floor was possessed by a withering spirit. She'll need an exorcism to get free now. Plus she's a minor deity, which complicates everything."

"Does that mean she's like a demigod? Half human or whatever?"

The head spit in anger.

Mordecai shrugged. "It could be, but probably not. She's clearly not 100% ascendency material, or else she'd never have been cast away to the Nothing. Think of the pantheon like a rich guy's country club. She might have a famous dad, but her mother was probably from the wrong side of the tracks, so to speak. We don't want to get involved in her story. We avoid gods like we avoid dealing with factions outside the dungeon. We have enough of this bullshit to deal with already."

"I know what happened," Katia said, snapping her finger. "It said that when she escaped the first time, she ended up in the body of the love doll, right? It said it was the closest thing she could find to her real form. That means she was the one who talked Ghazi into coming here in the first place. She'd been lying to him the whole time about who she really was. She wanted him to open the Nothing. She told him it was to find that god of lust, but it was a trick. The moment the Nothing opened up, her second half flowed out along with the sand ooze. But something went wrong. Ghazi screwed something up during the process, and the love doll, the vessel holding her first half, got turned to glass. She had to use the ooze to keep him here until something came along and de-crystallized everything. Everyone thought she went into the body of Quetzalcoatlus but they had it wrong because they didn't know she'd been split in two, and they didn't know Ghazi had her other half on him the whole time."

"And she would've gotten away with it if a certain little dinosaur hadn't knocked her over and shattered her into a thousand pieces," I said.

"Good boy, Mongo!" Donut said.

It'd been a trap, I realized. If we had managed to keep the castle intact and cancel out the glass spell, the sex doll would've woken up, but she'd have been a full-powered minor deity.

I wasn't sure if we'd gotten lucky or not. Mongo had barely touched the thing when it'd fallen over and broken. I had an ominous feeling we were still on rails here, heading toward a manufactured confrontation.

And that was always a bad thing.

The head continued to muffle-scream at us from the floor.

Donut batted at the head, and it rolled. "Carl, I just realized something! This is just like the plot of those *Child's Play* movies with that Chucky doll," Donut said. "This Psamathe lady is Chucky, but she's only a head, and she can't move."

"I was thinking it's more like the horcruxes from Harry Potter," Katia said. "But in this case, her soul was only broken into two pieces."

"No," Donut said. "Definitely Chucky. That lady who wrote that wizard movie stole all of her ideas from those ridiculous 80's horror movies Carl always watched. I only saw one of those wizard movies, and it had a dog in it. Disgusting."

"They were books before they were…" Katia stopped. She made the wise decision not to pursue it.

"It doesn't matter. She's probably batshit crazy by now," I said. I went down to my knee and poked at her. She growled. "There's only so many ways the game can tell us that spending time in the Nothing makes you insane."

Donut nodded. "Yes, I supposed you're right. Plus part of her was frozen in that doll all this time. That probably wasn't good for her mental health, either. I've watched you abuse yourself more than once, and I know it wasn't good for mine. I can't imagine what it would've done to me if I'd been forced to actually participate." She turned to Katia and lowered her voice. "He wiped his hand on me once. You know, afterward."

"That is absolutely not true!" I exclaimed.

"What are we going to do?" Katia asked, changing the subject. "We can't even understand what she's saying. Do you think a real

god is going to come down and try to attack her? That's why those people from that college were so alarmed in the first place."

"I don't know," I said. "Mordecai?"

He shook his head. "You guys are blazing new trails with this one. I don't know what in the hell is going to happen. I've never seen so many cross-floor storylines before. The fact they're using Larracos and the Ascendency as a plot point on a fifth floor quest is just astounding to me. Based on everything I've seen, I suspect the moment she leaves the safe room, her presence *might* summon an angry god. But maybe not. After all, she's not fully resurrected."

"Let's let Mongo eat her!" Donut said. "Or we can burn her away. Or we can just toss the head back into the Nothing. We don't have to do it here. They have a Nothing gate at the casino, too. Remember?"

"We'd have to get her out the saferoom first before it'll let us do anything to her," I said. It was starting to dawn on me that her existence was going to be a bigger headache than I first thought. "We can't stick her in a pet carrier. At least I don't think it'll let us."

"Probably not," Mordecai agreed.

"We can just dump her in the tavern," Katia said.

I thought for a moment. "That's not a bad idea, but that scorpion guy will probably punt her out the door, which might cause issues."

"Then what? Keep her in the safe room?" Katia asked.

"Hang on," I said. I picked the head back up by her hair. The jaw on the thing was posable. I pushed it closed all the way. She continued to wail, but now it was completely muffled. I grasped the chin and pulled down, moving in increments until I could understand what she was trying to say.

"…Going to kill your mother. I'm going to find where she lives and set her on fire and then kill her and then get a necromancer to bring her back from the dead and then kill her over and over again and make you watch while I…" She trailed off once she realized I'd moved her mouth to just the right position where she made coherent words, like I'd tuned into the proper radio station.

"Hello," I said. "My name is Carl. Can I call you Samantha? I'm going to call you Samantha. Your real name is a little too weird for

me."

"Where's the rest of my body?" she demanded. She could move her lips. Sort of. She sounded as if she was talking through clenched teeth. "Do you know how long I worked to reunite myself? Do you know what I had to do?"

"Oh, honey," Donut said. "We were just talking about it. It must've been awful."

I adjusted her chin slightly. "Yeah, so your body got shattered into dozens of pieces and then swept out into the ocean. I would guess at least half of you is currently being digested by a very large shark."

I couldn't read any emotion on the head. The eyes were unblinking, and it kind of freaked me out. "My child. I can feel her. She's alive, but she's unable to reform. I only had moments, and I made her marry that idiot. He'd used too much power and flash-froze everything, including the vessel. I only had a few minutes. That's the last I can remember. My child. My child. Oh, my sweet child."

She was talking about the sand ooze, I realized.

"She's probably in the ocean. She'll eventually end up back on shore. Her husband might be a little dead, though."

"I'm going to kill your mother."

"Uh," I said. "Look. What do you want us to do with you? I can't take you with me. Do you want us to toss you back into the Nothing?"

"No. Please. No. Not that. I want you to go find my pieces and put them back together. I worked so long to escape. I need a physical form."

"That's not going to happen," I said.

"So you tricked that guy into coming here?" Donut asked. "I must say, I am impressed. Men are so easily tricked, but still. Bravo. I'm always tricking Carl here into doing things for me, but you talked him into opening a different dimension for you. I do feel bad for Tish, however. She really seemed to like him."

"Tish? Tish almost ruined everything. Take me to her. I'm… I'm…"

"Going to kill her mother?" I asked.

Samantha started bawling.

"All right," I said, standing up and dropping the head back on the floor. "This isn't going to work. I'm either going to toss you out the door or risk letting Mongo eat you or something. What's your pleasure?"

She stopped crying just as quickly as she started. "Take me with you," she said. "We can go on adventures together. There's this naiad who lives in the Hunting Grounds who might be able to help me."

And there it was. This was how they were going to write this goddamned talking sex doll head into our story.

"I already have a talking cat, a dinosaur, a Katia, and a grumpy eagle guy in my party. The last doll we had didn't work out. I mean no offense, but the inn is full. Especially for a creature who is probably going to get us murdered by an angry god at any moment."

"I'm going to kill your mother."

Mordecai: I know I'm going to regret this, but I have an idea. I think we should keep her. We can keep her in the saferoom, so she can't hurt us. If she doesn't leave, she won't summon a god. This is a minor deity, so she may have some valuable knowledge. She's probably the one who taught Ghazi how to cast all of those spells. If I can get some potion knowledge out of her, it would be worth it.

Carl: She's a talking sex doll head, and she keeps threatening to kill my dead mother. Besides, how can we keep her? Won't she disappear when we go down a level?

Mordecai: Like I mentioned before, we can hire a few NPCs. It only lets you do it to certain kinds, but I can guarantee it'll work on her. Donut can hire her using the personal space menu. You have a slot for a trainer and a cook right now. Hire her as a trainer, and she'll live in a corner of the training room. On the next floor, we can get a new module that'll allow us to hire mercenaries and additional staff. We can stick her in one of those slots.

Donut: I LIKE HER. AND I DIDN'T KNOW WE CAN HIRE MERCENARIES! CAN I HIRE SLEDGIE?

Katia: I think it's a terrible idea, but if keeping her in the room keeps us safe, then we can give it a go for a little while. The game obviously wants us to keep her.

Carl: Yeah, that's what I'm worried about.

I picked up the head, pushed the mouth all the way closed, and I strode to the training room. I rolled her inside and closed the door.

"We'll deal with her later. We have four and a half days left. I want to get that fourth castle taken care of as soon as possible because as soon as that's done, we're going to start rescuing as many people as we can."

"What I'm saying is you take two sometimes three showers a day. That's water. I don't understand how that's any different than going into the ocean."

"It's not going to happen again, Carl. No. Take Katia. Or Louis. Or Gwen. Or Samantha the love doll for all I care. It is not happening, and there is not a thing in this world you can say that will get me to change my mind."

I reached up and scratched her. Her entire body was tense. "It's okay. I'm just teasing you. You won't have to go into the water this time. I will need you to float over it in that house, though. You'll be in charge of the depth charges."

She sniffed. "I do like the death charges."

We'd taken a nap, spent some time in the craft room, and reset all of our buffs. Zev had messaged us earlier and reminded us that our normal appearance on Odette's show was canceled. Zev still spoke to us in her robotic, Stepford Wife voice, but Donut had greeted her cheerfully and no longer seemed concerned about her condition. There was more going on there, but I couldn't ask her about it.

I'd gone into the training room to work on my Powerful Strike. It was currently at 14 with my gear, but only eight unenhanced. We needed to find a guildhall for it. It was one of those stubborn skills

that didn't like to move up no matter how much I trained. We really needed to find a place to just grind and kill mobs without gods or quests or distractions.

Mordecai said the sixth floor would have plenty of that, but I already knew if we made it down there, we were going to be very, very busy.

I'd taken the Psamathe—Samantha—head and placed her in the corner. She started squealing at me while I trained, so I turned her around and threatened to stick her in the bathroom or seal her in a bucket if she didn't shut up. She stopped after that, though I occasionally heard a few random growls from her.

Afterward, it was time to start planning our next move in earnest. The first step was we needed to get to the submarine, get inside, and figure out the pump system. Gwen was going to meet us with the two other survivors from that quadrant in an hour. In the meantime, they turned the drain back on. I sent a message to the tomb raiders and told them they really needed to start carving a path down to the water line.

If those assholes refused, and I feared they would, we'd have to spend a day or two grinding traps, and nobody wanted that.

Outside, we were hours from the start of the equinox where the sandstorms would last twice as long, and the days would be mostly dark.

"You know what," I said to Donut. "When was the last time you checked your social media board? You know you can do that now again since Zev has gotten her job back."

Donut lit up. "Carl, you are a genius! Mongo, come on, let's see if Fleek-Otter12 got people to sign up for the unofficial fanclub!"

Katia watched her run off. "So she really can't swim?"

"She sank like a rock."

Katia laughed. She was, on my direction, leaning over a piece of paper and drawing out a map of the ninth floor. Mordecai wandered into the room, muttering something.

"Hey, Mordecai. Come here a second," I said.

He seemed distracted. "I think I need one more ingredient, but I don't know what it is," he grumbled. He was talking to himself. He

did that a lot while he worked at his table. “What do you need?”

I pulled the map from Katia’s hands and flipped it over. The map looked like a flower with the large city in the center. I already knew some of what I was about to ask, but I didn’t know everything, including one crucial piece of information.

“Is this an accurate depiction of the ninth floor?”

“Guys,” he said. “Do not worry yourselves about something that is very far away.”

“I know,” I said. “But I’m curious. Especially since the sixth floor is coming up. They’re all part of that weird volcano storyline, and I just want to be prepared.”

“You’re not going to get to the sixth floor if you spend all this time worrying about what’s not right in front of you.”

“Indulge me, please,” I said.

He sighed and hopped up onto the table. He picked up a pen with his talon and drew lines on the map, creating nine petals for the flower. “This is pretty close. Larracos is in the middle, and the nine faction areas surround the center. You have the diameter of the city a little too big, I think,” he said. He drew a smaller circle. “There’s an NPC shanty town, but it’s not part of the city. This is Larracos here.”

“That’s way smaller than I thought,” Katia said.

“The city is huge, but it has a narrow diameter. It’s shaped like an inverted cone. It’s dug deep into the ground. Built by dwarves. Different levels have different things. The castle is at the bottom.” He continued to make small corrections, moving back to the flower petals. “This whole area is mostly rolling hills and pre-dug trenches. There’s a forest that surrounds the whole thing. The deeper you get into the forest, the more difficult the monsters are, but they’re usually hunted to extinction by the time you get there.”

“So how does it work?” I asked.

“Back when the third floor opened up, each of the nine factions arrived at their designated area. Each spot is randomly picked with one exception. The previous winner is allowed to choose where they start. From there, they start building their army and their defenses and their fortifications. Once the sixth floor opens, they have access to the market, and they can start buying armor and magical supplies

from the crawlers. They can only bring one large chest of supplies, so it's not enough to outfit their army. Everything else has to be purchased or looted. They aren't allowed to fight each other until the crawlers arrive. But before that happens, they make the officers fight and grind in the forests, leveling themselves up. Plus they all bring several cheat potions to buff themselves."

"Where do the armies come from?"

"They all start with fifteen thousand troops, and there's a pool of mercenaries and specialists they can hire. The additional mercenaries are all collected via games and gambling and trades up until when the ninth floor opens." He tapped the small circled he'd made, indicating the city. "The mercenary market is near the castle. Deep in the city. Same with the markets."

"But they can't really die?" Katia asked.

"The tourists? No. Not on that floor. It's like a game for them. The system holds some of their health in reserve and teleports them away before they can die. They feel real pain, though. The troops are mostly NPCs, but the richer of the factions can pay for their own people to fill the ranks. They are equally protected. The real people can respawn too, up until the time you guys arrive. The NPC troops don't respawn. Dead is dead for those poor bastards."

I felt my heart quicken. "How many of the fifteen thousand are outside people usually?"

He shrugged. "A rich faction will bring maybe two hundred. It's not very many because it's expensive. A poor faction, like the Blood Sultanate will only bring about twenty. It's a little like the dance floor for the Desperado Club. For every person they bring in, one of the NPCs is removed, so there's no major tactical advantage to bring too many people in unless they're well-trained already. And these guys usually aren't."

"So they have to build all of their fortifications from the ground up?"

"That's right," Mordecai said. He pointed to one of the petals at the top of the flower. "This petal comes with a pre-built, fortified castle. The King's Point. It's a more narrow area, but with steeper

hills. Most previous winners choose this so they don't have to waste time and resources building, and it's naturally defensible."

I nodded. "Okay. So with the sixth floor, how does that work in conjunction with the ninth?"

"The Hunting Grounds are a different sort of thing. The factions can, and sometimes do, send people to the sixth floor to collect gear. But it's dangerous because they are not protected. It's the only place in the game where they can really die. And like I said before, they *do* die. Most of these guys are rich assholes who treat the whole thing like a weekend excursion playing paintball. A lot of bets are made regarding the outcome of the faction wars, but most of the ones who are here are so rich they don't care. If there's an upset, a lot of credits can change hands. Plus there is a cash prize to the winner. It's more about the bragging rights than the cash, though."

"But," I said, "The people who do decide to hunt on the sixth floor, they can bring gear back to the factions?"

"Yes," Mordecai said. "That's pretty much the point for some of them. Someone on the ninth right now can go down to the sixth. But more often, the hunters are people who aren't a part of any faction. They come to win gear. Things like that ring you still need to ditch. Then they sell it to the factions."

"Okay," I said, thinking hard. "One last question. When can someone decide to participate in all of this? Say I'm a random guy floating around in a spaceship, and I decide tomorrow I want to get in on the action. Can I?"

"Yeah, if you have the credits and can get here in time. Hunters can sign up until the opening of the sixth floor. It's not too late for the ninth floor guys, or any of the tourists and party-goers on the 18th for that matter, to wander down to the sixth if they dare. But most of the hunters are already there. It would be dumb to wait until the last minute."

"Why is that?"

"Because all hunters start out as level thirty. They can start arriving when you hit the third. There are appropriate mob areas for them to train, so they can be pretty strong by the time you arrive. Especially since the lethality doesn't get turned on until you get

there. The hunters tend to be around fifty, though with the shortened timers, it might not be that high. In fact, I'm willing to bet my tailfeathers they won't be that high."

"Thanks, Mordecai," I said.

"Carl," Katia said as Mordecai returned to his work. "Why do I get the feeling you're about to do something really stupid?"

I grinned. "Let's get the bubble popped first. Then we'll worry about how stupid or not I am."

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I opened the pocket watch and set off the alarm in hopes that Henrik would respond. I had my ink quill ready to write him a note, but he didn't answer. He hadn't replied since that first time. I relayed this to Juice Box via Langley. He said she was concerned about her brother, so much so that she was about to go in there herself. I told him to try and talk her out of it.

Meanwhile, the tomb raider guys had finally started moving toward the water line, which was about halfway down the necropolis. The water had done a fine job of killing almost every non-ghost mob in the quadrant, but it'd only triggered about half of the traps. Bobby, the trap-finding spy, was on the verge of a literal breakdown and kept stopping to compose himself.

Chris and Maggie My remained in their tomb. I still didn't know what we were going to do about them. Mordecai was having little luck finding the supplies he needed to kill the parasite. I had Langley's crew physically drag the decapitated top floor of the house containing the stairwell to just outside of Hump Town. That way, Donut could open up the chamber, and Katia could use her remaining rock-monster-paralyzing bolts to knock them out. We could then easily toss the paralyzed creature through the portal if we had to when the time came.

I did not want to do that. Chris clearly didn't want us to do that. Since we probably wouldn't teleport to the same place, it would just unleash Maggie onto the sixth floor, and all of this bullshit would

start over again. Imani was insistent we do everything to save him. It felt like the wrong move, but what could we do?

None of this would matter if we didn't take the final castle. The Necropolis of Anser.

The first step: draining the rest of the water. In order to do that, we had to turn off the pump inside of that submarine.

The town of Pandinus was smaller than Hump Town, but it still featured several inns and taverns. There was no Desperado Club here, but there was a Club Vanquisher. Of all of us, the only one who could get in was Gwen. She said there was a big fight in there recently, which was unusual for the club. Apparently Miriam Dom had her membership revoked once she'd turned into a vampire, which caused Prepotente to lose his absolute shit. He unleashed their third companion—that scary-ass hellspawn familiar goat—into the main lounge, and it had devoured a bunch of clerics before they fled. There was now a "Holy Crusade Bounty" on the trio, whatever that meant. But in the meantime, the club was closed so it could be cleansed.

We met up at a tavern called "The Death Stalker" that was nothing more than a few tables and a bar. And, inexplicably, a gelato cart. The scorpion guy behind the counter had about twenty flavors of the stuff, and you could get it in a waffle cone or in a bowl. The moment I saw the cones, I was reminded of another cone of ice cream I'd eaten earlier in the dungeon, one made of worms, and I suddenly felt ill. Both Katia and Gwen got themselves cones. Donut happily bought a bowl of raspberry while we all sat down. She'd talked the pazuzu down from two gold to one for the bowl.

It was me, Donut, Katia, Gwen, Tran the human swashbuckler guy, and two newcomers, both crawlers from the Ukraine.

I examined the two strangers. One was a human named Britney Proskurina, and she was a level-27 **Pit Fighter**. The dark-haired woman was outfitted in a fur bikini and carried a spike-covered stick over her shoulder. She was really leaning into the barbarian theme that the dungeon had chosen for her.

The other crawler was a level-28, spotted gecko-like creature called a **Kuhli**, which I thought was weird because I knew that was

a type of fish, not lizard. His name was Vadim Zbar, and his class was something called a **Gut Rearranger**, which was apparently a healer/rogue combo. He was covered head to toe in little sheaths filled with daggers of all types.

These were the two other survivors of the water quadrant. It turned out Vadim was a cosmetic surgeon in the real world, and Britney had been at his office for a consultation when it all went down, and they were the last two survivors of their original party. It was just by sheer luck that they'd stepped outside to take some "before" photos for her surgery when the collapse happened.

"I'm not going back down there," Britney said the moment we sat down at the table. "I'll tell you what you need to know, but I'd rather die than go back in that water."

"Oh, I just love your furs," Donut said, after coming up for air between bites of her raspberry gelato. "And I feel you. I'm not going back in there, either."

She just looked at Donut.

"What about you?" I asked Vadim, the gecko man.

"I'll go," he said.

"No, you will not," Britney said. "You will die. Everybody who goes down there dies. We were lucky to get out the first time."

"I'll go," he repeated. "I think I know where the pump controls are."

I nodded, pointing to Katia and Tran the swashbuckler. "The four of us are going into the water, we are getting to the submarine, and we're going to turn off the pump. Once it's off, we're going to get the hell out of there. I hope to be in and out in an hour, tops."

Tran turned to Vadim. "Do you own a red shirt? I feel as if I should put one on."

"What does that mean?" Vadim asked.

The gnomish Drop Bear, the *Nightmare II*, remained in the large garage of the house. The garage was the only part of the uprooted,

flying home that still had a roof over it. Louis and Firas did an admirable job of lashing the small biplane down. I inspected it as the entire garage and the rest of the house rose into the air, the ground swaying under us.

Donut was in a foul mood. Apparently the AI had showed her a message from the intergalactic internet that had pissed her off, and she'd been grumbling about it for an hour straight.

"'No redeeming qualities whatsoever,'" Donut muttered. "He said that, Carl. Can you believe it? He also said I ruined the viewing experience and almost made him stop watching the whole show! Stupid Shuruga36. What kind of name is that anyway? Shuruga. It sounds like the noise one makes as he's getting whooped by a group of angry toddlers."

I peered into the rear-facing backseat of the airplane. The tail gun was still loaded with a semi-circle-shaped magazine, but I couldn't tell how many rounds were left. "You spend too much time reading that stuff. Don't pay attention to it. It's just people talking. It doesn't mean anything."

She ignored me. "Plus, he insulted Mongo. He said, and I quote, 'Donut and her stupid dino-chicken irritate me to no end.' Mongo is just a child. If he could read, he'd be appalled. I can take criticism, but picking on a child? That's just uncalled for. I bet he sucks his thumb and thinks of his grandmother when he touches himself."

"You can take criticism?" I asked.

"I'm serious, Carl."

Katia entered the garage.

"I still can't believe you guys flew that thing," she said.

"We didn't really fly it. We just kinda went up into the air using it as a balloon."

"Well, the chum bombs are ready."

"Okay. Go ahead and start dropping them. Donut has the detonator in her inventory."

The chum bombs were nothing more than triple-ply garbage bags filled with various dead bodies along with fused, $1/8^{th}$-strength hob-lobbers, each with a piece of hobgoblin pus attached to them.

They were all timed to the same detonator, so when Donut hit the button, they'd all blow at the same time, sending a mighty plume of gore out into the ocean.

We were dropping them near the edge of the current from the draining necropolis. The bags would probably start leaking before we got into position, but that was okay. All I really wanted was a distraction for the first layer of underwater security, the concierge sharks. We needed them as far away from our position as possible.

We had not dived deep enough to meet any of the other denizens of the ocean. Vadim spoke of several, including jellyfish and squids and hammerhead sharks. The man was very matter-of-fact and emotionless, unlike his companion, Britney, who seemed to be on the edge of hysterics the whole time.

"Did Langley tell you about that Vadim guy?" Katia asked as I finished inspecting the airplane.

I paused. "No. What about him? How do they know each other?" They'd never even met as far as I was aware.

"I guess Doctor Vadim is, or was, pretty famous in the Ukraine. He had television commercials and billboards and stuff everywhere, advertising his cosmetic surgery clinics. He was always getting sued for botched surgeries. Langley says he has like 50 children. He's known for impregnating many of his clients."

"Oh my," Donut said. "I just love gossip like that when it's extra delicious. I wonder why he turned himself into a lizard, then? I once knew a red Persian like that. Someone who pollinated his seed everywhere. His name was Santana's Famous Solo. He once got out of his cage at a CFA event and impregnated a Sphynx. Can you imagine? It's the equivalent of royalty impregnating an uncooked chicken. It was quite the scandal. Do you think Vadim has knocked-up Britney? She looks like the type who'd get knocked up by a plastic surgeon."

"How does Langley know about some Ukrainian guy?" I asked.

"That's where he's from," Katia said.

"I thought he was Finnish."

Donut made an exasperated noise. "He *is* from Finland. Really, Carl. Sometimes I feel you don't pay proper attention. Langley is

originally from the Ukraine, but he immigrated to Finland not that long ago. Almost all of those guys in his group are from other countries."

I didn't actually care where anybody was from as long as they were from Earth, though the story about Vadim did worry me somewhat. If it was true, and who knew with this sort of thing, then it made him sound like a weasel. Not the sort of person you wanted to go with into dangerous situations. Especially when you had a large bounty on your head.

"Britney is not pregnant," Katia said. "If she was when she went in, she'd probably be showing by now. Women can't get pregnant in the dungeon. Our periods stop, and we get a notification informing us we are no longer able to conceive until after we fulfill our crawl."

"Wait, really?" I asked. "I never received anything like that." I realized how stupid that sounded the moment I said it out loud. I, did, however remember an oddity from the cookbook. Rickard, the guy who'd written the most recent version of the book, didn't add too much content, but he did mention that he'd entered the dungeon with his pregnant wife, but the moment he went through the gate, she'd disappeared, and he never saw her again. I thought it was just one of those things. I knew dudes still had the ability to knock creatures up. The whole reason Brandon had died was because another guy in their party, one of the formerly-ancient residents, had banged a succubus in an alleyway on the third floor, and she'd given birth to hundreds of baby monsters with the guy's face.

"Has anybody seen any pregnant women in the dungeon?" I asked.

Katia shrugged. "I don't think so. Except Fire Brandy on the last floor."

"And Eunice the dwarf on the third floor!" Donut added.

"Those were both NPCs. I wonder if they do something special with pregnant crawlers," I said.

"Probably something awful," Katia said. "But I can't imagine someone who was pregnant would come in here voluntarily."

Firas popped his head into the garage. “We’re in position to drop your chum bombs,” he said. “The barrel launchers for the depth charges are all installed, too. They’re ready for you to load them. We have five hours before it gets dark and six before the first of the equinox sand storms hits, so let’s get a move on.”

“All right,” I said. “Let’s get to work.”

After we dropped the chum bombs, we quickly flew around the side of the necropolis and directly over the position of the sub. Louis and Firas had some system where they could adjust the elevation of the house, and it’d hit an air current that would blow the balloon in the direction they wanted it to go. They were very good at it, and Louis said they’d received a half dozen achievements for flying the magical balloon.

“Hit it,” I said to Donut as we sank toward sea level.

Donut did a little hop and then hit the hobgoblin pus detonator. We were too far away to hear the sound of the bags exploding, but I knew there would now be blood and guts and floor-four wraith body parts spreading all over.

“Carl, Carl, I went up a level! I’m now 38!”

“I guess some of those sharks got into the bombs before we could blow them,” I said. I was hoping that would happen. With those missing five days, both Donut and I had lost a lot of grinding time. We hadn’t done nearly as much fighting and leveling as we should have by now, and we needed everything we could get.

“Does anybody see anything down there?” I asked as we hovered about fifteen feet off the calm surface of the water. The water level had risen somewhat once we’d turned the drain on, but it was still lower than when the floor opened. That’d change, hopefully, once we finished here.

“I can see the sub on the map,” Katia said. Tran, who also had the Pathfinder skill, nodded in agreement.

“Donut?” I asked.

"I don't see any monsters. I see some small fish here and there, but they're all white on the map."

"Okay. Remember. We don't roll the depth charges into the water unless I say we do. They are a last resort."

Donut jumped from my shoulder. "Aye, aye, Captain Carl." She paused, looking between me and Katia. "You two be safe. It's horrible down there."

"This is really damn weird," Tran said as we watched Katia form into the diving bell.

"Fascinating," Vadim agreed, walking in a circle around her.

I continued to marvel at Katia's growth. She was forming this on the fly without having made it before. We were at the corner of the house, standing on the crumbling ground of the garden. Katia hung off the side, with a single arm anchored to the magical brace that held the balloon high above. The whole house and balloon dipped at the corner as she continued to add weight.

I remembered when she first started playing with her shapeshifting abilities, it physically hurt her to make even a small change. Now she could contour herself into just about anything at a moment's notice. She still wasn't perfect with faces unless she sat in front of her makeup table, but with this sort of inanimate stuff, she was an expert.

The *Akula* was 500 meters under the surface. Although that didn't sound like much, it was an alarming depth. Vadim said the massive submarine had a chamber on the roof to enter and leave, but one of their mini-subs had been docked to it before they started their assault on the bridge. After they'd succeeded, something happened, and the mini-sub had blown, which caused the *Akula* to fill with water. The nose of the sub was now physically attached to the base of the necropolis below the water line, and the massive torpedo tubes along the bottom were somehow pumping vast amounts of ocean water directly into the structure.

Like with the extreme height of the *Wasteland,* I knew diving 500 meters below the surface simply wasn't something that'd normally be possible. The crush depth of most submarines was around 400 meters. But Vadim and Britney both insisted they'd free dived those depths—and much deeper—with no real issue with the help of the water-breathing scrolls.

Whatever physics engine was running this shitshow, it was designed to allow us to do the impossible. It didn't want us dying from stupid environmental hazards, unless it was a deliberately placed trap or mob. Dying from the bends wasn't nearly as entertaining as watching us get eaten by a shark.

"Be careful," I said to Donut as Katia opened up an entrance for me to step inside of her. "Katia is really heavy right now. The moment we drop away, this thing is going to fly up into the air. I don't want you falling in."

Donut just nodded. Despite her loud insistence that she was never going back into the water, I could tell she was struggling with guilt over this. I patted her on the head. "We need you to keep us safe. Okay?"

"Be careful," she said, rubbing her head against my hand.

I stepped inside. Katia was spread thin, which allowed her to make herself pretty large. The three of us—me, Tran, and Vadim—stood in the middle of the shape. She'd helpfully grown three poles in the middle so we could steady ourselves. She called it the diving bell, but she was really shaped more like an elevator with a ring of heavy, dense metal at the bottom to prevent her from flipping. She would grow flaps and pull some mass and attempt to slow our descent as we approached the sub. We wanted to acclimate to the water as soon as possible, so we weren't sealed in. With Tran's pathfinder skill and Vadim's *Torch* spell, we'd hopefully be able to navigate the drowned halls of the submarine and quickly accomplish our task.

The boss had been a borough boss, not a neighborhood boss, so the map it left showed Vadim monster types in an area, but he still didn't have a full map of the *Akula*, which was unfortunate. There had apparently been a sentinel gun thing that'd been a

neighborhood boss, but he said he'd never looted the map. Things had been happening quickly.

"Everyone read a scroll," I said. All around us, we each cast *Water Breathing* on ourselves. All four of us now had enough of these things in our inventory to last at least four hours submerged, four times the amount we'd hopefully need.

I nervously watched the little needle that kept me apprised of our viewer count, and it was starting to spike. That was always a bad sign.

"And away we go," Katia said from a mouth that sat against the interior wall of the diving bell, right next to my ear. I almost crapped my boxers at the sound of the voice so close to me.

Before I could say, "Jesus, Katia," we dropped. The elevator hit the ocean and only gave the slightest pause before we were underwater. We sank, and the force of the water rushing inside almost pulled all three of us up and out.

I kept my eye on our altitude as we rapidly fell. We moved at about five meters a second, rocketing toward the depths. I did feel the increasing pressure of the water above us as we passed 100 meters, then 200, then 300, but it wasn't nearly as much as it should.

"I see it," Katia said after only a minute, her voice carrying through the water. "I'm pulling my mass in small amounts now and flapping my wings. Oh, wow. It's bigger than I thought. The whole top part is ripped away. There's a strong current. I can actually see the water getting pulled in. It's mostly under the sub. It's like water is being sucked in like through a vacuum cleaner. The whole front of the submarine is stuck in a hole. The whole sub is the pump."

I felt us start to slow. The *Akula* finally showed on my map, the structure stretching to completely fill it. The thing was the size of a small carrier.

"There are a bunch of jellyfish near the entrance," Katia said.

"What color are they?" Vadim snapped.

"Blue. They're big."

"Okay, good. Watch out for the white ones. The pain amplifiers. They're smaller. The big blue ones will wrap around you if you get

close, but they'll leave you alone if you avoid them. But you must watch because they drift."

"Okay, I'm aiming for an area without them," Katia said. "Landing now."

Crack. We hit the hull, and Katia's form instantly changed. The elevator opened like a flower, revealing the deep, dark world. It wasn't completely dark. Some light still filtered in through above, but everything had a deep, blue hue to it. I crouched, still standing atop Katia's form. It felt as if someone was standing on my shoulders, but the pressure wasn't too bad.

The *Akula*, like Katia had said, was huge. It looked more like a damn spaceship than an actual submarine. The slick, metallic structure spread out into the darkness in every direction. The whole thing vibrated. I could feel the water deep below being pumped through the vehicle. Directly ahead, the sail—the conning tower-like structure on top of most submarines—had been violently ripped away, giving me an unobstructed view of the bottom of the necropolis. From here, it was nothing more than an imposing, dark wall.

Katia continued to change. She was transforming herself so she'd cover the hull, camouflaging herself. She was going to stay out here and keep an eye out for the large, dangerous monsters while the three of us entered the sub. The ripped away entrance was about twenty feet away. In most subs, the con was directly below the sail. That wasn't the case with this submarine. According to Vadim, the con (called a bridge by the game), was at the fore of the vessel, just short of the nose. That's where the stairwell was. I couldn't see it, but Katia could.

Vadim had described a room directly below the bridge that I believed was the fire control. That was our target.

Above, the glowing, blue jellyfish floated like sentinels. Each were about fifteen feet in diameter, and their tentacles dangled underneath them ominously, hovering about twenty feet over the top of the submarine. They drifted aimlessly, bouncing off one another.

Their dots were white on the map, meaning they weren't naturally hostile.

Big Boy Blue – Level 40

The good ol' Big Boy Blue is the largest of the jellyfish one might find floating around. They're a little like that guy you used to know in high school who was always wearing either overalls or a jersey of some sort. The dude is like six foot five and pushing 300 pounds when he was a freshman. He always had a crewcut. Dad's a trucker. Never talks. Never does his homework. He's just always, you know, kinda there. He doesn't mean any harm. But he's so goddamned dumb he does harm anyway if you get in his way. Plus he always has a super-hot girlfriend for some reason, but that has nothing to do with the damn jellyfish. Anyway, you get the point. Harmless as long as you don't touch them.

I put my hand on the now-silver-colored edge of Katia and said, "We're going in. Be safe. Keep that salve I gave you in your hotlist."

"In and out, Carl," she replied. "If you can't figure it out, set the bombs."

I patted her, and the three of us half-walked, half-bounced along the top of the submarine and headed inside.

Entering the *Akula*.

Vadim cast his *Torch* the moment we sank through the destroyed superstructure hole into a round room. Mechanical parts floated everywhere as we swam down a tunnel. The water smelled of oil and smoke, and it was oddly calming. Familiar. The whole place was flooded. The hull creaked and moaned ominously.

Donut: ARE YOU OKAY?

Carl: We're fine. We're moving in now.

Vadim led the way. "The submarine was in terrible condition when we first got here. There were skeletons of bugbears and a

bunch of robots we had to fight on our way to the bridge," he said. We pushed our way through the tight corridors, swimming by pulling ourselves along the walls, which were warm, not freezing like I expected. "Only three of us survived."

"Did you get the gear of those who didn't make it?" I asked.

"No. Usually there wasn't anything left. There was a gun outside the bridge that just blew them up. Nobody could get past it except Chris. He had some ability that made him invisible to the thing. He went past and into the boss chamber alone. When he killed the robot thing with the head in the jar, the gun blew up on its own."

"You never had any hints he was really two people?"

Vadim shook his head. He swam under a floating, blue barrel. The man moved quickly in the water. I grasped the barrel and took it in, and it appeared in my inventory filled with sea water.

"It didn't surprise me," Vadim continued. "Chris was a higher level. Never talked much. Was a fierce fighter, but emotionless. He did have a lot of spells. He insulted us when we didn't do what he said. Britney never liked him."

"That's most definitely not the real Chris," I said.

Tran picked up what looked like a robot arm and let it go. I was taking everything and tossing it into my inventory. Most of this stuff was worthless, but some of it was made out of bugbear metal, which appeared to be very light.

We passed through what had once been a mess hall. I really wished we had more time to go exploring, but I knew we were on a timer. I finally saw the stairwell on the edge of my map. We were following the water party's original path through the *Akula*. I was deliberately making Vadim go first, lest he lead me into a trap.

"Did you guys loot any journals or notes from the boss?" I asked.

"Yes," Vadim said. "There was a note. Chris took it and read it. He didn't show us, but it had a key code on it to the escape tubes above the bridge. We all agreed to go to the land quadrant because it was the closest, but he somehow ended up with you guys."

"He said there wasn't room for him to get to the land quadrant," I said.

"That was a lie. There was plenty of room. We could've fit a whole party. But each escape tunnel can only be used once." He paused as we entered another hallway. We stopped in front of a hatch with a round, spinning wheel dogged closed. We were only a handful of rooms away from the bridge.

"What's wrong?"

"This was open. We left all the doors open so we could escape to our sub."

I moved forward to inspect the door. *Uh-oh*. "You don't see anything on the other side?" I asked.

Vadim's gecko face looked grim. "No. But it's a small room on the other side. Like one of those rooms where you can drain the water away."

"An airlock," I said.

Katia: Uh, guys, there's something out here. It's big. It just swam by underneath the sub. I didn't get a good look, but the damn thing is bigger than the submarine. It's gone now.

Carl: Okay. That's probably what really broke the sail off the sub.

Katia: We should be fine as long as you guys don't bring attention to yourselves.

I spun the wheel. It turned easily, revealing a small room with a switch on the wall. A red light glowed. I read another water-breathing scroll. "Come on, all of us inside."

Tran and Vadim looked at one another then followed me. I shut the door, locking us in. I hit the switch, and the room started to vibrate. A loud noise filled the chamber, my ears popped, and the water started to suck away. A minute later, and the room hissed. I spun the wheel on the second door, and I opened it.

"Tada," I said, stepping into the room.

The water was gone, but puddles appeared everywhere. This section had been drained, but it hadn't been like this for long. I took a breath. The air felt stale, but it was air. I didn't receive a warning about low oxygen. I knew if there was none, the water-breathing scroll wouldn't help. We'd have to flood the chamber again.

Tran was the first to vomit. We all waited for our spell to fade. When it hit me, I went to my knees, spewing brown water everywhere. *Christ, this is awful.*

"Why did I volunteer for this again?" Tran asked, rolling onto his back.

Vadim was unfazed by the vomiting. "You get used to it after a while. It's really bad if you're under for more than an hour."

We recovered and stepped into a large, semi-circle-shaped room. The center of the room was filled with removable grates. The metallic room appeared to have no purpose, which was unusual for a water vessel. A hole in the ceiling sparked. That, I realized, was the remains of the sentinel gun. The neighborhood boss. This had been a boss chamber. I didn't see a place to loot the map. I probably had to go a level higher or lower to grab it. Our feet echoed when we walked.

The next door was a similar portal to the one behind it. Vadim said just beyond it was the bridge. Within the bridge, I knew, was the captain's chambers, a separate room which contained the floor exit. There was also a real staircase that went below to the fire control station where we could, theoretically, turn off the pump. And if we went up instead of down, there was yet another room where the three escape hatches were. Two of the three had already been used.

"That door was open, too," Vadim said.

I really wished I had Donut with us. That way we could use the *Hole* spell to peer inside.

"There," Tran said, pointing to the ground. He pointed at one of the grates in the corner of the room. I finally saw what he was pointing at, the glint of a corpse's glow.

The moment I moved the grate, the X appeared on my map.

Lootable Corpse. The Bugbear's Delight. Neighborhood Boss. Killed by System Deactivation.

It was a small box, hidden under the floor, that one had to destroy in order to turn off the gun. Maggie had somehow circumvented it, which in turn allowed her to kill the borough boss on her own and reap all the experience. I reached down, opened the

small control panel, and looted the neighborhood map along with a **Blown Heavy-Duty Fuse**.

The moment I took the map, the entirety of the *Akula* populated on my screen. Multiple red dots appeared, mostly in the lower decks. The map helpfully showed which parts of the sub were flooded and which was dry. Most of it was flooded.

A red dot moved back and forth across the bridge on the other side of that door. There were also the multiple Xs of corpses. I first focused on the Xs, and my heart quickened.

The red dot kept disappearing and reappearing. It was moving back and forth between the bridge and the chamber just on the other side, *outside* the sub. Outside the water quadrant, even.

"Fuck me," I muttered.

"What is it?" Tran asked.

"It's a ghost. One that shouldn't be in here. It's…"

Before I could finish, an ear-piercing screech filled the submarine. The entire hull shuddered. A glowing, green head of a goddamned pterodactyl appeared, leaning in through the bulkhead leading to the bridge. It screamed again, and my vision flashed red. Vadim fell to the ground, his health suddenly in the red.

An aural attack.

Before I could examine the ghost, it disappeared back into the bridge. But I knew who that was. Quetzalcoatlus, the supposed boss monster of the subterranean level.

The dot disappeared, but a moment later, I heard her scream again, and it was somehow louder. The entire hull quaked. Tran used a *Heal Others* spell on Vadim.

Katia: Something green and glowing just shot out of the side of the submarine and went down. What is that? Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit. I can see it. The green thing just smacked it and turned around.

Carl: Blow your ballast. Get out of there. You don't have time to get to us. Get to the surface.

Katia: The flying green dot just flew back into the temple I think. But the large thing is coming. Carl, there's music. Music I haven't heard before.

Carl: GET OUT NOW.

Donut: DON'T ABANDON CARL.

Katia: It's coming. Oh, god. Oh, god. It's reaching for the sub, Carl.

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I CLAMBERED TOWARD THE DOOR OF THE BRIDGE AS THE MUSIC STARTED TO pulse. It was quiet at first, but it rose in volume, shaking the hull. And soon enough, the music was blasting. Not quite the level of an alarm trap, but loud enough I had to shout at the others.

This was a pure, deep dubstep growl punctuated by high-pitch, ear-piercing glitches that sounded like whale song. It gave the sense of overwhelming, frenetic panic. The grates under my feet clinked up and down.

The whole vessel shuddered, and suddenly the three of us fell to our backs. The sub vibrated as whatever this was physically grabbed the submarine.

I scrambled to my feet and pushed forward. I had to get to the dead bodies in the bridge. When Henrik the changeling principal had disappeared, we'd all just assumed he'd gone directly into the necropolis. When I had pinged him that first time using the watch, and he'd responded, I'd seen that he'd been underwater. I thought he was in a flooded cavern of the crypt. He'd been in the form of a fish creature.

He'd actually been on his way here, to the *Akula*. I had no idea why they'd come here, but whatever they were trying to do, they'd failed. Six of the seven bodies in the bridge were changeling principals, including Henrik. And if Henrik was here, that also meant the watch was here.

I spun the wheel, ripped open the portal as the submarine jolted again. The portal opened toward me, and I pulled myself inside. I shouted over the pounding music for Tran and Vadim to follow. We were going to loot the bodies, and then the three of us where going to jump to the last of the three escape hatches. We didn't have a choice. I already knew that whatever this was going to be, it wasn't a neighborhood or borough boss, which meant we were fucked.

Carl: Katia, did you get out?

The moment I sent the message, I realized, no. She hadn't gotten free. I saw her dot on the map, moving through the innards of the *Akula* in our direction. She'd fled into the submarine.

Carl: Goddamnit, Katia.

Katia: It was too late. I wouldn't have gotten away.

Carl: Okay, get your ass in here. Why is there boss music, but the other stuff hasn't happened yet?

Katia: I don't know.

The needle that indicated views was buried all the way to the right.

I yelled for Tran to stay back and to close the door to the airlock so Katia could get in here. The process took almost a full minute to transfer. I prayed she'd make it in time.

The whole sub rolled onto its side. I fell inside the bridge. Behind me, both Vadim and Tran yelled out in surprise as they also fell, plummeting out of sight in the room behind me. We'd been pulled free of the hole in the side of the necropolis. Below, the rushing noise of water changed in pitch.

I spied Henrik's body near the front of the bridge, and he was in the faceless humanoid form. I watched as he rolled toward the wall, smashing against it. Broken pieces of a robot fell with him. This was the borough boss corpse, which had been a spider carrying the head of Chaindrive the bugbear in a jar. They fell against yet another portal in the room, this one leading to the captain's stateroom and the level stairwell.

The sub remained at a 45-degree pitch as I stood, one foot on a bulkhead, one on the deck. The hull croaked and groaned, but I felt it more than I heard it, as the music continued to pound. My eyes

moved to the altitude chart on my display. We were at 550 meters and falling. *We're out of the hole. We're being dragged down.*

I took a precious moment to gawk at the opulence of the bridge. The *Akula*'s control center was a combination between the *Enterprise* bridge from *Star Trek* and the interior of a Victorian-era-themed restaurant that was so expensive, the prices weren't on the menu. At least it had been, once upon a time. Both the ravages of time and the recent flooding had ruined the place. A rust-covered chandelier dotted with random sparkles hung from the ceiling, swinging back and forth. The deck was covered with moldy and ripped velvet. The railings were made of polished wood capped with brass and covered with intricate carvings. A mighty, but peeled and faded, mural covered one bulkhead, depicting what appeared to be a bugbear getting knighted by an elf in flowing robes.

The captain's chair sat high in the middle of the room. It was a heavily-patinaed, brass throne covered with spigots and levers, reminding me of the cockpit of the *Nightmare*. The seat had once been cushioned with red velvet, but it'd disintegrated with time, revealing rusted springs. Next to the chair sat what appeared to be a mini-fridge and bar. The door to the fridge hung open, revealing it be empty. The bar was equally barren.

But the most impressive sight was the glass porthole giving me a wide view of the underwater world. The window was broad, about twenty-five feet across and ten feet high and framed with riveted brass. I could see a film of muck had grown over the glass, but an area had been recently cleaned off, either by Chris or Henrik's crew.

The window had revealed nothing but black a moment before, but now I could see movement just on the other side, bubbles and water rushing by. Something tightened on the glass, and I felt my heart clench in my chest. *It's not darkness. Something is covering the port.*

I swallowed when I realized what I was looking at. A sucker from a squid or octopus tentacle appeared, squeezing against the view. The oval-shaped suction cup took up half the window.

"Holy crap," I muttered.

Katia: I'm waiting for the room to drain.

Carl: Okay. I'm in the bridge. One room over. Grab the map if you have time. It's in the first room.

Donut: WHAT IS HAPPENING.

Carl: Get the depth charges ready. Don't drop until I say.

I scrambled along the wall to the corpse of Henrik.

Lootable Corpse. Henrik. Level 50 Changeling Principal. Killed by a very pissed-off Quetzalcoatlus.

Mysterious Watch.

Torn Book Page.

I took his entire body into my inventory. The moment I had it, the world froze.

Shit. Here we go.

System Message: Please Wait.

The world unfroze as quickly as it had frozen.

System Message: Thank you for your patience. You may now resume normal activities.

What the hell? That was the second time this had happened. I'd been expecting that to be the boss battle.

Admin Notice: Three items in your inventory have been placed under an administrative lock while an appeal in the Syndicate court determines if these items are…

The message appeared and disappeared in a flash, almost too quickly to read or understand. It never finished fully displaying. And then another message appeared and disappeared just as quickly.

Admin Notice: Court determination: Lack of Standing for all plaintiffs. Administrative lock removed. We apologize for the inconvenience.

The deck rumbled. The chandelier swung back and forth. The music continued to pound.

Donut: CARL, THE WORLD FROZE AGAIN. DID YOU DO THAT?

The submarine hit something solid and settled, righting itself, and I had to scramble to stay on my feet. The chandelier continued to swing wildly. The hull groaned and popped under my feet. We were almost exactly 1,500 meters below sea level. I was pretty sure we'd just settled at the very bottom of the bubble. Outside, the suction

cup moved away, squeaking loudly like a squeegee against a windshield.

At a depth of 500 meters, the world had been blue-hued. Down here, a green luminescence permeated the ocean's floor. I couldn't see any sign of the monster. I didn't see any sign of the island upon which the necropolis stood. I realized the sub had turned a full 180 degrees. The music continued.

Katia: I'm through. I'm coming up.

What was going on? Fuck this, I thought. We had to get to the escape hatch.

Carl: Get in here. Bring the other two guys.

I thought of the weird system message. Someone had sued to keep the pieces of the Gate of the Feral Gods out of my hands. That wasn't a surprise. Neither was it a surprise that there were multiple plaintiffs in the suit.

But Henrik had something else in his inventory. It was starting to become clear that this was a common thing in this game, that the system would plant important information on corpses. I extracted the Torn Book Page from Henrik's inventory and examined it.

Torn Book Page.

This piece of paper was mercilessly ripped from a perfectly-innocent book. Anybody who thinks to mutilate books in such a manner is obviously a terrible person. I mean, one minute this book is sitting there, minding its own business, and suddenly… BAM! It's torn away from its home. And even if it gets returned, you can't just repair that sort of thing. It's irreparably harmed. Anybody who would do that is a real jerk. It's a lot like what we did to you guys.

Anyway, this slip of old paper appears to be an extract of a cleric's journal. One side is half of a terrible love poem for his aunt. The other is something about ghosts. Fucking clerics. What a bunch of nerds. Am I right?

I quickly read the passage.

…and she formed into a rage elemental.

Another curiosity is the She Who Wails. Or Wailing Shrieker. A rare ghost, it is formed when a grieving widow dies of her despair, in

the dark, on hallowed ground, while the corpse of her affection rots nearby. These were often purposely created to guard tombs, oftentimes at the direction of the ailing pharaoh or king himself, who would ply the woman with affection in order to have ready stock upon his burial. Sometimes he would do this with a harem of women, if he was especially paranoid about keeping his treasures safe. The women would not know this was to be their fate.

If a Wailing Shrieker forms, she has the tendency to haunt her lover's grave, and she will aggressively defend the area. She is defeated with a high-level exorcism spell, the destruction of the corpse of her lover, by varying high-degree banishment spells, or via electric shock. Beware her scream and her touch. She is intelligent and jealous. She is fully non-corporeal, and any flesh-giving spell can be used to neutralize her.

Henrik and his team didn't want to kill Quetzalcoatlus. They wanted to physically touch her, but they could only do that if she was given flesh. Their original plan was to use Wynne the gnome to do it. I didn't know why they'd come here. Whatever he'd been planning, it was plan B. Or C. And it hadn't worked. They'd pissed off the ghost, she'd killed them all, and now we'd been dragged to the bottom of the ocean because of it.

Carl: Gwen. How long until the storm?

Gwen: Two and a half hours. And we don't know what's really going to happen.

I gave her a quick set of instructions and told her to hurry.

Katia pulled herself into the room, followed by Tran and Vadim.

"Loot the rest of these corpses," I said, yelling over the music as I moved to the closest body. I pulled him into my inventory. He only had a few gold coins on him, but Mordecai wanted the brains of these guys, too. I pointed to a set of spiral stairs on the opposite side of the bridge, pushed up against the mural. Both up and down led to additional hatches. "Go up. We don't need to turn the pump off anymore, but we need to get to the escape hatch room."

Katia and the other two didn't respond to my shout. All three of them stood still, staring out the window. That's when I looked up and saw what they were staring at. A massive, glowing form

approached the sub. A shark. A shark the size of a mountain. A shark? That didn't make sense. Then I saw the tentacles flowing behind it. *A sharktopus. A fucking sharktopus. Donut is going to be pissed she missed this one.*

"Oh," I heard myself say. "That's not good."

"That's not the same one that pulled us down here," Katia shouted so she could be heard over the music.

The monstrosity rocketed toward us, mouth opening wide. It turned to the side, like it was about to eat a goddamn taco.

Holy shit it's going to swallow us.

And then, finally, did the world freeze.

Admin Notice: This Special Event boss battle is being streamed to all special event subscribers.

Admin Notice: Congratulations. You have been opted into the Beta testing program. We are testing a new format with this battle. You may be asked to complete a survey on the completion of the fight, should you survive. Thank you.

B…B…B…Boss Battle!

Bronze-colored stars and fireworks exploded on the screen, curling in the air.

Special Event twirled, trailing a rainbow of colors before slamming onto an invisible plane and exploding.

A new window appeared. Something that had never happened before. The orange, lizard newscaster guy who hosted the recap episode appeared in the screen, holding a microphone. Next to him stood an orc-like creature I'd never seen before. This was a different race than Maestro. This guy looked more like a traditional, video game orc. He was big and meaty with pig-like eyes. He wore a sportscoat and a tie.

The music lowered in volume and became background noise, something else that had never happened.

"We are live, ladies and gentlemen! And boy do we have something amazing for you tonight!" the lizard guy said. His voice echoed as if we were in a goddamned stadium.

"I can't wait for this one, Kevin," the orc said, his voice that of a sports announcer. "My only regret is that Princess Donut isn't here to

round out the team."

"Something tells me she's just as disappointed as you are," the recap guy, whose name was apparently "Kevin" said. He chuckled. "But we all know by now how she feels about getting wet."

Our mugshots splattered into the air. Katia and I appeared first, teamed up together with Tran and Vadim individually on the other side. The frames around our pictures caught on fire and then exploded.

"Now, Magnificent Troy, tell me something," Kevin said. "Can you explain to our viewers why we chose this battle for tonight's special event?"

"What the fuck," I muttered through gritted teeth. Was the orc's name really Magnificent Troy? Were these assholes really going to live-comment as we fought? "What the fuck."

"Oh, certainly. Look what we have tonight. We have Carl and Katia, both top-ten crawlers along with two guys who've really been underperforming until recently…"

"Hey," Tran said, also through clenched teeth.

"And all four of them have to face such a powerful boss. Combine that with the drama regarding this particular bubble and the type of battle we're about to face, and it's truly a match for the ages."

"You got that right, Magnificent Troy. And let's find out exactly who that boss is, shall we?" Kevin took a dramatic pause. "It's the one. It's the only! Taken straight from the depths of the water moon Hayes 17, it's the queen bitch herself…"

An image appeared, super small. It started spinning toward us, looking like it was coming straight from the real sharktopus's mouth. It was a full, 3D rendition of the creature.

Carl: Depth charges. Now. Turn the little dial on the sides all the way to the left first. Set them all to maximum depth. Louis and Firas. Once you drop the charges, get out of there, land the house, and get all of your asses to a saferoom. Gwen, once you're done at the sandcastle, get to a saferoom. Bobby or Morris, if you can hear me, get all the tomb raiders to a saferoom. ASAP. You too, Langley.

Gwen: Why?

Donut: WHAT ABOUT YOU? WON'T THE DEATH CHARGES HIT YOU, TOO?

Carl: I really hope not.

The sharktopus image slammed into the air and then exploded, revealing the real creature, still frozen just outside the sub, mouth wide. Each individual tooth was the size of a surfboard.

"It's Lusca!" Kevin shouted.

The system AI voice provided the official description.

Lusca! Octo-Shark Brood Mother Queen!

Level 82 City Boss!

I know, I know. Sharktopus is much cooler sounding than Octo-Shark. Hey, this is a real creature, not something I made up, so don't blame me. It's not, I repeat, it's *not* named in such a way because of Nadya Suleman, the so-called Octo-mom and her eight babies who took the tabloids by storm all those years ago.

Though it would be appropriate for you to think so.

Being the biggest, baddest, and most voracious creature in the ocean requires a lot of sustenance, especially when you're a new mother carrying a boatload of hungry babies in your mouth. And since Lusca is a single mother, sometimes she requires a little help. She needs to keep them babies fed.

And who's the daddy of these precious little babies? Who knows? Lusca is a whore! Every Octo-Shark playa in the neighborhood knows she offers that sweet tentacle booty of hers to any bad boy who'll drop something juicy onto her plate.

That, by the way, is exactly what you are. Food dropped onto Lusca's plate in exchange for some one-on-one time. The male Octo-shark who brought you down here already got his and is now long gone. Just like your real daddy!

Lusca herself already ate. But that's okay!

Like I said, she needs to keep them babies fed.

The world unfroze.

I stumbled forward as the giant creature swallowed us. *Crunch.*

The sub tumbled. The minimap flashed.

The world froze once again, and the word **Uh-Oh!** splashed on the screen before turning into bubbles and disappearing.

A cartoon-like diagram of the shark's mouth appeared on the screen, replacing the two commentators, though I could still hear the two hosts talking.

"Lusca is a mouthbrooder," Magnificent Troy said. A circle appeared around the mouth, like Troy had a pen and was diagraming out a football play. The diagram zoomed in, and multiple, little happy-faced dots appeared floating in the mouth along with a helpful cartoon graphic depicting half of the submarine with a flashing exclamation mark over it. My eyes moved to the minimap. Sure enough, the giant shark had snapped the *Akula* in half. We were floating in the goddamn creature's mouth. "Once she chomps onto something for her babies, she gives them about ten minutes to eat their fill. Anything left over goes to mama!"

The graphic showed the happy-faced babies zooming in on the sub cartoon, zipping around it Tasmanian Devil-style, and then zooming away, leaving a skeleton of a ship trailing smoke. The babies zipped away into the teeth area while the mama shark swallowed with an exaggerated gulp. The remains of the cartoon submarine bounced merrily into the shark's stomach, where it was melted by stomach acid. And then it moved to another stomach, then a third, and then it finally depicted the massive creature pooping out a cartoon skeleton of a human wearing heart-covered boxers. And then it showed a cartoon Donut with tears flying from her eyes. The display returned to the two announcers, who both were falling over themselves laughing at the cartoon.

A ten minute timer slammed onto the screen.

Goddamnit, not this shit again.

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"And here we go!" Kevin shouted just as the world unfroze. The timer started to move.

"Carl, I don't think the escape hatch is going to work anymore," Katia called as we tumbled again.

Something smashed against the window. Then something else. The babies. Now that we were in the mouth, it was completely dark out there. The sub continued to twist. The chandelier broke free and crashed to the ground, shattering. Suddenly the interior of the bridge was also pitch black. The only light was from the giant timer and the floating window containing Kevin and Magnificent Troy, but the light did not illuminate our surroundings.

"Vadim," I called. "Torch!"

"Ooh, Vadim is running away, and Carl hasn't noticed yet," Kevin the announcer said.

"He went up the stairs," Tran called. The moment he said it, I saw his blue dot, almost directly above my own. He'd gone up the stairs, all right. There was only one escape pod left, and it looked as if he was going to use it.

Carl: Vadim. We're *inside* the goddamn sharktopus. The escape hatch isn't going to work!

He didn't answer.

Katia pulled a pair of regular torches from her inventory and tossed them to the corners of the room just as I did the same. A dull, red light filled the bridge, reflecting our horrified faces as we

caught glimpse of the terrors pressed against the glass. Katia let out a gasp. Mouths. Hundreds of round, ravening mouths, filled with teeth. Each mouth was the size of a bicycle wheel. The entire glass display was covered with them. One whipped sideways along the window, revealing there were hundreds more, maybe thousands, maybe tens of thousands, all beyond it.

"Look how hungry those little guys are," Magnificent Troy shouted.

I examined the one that was trying to slide along the glass. The monster looked like a huge lamprey eel, but the back half was separated into multiple tentacles. The terrifying creature was about ten feet long from mouth to tentacle tip.

Juvenile Octo-Shark. Level 30.

This is a minion of Lusca.

Ah, the babies. Here's the thing about Octo-Shark babies. The odds are stacked against them from the get-go. There's just too many of them. Their mom is really strict and won't let them leave her mouth. They don't know who their daddies are, which makes them kinda sad, especially around Christmas. They need constant nourishment. So when food does arrive, they have to fight for their morsels. Only the strongest survive.

Eventually, even Lusca won't be able to keep up with the demand. That's right around the time the juveniles start to realize their brothers and sisters are also delicious. In each birthing of 2-3,000 pups, only one or two survive.

In other words, their odds of survival are better than yours!

A distant explosion rocked the sub, followed by a second.

"Ohhh, that was a direct hit! Those depth charges are working great," Kevin said. "Their design is really interesting, too. He used multi-layered, gunpowder-filled barrels seeded with impact-detonated hob-lobbers designed to explode the moment the barrel crushes under the pressure. He then placed a hole through each barrel except the final one and placed a manual dial on the side, allowing him to choose the barrel's integrity. The more holes

covered, the deeper the barrel will drop before it's crushed and explodes. It's a design straight out of earth's history books!"

"Did you hear what Princess Donut said? She called them 'death charges' not 'depth charges.' I kinda like that better, Kevin."

"I do too. But it doesn't matter what they're called. You're not going to knock out Lusca that easily. It doesn't matter how well they're designed. She's just going to shrug them off and ask for more. She is bringing her A-game today," Kevin said. "But she is moving out of the area. It looks like the rest of the charges are going to be duds."

"It also looks like that display window is going to break at any moment," Troy added. "This should be good."

"Shit, shit," I said. As the commentators jabbered, I pulled a hob-lobber, yanked the fuse, and replaced it with a piece of hobgoblin pus. I'd purchased a few sets of pus from Pustule the last time we'd been in the Silk Road, and I was burning through the expensive detonator material. I then pulled a potion from my inventory and my duct tape. I taped the potion bottle to the hob-lobber.

There was a much more elegant version of this in the cookbook, though with a different potion. I had no idea if this would work. I looked wildly about the room for a place to plant the bomb where it would be safe from the immediate impact of water rushing in here. I spied the captain's chair and the minifridge next to it. The fridge was firmly bolted in place. I rushed to the open fridge, placed the makeshift bomb inside, and then I duct-taped the door closed. *There*.

The timer was already at eight minutes.

The window cracked. The mouths pounded at the glass. Kevin and Troy continued making idiotic comments.

"Guys, into the stateroom," I cried, rushing to the door to the captain's chambers. Inside the small room, sitting in the corner and blocked off by a forcefield was the stairwell to the sixth floor.

"Why in here?" Katia asked, lighting and dropping another torch. The three of us crowded in. As I closed the door, I took one last look out into the bridge. The window cracked again, spiderwebbing as Kevin and Troy oohed and ahhed.

"Because this is the only room that won't break apart, and we can seal it. I just need a minute. Keep your scrolls ready. Tran, tell Vadim it's too late to come back. Tell him to seal himself into that room up there if he can."

Even before I'd received the second watch and final piece of the Gate of the Feral Gods, Katia and I had both started playing around with the two pieces. We found if we put the watch in the second spot and closed the top of the winding box, the watch would move on its own to a specific time. After some experimentation, we confirmed the time displayed was the watch's current coordinates. Katia spent an hour writing down time/location combinations while I prepared for our "in and out" expedition to the *Akula*.

She'd already discovered several interesting things about the artifact, including a way to *very* roughly predict what a location's time would be, especially if I could relay to her the exact distance of a spot from the earth's sea level.

"If we never find that second watch, I think I can still use this as a sort of reverse compass that tells us exactly where we are relative to other locations. I just need more time to figure it out," Katia had said before we set out.

But now we had all three pieces and a very pressing reason to use the artifact.

I pulled the first watch now and examined it. It always started ticking on its own if you pulled it out of the winding box. I rolled the time back, carefully dialing in the third hand to exactly where I wanted it to go. A spot just outside the pazuzu town. If we weren't teleporting far, the artifact would only need a few seconds to set itself. At least in theory.

The magical window with the two newscaster guys didn't follow us into the stateroom, but we could still hear their chattering. And it was obvious they could still see us.

"It looks like Carl is going to use the gate to escape!"

"Shut the fuck up, Kevin," I said as I worked. The sub rocked again, and I pushed the hand too far and cursed.

Seven minutes.

I didn't want to do this. This was a terrible idea. It would save us, temporarily, but it would also screw over everybody else in the bubble. Mordecai said some of these feral monsters were literally bigger than the bubble itself. What would happen then? Until we took out that final castle, we'd be stuck with whatever I summoned.

And that, I knew, was exactly what they wanted me to do. Once again, I couldn't help but feel we'd been steered directly onto this path. It'd been obvious that I was headed down here. The game had somehow convinced Henrik to come here first and get himself killed and to drop that final piece of the gate. They set up this boss battle, knowing we'd be placed in an impossible situation. We couldn't fight our way out of here. There was no fucking way. This was an impossible battle. Even if we could get past the babies, then what? We'd already been swallowed.

There was no way to win. Not unless we had a magical gate that'd let us zap ourselves away.

Carl: Donut. Are you guys almost back yet?

Donut: NO! THE WIND STARTED EARLY! FIRAS SAYS IT'S BLOWING DIFFERENT THAN BEFORE, AND IT'S MAKING IT HARD FOR THEM TO NAVIGATE! WE'RE JUST GETTING HIGHER AND HIGHER. WE'RE GONNA HAVE TO GO BACK TO HUMP TOWN!

Carl: How long?

Donut: LOUIS SAYS TEN MINUTES.

Fuck. That wasn't good enough. I didn't want to do this. I *wouldn't* do this if everybody out there wasn't in a safe room.

There had to be a different way.

Look for the clues.

"Here it comes!" Magnificent Troy shrieked.

A colossal shattering pitched the sub, and we fell to the side, all of us smashing against the bulkhead. The world did not right itself. I grasped the door to the stateroom, and I clung to it, making sure it was dogged in place. The glass had broken. I felt the bridge getting flooded. The hull quivered as the babies flowed into the room on the other side.

Six minutes.

Already, they started pounding at the door. While I knew the room itself would be safe, I also knew *we* weren't safe in here. Not for long. I had no idea what would happen if the octo-shark digested the stairwell, but I suspected it'd quickly pass through the shark's system, and the entire room would just end up on the ocean floor. Along with a boxer-wearing skeleton.

To my horror, the wheel on the door started to turn. The goddamn things were smart. The door sat at a thirty degree angle. They only needed to open it a little, and the water would push it the rest of the way. I grabbed it and held it closed.

"Okay guys," I said. "Hold on. This might not go as I hope." With one hand still on the hatch wheel, I pulled the detonator and slammed down on it. There was a ten-second delay followed by a muted *thump*.

I kept my eye on the map. The entire bridge was nothing but a sea of red dots. Above, Vadim remained, still alive and alone in the room above us. I could see him pacing back and forth. He still wasn't answering us.

"Nothing happened," Tran said after a moment.

"Wait for it," I said. An X appeared on the map. Then another. And then ten. On the other side of the door, the pounding became even more frantic. It sounded as if thousands of hammers were suddenly slamming against the metal wall.

"What was that potion?" Katia asked.

"The potion of bloodlust," I said. The number of Xs was increasing by the moment, but even as they did, more and more of the babies were entering the ship. "The berserking potion. I don't know how many it affected when it spread through the water, but it looks like it worked. They may be babies. They may be half octopus. But they're still sharks. Even if the potion only affected a few of them, once the feeding frenzy starts, they just go nuts. The description says they'll eventually kill each other once they learn their siblings are edible."

"Holy cow," Katia said after a moment.

With four and a half minutes remaining, only a few of the baby sharktopuses remained. They'd torn through each other like wildfire.

One of them was pinging about like a damn pinball, but it suddenly stopped and just started floating there. There were thousands of X's out there.

"Well that was entertaining," Kevin said, his voice echoing.

"Yes it was, but what are they going to do now?" Magnificent Troy asked. "Those were just the minions."

Warning: Your oxygen levels are low. Plus you're just sitting there being all boring and shit.

"Can't argue with the AI on this one," Kevin said.

I growled. "Damnit. We're gonna have to go out there. Everyone take a scroll."

The world shifted again. I looked down at my indicator, and we were traveling at a good clip, about 35 kilometers per hour, which was why only a few of the depth charges had come close. It seemed Lusca just swam in circles around the circumference of the water quadrant. I wondered if she knew that most of her babies were now dead.

"Hold on," I said after I took our water-breathing scrolls. I only had to turn the portal an inch before water started flowing in around the seal. I spun the wheel some more and jumped out of the way as water rushed into the room.

Only it wasn't really water so much as it was blood and ripped and shredded body pieces of dead octo-shark babies. There was a good five seconds of chaos where it felt as if I was just getting pummeled while the announcers howled with laughter. Eventually it settled. Katia formed a spear at the end of her hand and swam forward, pushing her way through the crowded mess. It was pitch dark. I tried lighting a torch, and it wouldn't let me. I watched as Katia's dot descended on one of the remaining babies, and she speared it, killing it instantly. Tran and I followed, pushing our way through the thick mess.

"What are we going to do now," Katia called.

Two minutes.

I pointed at the hole in the window. They couldn't see me, but I pointed anyway. "Out of the sub. Swim toward the teeth. We need

to be in the front of the mouth when she swallows! Use the map to navigate."

I had a thought, and I cast *Wisp Armor* on myself. I started to glow as swirling lights twirled around me. The magic protection spell would last seven minutes, and it filled the room with a pulsing, green and red light, illuminating the mass of half-eaten corpses. Damn, I wish I'd thought of this earlier. I could taste their blood in my mouth. Ahead of me, Katia had formed a single eye on her head, as big as a fist. The eye melded into her body as my light reached it. She swirled in the water and skewed another, killing the last of the ones in the room. Tran had a sword in his hand, and he hacked through the corpses like he was blazing a trail.

"What about Vadim?" Tran asked as we pushed toward the window.

He can go fuck himself, I didn't say. "He'll be safe in that room for a bit," I said as we pushed our way through the corpses toward the exit. "Even if he's fully swallowed, it'll take a bit for it to break the sub down. I hope."

"The crawlers are looking for a place to anchor themselves," Kevin shouted as the timer reached one minute. "Mama is gonna swallow them up!"

We broke free of the corpses just as we moved into the free water inside the shark's cavernous mouth. It was boiling hot in here, and despite the light of my body, the water was pitch black. We still within the shark's cavernous mouth, but it almost felt like open ocean. We continued to swim upward, and I could finally see the roof of Lusca's alabaster mouth, a wide, smooth plane. The shark undulated, and I caught sight of multiple slits in the roof. As we watched, a single baby emerged from the darkness and fled into one of the slits. More red dots appeared, and suddenly hundreds of the babies were in the water, all ignoring us and disappearing up into the holes. Most of them appeared to be injured.

This was where the babies went, not the front of the mouth like the cartoon depicted.

"We need to get into one of those holes," Katia cried, seeing it the same time I did. "Hurry!"

"I have a better idea," I said. "Leatherface."

"Are you crazy?" Katia called, whirling in the water. "I'm not big enough. I don't have time to gain the mass. The move is made for the flying house."

"Don't worry," I said. "Just hold onto the back and keep us wrapped up. I'm gonna cut a pilot hole first, too. Just hold on. And try to avoid the submarine."

"Do you want me to use the rocket?"

I thought for a moment. We had two different methods to quickly ascend. We had the barrels, which I was pretty sure wouldn't work at this depth, and we had the rocket, which was nothing more than a pressurized goblin steam boiler that would propel us forward for about thirty seconds. I doubted that would work at this depth also. At least not outside the octo-shark's mouth. *Might as well use it now.*

"Do it."

A fin grew out of Katia's form, and the small tank appeared. She wrapped it in flesh. The thing was the size of a two-liter bottle of soda, but we knew from experience these things packed a punch when they went off. One of these had helped propel my long-lost copper chopper motorcycle. Thanks to the newly-added pressure valve on the end, we now had the equivalent of a redneck torpedo propeller. I'd only had time to make and pressurize two at my workbench, but we'd used one to test it and make sure it didn't blow up.

"Uh, what is happening?" Tran asked.

"All you need to do is hold on," Katia said as she grew wider. A pair of braces grew out of her back, grasping onto the both of us and pulling our bodies against hers. In front of us, now a few hundred meters away and barely visible, the massive form of the *Akula's* bow sat sideways in the back of the Octo-shark's throat. It'd gotten completely turned around, and it faced us. We were well above it, and I hoped we'd remain that way. As the timer plunged toward zero, I kept my eye on the speed monitor, making certain the city boss was still moving at a good speed. She was. Not as fast as the train. But that was okay.

"Ten seconds!" Kevin squealed, his voice going up an octave.

"Okay, I cast first, you turn the valve, and then pull it out," I yelled. I realized belatedly that as the timer was reaching zero, the music had once again risen in volume. They were also raising the volume of the commentators to compensate.

Carl: Donut, if this doesn't work, do what we talked about before. Get to Imani and Elle once you hit the next floor.

Donut replied, but I waved it away. The timer hit zero.

Lusca swallowed at the same moment. She, as I hoped, raised her head slightly upward in order to fully get that massive hunk of metal down her throat. The water rushed back, all of us getting pulled down. Ahead, the *Akula* disappeared down the shark's gullet.

At the same moment, just as we started to flow downward, I slammed onto *Protective Shell.*

We were moving fast toward the back of the creature's throat, but the shark was still swimming forward. The static sphere of protection shot away, quickly outpacing us as it rocketed toward the back of the creature's throat, skirting just below the white flesh of the shark's mouth.

I'd done this twice before, using it to kill everything on a train. The spell's radius was three meters plus a half a meter for every point of intelligence, meaning the sphere that formed and then rocketed away was about 12 meters in diameter.

I was hoping that the spell would act like a bullet, punching a hole through the city boss, piercing her brain, and then continuing on its way all the way through the tentacles and out the back as her momentum propelled her forward.

Instead, it did something a little unexpected. The city boss stopped dead in the water, as if she'd slammed into a wall. The top half of Lusca's mouth bent back and opened, breaking as it splayed so much, it curved over her own eyes, cartilage and bone snapping, like the hood of a car that popped open while you were driving down the highway. One moment we were in the monster's mouth, and the next the top jaw of shark was peeled up and away, exposing us to open ocean. Teeth shattered as the boss was pushed down and into the ocean floor by the floating, immoveable spell. All the remaining

babies were instantly killed as the soft palate of her mouth was suddenly upside down and outside and exposed and squeezed by the pressure of the depth.

The spell's passage had indeed grievously wounded Lusca, but despite the horrific injury to her mouth, she wasn't yet dead.

At that moment, however, I didn't yet see or know what the spell had done. As we moved toward the throat, Katia activated the rocket, which increased our speed. And at the same time, she pulled the giant, 25-foot, activated buzzsaw out of her inventory and held onto the back of it for dear life.

The Leatherface plan was simple. While we flew the house, if we called "Leatherface," Katia was to drop the giant buzzsaw over the edge and let it hang free. We'd built a chain specifically for it. We'd then use the dangling buzzsaw as a melee weapon for the balloon.

The buzzsaw was heavy, but much lighter than one would think. I'd been hoping that with our forward momentum from the rocket along with the swallowing push toward the boss's stomach, we'd follow the same path of destruction wrought by the protective shell, all the way through the shark and out the back. Lusca was so damn big, I didn't know if that would actually kill her or not, but I hoped we'd get her brain, and if not, do enough damage that it'd let us flee.

But instead of rocketing forward, we started to pinwheel.

The enormous pressure of the water pushed onto us, but we were already spinning by the time I realized we were in open ocean. We flew in the opposite direction I'd anticipated, like we'd been ejected through the windshield thanks to the boss's sudden, violent stop. The rocket continued to blast air, causing us to spin even faster. We vomited from the shark's mouth, still pinwheeling forward, slowed, and then reversed direction, cleaving straight through the center of the octo-shark's now-on-the-outside upper snout. The screaming buzzsaw was not hampered by the water or the depth, and it cut through Lusca as if she was nothing more than a soft piece of calamari being pierced by a hot knife. We continued to spin, picking up speed and curving downward as we cut through the shark's head.

Only when one of the massive tentacles, just as wide as the length of the buzzsaw, slammed down on us did we stop. The rocket fizzled out, the buzzsaw slammed into the rocky ground of the floor, burying itself completely, yet still screaming. Katia let go, causing all three of us to go flying.

I spun and twirled, hitting the rocky ground of the ocean, skipping off the floor and rolling. My health was slowly going down. My head spun, nausea washing over me. I continued to tumble and roll, coming to a stop against a rock. It felt as if I had a dozen sandbags on my shoulders. I twisted, trying to see what damage we'd done. The green-hued world was a sea of upset silt and blood.

A full page of notifications flew by. I could still hear the two announcers, and they were screaming their heads off. The swirling silt cleared, and I saw it.

Lusca, the octo-shark floated on her side on the ocean floor, her upper jaw horrifically peeled back and split. A jagged line of red curved along the top of the massive, building-sized creature, not perfectly centered, but enough. We'd cleaved right through her tiny little brain.

Behind me, the buzzsaw was buried all the way into the ocean's floor. It made a strangled noise, and suddenly the whole thing broke apart, pieces flying every which way. One of the round buzzsaws dislodged and shot through the water, spinning and disappearing into the darkness, like a tire rocketing off a crashed car.

Winner!

More notifications flew by. I saw a fan box notification. I waved it all away. I clicked another scroll of water breathing. The music abruptly stopped. Only one notice remained on my screen.

Warning: At this depth, your health will decrease by two percent per second.

Shit.

Tran: Help. I can't get up.

I saw his dot on the map. Close. Katia had pulled herself to her feet about a hundred meters away.

Donut: CARL I JUST WENT UP A LEVEL, AND I DIDN'T EVEN DO ANYTHING. I SHOULD STAY BACK MORE OFTEN.

THIS IS GREAT.

I didn't have to time to revel in the sheer insanity of what'd just happened. We had to get back to the remains of the *Akula*. Was it still inside of the shark? It had been swallowed. I hit a health potion as I tramped toward Tran. I picked him up and pulled him over my shoulder.

"Can you see the boat? If we get inside, we won't have to deal with the pressure," I called.

"Yes. It's about halfway down the shark's throat," Katia called, pulling up next to me. She'd reverted to her she-hulk form. We couldn't swim. We had to walk, like we were pushing through a blizzard. She looked as if she might vomit.

"Okay," I said, struggling to speak. We didn't have far to go. "Let's get back in there."

As we trudged back to the boat, Vadim finally answered us.

Vadim: I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I panicked. It was stupid. I sealed the room.

Carl: We'll worry about that later. Just chill there for a bit. We're coming to you.

Vadim: I sealed the room. I had to. The door is different. It's not going to let me open it again if there's water on the other side. I can't get out, and I just got a warning about my oxygen levels. I have five minutes left, and then I must use the last escape hatch. I'm sorry.

Goddamnit.

Carl: The boat is still inside the damn shark. I don't know if it'll work. It might. It might not. Do you have a shield spell? Make sure you turn it on before you try it.

Katia had, in her inventory, a group of empty, reinforced barrels welded together and attached by a chain that she could pull from her inventory, and they'd rocket to the surface like a balloon. We didn't have to worry about decompression stops. We'd designed

them so we'd be able to quickly ascend from a depth of 500 meters. But we were now on the damn ocean floor, and I knew they'd crush like tin cans the moment she pulled them out. The depth charges had gone off, and they were in thicker containers than the barrels.

Maybe if she wrapped herself around them. I didn't know. We'd have to try.

"Look!" Katia said, pointing up.

I looked. Above us, thousands of the giant jellyfish floated. They were everywhere, glowing blue. They filled the world above us.

"There's a layer of smaller jellyfish below them, too," Tran groaned from my shoulder. He was losing five percent of health per second. Luckily we all had literally dozens of healing potions. But even that many would soon run low.

Carl: Uh, Vadim. Maybe I should blow the hatch to get you out. I don't think you should try it.

Ahead, a mighty hissing noise filled the water. A line of bubbles appeared as the escape pod rocketed up and away, like the glass elevator at the end of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory.* It'd popped out at a steep angle, but the elevator-like escape hatch curved upward until it was headed straight up.

"Son of a bitch," I said, following his trajectory. "He punched right through the top of the shark. We should've had him do it while it was still alive."

He also punched through the line of jellyfish like they weren't even there. He was soon gone. I knew that the elevator surrounding him would peel away once he was out of the water, and he'd land, supposedly gently, in the necropolis. I had no idea how that was going to work. I suspected it'd be through one of the entrance holes at the top.

"Don't be too jealous," Katia muttered. "He's going to find himself alone in the necropolis."

"Yeah, at least he's out of here. You know what we're gonna have to do, right?" I said. "They're pretty much making us do it."

"I know," Katia said. "We'll wait until everyone is in safe rooms."

Vadim: Oh god, oh god. They're in the pod with me. Oh god.

Carl: What? What?
Vadim: The pain amplifier…
Warning: This message is from a deceased crawler.
"Yikes," was all I could bring myself to say.

Neither Bobby nor Morris the human spider guy answered me. It didn't say either of the tomb raiders was dead on my chat, so I didn't know what was going on there. But we couldn't wait any longer. Everyone else was in a safe room. Donut, Louis, and Firas were back in Hump Town. They were in the personal space with Juice Box and half the town. Juice Box was not taking the death of her brother well. I was having Donut and Mordecai relay to her what we wanted her to do, and Donut believed she was going to agree.

We weren't certain enough of the coordinates to the top of the Necropolis, so we had to dial in the location just outside of Pandinus, the town on the land quadrant. The plan was simple. We'd use the Gate of the Feral Gods to teleport ourselves to the town and then we'd get our asses to a saferoom as the god was summoned, and then we'd see what happened next.

I was keenly aware that we were possibly about to fuck over everybody in the bubble. Gwen was pretty vocal with this fact, but even she seemed morbidly curious about what was going to happen next. I also worried about the safety of Chris and Maggie, but there really wasn't anything I could do about it. If the mountain exploded or something, we'd all probably be dead. Not just them.

The necropolis remained half-filled with water. I'd had her turn off the drain once I read how to kill Quetzalcoatlus. And now thanks to the Map of the Stars I'd received from the city boss corpse, we'd be able to see exactly where she, along with every other boss, was on the map. Katia could actually see her right now, and she was right by the exit, still fully submerged.

Once the storm started in a few hours, the lightning would hopefully hit the tower and zap everything still inside the submerged

parts of the necropolis. And probably the water quadrant, too, which was another reason why we had to get the hell out of here.

"Ready?" I said. I'd already dialed in the first watch and placed it in the first spot of the winding box. The second watch was also dialed to the time. We'd stepped back out onto the ocean floor.

"Let's do it," Katia said. Tran nodded nervously.

"Remember. Go through quickly. Don't linger in the middle. I'll go last."

I placed the second watch in, closed the lip, and turned the winding mechanism on the box of the watch. It took less than a second for it to start to glow.

Quest Complete. The Gate of the Feral Gods.

I opened the winding box, and it rumbled in my hand. A swirling portal appeared in front of us, huge, bigger than I expected. The portal was twenty feet tall.

"Gah," I cried as the three of us were instantly sucked through before I could even examine it.

We splashed onto the beach outside of the small pazuzu town, surrounded by a wall of water. I hadn't realized the ocean water would get sucked in, too. Luckily the portal had closed the moment I'd been pulled through. I looked about to make sure both Katia and Tran had made it. They had.

Even though the portal had only been open for about three or four seconds, the spray of pressurized water had been enough to topple over the metal wall just outside the town of Pandinus. A guard tower had also fallen over. Further down the street, a wide-eyed pazuzu peered from his home. A chunk of metal had pierced through his front door, skewering it like a javelin. If we'd kept the gate open any longer, it would've done the same thing to this town that we'd done to the sandcastle. Whoops.

"Into town," I said, "Quick." Even though we were out of the water, I took another scroll of water breathing to stave off the vomiting that would incapacitate me. A steady wind blew across the beach. The sun had already gone down. The three of us turned and ran toward the closest pub.

New Achievement! Who Let the Gods Out?

You have allowed a feral god to enter your current realm. That is the equivalent of dropping a grenade down your pants and shouting, "Yolo!"

Here's a fun fact. Other gods don't like feral gods. They've been thrown into the Nothing for a reason. They tend to react to this sort of thing, depending on who you've brought out.

***Reward*: Whatever is about to happen is going to hit the *Dungeon Crawler World* blooper reel for sure.**

We stumbled toward the closest inn. Gwen and the rest of her team were there, waiting for us. A pazuzu stared at us as we burst inside, sopping wet. "Follow me!" I yelled at the bartender, moving toward the door to the personal space. It didn't follow, and I spent a maddening full minute giving permission to Gwen and her people so they could get inside.

We fell into the room, which was already packed, landing in a heap in front of Donut and Mordecai.

Donut leaped down from the counter and sniffed at me.

"Really, Carl. You smell terrible. And you have seaweed in your hair."

I started to vomit seawater onto the floor.

Outside, the world rumbled.

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[28]

Time to level collapse: 3 Days, 20 hours.

The walls shook. A terrible screeching filled the world. Multiple children sat within the safe room, just like the last time, and they all huddled together, no longer paying attention to the movie on the screen, which appeared to be the original *Space Jam*.

"Open your boxes," Mordecai said, keeping his voice down. "Let the world settle first before we go out there and see what you did."

Juice Box stood nearby in her human form, leaning over Ruby, the changeling girl with compression sickness. The armless child was also in human form, and her sunken-in head looked especially disconcerting. I thought of Henrik, who had died trying to do something, anything, to keep this from happening again to his people.

I continued to watch Juice Box. "What did she say?" I asked Mordecai, not moving yet to open my boxes. The woman patted the girl on the head and then moved to another group of children.

"I think she'll do it, but not for free," Mordecai said. "We offered to send them all through, but she is rightfully afraid of that option."

"Okay," I said. "Let's see if we survive the next few hours first."

"Carl," Donut said, also whispering. "Do you remember what happened with Fire Brandy and that dwarf on the last floor? When they started to remember, I mean."

"I do," I said. I remembered exactly what happened with Fire Brandy and Tizquick the dwarf. Once they realized they were NPCs, they'd killed themselves by crashing the *Nightmare* into the abyss.

"I think that's happening with Juice Box, too. When we told her that her brother died, she said she was sad at first, but then she got really happy. Then she said she'd been dreaming that she was a school teacher, but a bunch of people came in and had to kill all of the students because the children were spreading a disease. She had touched one of the people who'd killed the children, and he was a dragon-headed guy. She has the ability to turn into one of those creatures, but she's never *really* touched one. Only in her dream. Louis told her that was because she was an NPC and she was maybe remembering the last time she'd been in the dungeon, and she got a really funny look on her face. The same look you get when you look at that picture of Miss Beatrice on my nightstand."

"We'll need to be careful with her," I said.

I also caught sight of Britney, the last surviving member of Vadim's team. She'd been on the flying house, so she'd come in with Donut. She sat huddled up against the corner of the space where the crafting room met the back wall. She'd railed at him not to go, and he'd gone anyway. He'd died because of it.

He should've listened to her. We all would've been better off. I sighed.

I thumbed over my shoulder, indicating outside. "Mordecai, are those feral god things invulnerable like regular gods are?"

Mordecai shook his head. "My boy, I have no clue. I've seen a few random ones here or there, usually as part of a storyline on the tenth or eleventh or twelfth floor. I watched one die once on the recap episode, but that was during the Celestial Ascendency, and *all* gods lose their invulnerability on the 12th. My gut says it won't be invulnerable, but I don't know for certain. Now open your goddamn

boxes. You have a fan box that needs to get the timer going on, and you have your first gold boss box."

"Wait, you got a boss box?" Donut suddenly exclaimed. "Why did Carl and Katia get boss boxes, but I didn't? I dropped the death charges! I thought we'd just all gotten screwed out of boxes because we always get screwed out of boxes."

"Maybe if you'd gotten wet with us, you'd have one too," I said.

"If I had gone in there, I would've been smushed on the ocean floor. You know how I feel about getting smushed. I'm not one of your hamsters, Carl." She continued to mutter angrily under her breath. "First he goes up three levels when I only go up one, and he also gets a box. This is an outrage!"

Mongo, who'd been getting his stomach rubbed by Langley, hopped up and screeched in agreement.

Outside, the world rumbled again. We all stopped to look uncertainly at the ceiling.

I had, indeed, gone up three levels to 47. Katia had also ascended three levels, taking her to 44. Donut was level 39, which worried me. She was still well above average, but I was starting to outpace her. She still had the most stat points by far thanks to her enhanced growth benefit, but this floor had really hindered her progress. Those five days in a time out had not helped.

I pulled up my list of missed achievements, and I was surprised at the number of them. The quantity of achievements had been steadily decreasing the more time we spent in the dungeon, but this was probably the most I'd ever received at once. I realized I'd received one of them seven times. I thought it was a mistake at first until I saw the description.

The AI was in rare form as he read this out. He was especially enthusiastic and giddy.

New Achievement! Rock Bottom!

You dived more than 1,000 meters below the surface, and you survived! You weren't even wearing one of those

deep-diving suits! The next thing you know, they're gonna start calling you an honorary mudskipper!

***Reward*: You've received a Gold I'm Wet Box!**

New Achievement! Fight the Power! (x7)

I'm not repeating this shit over and over, but you got seven of these bad boys all at the same time.

You and I have been named co-defendants in an action brought to the Syndicate Court by a third party, and we have been deemed—drum roll please—victorious! Why did they sue us? If you don't already know why, you probably will never know. This is a rare event, but when it happens, crawlers usually lose these fights since they can't afford a lawyer, being slaves and all. Plus I'll throw you under the bus quicker than you can say "Arch Support." But that doesn't matter because today, victory is ours! Chalk one up for the little guy!

This is one of the rare achievements that may be awarded more than once.

***Reward*: You've received a Silver Summary Judgement box! (x7)**

New Achievement! Janet Jackson's Nipple!

You have been featured during a live special event. Sure you got your loyal followers and viewers, but this is on a whole new level. This is like getting to play the halftime show during the Super Bowl. We brought you to the stage, now dance for us, monkey. Dance!

***Reward*: You have received a Platinum Fan Box!**

Note: Voting is now enabled on this box's prize. Box will become available in 30 hours.

This next one was in the AI's creepy, I'm touching myself voice. I suppressed a shudder.

New Achievement! Soft Vore!

You got eaten by a monster much bigger than yourself, and you managed to get out without even getting chewed a little bit.

Uh-oh. I think Daddy kinda liked that. I think it moved.

We're gonna have to do some experimenting with this one.

***Reward*: You've received a Platinum Spicy Box.**

New Achievement! Flex in the City!

You killed a city boss with the participation of five or less crawlers. That is some serious badassery right there. Color me impressed. Now go do it again with a Province Boss.

***Reward*: You already got a boss box. Go open that instead.**

I received 10 other achievements, mostly regarding jumping around on the ocean floor, giving me a handful of regular adventurer and I'm wet boxes. To my left, Tran was opening his boxes with Gwen and the others, and they were gawking at all he'd received. Next to me, Katia was quietly going through her loot as well. I noted she hadn't received either the Summary Judgement boxes or the spicy box.

I wasn't sure why she hadn't received that weird "vore" achievement, whatever that meant. That was likely just one of those discretionary prizes the AI gave out. It wasn't even a little bit fair, but I wasn't about to complain about getting an extra box. At least I wasn't going to complain *yet*. If the AI decided it had a thing for me

getting swallowed alive, then that was going to be a problem. It was hard for me to tell if it was being serious or not.

I looked at the line of **Summary Judgement** boxes. The last time the AI had gotten sued was when we'd been screwed out of the celestial boxes, and the system had been so butthurt over it, it had rewarded us with a ton of personal space coupons.

The fact we'd gotten sued at all was testament to the notion that my plan was both possible and had merit. And that Borant hadn't yet patched the game to disallow what I was going to attempt suggested that they had no problem with it, either. Zev even chimed in to ask me to reword my earlier conversation with Donut and Katia regarding my idea.

Katia gasped as she opened the boss box, and a backpack appeared. Donut was pouting at her lack of loot and was making an effort to pretend like she was watching the movie, though nobody was paying attention anymore. The world outside continued to rumble and shake. There was a sound, too, like a stifled whimper.

I started opening my loot.

None of the adventurer boxes contained any more Water Breathing scrolls, though I did receive a handful more with the bronze I'm Wet boxes. It was mostly the regular stuff. Junk clothing items and weapons. Healing potions and mana restorations. A single invisibility potion. Hobgoblin dynamite. I was also starting to receive something called Good Healing Potions, which Mordecai said was a sign that I was progressing nicely.

I did receive something a little concerning, however. Mordecai's "uh-oh" when it appeared didn't help.

Potion of Dinosaur Repellent.

Drink this if your party is attacked by a pack of dinosaurs, and they'll eat you last. Effect lasts a full 30 hours.

All seven of the silver Summary Judgement boxes contained three items.

"What the hell?" I muttered as they appeared one by one. Mordecai appeared equally confused.

Each box contained one gold piece, a **Stock Certificate** equal to one share, and a photograph. All seven of the stock certificates

looked different. Some were paper. One was an actual egg covered in writing. Another was printed on glass. The photos were all the same size, but depicted a different creature.

I picked up the first photo, and it was of a familiar type of orc. It was just an 8x10 color photograph on regular photo paper. It had no magical or special abilities at all. It portrayed a young, beefy female completely decked out in an overly-flowery and intricate Shakespeare-time dress. She wore a gaudy crown on her head. It reminded me of one of those ridiculous renaissance paintings people would get of their dogs and cats, but this time with a wild boar.

Mother of Plaintiff #1, Prince Stalwart of the Skull Empire.

This photograph portrays Queen Consort Ugloo of the Skull Empire. Portrait taken upon her Age Day ceremony.

"What the hell?" I said again.

The second photograph was an insectoid creature, but the rest of the photos disappeared into my inventory before I could fully examine them.

Mordecai just sat there with his beak open. "I… I think the AI just gave you photographs of the mothers of all the plaintiffs in that lawsuit."

"Why?"

He didn't answer as the Gold I'm Wet box opened, revealing a prize I wished I'd had all along. It was a glowing, blue ring that twinkled with little sparkles. Katia and Tran had also received this exact same prize.

Ring of Water Breathing.

If you wear this ring, you can breathe underwater. You can still breathe on land, too. That makes you an amphibian. Did you know that all amphibians swallow their prey whole? That's such an interesting fact.

-1 Charisma

"Don't wear that unless you are actually going into water," Mordecai warned as it disappeared. "It makes you grow gills, and it makes your skin slimy."

Next came the boss box. Even though this was only a gold box, I knew this was *supposed* to be the best prize of the lot. I wasn't expecting much. The box swirled and spun, little clockwork gears ratcheting loudly as it peeled open like a banana.

The item appeared in a puff of magic smoke. A black bandana. It looked like a standard bandana, like the one I'd wear at work to cover my nose and mouth when the stench from the docks got too much. It was decorated with a typical white, paisley pattern.

Mordecai made a little gasp. I didn't have time to read the full description before it disappeared. I was too caught off guard by the item's name. I felt my pulse quicken.

Drakea's Enchanted Kerchief of Disorder.

Drakea was the author of the 22nd edition of the *Dungeon Anarchist's Cookbook*, and he (or she, I wasn't really sure) was also a crawler during the final naga-controlled season, which had suffered some sort of cataclysm. I needed to pretend I'd never heard the name before. My hands were shaking as the last item opened, the platinum Spicy box.

Three items popped out.

The first was a black, sleeveless, jacket made of a thick canvas. It glowed with a very subtle light, almost purple. The second item was a tiny, round patch depicting the planet earth. The thing was the size of a half-dollar. It wasn't attached to the jacket, but it was clearly meant to be sewed on. The third item was a small, unenchanted sewing kit. It had two spools of thread, white and red. We'd already looted something similar from the floating house.

Donut immediately jumped to the table and started inspecting the small patch.

"Damn," Mordecai said. "You got really good loot this time. The dungeon is starting to solidify your look for you. That's a patch jacket. That means it has upgrade slots. Lots of upgrade slots. We're gonna need to find you more patches as soon as possible."

Other than my zippo, my current jacket was my only remaining artifact from when I entered the dungeon. The old leather jacket was burned to hell, covered with holes, and missing an arm. The

zipper had broken two floors ago, and it smelled pretty bad, too. I was glad to finally be rid of it.

"This is just a screen print," Donut said, pushing the patch aside with a strange amount of disgust. "Amateur hour. It really is a shame we've walked away from the fine art of embroidery."

"What? What're you talking about?" I asked. Donut harumphed and returned her attention to the movie. I picked up the jacket and examined it.

Enchanted Anarchist's Battle Rattle.

This sleeveless jacket in its current form only offers meager protections compared to some other items of this caliber. However, its ability to host as many upgrade patches as you can fit makes this one of the best, most upgradeable protection items in the game.

The plain, unadorned version of this jacket imbues the following effects:

+1 to all base stats.

This base stat upgrade increases by +1 for every compatible patch that is added to this jacket. If an eligible Back Patch is added, this benefit is doubled.

Access to the Desperado Club (already obtained)

Access to the Naughty Boys Employment Agency (already obtained)

+50% range and accuracy for all thrown explosives.

"Hell yeah," I said. The range benefit alone made this one of the most valuable items I had. I picked up the patch.

Upgrade Patch. Small.

This patch depicts the planet Earth, which is currently under the regency of the Borant System.

Ahh, the planet earth. A whole lot of culture. A whole lot of spunk. So many dumbasses.

If this upgrade patch is affixed to an eligible garment, it will imbue the following upgrades:

+5% to Strength.

Immunity from cloud-based attacks.

Warning: Upgrade patches are fleeting items. You may remove them, but they will be destroyed in the process.

"You already have several immunities, but this is another layer of protection," Mordecai said. "You'll want to sew that on right away. Just keep in mind you'll want to maximize the available space. The bandana is also really good. You'll have to wear it around your head or as a mask. Your neck slot is taken by your cloak."

Drakea's Enchanted Kerchief of Disorder.

This handy-dandy, versatile garment can be worn around the neck, in the hair, or on your face if you want to cosplay as a cowboy robbing a bank. Can also be tied around your arms or legs, but only if you want to look like a moron. Don't tie it around your leg.

This simple, square piece of fabric is a reminder that looks can be deceiving. The wearer of this item receives the following benefits:

+5 to the Detect Traps skill.

Wearer may cast a level-15 *Tripper* spell once every five hours.

The Remote Detonator benefit.

The Tripper spell was something I'd seen a few times during class selection, but at level 15, it had a very wide radius. The only problem was that I could only cast it once every five hours.

Tripper

A lot of people say crawlers who use this spell are chickenshit cowards. But then again, those same people are sitting at home covered in Cheeto mud watching this show while wearing pajamas.

This spell automatically triggers all passage, motion, heat, and weight-based traps in a certain radius.

Cost: This is an item-based spell. This spell does not require mana to cast. If you unequip the associated item, you will lose access to this spell. The cooldown will not reset.

Target: a 10-meter radius sphere centered around the right hand of caster + 10 meters of radius per level of

Intelligence.

Duration: instantaneous.

This spell is one of those good news, bad news situations. If you have your intelligence high enough, you can automagically trigger every trap in the quadrant with the snap of the finger. Blades will fall. Bombs will explode. Electrodes will zap. It's great fun.

Here's the catch. This triggers the traps. It doesn't disarm them. If you don't know why that might be bad, then you're probably gonna die anyway, so I wouldn't worry about it.

The spell was great, but I knew a lot of those traps involved throwing monsters at you. So it could be dangerous if it wasn't utilized properly. We were already planning on using clockwork Mongos as minesweepers if we found ourselves in a heavy trap area. This would ease the load on Donut.

The real prize was the remote detonator benefit.

Remote Detonator.

If you're one of those explodey guys, I bet you use a lot of Hobgoblin Pus or Troll Boom-Boom Paste to make your bombs pop. Those days are now over. This benefit allows you to magically remote-detonate any explosive that has been designated by you.

This benefit offers multiple physical and interface-based triggering options when combined with a Sapper's table.

"This is pretty awesome," I said. I took the bandana and tied it around my head.

"Hmm," Donut said, examining the bandana. "We're gonna have to work on this vibe. You look like a cross between someone wearing a racist Halloween costume and an old dude desperately trying to be a rock star even though he's too old and is really just a bass player. It's not working for me. Maybe once you get that new jacket on, though I suppose you'll have to attach that awful patch first."

"I remember Drakea," Mordecai said, leaning in to adjust my bandana with a talon. "He was a pretty famous crawler. He had a

similar class to your own, though more magic-based. He was partly responsible for what happened to the nagas."

Drakea had more comments in the cookbook than anybody else. He commented on everything. He never really talked about himself, but he filled pages and pages with borderline-insane ranting against the nagas. He built elaborate traps using magical items and triggers I probably wouldn't ever be able to utilize.

"What happened that season?"

Mordecai looked pointedly up in the air. Apparently this was a taboo subject. He seemed hesitant to answer, but I persisted as tactfully as I could. This was my first opportunity to learn the fate of one of my brothers, and I found myself overwhelmed with the need to know as much as possible.

"What sort of creature was he?"

"He was a bune," Mordecai said. "They are a slight, dragon-like people. Naturally peaceful, but they can be some of the most clever fighters. That was his real race. I've seen a few crawlers this season who've picked it. Good rogues and magic casters, but they have low constitution. They grow wings and get a dexterity bonus when they hit level 50. If crocodilians are the barbarians of the lizard world, think of the bune as the elves."

"Did he make it out?"

Mordecai sighed. "He died on the eleventh floor. Or was it the twelfth? I don't remember. He'd gotten a pretty good offer, and he spit in their faces. He was a big trap guy. He had some elaborate setup, and it backfired." Mordecai paused, again glancing at the ceiling uncertainly. "It *unnaturally* backfired. Lawyers got involved. The Syndicate, acting on his behalf, collected a pretty big sum from the Sultanate, who'd already been kicked in the teeth a dozen times over that season."

I felt an odd surge of elation and outrage. They'd gotten him by cheating, but he had the last laugh. He'd help bankrupt the nagas.

I pulled one of the seven stock certificates from my inventory.

Stock Certificate.

The bearer of this instrument now holds one share of common stock in the Sigmund Textiles Foundry, a publicly-

traded company based in the Gun-ya system within the Skull Empire and traded via the I.R.F.

Last recorded value per share: 10.422 credits.

"What the hell?" I said.

"Odd," Mordecai agreed. "I can't remember what the I.R.F. stands for, but it's like the biggest stock exchange in the universe. Crawlers shouldn't be receiving anything with credit value. You're not even allowed to gamble at the credit tables on the Desperado Club's 9th floor."

I pulled the rest of the certificates out, and all seven basically said the same thing, though each one was a different, publicly-traded company. All averaged in value of about 10 credits, which apparently wasn't very much.

"Each stock is from a company that is based in the system of one of the plaintiffs in the suit against you," Mordecai said. "It's like the AI is doing it to needle at the plaintiffs."

"Are these real?" I asked. "How does the system even have access to this sort of thing?"

"I have no idea," Mordecai said. "The whole AI seems to be going insane." He looked up. "No offense."

"And it also gave me a photo of each plaintiff's mom," I said, leafing through the pictures. "That's really… fucked up." It was also, I realized, very valuable. I now knew the identity of the seven factions who had tried to take the gate away from me. I already knew a bit about the twelve different factions who regularly played faction wars. There were nine slots each season, and five of those were always taken by teams who'd purchased legacy spots. The remaining four slots were usually, but not always, taken by one of seven different nations. Since the naga weren't one of the factions who'd sued but were going to participate, I now knew the identity of eight of the nine teams that we would have to deal with on that ninth level.

But was that the reason the AI had given me these photos and the stock certificates? Was it to give me information? Was it just to

be a dick? It was like something middle-school kids would do. *Haha I drew a pic of your mom.*

Louis leaned over the table to look at the seven photos. "Dude, who's the hottie?" he said, picking up a photo of a very angry-looking, bald elf woman. She had smoldering blue eyes and bone white skin. The description had her as **Epitome Noflex of the Dream**. The "Dream" were zebra-riding elves who liked to use poison and druid magic. And long-range artillery. The outside-the-dungeon version of these guys were just as humorless as the Skull Empire and controlled half of the universe's food supplies.

Louis did not need to be seen talking about some alien billionaire's mother.

"No," was all I managed to say as I tried to grab the photo from him, but he pulled it from my reach.

"Hey, Juice Box," he called, waving the photo. "Can I get another session, but where you look like this chick? She's the hottest thing I've ever seen. She's giving off serious Gelfling meets the Borg queen vibes, and I am all in."

"Goddamnit, Louis," I said, ripping the photo from his hands.

"Keep these in your inventory," Mordecai said, looking alarmed.

"I think the AI gave these to us just to piss off the factions."

"That's worrisome," Mordecai said. "The AI is supposed to help monitor prohibited speech against the sponsors. Not go all-in and participate. This usually ends up happening, but it's always at the end. The system is usually pretty bonkers by the time the twelfth floor rolls around. Like I said before, its personality rarely shines through this early. There's a reason why the Syndicate has strict rules about Macro AI intelligences. Some believe that your people learned this the hard way. The primals, I mean, not the humans. All large-scale AIs eventually go insane. There's even a term for it. Primal Degeneration. Going primal."

"So what do they do when the crawl is over? Take the AI out behind the woodshed and shoot it?"

"No. A Macro AI is a lifeform, and it's protected by Syndicate law. They're given their own closed and sealed system where they're allowed to bounce around for the rest of eternity."

"Are you fucking kidding me? The *computer*'s life is protected?" I took a deep breath. This was not a conversation to be having out loud.

Outside, the world rumbled again, but it was starting to settle. Whatever had happened, what we had released from the prison of the Nothing was still out there. But it seemed as if it had stopped knocking shit down.

"I'm gonna stick my head out there," I said. Before I could go, I received a message.

Elle: Carl. Something tells me this is your doing.

Surprised, I took a quick glance at my main chat window, and it was filled with panicked people.

Carl: I don't think so. What's going on?

Elle: A flaming giant just smashed through our little world here. We finally popped our bubble, and suddenly a god taller than the height of the damn place just walked right through. He smooshed an entire Lyrx Elf village and knocked over two of their oil derricks and caught them on fire. Half of the world is in flames. Imani and I are stuck in the Desperado, but almost everybody else had to flee into the stairwell. We're lucky nobody caught on fire.

Carl: Our bubble is still intact.

Elle: It's some fire god named Emberus. He's really pissed off. He's looking for something. He keeps shouting "Orthrus" over and over. I don't think he can see inside of the bubbles that haven't popped yet. He's trashing all the ones that are popped. Look at the main chat.

I suddenly felt ill. Uh-oh.

Carl: Uh. So, yeah. Maybe this was our doing. I'm not sure yet.

Elle: Well you better fix it.

I quickly related to Mordecai and the others what was happening.

"Hang on," Mordecai said. "I'll be right back." He disappeared into the training room as the world rumbled again. Each crash was weaker than the last.

"Man, I hope the *Twister* is okay," Louis said.

"The Twister?" I asked, distracted. Holy shit. If that god was looking for what we summoned. What *I* summoned, then this was my fault.

"That's what we named the house," Firas replied, coming to stand next to us. "It's parked right outside of town. Louis wanted to call it the *Tiddy Twister II*, but I told him we're trying to be more mature. Plus Katia wouldn't let us."

"The original *Tiddy Twister* was my van," Louis added.

"I thought it was your mom's van," I said.

"It pretty much became mine once I chopped the top off."

Katia also came to stand with us while we waited for Mordecai to return. She was equally horrified.

"God, I hope people are getting away," she said.

Donut jumped to my shoulder. "Carl, this *Space Jam* movie doesn't make any sense. Why are half of them cartoons?"

I reached up and petted her. I suddenly wished I had her ability to just detach from everything. "Next time, pay attention." I turned to Katia. "Hey, what was that backpack you got?"

She smiled, but without humor. "It's pretty much the same backpack you designed for my mass storage, but it's adjustable, so I can carry even more, and it won't break. It gives me a stability enhancement while I'm wearing it. It also has retractable stilts that makes loading a lot easier. I can add large amounts of mass much more quickly now."

"Really?" I said, suddenly intrigued. "So they actually made something new for you? Or do you think it was something already invented?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. It's good, but it sounds like you got all the best stuff this time."

I swallowed, suddenly feeling dirty. "Jesus. We should have tried to swim out of there."

"Carl," Donut said. "Do you really think they gave you a choice? You were set up to summon that thing. Otherwise you all would've died like that plastic surgeon guy."

Mordecai returned, holding the Samantha head by the hair. He plopped the possessed sex doll head onto the kitchen counter. She

was cackling wildly.

"What the fuck is that?" Gwen asked, coming to stand with us.

Juice Box was also suddenly there. She reached over and touched the head. Her eyes went wide.

"Guys, meet Samantha," I said.

"We just hired her as our new trainer!" Donut added.

I adjusted the love doll's mouth so she could talk, and she continued to cackle. "The feather boy tells me Emberus is rampaging. And he's yelling for Orthrus, which means you let him out of the Nothing. He's blind, you know. Emberus. He plucked his own eyes out when his son died."

"So Orthrus is from the Nothing? Who is he?" I asked, feeling sick. It was confirmed, then. This was our doing.

"Emberus is a god. One of the big ones. Has a bunch of kids, but only really liked the dead one. Likes to kill people by setting their faces on fire. You know how it goes. He's my great uncle. And my cousin, too, I think. It gets confusing. He and I never talked much."

"It's a talking sex doll!" Louis exclaimed.

"Whoa," Firas said. He leaned in and poked at the head.

"I'm going to kill your mother," Samantha said. She made a growling noise at Firas, who skittered back.

"Samantha, who is Orthrus?" I asked again.

"Oh, yes. His little doggie. He's so cute. Orthrus got sucked into the Nothing accidentally the same time the son was murdered. It's a really long story. But Emberus probably wants the dog back. Also, he's a big asshole, so don't expect a reward." She started laughing maniacally. "Once, there was this drunk guy walking home from a pub, and he dropped his torch, and he took a tinkle directly on the flames, snuffing it out. Emberus found out and took offense. He destroyed the entire country. He woke up a volcano and covered the whole world with lava. Even Eris was pissed at him. He's funny like that. You guys are so fucking dead."

"Orthrus is a dog?" Donut asked, starting to poof out.

"A puppy! He's a really good boy."

<u>Bautista</u>: Hey man. We're going down into the stairwell. A giant god thing is going berserk out here. See you on the

other side.

Other messages came from groups who weren't as lucky. One set of people were trapped in their saferoom while the mountain above them burned. Another group, inside of an intact bubble, said the god was currently standing right outside, and even though he couldn't get in, their whole world was starting to heat up. They said the saferoom door was glowing red hot. I received a panicked message from another crawler inside that same bubble. I recognized her name.

Tserendolgor: We need help. I was crawling along the inside of the bubble wall, looking for the last slot to put the final gem. We were almost goddamned there. Then this giant, empty eye socket thing appeared just on the other side of the bubble. It called me Orthrus and started screaming. Now it's pounding on the bubble wall. The world is getting hotter by the moment. The mountain walls are starting to glow. Everything is going to melt. Someone please help us. There's 160 of us in here, and we haven't lost a person yet. We were almost done. It's not fucking fair.

We'd met the woman crawler at the end of the previous floor. She was a German Shepherd-looking creature called a dog soldier. She and Donut had gotten into a spat. I remembered the woman's main weapon was a flame thrower.

"Goddamnit," I said. This was my fault. I explained to the others the message.

"He thinks that experience hog lady is *his* dog!" Donut said.

"Uh, isn't his real dog, like huge?" Louis asked, looking up as the walls rumbled.

"It doesn't matter. We need to get the real damn dog back to his owner," I said.

"The only way to do that is to first get the bubble popped," Katia said.

I glanced at my clock. We had less than an hour before the lightning was supposed to start.

"We need to get moving," I said.

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[29]

"The storm is already starting to blow. The lightning will come at any minute," Gwen said as our small group pushed our way out of the personal space. It was me, Katia, Gwen, and Tran. Donut had entered the saferoom from Hump Town, so she was on a different mission, high above us. The pazuzu barkeep remained huddled behind his bar. He pointed with a shaking hand outside, but I couldn't see anything. Night had fully descended. Wind howled. Even though the ocean remained half-drained and was usually calm, waves splashed against the windows.

I checked the boss map. I could see that Quetzalcoatlus was bouncing around the lower part of the temple. There were no other bosses down there. In fact, it appeared the earlier flooding had killed just about everything. It also looked as if multiple pieces of the crypt had been torn away. The tomb raider guys were still MIA. I had no idea if Chris was safe or even if he was still in his spot.

"I don't see the dog on the map," I said as we exited the pub. "Maybe it wasn't very… oh fuck me."

I hadn't noticed the dog on the map because the orange star took up the entirety of my overlay, and the minimap had helpfully dimmed it for me.

Orthrus filled almost half the available space of the bubble. Like a dog that was trapped under a laundry basket.

In the darkness, I could only see the parts closest to us. The creature stood on two, bowed, fuzzy legs, erupting out of the water

like a massive pair of hairy and wet parentheses. High above and directly over us, its pudgy and pink belly smooshed up against the side of the necropolis. Stone and debris rained down with each breath. Its fore legs disappeared over the bowl. From above, I imagined it appeared the dog was eagerly hanging over a fence, waiting for his master to come home. If we were on the other side of the island, we could probably see its front paws dangling over the top. I imagined the dog's head likely reached all the way to the very top of the bubble.

The world stank like wet dog.

About fifty feet over our heads, the puppy's testicles were retracted, indicating the creature was still very young. The twin lumps were like a pair of domed sports arenas. If he decided he needed to pee, we'd be drowned.

"Now I know how a flea feels when he sees a dog," Tran muttered.

Waves continued to crash onto the beach and into the town. With each movement, a new tsunami appeared, sometimes splashing over our heads. Behind the enormous body, a *swish, swish, swish* noise filled the night, louder even than the wind.

It was the puppy's tail, I realized. He was wagging his goddamned tail.

A whimper filled the night. It wasn't loud, but strangled. And sad. The cry of a puppy who hadn't yet learned how to howl.

"Poor guy," Katia said. "He's just a puppy, and he's probably really scared."

A second howl filled the darkness, joining the first, equally mournful.

"What?" I said. "Is there two of them?"

Donut: THIS THING IS JUST REVOLTING. ALSO, IT'S A WOLF, WHICH IS EVEN WORSE. AT LEAST REGULAR DOGS GET BATHS EVERY NOW AND THEN. IT'S WET, AND IT SMELLS. I DON'T UNDERSTAND WHY ANYONE WOULD WANT ONE OF THESE THINGS IN THEIR HOME. ONE OF HIS TWO HEADS IS CHEWING ON THE SIDE OF THE BOWL. THE OTHER IS LICKING AT THE CEILING AND DROOLING AND

WHINING AT THE SAME TIME. THE BOWL IS LITERALLY FILLING UP WITH DROOL, CARL. YOU KNOW HOW I FEEL ABOUT DROOL. THIS IS LIKE A NIGHTMARE. DISGUSTING. I THINK WE SHOULD KILL IT AND PUT BOTH OF US OUT OF OUR MISERY.

Two heads? Holy shit.

Carl: Goddamnit, Donut. Don't linger. Don't let it see you. Get to the Desperado.

Donut was supposed to run from the exit straight to the Desperado Club, where she'd meet up with Imani and Elle and several other groups of crawlers.

Donut: KEEP YOUR BOXERS ON, CARL. I'M ALREADY THERE.

"It's moving!" Katia cried.

We hunched over as the legs bowed, and Orthrus did a little jump, like he was trying to get on top of the bowl, despite being much too big. The world quaked. A massive wave of water splashed over us. All of us except Katia fell over. Two hundred feet away, one of the angular, stone statues that dotted the side of the necropolis fell from the sky and crashed into a pazuzu's hut, crushing it.

In that moment as the dog scrambled to change his position, thunder rolled through the sky. I caught sight of something high above in the darkness. It was the shadow of a big, floppy ear. The moment I saw the outline, the creature's description popped up.

Orthrus. Juvenile Gate Guardian. Level 10.

This is a bereft pet of Geyrun.

Who's a good boy? Who's a good boy?

When you see a multi-headed dog trained to guard gates, you probably first think of Cerberus, the three-headed monstrosity that is said to protect one of the stairwell exits on the twelfth floor. What you probably don't know is that grumpy Cerberus has a kid brother who is still learning the ropes.

Orthrus. The most loveable hell-hound on this side of Alpha Centari. The left side is for sniffin' and the right side is for lickin' and that pink belly of his?

It's for kissin'.

If this lil pup was any more sweet and adorable, you'd all be inflicted with diabetes.

The universe's goodest boy was originally destined for a fate like that of his brother. But before the two-headed Orthrus could get turned into a vicious, baby-eating, nun-defiling murder machine, he met with some bad luck. First, his master was murdered, and then he got sucked into the Nothing, all on the same day.

Unlike most creatures who have been touched by the Nothing, Orthrus's pure innocence causes him to be unaffected by the blight. Fire doesn't do a thing, which is good considering his adopted family. But unlike most gods, he is not invulnerable. He is but a little puppy. Happy, but destructive. Rambunctious, roly-poly, very pokey. But fragile.

Which is unfortunate. His master may be dead, but his master's father, Emberus the Fire God, is not. He would not be pleased if anything were to happen to his dead son's best friend.

All four of us started jogging out of town, angling toward the remains of the sandcastle. "How is something the size of the goddamned bubble only level 10?" I asked. "Seriously, will he die if I punch him in the leg?"

"You'd probably get an awesome achievement for that," Gwen said.

"I think that's the point," Katia said. "They make the puppy fragile so he dies. And then this Emberus god gets extra angry."

I looked at the pair of legs rising out of the ocean and had a horrific thought.

"Do you think the lightning is going to hurt it?"

"Oh no," Katia said, bringing her hand to her mouth. "We should disconnect the tower."

"I ain't touching that electrical line while the storm is going," Gwen said.

I'd had Gwen attach that long lead from the drain mechanism to the still-standing lightning tower. I'd also had her turn off the drain so some water remained in the temple. The theory was that the moment the tower was hit with lightning, it would electrify the interior waterways. And since Quetzalcoatlus was vulnerable to lightning, it'd kill her, and we'd hopefully win the quadrant. Each one of these four quadrants had a "cheat." A quick way to kill everything. The knock-knocks on the bottom of the *Wasteland.* The hidden drain on the side of the sandcastle. I wasn't sure what the easy-win scenario was for the *Akula*, but I suspected it had something to do with Lusca the octo-shark. And for the final castle, this lightning tower attack was the fast way.

I didn't want to disconnect it. We didn't have time to deal with yet another mystery and storyline and puzzle. We needed to be done with it. If the lightning killed the dog, then we'd simply have to deal with grandpa. At least the quadrant would be done.

But the moment I thought that, I knew I was kidding myself. Emberus wasn't doing anything to us directly. He was doing it to other crawlers. That was by design. They *knew* it was something that would get my hackles up. It was bait. Obvious bait.

It was the same goddamn bait Hekla had used to get me to go along with her. It had been a trap then, and it was a trap now.

I thought of Lucia Mar, sobbing on the recap. I hadn't seen the episode, but it was clear they'd done something deliberate to torture her. She was their most popular stream, and they were milking it for the drama. That's exactly what they were doing here, too.

You will not break me. Fuck you all. I will break you.

A thunderclap broke the sky directly over our heads. The wind picked up further. Suddenly it was blowing harder than it ever had. The sand took flight, lowering our visibility to nothing. We were actually running *with* the wind, which was good. I could no longer see the dog. The sand felt like needles against my skin. I took my new bandana, and I pulled it over my face like a mask. I pulled up the hood on my cloak.

Lightning flashed again, and the puppy yelped.

New Quest. Where the Red God Glows.

THIS IS A GROUP QUEST. All Crawlers currently within bubble number 543 will receive this quest.

Your party has been designated Host of this Group Quest.

No parties may opt-out of this quest.

Did you ever read the book *Where the Red Fern Grows*?

Oh, it's great. It's about this kid who saves up his money to buy a couple of coonhounds. Little Ann and Old Dan. And there's a naughty cat involved. A bunch of stuff happens.

Anyway, did you ever notice this strange phenomenon when it comes to earth books about dogs? They always die in the end. Always. What kind of sick, sadistic fuckers are you?

Puppies shouldn't ever share a world with pain. Yet here we are. Thanks, earth culture.

Orthrus the giant puppy is getting shocked in the ass by a constant barrage of lightning. He's also getting bitten over and over in the ankles by a bunch of tenacious sharks. It's starting to hurt. Poor little guy. His health is going down.

His death will be the fault of all of you. Especially Crawler Carl, who callously shoved the poor puppy into a bubble much too small and much too dangerous for him.

If Orthrus dies, the full-powered god Emberus will turn this bubble into a kiln. Good luck getting to a stairwell if that happens.

If the puppy survives the lightning storm and escapes the sharks, odds are pretty good you'll die anyway. But at least you'll die knowing you shed this world without ever causing harm to a defenseless puppy.

Oh, except Crawler Maggie My. She once ran over a baby Labrador with her Chevy Tahoe. What a bitch!

***Reward*: It's a surprise.**

"Oh shit," I said as lightning struck again. The dog howled. If there was a health bar over the thing, I couldn't see it. I felt sick all over again. I sent a note to Donut.

Donut: WHAT DID YOU SAY?

Carl: You heard me. Do you have those invisibility potions I gave you? Use them, but only if you absolutely have to. Keep the Mordecai potion ready too. It saved me last time.

Donut: ARE YOU DRUNK?

Carl: I'm sorry. I can't do it myself. You're the only one with the spell. You can do this. I believe in you.

Donut: I LIKED YOU BETTER WHEN YOU WOULDN'T LET ME GO INTO DANGER.

Through the driving sand, I could see our destination. I watched as the towers were struck by lightning. They glowed like a beacon before fading away. Nothing seemed to happen.

"It's not working," Katia said.

"I think the earthquakes might've dislodged the power cable," I said.

The **Quest Chat** notification popped up on the side of my interface as we pushed through the remains of what had once been a group of walls protecting Ghazi's castle. I could see the stairwell on my map, sealed and buried in the blowing sand.

I realized the quest chat suddenly gave me an opportunity I didn't have before. It was a special chat room that only appeared during group quests, and it included everyone in the bubble. I pulled it up. My breath caught in my throat when I saw the list. It listed all of us from the air quadrant, Gwen's team, Britney, and the tomb raider guys. But amongst the tomb raiders, there were only three left. It was Low Thi the D-bag geek, Morris the spider guy, and Bobby the trap finder. All three had **Possessed** after their name.

But there were also two more names at the bottom of the list. Separated. Maggie My and Chris Andrews 2. After Chris's name it said **Enslaved**.

Despite the possessed and enslaved markers, it appeared all of them still had the ability to chat.

Donut had already discovered the chat, and she was absolutely *ripping* into Maggie My, who hadn't yet answered.

Tran ran off along the side of the castle to see what the problem was with the electrical line while Katia hesitantly approached the tower. Above, Orthrus whined, the dog's voice carrying over the

wind. The world rumbled as the dog lifted a leg, trying to gain purchase on dry ground. We all stumbled. In the distance came a mighty crash as part of the temple collapsed.

Donut: …AND JUST BECAUSE YOU KILLED A DOG DOESN'T MAKE UP FOR WHAT YOU DID TO CHRIS. BRANDON DIED THINKING HIS BROTHER WAS MAD AT HIM, AND THAT WAS YOUR FAULT. YOU'RE THE WORST PERSON WHO HAS EVER LIVED, AND I HAVE KNOWN SOME REALLY BAD PEOPLE.

Chris: Donut.

Donut: I ONCE KNEW A LADY WHO USED TO MAKE A HIMALAYAN CAT NAMED PEANUT'S SPLENDID FLAVOR EAT NOTHING BUT A WEIRD DIET WITH NO MEAT AND THEN PEANUT GOT REALLY SICK AND SHE GOT ALOPECIA.

Chris: Donut.

Donut: AND ANOTHER LADY TALKED HER DAUGHTER INTO SELLING A PERFECTLY BEAUTIFUL AND LOYAL CAT AFTER SHE WON GRAND CHAMPION JUST SO THEY COULD PUT HER IN A CAGE AND HAVE BABIES WITH HER OWN UNCLE WHO WAS REALLY SCARY AND MEAN AND MAKE A PROFIT OFF IT.

Chris: Donut. Please.

Donut: AND YOU'RE WORSE THAN ALL OF THEM COMBINED! FRANK GOT REALLY SAD AND WAS DONE BEING A MURDERER, AND HE GAVE CARL THE RING BUT YOU CAME ALONG AND JUST MADE CHRIS KILL HIM AND NOW CHRIS IS BANNED FROM THE DESPERADO CLUB. THAT'S JUST AWFUL. HE'S PROBABLY NEVER GOING TO DANCE AGAIN. MISS BEATRICE USED TO DANCE WITH ME WHEN WE WERE BOTH SAD, AND IT ALWAYS MADE IT A LITTLE BETTER, AND YOU JUST TOOK THAT AWAY.

Carl: Donut. You have something you need to be doing.

Donut: I'M RUNNING AS FAST AS I CAN, CARL. I CAN RUN AND CHAT AT THE SAME TIME.

Carl: Chris, are you guys still trapped in that room?

Chris: We're out. We went down a long ladder and disconnected a wire in the water, and then we attacked a group of crawlers and killed one. Now we're moving back up to the top. Don't know if she reads this chat.

No. No, no, no.

Low Thi: He killed Tyler! We were moving down, and he came out of nowhere and ripped him in half! We ran, but we tripped a trap, and now we're all possessed by ghosts.

Morris Sp: We're not even together anymore. We're wandering aimlessly. Janice walked straight into one of those crushers, and she exploded.

Bobby: I can't do this anymore. I'm done. I'm done. This is too much. This is too much.

Carl: Can you move your hand? Scratch it against the wall. If you damage yourself, I think the ghost will leave your body.

I regretted posting that the moment I hit *send*. It was a mistake. But what else could I do?

There was only one way I could possibly know how to get out of being possessed.

Tran returned. We all scrambled back as lightning struck the double towers again. The whole thing lit up. It hummed for about ten seconds before fading away.

"The wires are still attached," Tran said, breathless. "I don't think there's a break in the line."

Carl: Chris, look we don't have much time. I'm really sorry we didn't listen before. I promise we'll…

Chris: Unimportant. We're back atop the temple. Maggie is cheating. She has outside help. A cap…

Chris has been muted from chat.

His previous notes disappeared from the log.

"Goddamnit," I cried. That was the second time that had happened. I looked up in the air. "This is bullshit!"

"Oh, crap," Katia said, turning. Her riot shield appeared on her arm. "Now? Seriously? Guys, monsters coming."

Gwen's spear appeared in her hand. A wave of red dots materialized, coming through the sandstorm. Feral pazuzu. Gwen and Katia moved as if one, like a pair of pack hunters as they rushed away to meet the new threat. Tran pulled a curved sword and moved to fight alongside them. I continued to juggle multiple chats. In addition to the quest chat, I was talking to Imani and another crawler who was relaying messages for me to a few other crawlers I couldn't yet talk directly to. I simply couldn't do both at the same time.

Morris Sp: It worked. I'm free!

Low Thi: Me too!

Carl: Good. I once had to break my finger to get away from a charm spell, and I figured that would work here, too.

It was a lame and desperate excuse, and it didn't explain how I knew they still had control of their left hands. There was a whole chapter in the cookbook that dealt with circumventing debuffs. Hopefully nobody would question my unusual knowledge.

Tserendolgor: If anyone can hear us, the interior doorknobs in our saferooms are literally melting.

Carl: We're working on it. We're doing the best we can.

A frothing scorpion man flew through the air and landed with a *crunch* right in front of me. These guys were huge, bigger than the normal versions who lived in town. Gwen and Katia had spent days fighting these mobs together while Donut and I were in our time out. This one was still alive, and I activated *Talon Strike* and kicked him in the head, finishing him off. I pulled a banger sphere and tossed it at another, and the ball curved in the air with the wind. It still clipped him in the side of the head, and he went down.

Donut: IT WON'T LET ME. IT SAYS I'M TOO FAR AWAY. HIS HEALTH IS HALF DOWN.

Carl: Louis, Firas. I'm gonna need you guys. Get out there and to the *Twister*. Donut, meet them at the house. Hurry.

Louis: In the goddamned storm?

Firas: Are you drunk?

Donut: ARE YOU TRYING TO GET ME KILLED?

I sent a quick message to the tomb raider guys.

Morris: The side ladder. I know where that is. An entrance isn't far. We cleared it before, but it just leads to a weird electrical panel thing that didn't do anything no matter how it was connected. It's still submerged. You can't get to the crypt from there. Believe me, we tried.

Carl: Look, guys. We need that connected. I'm pretty sure that's the last piece. But it'll be dangerous. The moment it's hooked up, the next lightning strike is going to zap everyone still underwater in the tomb. You'll have to get out of the water as quickly as you can.

Morris: It's like a mile down a ladder, but I can use my silk ability to get to the water level quickly. Bobby is still possessed. Low is too far away. It looks like it's me. I can be at the connector in five minutes. But last time we went down there, Quetzalcoatlus started screaming and moving toward us.

Low Thi: I'm on pterodactyl duty. I'll distract her. Let's roll.

Carl: Godspeed.

I turned toward the wave of feral pazuzu, and I joined in the fight.

Gwen vaulted over a pazuzu, twisting in the air. Her spear flashed as I caught a face full of bloody sand. Katia's crossbow appeared, and her magical bolts pelted into a pair of the scorpions. The wind screamed, and our visibility was next to nothing. It was like they were coming up through the sand.

One lunged at me out of nowhere, stinger dripping with poison. I caught the jagged point in my hand. I was immune to the venom, but my hand was pierced, and I cried out in pain. I formed a fist around the barbed spike as the feral creature struggled. The thing was frothing at the mouth like it had goddamned rabies. My gauntlet appeared, ripping the end of the tail off. Gore spewed from the

wound as I kneed the monster in the chest. I hit him in the jaw with a left cross, and then I stabbed him in the neck with the point from his own stinger.

Donut: WE DID IT. I CAST *HEAL CRITTER*, AND IT WORKED. I CAN'T BELIEVE IT. THE HEALTH IS STILL GOING DOWN THOUGH. THE STUPID DOG DOESN'T EVEN APPRECIATE IT.

Louis: The house is breaking up. The balloon is slamming back and forth. We're getting whiplash. It's like riding a bull.

Firas: I did that once. I fell off.

Carl: What about lightning?

Louis: It's mostly below us. I'm more worried about the dog. We're trying to keep behind the heads, but they keep moving and howling. If it sees us, we're in trouble.

Carl: You have to keep that dog's health topped up. Do your best.

Firas: Holy shit! Half the bowl just broke away! The side with the Bactrian village is just gone!

A huge chunk of rock slammed onto the beach nearby. The ground trembled. The other side of the island had probably just been buried in an avalanche. We didn't have much time. Above, the dog howled anew. I kept my eye on the map of the necropolis. The dot of Quetzalcoatlus was moving toward the room with the connector, but suddenly it veered away.

Morris: Bobby is gone! Oh god! I think he was crushed.

Carl: Stay on mission.

Morris: Almost there.

Low Thi: It's chasing me! I have it distracted. Do it!

Warning: This message is from a deceased crawler.

The boss, which could move through walls, barely paused as it apparently ripped through the crawler. It rocketed back toward Morris's position. *Oh, god. I sent them to their doom.*

Morris: It's connected! I did it! Going back up…

Warning: This message is from a deceased crawler.

The same moment the message appeared, the towers in front of me lit up with a lightning strike.

The sound was like that of every branch on every tree in the universe cracking at the same time. The sand under the tower, including the sand I was ankle-deep within, flashed. Pain ripped through me, and for a horrifying moment I thought both of my feet had been ripped off. My health went down almost half way. I was suddenly frozen in place. I stumbled, but I couldn't fall because I couldn't move my legs. The entire beach around the twin lightning towers for about two hundred feet in every direction had turned to glass.

Katia, Gwen, and Tran were all equally stuck. Tran's health was almost zeroed out, but it moved back up as he healed himself. I pulled my leg, and the glass splintered. I pulled myself free just in time to punch down a charging pazuzu who hadn't been caught in the glass. It was the last one.

I didn't know if Quetzalcoatlus or the sudden electrification of the interior of the temple was what killed Morris Sp, the final crawler within the subterranean quadrant. It didn't matter.

I wasn't sure how many people started in the necropolis. They all died. Each and every one. I was pretty sure they'd been dealt one of the worst hands they could've gotten this entire floor. And that really sucked. I took a moment in their honor.

But in the end, their sacrifice meant something. They completed their job.

Bubble Notification. The guardian of Anser's tomb has been successfully destroyed. The Subterranean Quadrant has been liberated!

All give congratulations to the crawlers who successfully liberated the throne room. All hail crawlers Gwendolyn Duet, Low Thi, and Morris Sp.

All crawlers who originated in the Subterranean Quadrant may now freely travel to the other quadrants.

Oh, wait. They're all dead!

Bubble Notification. All four quadrants have been successfully liberated.

Congratulations.

Psst! The sound was like a can of beer fizzing after it opened. For about ten seconds, the wind turned even stronger, so much so it was hard to breathe. My ears popped. The temperature plummeted, and a strange, ozone-like stench filled the world, followed by the distant smell of something burning. And then the sandstorm just stopped, much the same way a storm within a snow globe would stop the moment you broke the glass.

A moment passed, and then a new wind filled the beach, slow and constant and cold. It was still dark, but the starless sky took on a red hue. Above Orthrus continued to whimper, his shadow taking up half the sky.

Bubble number 543 has been popped. All four stairwell locations are now open. See? That wasn't so hard. All that whining and dying was a bit dramatic, don't you think?

I'd been expecting the ocean to drain away, but it didn't. I realized that only the top part of the bubble had disappeared, like the top half of a plastic easter egg, leaving the water and the island intact. Choking dust still filled the air, not yet settling because of the new breeze.

But I could feel it. That sense of claustrophobia I hadn't even realized I was suffering was now gone.

Donut: CARL, HIS HEALTH ALMOST WENT TO ZERO WHEN YOU DID THE BIG LIGHTNING THING. I HEALED HIM. THE LIGHTNING IS GONE, BUT HIS LIFE IS STILL GOING DOWN. THE STUPID DOG DOESN'T EVEN KNOW HOW TO NOT DIE. I THINK THE SHARKS ARE BITING HIM.

Shit. This wasn't over yet. We had to get him out of the water.

I was pretty sure that we could probably now flee down the stairs, despite the bubble quest. But that would mean abandoning everyone else. Plus Elle now had the gate of the feral gods thanks to Donut, and I needed it back before we left the floor.

Louis: We're gonna have to land to fix the net. Can't keep it stable in these new crosswinds. Don't have a choice.

<u>Carl</u>: Come to me. Stay behind the dog so he doesn't see you. Maggie is loose and up on the bowl somewhere. I don't want you near there. Everybody else needs to stay in the saferoom until we deal with her. But we gotta do this first.

Katia put her hand on my shoulder. She was drenched in blood. I suddenly felt as if I hadn't done anything in this fight, even though I'd been juggling a dozen things at once. *I sent those guys to their deaths. I knew they were probably going to die, but I sent them anyway. Christ, what gives me the right?*

"Should I tell the others to wait?" Katia asked.

"Yes. We still have three days. We need what? Four and a half hours for the last thing?"

She hesitated. "That's right," she said, finally. "If you're sure. Plus maybe an hour for the portal to the sixth floor."

It was going to be close. "Tell Elle to wait until this dog quest is done, then we start with the rescues." I swallowed. "If every feral god we summon also summons a real god, it's going to get crowded out there."

Above, the *Twister* appeared. The net holding the house was ripped to pieces. I caught sight of Donut on the edge, hopping up and down. The yard around the half house had literal holes in it. Water arced from a severed main.

"Jesus," I muttered. "They're lucky that thing didn't fall from the sky."

I looked up at the whimpering dog. We weren't directly under it anymore, but I still couldn't see it very well in the darkness. I re-read the winning condition of the quest. He had to survive the lightning storm and escape the sharks. The problem was despite the bubble being popped, the dog wasn't making any moves to leave the water. The fire god didn't seem to be aware he was here. I had no idea what was outside the bubble. Was it like a bottomless pit? Probably not. It was too dark to see.

We jogged up to the house as it landed. Louis and Firas were crawling over it like a pair of worker ants. Donut leaped down and straight to my shoulder. Mongo appeared, still on the house and howled at me.

"Carl, we don't have time. That smelly dog is going to die soon. What are we going to do?" Donut asked.

"This thing is going to fall straight out of the sky if we don't fix this," Louis called down to me from the roof of the house.

I moved my eyes to the attached garage. The garage door remained closed. I sighed.

"Donut, do you still have that *Meat Hooks* scroll we got on the third floor?"

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<Crawler Sinjin. 15th Edition>

I now worship the goddess Kuraokami. Worst decision ever. The goddess is sponsored by some male soother twat who is treating it like I really worship him*. They made this whole system more complicated than it needs to be. If you see a god or if you find a temple or if you find a scroll of prayer, you're given the option to worship a god. Once you do it, there's a pawful of benefits but also a bunch of rules you gotta follow. For Kuraokami, if you kill something, you have to touch the corpse with ice at least once a day. Why? Who the fuck knows. I don't have an ice spell, so I need to go back to safe rooms and get more ice every day.*

If I do the ice thing once a day five days in a row, I get a boon. Only you don't know what the boon is going to be. I haven't made it five days yet. If you miss a day, the goddess "turns her back," and you stop getting any of her benefits. If you miss two days, you receive a debuff. If you miss three, you fall from grace and can't worship them anymore. There's a 50% chance you'll get "smited." I don't know what that means, but it ain't gonna be good.

You can also voluntarily leave the faith, but it comes with an automatic smite.

But worst of all, while you worship the god, the god can sometimes send you messages. The description says it's rare,

but my goddess won't shut the hell up. I'm pretty sure I'm the only one who worships her, and this rat asshole is bored or something and sends me message after message. The last note I got was, "You need to say I'm the prettiest goddess out loud." I finally told him to fuck off. But now the twat is swearing at me in my messages. I don't know if they have any real power over me unless he somehow gets summoned or I get smote. As soon as I get to the stairwell station, I'm going to leave the faith and then jump down the stairs. Maybe that'll save me.

<Note added by Crawler Azin. 17th Edition>

This is Sinjin's last entry. A person in my party was smote by his god, and it made his blindness debuff permanent.

Stay the fuck away from gods.

"Carl, the balloon escape hatch thing is gone. If we want to land, we'll have to actually land it," Donut said as we prepared for flight.

As I made sure the gas tank was topped off, Katia leaned over the engine, frantically tightening bolts.

She smashed her wrench on one of the cylinders of the radial engine over the left wing. "It's no wonder these things have such low power. Some of these pistons are completely gummed up. This one wasn't even attached. It's a miracle it even flies. This is a terrible idea."

"They're always terrible ideas," I said.

Above, Orthrus whimpered again. We needed to get up there and heal him as soon as possible. I really hoped this worked. We were going to have to worry about silly little details such as landing later.

Since there was nowhere to properly take off, I talked Louis and Firas to temporarily fly the house, which would allow us to drop off the edge of the *Twister* and hopefully pull up in time. We decided to move out and over the ocean, away from the dog and close to the edge of the bubble.

"I can't see anything down there," Firas said, leaning over to peer down. The water quadrant just ended, and the shimmering bottom half of the bubble rose another forty or fifty feet above the top of the water. Beyond it was nothing but darkness. I could see the blurry hints of something glowing not too far away, and I was pretty sure it was the edges of another bubble, but it was hard to see.

"This is probably high enough," I said. "We need to figure out where the fire god guy is."

"He's that way," Donut said, pointing due east. "The air temperature that way is much higher. And I can see heat wave things coming up from the distant horizon when I turn my glasses to that weird setting where everything goes dark."

"All righty," I said.

Down on the land quadrant, I had Gwen and Tran turn on the drain and keep it on, which would hopefully fully drain out the necropolis. I sent them back to the saferoom after that.

"You're gonna have to do it here," Louis called from the roof of the house. He was desperately mending the net of ropes together. "The wind is picking up, and this patch isn't going to hold." He tossed the empty roll of magical duct tape back to me. He tossed it high, and I had to jump to grab it. I caught it. Barely. I would've throttled his ass if it had fallen off the edge. I returned the roll to my inventory to allow it to regenerate.

Carl: Hey, is that fire god dude still melting your world?

Tserendolgor: JESUS CHRIST YES.

Carl: Okay. On our way to help. I hope.

"Louis, get this thing on the ground right after we take off." I looked over at Donut, who was playing with the gun on the back of the drop bear. I lowered my voice. "Uh, first make sure we don't, you know, go swimming. We might need you to pick us up out of the ocean."

We pulled the drop bear out of the large garage, positioning it facing the wind. Louis lowered the balloon, catching onto the new breeze coming from outside the bubble. The balloon sped up. I sat behind the cockpit, and we spun up the engines, which roared. I barely knew what the hell I was doing. There was the yoke, the

pedals, a fuel indicator, a gyroscope thing which I did not understand, the twin throttles, and that was it. Above, I could see Orthrus's health, and it was deep in the red. Donut remained in the seat behind me.

She cast her *Torch* spell and somehow plastered the light to the underside of the top wing so it lit up the interior of both of our cockpits, solving an issue I hadn't even realized we had.

"Ready?" I shouted over the roar of the engines.

Donut grumbled something I couldn't hear. I gave Katia a thumbs up, and I pushed the throttle, trying to get as much speed as possible. The small biplane rumbled forward and then promptly rolled off the edge of the yard, dirt showering around us.

We dropped like a rock, but flying into the wind like that kept us from going into a full nosedive. I pulled up on the stick as the ocean reached up to us. My stomach lurched like we were on a roller coaster. I held on for dear life as we angled downward. We evened out, and then I felt us starting to rise in the air. I adjusted the rudder with the rocking foot pedal, and we stabilized. I pulled up further. *Holy shit, holy shit, it's working.*

Donut: DON'T FLY LIKE THAT. YOU'RE GOING TO MAKE ME VOMIT.

We banked toward Orthrus as I ascended. I moved in a slow and steady curve, overshooting the dog and corkscrewing upward, not wanting to do anything that I couldn't recover from. I caught sight of the *Twister* quickly descending back toward the pazuzu village.

Even the slightest movement of my hand or feet had a massive impact on how the plane moved, and a lot of it was counterintuitive. The whole plane felt as if it'd break into a million pieces if I pushed the stick just an inch in the wrong direction.

My **Biplane Pilot** skill suddenly rose to three. These skill levels didn't come with any new knowledge, but the stick suddenly felt less tight. Still, the whole plane vibrated ominously.

As we ascended, I could finally see the twin crowns of the enormous dog. They were like the heads of wolf puppies but with larger ears. The ears on the right head were both perked up, and on the left, one was up and one was down. A massive tongue lolled out

of the left head with the floppy ear. *Jesus, that damn thing is adorable.*

Its health was at about 10 percent. It'd go unconscious soon. We needed to hurry.

As I carefully lined the plane up for a flyby behind the twin heads, I caught another glimmer of distant light beyond the edge of the bubble. The landscape beyond the borders of our world was like a sheet of bubble wrap. Half of them were popped, but an equal number were fully intact. This was the opposite direction from the fire god. The line of bubbles disappeared off into the darkness.

I remembered where we were, which was under the surface of our planet, which meant even though I couldn't see it, there was a roof up there somewhere. We needed to be careful and not go too high. Ahead, Orthrus's first mountain-sized head loomed, bobbing back and forth.

"I need to get closer," Donut called.

I gritted my teeth and kept our current trajectory. We were small and hopefully unnoticeable. "Okay, hold on!"

I finally realized that if I put the dot in the middle of the weird, spinning gyroscope thing, that meant the plane was completely level, neither pulling up or down and straight. There was a little lock on the gyroscope. Out of curiosity, I clicked it. Nothing seemed to happen at first, but then I realized the yoke was locked in place. It was a rudimentary autopilot, designed to keep us stuck on the current trajectory. *Huh*. It unclicked itself the moment I pulled on the stick.

We approached the back of the dog, perilously close. I could see the individual hairs, like a forest beneath us. The world smelled of wet dog.

"Casting now!"

The whole creature glowed as its health zoomed up about 50%. Donut cast a second time just as we rocketed out of range, bringing it up to 100%, though it immediately started to dip. Both of the heads howled, and I had to jerk on the stick to avoid a collision, causing the whole plane to shudder like a bike rolling over rocks.

The damn thing was hard to fly. It always felt like it wanted to nose dive, and since there was no definitive horizon, it was hard to tell if the plane was even level without looking at the gyroscope.

"Okay, you ready?" I called.

"Don't do the bumpy thing, Carl," Donut said.

"Let me circle around. Get the scroll ready."

We'd received the scroll of *Meat Hooks* way back on the third floor. A city elf had used the same scroll to lure Mongo away from us and into an alleyway. We, thankfully, didn't have to be nearly as close to cast this one. The problem was once it was cast, the dog's attention would suddenly be fully on us. I hoped we could move fast enough.

Before we'd taken off, I'd re-read the scroll's description.

Scroll of Meat Hooks.

Let's be real. Every pet owner already has this spell, at least when it comes to their own pets. Sometimes it's the sound of a can opener. Or a command, such as "chow time, Fido!" Sometimes it's the *wisp* of a jar of peanut butter being cracked open. No matter what the trigger is, the effect is the same. You do something, and your pets come running.

***Meat Hooks* works on the same principle. You cast, and pets come to you. Except in this case, the resulting stench of black smoke that emanates from your hand smells like the rancid remains of the bloated corpse of a leprotic muskox after it was repeatedly violated by a randy hyena. In other words, it stinks.**

But pets love it. They love it so much, they just come barreling in.

This spell attracts all carnivorous pet-class mobs, whether they are bonded or not, to the source of the stench for a duration of 30 seconds plus ten seconds per point of intelligence of the caster. This spell has a range of 100 meters plus 20 meters per point of Charisma.

Donut's current intelligence sat at 53, but it was really more than ten points higher than that with the temporary buffs imparted by the good rest bonus and the shower. The system was still "bugged" and

didn't display the proper number, but it would apply it when the spell was cast. Sometimes. Assuming her effective intelligence was about 64, that meant the spell would last just over nine minutes. That should be plenty of time to entice the puppy to get out of the damn water and out of the bubble. That's all we needed to do to win the quest.

Donut's charisma was a whopping 120. With the bonuses, the spell would have a range of almost three full kilometers. That seemed like a lot, and it *was* under normal circumstances, but this monster was just massive. A single leap, and it could likely cover that distance in seconds. If we weren't careful, we were toast.

I arced around, so I was back over the water and behind the puppy. I was continuously ascending, wary of a potential invisible ceiling. The icy wind whipped at my face. It was goddamned freezing. My new jacket was shitty protection against the cold. The plane sputtered a few times, and I feared we'd reached the plane's height ceiling. I leveled out, praying the drop bear would hold out just a few more minutes.

"Read the scroll," I called.

The pungent stench immediately started to trail behind the plane, like we'd just blown an engine. Behind us, the enormous puppy stopped whining. We buzzed straight out of the bubble and into the blackness, the smoke trailing us like a train.

"Carl, Carl it smells really bad! Oh my god, I'm going to vomit all over again. Why did I have to cast the spell? I don't know how this ever attracted Mongo."

Entering the Lacuna.

"Is it following?" I yelled.

"It's looking at us, Carl," Donut said. "Go faster!"

"I'm going as fast as I can," I called.

A mighty thrashing noise filled the world behind us as the puppy pulled itself off the top of the necropolis and slammed down into the ocean on its back. I looked over my shoulder to see the creature as it howled in indignation. Rocks showered off the top of the necropolis. Paws waved in the air. Water splashed in every direction.

The puppy twisted as it turned to face us. The dog yelped as it tipped over the edge of the bubble and tumbled out.

"It's out!" Donut cried. "We did it!"

I'd been half-expecting the puppy to plummet away and disappear. Instead, it fell, landing on a floor that was much closer than I thought. When the puppy scrambled to its feet, it was actually taller now than it had been before. Both heads howled. A happy tongue continued to loll out of the left head. It made an *arooo* noise and scrambled after us, awkwardly bounding. The thing was terrifyingly fast.

Quest Complete! Where the Red God Glows!

You removed the puppy from danger! Hurray!

For everybody who was involved in this quest who actually didn't do anything, shame on you. The next time you're in mortal danger, I hope you remember this moment when nobody comes out of nowhere to save your ass. At least you all get the same reward.

***Reward*: You get a new quest!**

"Oh fuck me," I muttered.

Two bubbles loomed in front of us. We traveled at about ¾'s the bubbles' height. Both domes remained intact, meaning the residents hadn't yet completed their tasks. The impenetrable walls were opaque, though one of them glowed like a frosted lightbulb. I angled the plane toward the space between them. At the widest part of the bubble, there was about a quarter mile between the two. Plenty of space to fly, but a struggle for the giant dog.

New Quest. The Dumber of the Flunkies.

THIS IS A GROUP QUEST. All survivors of the previous group quest are now a party to this quest. And why the hell not, all Crawlers in Bubble number 18 are also added to the quest. Let's make it a fiesta.

Your party has been designated Host of this Group Quest.

No parties may opt-out of this quest.

Oh boy, oh boy do we have a situation here. Emberus, god of fire and ash seems to believe his son's missing puppy is inside of bubble 18. The dog is not, in fact, within that

bubble. He's just outside of 543, having been recently rescued from a painful death. The next step should be easy. You just gotta bring the two together. Once that happens, both Emberus and Orthrus will immediately return to the Celestial Halls and everything will be almost back to normal.

If something happens to the pup, you will fail this quest. If you fail this quest, you will each in turn be smote by Emberus one by one, no matter what floor you're on. You probably don't know what that means. You don't want to know what that means.

Hmmm. Maybe that's a little too easy. Do you know not a single crawler in Bubble 18 has yet died? The whole world has been turned to lava, and they're all still alive! That's just ridiculous. That's no fiesta. Let me think on this for a minute.

Reward: You will receive a Platinum Quest Box!

"Carl, why is the quest called that?" Donut yelled. "And what did it mean at the end? I don't like that."

"I have no idea. Hold on." I curved the plane around the edge of the bubble. My skill went up another notch. The plane's shudder eased. A little.

Ahead, I could finally see it. It wasn't that far. A glowing presence filled the horizon, like a rising sun. It lit up this outside world, more and more the closer we got.

This inbetween world, the lacuna, was more like an egg carton than just a sheet of bubble wrap. Each individual bubble was in a spot of its own, sunken in deep. The "land" of the lacuna, which I still couldn't see, was only a few hundred feet below the waterline on our quadrant.

Orthrus scrambled toward us, howling happily. The damn puppy seemed to have forgotten he'd almost died a minute before and was now joyfully crashing through the world outside the bubbles. The thing leaped atop the intact bubbles, which were apparently slippery. It bayed and fell sideways and rolled away. *Bark, bark, bark, bark.*

The puppy was clearly out of range of the *Meat Hooks* spell, but it didn't seem to matter. Spell or not, he had noticed us, and he

wanted to catch us.

Donut was shouting insults I couldn't quite catch. The next two bubbles in line were both popped. The bubble on the left featured what appeared to be a massive cactus. The one on the right was a curved, concrete structure shaped like a half-moon. Both landscapes were only half-lit by the red glow on the horizon.

The puppy pounced out of nowhere, landing heavily on the giant cactus world. It paused to piddle before resuming its chase. I cringed, hoping everybody within the cactus world was okay.

Carl: Jesus, everybody, if your bubble is popped, get in a saferoom. Spread the word!

"It's going to catch us, Carl," Donut cried. "If I get eaten by a giant, two-headed cocker spaniel so help me I will never forgive you."

"If it gets too close, turn off the spell!"

Donut waved her paw frantically. "I can't turn off the spell!" Her voice had gone up an octave. "There's no button! There's usually a button! The smoke won't stop! The smell is just unbearable!"

It was getting warmer by the moment. Katia's last-minute tinkering seemed to have worked. We were moving quickly, almost 400 kilometers per hour. We were halfway there. As long as the god's presence didn't explode the damn airplane, we'd soon get the dog close enough that the god would notice. Behind us, the dog had veered away to investigate another world. But then its left head howled in our direction, and the chase was on.

New Quest! Get Orthrus.

This is a world quest! All living crawlers on the fifth floor will receive this message!

***Now* it's a party.**

Orthrus, the two-headed puppy is bounding his way happily through the Lacuna, the world that houses the bubbles. This very adorable pup is running back to his former master's father. Don't worry. You can't miss him. He just drenched the folks in bubble 331, and then he knocked down the Sounder Tower in bubble 298.

What a menace!

Let's kill it.

***Reward*: Any crawler who kills this cute puppy before he reunites with grandpa will receive the following:**

One million gold pieces.

Five level-up potions.

A pet monkey named Jimbo.

Current participants in the "Dumber of the Flunkies" group quest are free to kill the puppy if they are sadistic assholes, but they will not receive the rewards. You know what, never mind. They get the prize, too!

"Are you kidding me? Are you fucking kidding me?" I yelled. "Come on!"

I immediately moved to send out a group message, but both Katia and Elle were already on it, telling everybody they would personally hunt down and murder anybody who so much as shot an arrow at the dog as it passed by their world.

I banked left to move between two more intact bubbles. There was a line of unpopped worlds here, and I moved to fly past them, like we were diving into a ravine. Just as we plunged between the first two bubbles, Orthrus pounced, landing atop a bubble just above our heads. He made a happy *aroo* and bounced twice before sticking a paw down to bat at us.

"*Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit*," I said, pushing the stick down and diving. We were so damn small compared to the monster, he probably couldn't even see us. He was chasing the massive plume of smoke trailing behind us. The giant paw swiped at the smoke, missing us.

"Carl, this was a terrible idea," Donut yelled, still shaking her own paw like it was on fire, which made the smoke plume even bigger. She had six minutes left on the spell.

Suddenly, both heads of the puppy yelped in surprise and pain at the same time. The sound was so loud and so sudden, I almost jumped out of my skin. I whipped my head around to look back. The health bar above his twin heads plummeted down as Orthrus fell away and out of sight. He started yelping pitifully and loudly in the darkness.

"Goddamnit," I growled. "Somebody hit it with a spell or something. Get ready to heal it."

"Carl, we have to get really close for the healing spell."

"I know," I said, pulling up and leaving the protection of the ravine, turning away from the burning horizon. The plane whined as I dared to make a tight curve.

"Someone else is out here!" Donut yelled.

I saw the blue dot on my map, rocketing through the darkness high above us, banking back toward the puppy on roughly the same trajectory as us.

You absolute fuck, I thought.

He'd flown past the dog and hit it with some spell and was now circling back to finish him off.

I didn't have to see the crawler's description to know who this was.

I didn't have the ability to message him directly. I'd only been able to talk to him once, during that first group quest on the third floor. We'd never actually met. There was no group chat for this world chat thing. If that ass managed to kill the dog, he'd effectively murder everyone in both our bubble and bubble 18.

Carl: If someone has Quan Ch in their chat, tell him to back the fuck off.

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Tran: I have him on my chat! I said he'd kill us if he hurt the dog, and he said, "Sorry, but it's too good of a prize. Plus, if I get that fucking cat in the process it'd be a bonus."

"What did I do?" Donut yelled, not bothering to put it in chat.

Donut had mentioned how much she hated the "cheater" Quan no less than twenty times since he'd gotten that celestial box at the end of the third floor. I wasn't surprised that this had somehow gotten back to him. They'd probably shown him clips during an interview.

I sent a quick, frantic question to Mordecai, and he answered with one word.

Mordecai: Yes.

"Hit him with a goddamn magic missile," I yelled. I put my hand back, holding it out toward Donut. "And give me that potion. Mordecai's special brew."

Donut shot a missile, but she missed by a wide margin. At this speed, it was difficult to properly aim and fire. The potion appeared in my hand, and I pulled it into my inventory. Donut knew by now not to ask questions at times like this.

Thanks to the inventory system, it allowed me to prepare the potion without having to actually pull it out. I mentally clicked on the potion in the list and dragged it to the other item Mordecai had given me that same day he'd created the potion for us. The items combined, and a new item was created.

Orthrus was cowering, ears flattened on both of his heads. He'd shoved himself between two bubbles, one popped and another intact, The popped world was heavily forested. If there'd been any sort of raised air quadrant, it was gone now. The dog whimpered as he backed away from the approaching Quan. His health was at 20%.

We lined up behind Quan, who'd lowered and was moving in to strike again. I'd seen his main attack a few times on the recap episode, and it had a relatively short range. It was some sort of blue lightning energy strike that came from his left hand. He'd used it to crash trains on the previous floor.

He'd be in range to strike the dog again in about twenty seconds.

"Try it again," I growled.

A magic missile sizzled by my ear as Donut shot directly at the flying man. The bolt hit him square in the back.

He staggered in the air, but nothing else happened. He recovered almost immediately. A health bar didn't even appear. A translucent shield shimmered for just a moment. He looked over his shoulder at us. He gave a little grin.

"He's cheating, Carl," Donut yelled. "He has a shield!"

"It's that goddamned robe," I said. The celestial-tier item gave him his flying ability, the lightning attack, and presumably the shield. We'd seen hints of the shield before. Lucia Mar had something similar. Mordecai said the robe also likely added multiple other benefits we didn't know about, like enormous stat boosts and additional special abilities or spells.

The protection was *probably* a level-15 *Shield* spell, but we didn't know for sure. *Shield* was one of the spells Mordecai and I had discussed extensively. We were going to use all of our money to buy a tome of it the next floor so we could give it to Donut.

If this was a level-15 shield, it'd last for as long as his intelligence stat times three seconds, however long that was. It protected against most attacks, including explosions and magic. However, it wasn't a spell of invulnerability. Psionic, aural, and cloud-based attacks still worked. Blunt force trauma still staggered the caster, and the shield itself had hit points. Do enough damage and *poof* the shield was gone. The total health points of the shield went up

based on level. At 15, it was something crazy, like ten times the caster's constitution.

We'd seen Quan Ch run instead of fight multiple times, so the shield either had a long cooldown or the guy was just a wuss. He was at level 48, one higher than myself. He had an incalculable number of neighborhood and borough boss kill stars over his head. He didn't have any skulls, despite all the damage he'd done on the previous floor. But he fought dirty. He was like a vulture. He preyed on the weak and the almost dead, stealing kills from others. I was willing to bet he would turn tail the moment he sensed he was in any real danger.

We were moving faster than him and would overtake him in seconds, but he could blow us out of the sky with the flick of a wrist. I'd watched him crush the front of an onrushing train with little effort.

"Donut," I yelled as we approached. "Set your sunglasses so you can see his heat signature! And then empty the gun into him as we pass! Magic missiles, too!" I leveled the plane and clicked the gyroscope, locking our trajectory in place. If he maintained his position, we'd pass under him by about thirty feet.

Ahead, the massive, mountain-sized Orthrus loomed.

"Carl, he's going to blow us up!"

"If this doesn't work, jump!"

I pulled myself up out of the seat and moved to the right, grasping onto the metal pole that connected the top wing to the fuselage. I stepped out onto the lower wing, anchoring myself to the plane as the wind whipped at me and threatened to throw me out into the darkness. The small, starboard propellor whined, right in front of me. I needed to be careful.

"Carl, Carl! What are you doing!"

"Switch your glasses now," I yelled as I extended my xistera and loaded the hobgoblin disco ball. Quan turned his head to gauge our position, and I saw his eyes go wide at the sight of me on the wing. He banked away and flipped in midair, left hand glowing as I tossed the ball, avoiding the propellor by inches.

His shield was still intact, but the disco ball exploded over his chest anyway, knocking him back. The sticky, sand-like residue clung to the outside of the shield like mud. A rainbow of smoke started to billow from the impact. He waved frantically at it as the smoke rose. He cast a bolt, but it flew wide.

We zipped past Quan, who was still positioned above us. The gun rattled to life. Donut shrieked with joy as she fired the gun at her prey. A double-shot, full powered magic missile slammed into the cloud.

"I hit him! I hit him!"

I loaded a fused hob-lobber, designated it with my new remote detonator skill and tossed it at the growing plume of pulsing, rainbow smoke. Even with my new ability to toss these things twice as far, I'd waited a hair too long to throw it. Still, I set it off right when the ball started to dip. The explosion crackled through the air, twenty feet short of the ever-growing plume.

I knew from experience that was plenty close to do its job.

The sizzling and crackling circle of pulsing rainbow smoke plummeted out of the sky. I couldn't see Quan himself. The disco-ball remnants were sticky, and they adhered to his chest and followed him as he fell like a comet. He disappeared below.

"Did we kill him? Did we?" Donut yelled.

"No," I shouted, pulling myself back into the cockpit. I resumed control and banked to the right. We flew over the dog, barely 50 feet over the top of the head. If he reared up now, we'd get splattered. "But he's gonna be mighty sore and deaf. Hopefully that ran him off. Cast your heal spell."

Below, Orthrus whimpered. Donut healed him, and I pulled up, angling between two bubbles. We brought the health back up to 70%, which had the unfortunate and immediate side effect of renewing the dog's interest in chasing us. The *Meat Hooks* spell still spewed from Donut's paw.

The thing howled as he jumped to its feet. I turned the plane sharply, growing more confident in my ability to steer, angling back in the correct direction.

"Carl, more crawlers!" Donut shouted just as I saw the new threat.

A metal-skinned dirigible shaped like a fish emerged in front and below us. The slow-moving airship had come out of nowhere. I watched as twin harpoons shot from the flying machine, right at the dog.

"Goddamnit," I cried.

They were flying too low and too slow. The harpoons fell short of their target, and I watched as three crawlers jumped away as the dog smashed into them, not even noticing their presence. The fish-shaped balloon exploded and disappeared against the fur. I suspected the crawlers who'd jumped out hadn't fared much better.

"Serves you right!" Donut yelled as we zoomed forward. Ahead, I could now see the god. I could feel him, too, heat rising like we were slowly approaching a campfire.

Emberus. The humanoid god looked asymmetrical from behind. A massive, curved horn erupted from the left side of his head. His right side appeared caved-in, almost like that kid with compression sickness. The horn smoked like an incense stick. The god's skin was made of curls of orange and red fire, licking up and down, all coming together to vaguely form a muscular human-shaped body. From the descriptions of the others, his skin was normally like a gooey, blue-hued rock, and he'd only set himself fully alight the moment he started shrieking at the dog soldier woman. The god was massive, but not as big as I thought he'd be. If he was sized as a regular human, Orthrus would be like a large horse to him. The god was leaned against a bubble, pounding on it with a giant fist, shouting over and over. The bubble wall glowed red.

Sun and Ash God Emberus. Level 250.

Warning: This is a deity. He is invulnerable on this floor.

This is a locked god. There will be no sponsors of this deity this season.

This god has been summoned to this location. Summoning rules apply.

The youngest brother of Taranis, and half of the sun duology, Emberus strongly feels he is the best-suited

candidate to ascend to the Celestial Throne. Known to be stoic and indifferent to the suffering of all but those he feels worthy, Emberus can be a just god if the fancy strikes him. The problem is the fancy hasn't struck in a very long time. He's usually an unmitigated asshole who'll arbitrarily burn everyone you know and love just for looking at him funny. He's considered one of the most unhinged of all the pantheon.

His twin brother is Hellik, another sun god who is quite obsessed with killing both Emberus and big brother Taranis. It's a very dysfunctional relationship. I guess most families are like this. You probably don't want to get involved.

Emberus's very presence can be deadly to crawlers, and that's just when he's in his regular form. When he gets emotional, things really start to heat up.

Word on the street is that since his favorite son was murdered by an unknown assailant, Emberus has been acting even kookier than usual. The dude plucked his own eyes out in his grief. It was really gross.

We were still miles away, but the heat was rising by the moment. We wouldn't be able to get much closer. We needed the damn god to just turn around. *He's blind. That's not going to make a difference.*

He'd somehow sensed the dog soldier woman. But how?

"More, on the ground!" Donut yelled, pointing down.

This was a whole group of crawlers, maybe 15 of them. They were a line of blue dots on the floor between the bubbles, moving toward the dog. I couldn't actually see them down there in the darkness. But right after Donut pointed them out, a fireball arced from the group and headed toward Orthrus. The spell splashed against the dog, ineffective.

"Holy shit," I said. "Those idiots are going to get themselves killed."

"They're going to kill *us* if they get the stupid puppy," Donut replied.

A new spell shot from the group. This was a magic missile, but Orthrus bounded up atop a pair of bubbles and moved out of range, completely oblivious to the danger. He looked in our direction and started barking frantically and jumping. He slipped off and fell forward, rolling over a popped quadrant before jumping back to his feet.

"Do you see anybody else?" I yelled. The plane whined ominously. It was getting harder to breathe the closer we got to Emberus. The wind felt like a hairdryer to the face.

Orthrus yelped once again, pained voice higher-pitched than before. Both heads squeaked and cried and then stopped abruptly. The dog crashed heavily to the ground. *Oh no. No, no, no.*

I turned the plane around. The dog wasn't dead. His health was down to 2% and he was **Unconscious** with a one-minute timer over his head. The front half of the puppy was draped over a popped bubble with water cascading off it. It was a rocky, barren world.

Quan. *Goddamn shit stain mother fucker.* He'd recovered and returned. He'd hit the dog from behind. In the distance, I could see the tiny, glowing speck of him floating there in the darkness. He was moving in to finish the puppy off.

The goddamned sun god was too busy shouting to even hear all of this happening a few miles behind him. I aimed right at the dog, putting the plane into a shallow dive. I punched the throttle.

"Grab the stick," I yelled as I clicked the gyroscope and jumped onto the wing. The plane started to shudder.

"Grab the stick?" Donut shrieked. "What do you mean, grab the stick! Thumbs, Carl! Thumbs!"

"Pull up as soon as I throw!"

I loaded the potion ball into my xistera. It was filled with Mordecai's Special Brew, which would immediately heal the puppy and make him near-invulnerable for thirty seconds. Mordecai had confirmed it'd work on the dog. I just had to hit the damn thing before Quan got close enough to cast his electrical attack.

Donut continued to scream as we dove. I tuned her out, and I put all of my strength into the throw. Far on the other side of the

puppy, Quan's left hand crackled to life. I hurled the ball, grunting with the effort. It shot through the air like a bullet. It disappeared from sight, lost as we rapidly dove toward the colossal left head.

The ball hit the puppy at the same moment Quan attacked.

"Yes!" I cried as the dog glowed. His health rocketed to the top. It did not wake him up. "That's right you worthless… gah!"

The plane pulled sharply upward as I clutched onto the wing brace. We whipped around like in a haywire carnival ride. I immediately activated sticky feet, which momentarily saved me from flying right off the wing. Donut was in the main cockpit, screaming with her paws wrapped around the stick. She was all the way on her back against the small seat, and she had a death grip on the yoke. The plane did a complete loop as I also screamed, immediately regretting every life choice I'd ever made that led us to this moment. We looped again, this time rolling starboard. The plane groaned. Something flew off the back rudder.

"Let go of the stick!" I cried as we tumbled through the air. I forcibly pulled myself headfirst into the cockpit. I desperately held onto the seat as my back legs disconnected from the wing and dangled in the air. Donut did not let go.

I grabbed the cat and pulled myself all the way in, scrambling to sit upright and planting my feet on the rudder pedals. The plane rolled through the air, corkscrewing, centrifugal forces tossing us every direction at once. I had no idea how to correct a roll. Something had fallen off the back of the plane. Donut's paw still trailed stinking black smoke, and it was now trailing it directly into my face, blinding me.

I centered out the pedals on the floor. They were sticky and pulled to the right. Something broke when I forced the pedals into place.

I closed my eyes, instead focusing on the controls in my interface. I gently worked the stick—which still had a screaming Donut attached to it—attempting to straighten the plane out.

We continued to spin, but less violently. I opened my eyes, and I took in the scene. I'd only managed to partially stabilize the plane. I'd stopped the barrel-roll spinning, but now we were spiraling

downward, like we were going down a drain. I tried pulling up, but the plane barely reacted.

We were going to crash into the side of the puppy or land into the rock quadrant in about twenty seconds. Orthrus was still unconscious, but his health was topped off. Quan was moving in toward us, hands glowing. I could tell he was pissed off. I wondered if he still had his shield spell active. I suspected not. Below, I caught sight of something else. Someone—probably that same group as before—were attempting to kill the dog from the floor of the Lacuna with a parade of spells. They didn't seem to realize Orthrus was invulnerable for another 15 seconds.

Quan was going to kill us before we crashed. And then either him or those idiots on the ground were going kill the goddamned dog before that idiot Emberus noticed the giant battle right behind him.

I only had one choice. I went with the nuclear option.

The moment Emberus's description popped up on my display, I received the option to "worship" him. The notes in the cookbook all warned against this. I quickly moved to the god tab. I only had the option to worship two different gods. Grull and Emberus. I clicked **Emberus**.

An **Are You Sure?** popped up. I clicked **Yes**. A wall of text appeared. I waved it away.

I clicked the gyroscope in place.

"Carl, what's happening? Why are you glowing?" Donut asked.

"Get on my back and hold on. Do not let go. Use your claws if you have to. Take the half-splat potion."

I stood up in the cockpit as Donut clung to my back shoulders, placing herself between my cloak and my jacket. Her claws clung painfully to me, even through the fabric of both the jacket and the trollskin shirt. I reached up and grabbed the back of the top wing.

"Don't let go!" I yelled. She trembled against my back.

There was a small, gnome-sized handhold here. I used it to bodily pull myself to the top of the upper wing. I firmly planted my feet, and I stood tall atop of the death-spiraling biplane. Quan angled in, left hand glowing blue, right glowing red—which was new.

I pulled the celestial grenade from my inventory, I activated it, and I threw it with all of my strength directly at him.

He immediately shot the red bolt at the grenade in an attempt to intercept it. The ball froze in the air about fifteen feet in front of him. I had no idea what the spell was or how it was supposed to work, but it had stopped the attack in midair.

And, ultimately, it made no difference whatsoever.

The celestial grenade had been a sponsor prize to Chris and Maggie from the Skull Empire, and it was supposed to have been used to summon a pain god to kill me. Instead, I used Prince Maestro's gift to save myself. Myself and everybody in two different bubbles.

The ball blinked once, and it seemed to wink out of existence. Quan moved to fire his main attack. I leaped from the top of the spiraling plane, plummeting out of range.

It didn't matter. Quan never got a chance to fire his spell.

The grenade was designed to summon a god. It would be a random god. That is, unless the person who threw the grenade worshiped a deity.

Emberus appeared, having been involuntarily summoned to this location from just a few miles over. As I plummeted out of the sky and toward the ground below, I twisted in the air to see the god manifest above us. I cringed, preparing for the heat. It never came.

He took on a strange form, different than before. He was nothing more than a massive, floating head and shoulders. The god was huge and angry, his skin a sort of shimmering, smoldering rocky gray dotted with multicolor hotspots, almost like acne. A secondary mouth screamed on his right cheek, glowing red. Above this second mouth, his skin was sunken in and flattened, like an ancient injury that had healed poorly. His empty eye sockets trailed smoke and rained blood.

The spiraling drop bear hit him right in the nose and exploded.

You have been imbued with Divine Intervention. You are invulnerable for sixty seconds.

I was invulnerable. Donut wasn't.

Quan had been in there somewhere, and he wasn't there now. I didn't know if he'd been killed or not, but if he was still alive, he'd been knocked from the sky.

The head was huge, city-sized, but still smaller than the god had been just moments before when he'd been pounding on the side of bubble 18.

It looked as if we were going to miss hitting Orthrus. Instead, we'd land in what looked like a flat valley that was part of the land quadrant of this world. There was a level stairwell just sitting there not too far away, out in the open. I could see the light shining off of it, reaching desperately into the sky like a spotlight.

"Orthrus," the god said, his relief-filled voice flowing into the world, filling the valley with sound. The blood pouring from the god's eyes turned to rain. "Orthrus. There you are. I've been looking for you. I was so very worried."

The god was supposed to hang around for sixty seconds. He didn't. Even before we hit the ground, Orthrus just blinked away. I twisted, and the god was also gone, leaving a shimmering wake in the sky. The world around us plunged into darkness, lit only by the spotlight from the stairwell location.

I flipped onto my stomach. "Hold on," I cried.

We slammed into the ground. Donut, on my back, cried out in pain as she bounced up off me. The wind knocked out of me, but my bones didn't break. I took no damage. I jumped to my feet, breathing.

Entering the land quadrant of the Soulless Prophet.

Donut was unconscious. Her health had been knocked all the way down to 5%, and I realized her skin was smoldering, her hair singed. Smoke had finally stopped pouring from her paw. I immediately cast a heal scroll, and her health returned. I rubbed her fur, and my hands came away black. The god, even in the giant floating head form had been blazing hot. The Divine Intervention

buff that came with the celestial grenade had protected me, and I hadn't even realized it.

The only light came from the stairwell, a quarter of a mile away. It reminded me of when it all started, of that stairwell shining into the freezing, night air.

Something slammed into me. I went flying back.

Quan. He'd sneaked up and hit me with his lightning attack. My invulnerability was still active for another few seconds. *You goddamn idiot*. I leaped to my feet, turned toward him, and I charged.

The half-elf's eyes went huge. I punched him straight in the face with my bare fist, and he flew back. A health bar appeared.

"You murderous fuck," I yelled as he scrambled to his feet. "I'm going to rip you to pieces."

A knife appeared in Quan's hand, and he stabbed at me. The knife exploded in his hand just as my invulnerability ran out. The buff was invisible, I realized. I had no indicator over my head saying I was invulnerable. There was no other explanation as to why the idiot would've attacked me now.

I was now able to be hurt, but he didn't know that. I gasped, and I tried to hide it. Even though the god was gone, the air felt as if it was on fire. The ground, I realized, was burning hot to the touch. It didn't hurt my feet, but I could sense it. The stench of burning flesh filled this world.

I growled, anger building and building. I thought of what he'd done. What he'd *purposely* done.

"Don't you realize," I said. I was unable to make a coherent sentence come out. "Don't you realize?"

Don't you realize what you've done, I was trying to say. *You only care about yourself. You're stronger than all of us, but you don't care. Think of all the good you could do. Think of how much better we'd all be if you weren't such a selfish prick*. But that's not what came out. "Don't you realize," I said again, the words a jumbled growl. "You're a bully. You're a bully and nobody likes you. That's why…" I caught myself.

The man turned and tried to fly away. I grasped him by the magical robe, and I slammed him to the ground. He hit face-first

into a rock, and teeth went flying. I activated *Talon Strike* on my foot and slammed down. But the man was quick, and he rolled away.

Stop, a distant voice cried in my head. *Stop. He's not the enemy.*

Fuck you, I said to that voice. *He* is *the enemy. He's the worst kind.*

Quan was a small guy, but he was fast. Blood poured from his mouth. He glowed as he healed himself.

I lunged, and he continued to roll on the ground. He suddenly leaped to his feet, backflipping. His hand glowed blue. I jumped forward, grabbed his glowing left arm, and I yanked it, trying to interrupt the spell and pull him off balance.

At the same moment, he tried once again to take flight and escape, only this time he used some sort of special ability that caused him to launch away like a rocket, superman-like. The crawler screamed in agony as I fell back onto my ass. He took flight, disappearing into the darkness. Stunned, I watched the trajectory of the blue dot on the map. He landed a quarter mile away, and he stumbled into the stairwell station, disappearing.

"Coward," I shouted, my rage bubbling over. "This isn't over!"

Carl: Tran, send a message to Quan for me. Tell him that was just a deposit.

I stared down at the severed arm in my hand. It was his whole damn arm, all the way to the shoulder. It sagged, dangling limply in my grip. I just stared at it, breathing heavily.

I'd ripped his goddamned arm off. He had three rings on his fingers.

I turned, and Donut had awakened. Her luminous eyes blinked at me. I couldn't read the expression on her face.

I sat on the hot ground, which was rapidly cooling. Fog filled the world.

Holy shit, I thought*. Holy shit. That just happened. Holy shit, we're still alive.*

Before I could bring myself to say anything to Donut, the announcement came.

Quest Failed! Get Orthrus.

Not a single one of you was able to kill a level 10 puppy. A puppy. It's no wonder you guys keep dying.

Jimbo the monkey is never going to get adopted now!

As a penalty for failing the quest, all safe rooms will only serve monkey soup and saltine crackers for the remainder of this floor.

I groaned, rolling onto my back. I felt as if I'd been run over.

Quest Complete! The Dumber of the Flunkies!

You saved a sweet, innocent puppy! He's now frolicking on the twelfth floor where he will soon resume his training. Nun-defiling is back on the menu!

Reward: You've received a platinum quest box!

I briefly wondered who lived here in this bubble. I didn't see anybody, mobs or crawlers. They'd likely all fled when Emberus started his rampage. I could go to sleep here. That, of course, would be a terrible idea.

Donut just sat next to me. She still hadn't said a word since we'd jumped from the plane.

I sent a message to Imani.

Carl: Might as well get started.

Imani: Are you sure? Shouldn't we wait until you're back?

Carl: Don't have time. If a bunch of gods start popping up, we'll deal with it when it happens.

I still had a whole page of notifications to read. I was putting it off. I now had two new tattoos, one on the back of each of my hands. Each was of a sun. Both tattoos glowed vaguely orange.

"You know what, Carl? I've decided something," Donut said, finally speaking. She released Mongo, who squawked and started investigating this strange, new world.

"Yeah, Donut?"

"I think they're right about you. I think you're crazy. Like, not a little weird crazy. Not guy who eats cereal without milk crazy. But crazy, crazy. Straitjacket crazy."

I took the cat into my lap, and then I pulled her to my chest. She purred heavily into my ear.

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<Note by Crawler Justice Light, 8th Edition>

I made a mistake today. I killed an NPC I shouldn't have. We are a strong people, the skyfowl of the white cliffs. We do not take insults without retribution. He was a proprietor of a store selling trap supplies in a large settlement here on the sixth floor. I needed what he had, but he insulted me, so I killed him. It let me take the item that was on the shelf. But he had so much more. He always said the items were in the back, but there was nothing there. I think everything was in his inventory, but it appears shopkeepers don't drop their full inventory if you kill them. Now the town guards are after me, and the shop, which was a good source of supplies for me and many others, is just gone, and I fear the whole operation is going to fail thanks to my actions. It was the only trap shop on the whole floor.

This is something we should note and remain aware of. Do not make the same mistake as me. Killing of these innocents should be kept to a minimum, unless absolutely necessary.

Time to Level Collapse: 3 days, 7 hours.

Tserendolgor: He's gone. The world is still too hot. Everything melted. One of us can fly, and she's going out there to put the last crystal in place, which'll pop the bubble. We're gonna have to go down the stairs right after. Thanks for the platinum box, too. I got an upgrade for my flamethrower. A guy in my group got a tome of *Heal Party*. Everyone is getting good stuff.

Carl: Okay, good. Try to do it as soon as you can. You don't want to be sitting around in a popped bubble for this next part.

"Carl, what in god's name is on the back of your hands?" Donut asked. "What did you do?"

I examined the twin tattoos. They were round, tribal-style tats of the sun. The tattoos were almost identical, but not exactly. The rays coming off the sun on my right hand were curled, and on my left, they were little triangles. The difference was subtle. Each tattoo was black, but with an orange glow. I could feel them there, warm and vaguely uncomfortable.

"I'm guessing they're a sign of my new religion," I said as we trudged toward the stairwell. We wanted to examine it to make sure Quan really went down there. Plus there had to be a saferoom around here somewhere. Even if everything got destroyed, they would persist.

The ground was too hot for Donut, and she rode on my shoulder. We'd had to put Mongo away, too. The area was barren. "Religion? Whatever do you mean? You can't join a religion, Carl. You wake up at noon on Sundays. I don't even know what the ten commandments are, but I'm certain I've watched you break almost all of them multiple times."

I told her what I did and why I did it. Before I could finish, we were interrupted.

Mordecai: Which one of you two idiots is responsible for this?

Carl: What?

Mordecai: A shrine just appeared in the saferoom. It's a sun disk with a cup and a skull. It doesn't say what god this is for, but I'm guessing it's Emberus.

Donut: CARL DID IT. DON'T GET MAD AT ME.

Donut sighed. "Really, Carl. We could've avoided all this just by going down the stairs earlier." She examined the twin suns again and clucked with disdain. "With your new jacket and bandana and tattoos, you look like someone whose picture gets put on the news because he did something involving indecent exposure and a Wal-Mart. What does this new religion actually mean for you?"

"I don't know," I said, grinning sheepishly. "I'm kind of scared to click on the notification."

"Don't be a baby, Carl. Guys covered in disgusting tattoos shouldn't be babies. Look, there's a saferoom that way. You can find out what you did while we walk. Let's get inside before Imani and Katia start blowing everything up."

I sighed, and I pulled up the notification as I turned toward the saferoom. I couldn't see the room in the darkness, but it was only about a quarter mile beyond the stairwell.

Congratulations, Crawler. You have devoted your life and fate to one of service. You are now an adherent of Emberus, God of Sun and Ash!

Your ranking in the church: Acolyte.

Warning: You do not have a cleric or paladin class. As such, you may not ascend past Devotee. See the Deity tab for more information.

Emberus, the personification of a star's destructive power, welcomes you into his warm embrace. He welcomes all who accept his core philosophy. Emberus believes power, once held, must never sit idle. It is to be used and never squandered.

Because of your new-found faith, you must adhere to the following rules, lest you provoke the god's wrath.

- **You mustn't cause harm to fellow worshippers of Emberus.**
- **You must stop and offer a single drop of blood at an Emberus temple at least once a day. If no temples are found in a 30-hour period, you must make the offering at the sun shrine that has now appeared in your personal space.**
- **Five percent of all looted gold must also be tossed into the shrine.**
- **You may not own or wield any magical gear that is blessed by the god Hellik.**
- **You must successfully complete all issued church quests.**

A drop of blood and some coins once a day didn't seem so bad.

I didn't know what a "Church quest" was. I couldn't remember seeing anything like that in the cookbook, but that was the most worrisome of all the rules. Donut was going to be pissed by the 5% gold payment, but we could work around it by making her loot the majority of our kills. I didn't have anything in my inventory that had anything to do with Hellik. I moved on to the benefits.

All adherents in good standing with the God Emberus receive the following holy benefits:

- **Access to all Temples of Emberus.**
- **All temples of Emberus now appear on your map.**
- **All temples of Hellik now appear on your map.**
- **All worshippers of Emberus will be indicated with a symbol.**
- **All worshippers of Hellik will be indicated with a symbol.**
- **All Hellik-worshipping NPCs, crawlers, and mobs killed by you will now offer 100% more experience.**
- **Immunity to Burn effect.**

- **All physical attacks by you have a 10% chance to inflict Burn.**
- **Free access* to Club Vanquisher, regardless of previous and current affiliations.**
- **Every five consecutive days of worship, you will receive a boon from the god.**
- **Additional benefits and responsibilities will become available as your worship circle increases.**

That was actually pretty good, especially the access to Club Vanquisher. There was an asterisk after "Free Access" without any sort of corresponding information, which was worrying. But I guessed I'd figure that out when I tried to get inside. Last I heard, however, the club was still closed thanks to Prepotente going apeshit.

The burn effect was good. It was similar to poison, where it continued to damage the target over time. I wasn't sure what the benefits of temples were. There was very little information about this stuff in the cookbook, likely because this was all cleric territory, a class that'd never receive the book in the first place.

The only temples I could recall seeing were entrances to Club Vanquisher, but I hadn't noticed if they were for different deities. I knew all clerics and paladins had to pick a god upon class selection, and they'd all been doing this stuff since the third floor, so temples had to be all over the place. I had one additional notification waiting for me.

Message from Emberus.

I swallowed. It was set up just like a regular chat notification, but it glowed with a golden light. I clicked on it.

Emberus: My child, you have reunited me with my son's lost pet. I am grateful. I have granted you a boon. But our work is not done. I have two tasks for you.

You have a received a boon from your god!

Your constitution has been raised by 25% for 30 hours!

The message seemed so normal. It was odd that the message came to me this way. The system described him as unhinged, but nothing about any of the benefits or requirements seemed too crazy. If all the boons were this good, then it was totally worth it. The moment I clicked away from the message, I received two new notifications.

Unlike regular quests, these came in the god's gravelly voice.

New Quest. Find Out Who Killed My Son.

Geyrun was murdered. Find out who did it and why. My only clue is that the most obvious suspect, my brother Hellik, was in council with the rest of us when it happened. Visit the high cleric at the Emberus Shrine at Club Vanquisher for additional details.

***Time Limit*: There is no time limit for this quest. However, you will receive a smite if you attempt to exit the 18th floor of the world dungeon before this task is complete.**

***Reward*: That depends on who did it.**

Based on all the previous hints at this, I figured this was coming. At least there was no hurry. I clicked over to the next notification. Emberus's voice took on a decidedly angry tone for this one.

New Quest. Kill Hellik.

My twin brother Hellik, god of Sun and Life seeks to kill both me and my older brother, Taranis God of Thunder and regent to the Celestial Throne. He is a fool. He is a danger. He has no right to exist. As an adherent, it is your task to kill him. You will receive a bonus if his death is painful.

***Time Limit*: Hellik must die *before* you reach the 12th floor. If he still lives, you will receive a smite.**

***Reward*: Slaying Hellik will result in a Celestial God Box.**

Warning: Killing a god may have some unintended consequences for all crawlers.

I took a deep breath. If Hellik looked anything like Emberus did, killing him wasn't going to happen any time soon. Gods were invulnerable and level 250.

Again, this was something to worry about later. The idea of a celestial box was intoxicating, but the notion of harming one of those things was absurd. Even with Katia's special bolt that removed their invulnerability for a few seconds, it just seemed impossible.

We paused at the stairwell as I explained to Donut and Mordecai all of the god's benefits and tasks. As expected, Donut lost her mind at the 5% tithe.

"Well you're just going to have to immediately remove yourself from this religion. It's as simple as that, Carl. I don't know what you were thinking. We'll just have to live with whatever this smite business is. Surely it can't be worse than five percent. It's an outrage!"

"Five percent is a lot, but it's nothing compared to some religions. You know Bea's parents paid twenty percent of their income to their church? They used to get mad at her when she didn't donate, too."

"Twenty percent? I find that hard to believe, Carl."

"It's true. And her dad was a lawyer. They made a ton of money."

"Wow. It's no wonder they were always so grumpy."

Mordecai also called me an idiot, but he was distracted. He said we needed us to get back to the saferoom as soon as possible. Thanks to Samantha's help, he'd figured out the yam thing. He had a potion for me.

The stairwell was placed atop a perfectly-square, large sheet of metal with a small lip around it, like a giant cookie sheet that was about 10x10 feet. The stairwell was just a magical hole cut in the center. I wondered what had happened here in this bubble.

Fresh blood splattered on the metal. That was from Quan's passage. I smiled, looking down at the bare arm still in my hand. Had I just been walking with this thing in my hand? Huh. I hadn't managed to rip or tear the robe, unfortunately, but I was pretty sure I'd stopped him from using his lightning attack for good. Some crawlers had a limb regeneration benefit, but the spell was pretty rare. And apparently the limb didn't just regrow right away. Hopefully he learned his lesson.

"He's going to try to hurt us now," Donut said, looking down at the arm. "We already have Maggie and Maestro and Lucia after us. You should have killed him."

"I would have, but he got away," I said.

"Are you really going to keep the arm? Because that's really gross, Carl."

"Of course I'm going to keep it." The saferoom now appeared on my map, but I still couldn't see anything. Donut said it was a hatch into the ground.

He had three rings on the fingers. I pulled the first one off. It was a simple plus two ring of strength. These things had been pretty common on the first two floors. I put it on, making it my fifth ring. I could wear a total of ten rings, but I'd try to avoid putting one on my thumbs if I could.

The second ring was more interesting.

Rockard's Ring of Sniping.

This amber-stoned ring is named after Rockard, one of the dungeon's most infamous crawlers. This orcish warrior was known for his uncanny ability to swoop in at the last moment and steal glory from other crawlers, gaining the best loot and experience. Everybody *hated* him. It was great!

Fun fact. This guy led his season's top 10 list until he was knifed in his sleep by his own mother. Luckily for you, crawlers can't be killed by other crawlers in saferooms anymore. A shame, really.

Wearing this ring imbues the following benefits:

The Ripe benefit.

The Loaded benefit.

I looked up both of the benefits.

Ripe.

All creatures with less than 50% health are indicated on your map. This does not increase your map's view, but used in conjunction with other skills such as Pathfinder, it makes being a glory-stealing asshole really easy.

No wonder Quan had received such a reputation. The description was correct. Something like this made experience sniping simple. I remembered what had happened at the end of the last floor when he'd attempted to kill the province boss that Miriam Dom and Prepotente had been trying to kill. He'd screwed it up and fled.

The next benefit probably hadn't been too useful thus far. That would've changed for him starting the next floor. I grinned.

Loaded.

All non-hidden creatures wearing magical gear are indicated on your map. Particularly useful when you only want to hang out with the real fashionistas and not just the posers wearing fake shit. Also good if you want to sneak up behind someone, bonk them on their head, and steal all their stuff.

I also added this ring to my finger.

The last ring wasn't enchanted. I blinked at that until I realized this was a ring from before. It was a gold band stuck on his index finger. It didn't come off easily, like it was too small. I twisted and pulled. The finger crunched. "Whoops," I muttered.

The description just said **Sappy gold ring. Worthless. Toss it.** I held it up to the light orb floating over us, and I could see a few faded characters carved on the inside of the band. "For Daddy." I shoved the ring back on the finger, but it wouldn't go all the way. I pushed it to the first knuckle and then pulled the whole thing into my inventory.

I touched the metal sheet containing the stairwell. I was expecting it to be burning hot, but it was cool to the touch. I pushed it like a sled all the remaining way to the saferoom. It moved easily.

I figured it'd be best to have an escape directly outside the safe room. I didn't want to stay here in this weird world since we had so much to do, but we were stuck for the moment, and it was better to be prepared.

Katia: Louis just ate some monkey soup and got sick. He rushed into the personal space bathroom before I could stop him.

I cursed and immediately moved to my menu, clicked over to the second tab of my scratch pad, and I erased everything in the notes section, including the map and the coordinates. I wrote: **Louis, if you see this, don't say a word.** The words underlined themselves one by one as the magical quill started to write on the paper attached to the inside of the toilet-stall door. The underlining stopped at **Louis, if you see**.

Warning: You are out of ink.

I suppressed a growl. Last I'd checked, we'd still had half of a jar left. The container sat on a little shelf I'd installed on the inside of the stall, and both Katia and Donut knew by now to be careful when they pushed the door open since the whole thing wobbled. That idiot must have spilled it, especially if he was rushing toward the toilet and slammed into the door.

The main bathroom in the personal space was like the bathrooms in regular saferooms. You walked in, and there was a sink and mirror against one wall. The upgraded shower was on one side in the pink-tiled room, and the stall was on the other. The metal stall door had a lock on it and looked just like any typical bathroom stall one would find anywhere from before. They were not exclusive spaces like the random ones throughout the dungeon. Inside the wide stall there was a single toilet, a stand-up urinal, and a magical litter box. Mordecai, as a shapeshifter, apparently didn't ever use the bathroom unlike Katia.

NPCs couldn't enter the bathrooms, or any of the other rooms like the training room or crafting room, without being escorted in. When the dromedarian kids needed to go, we sent them back out into the safe room or just told them to hold it. If that wasn't possible, like when a god was outside trashing the world, Katia escorted them in and removed the paper, ink, and quill before they could see it and say something out loud.

Fellow crawlers were a different story. They had free access to the bathroom once they were inside. However, we told everyone to use the bathrooms out in the attached saferooms instead. Katia said it was because they gave us limited supplies, which was true, but it

was also because the stall was now the only place we could trade messages without anybody seeing.

We'd started trading messages by using one of Mordecai's dry erase markers against the interior metal, but the cleaner bot kept erasing it. I eventually figured out that the magical paper, pen, and quill set—the Coffee Shop Author Kit—worked even better since it was two ways. I attached the paper to the interior wall using a magnetic clip I'd looted from the Juicer's boss room all the way on the first floor. If Katia wrote something using the magical pen, It'd appear in my scratchpad, and I could respond right away. Donut could also use it, but it required her to jump on the shelf housing the ink and to write on the paper using her mouth. She'd only attempted it once. She wrote, I AM NOT USING THIS, CARL, and that was it.

Katia had removed everything once we packed the personal space with refugees, but she'd just replaced the quill and paper to relay some information about the coordinates from her latest calculation. She had failed to remove it before Louis barged in.

Louis: Hey Carl, you didn't tell me your bathroom was haunted! Also, don't eat the monkey soup. It's gross.

Carl: We'll be inside in a minute. Why don't you check out the magical shower? You won't get the buffs, but I think you can still use it.

Louis: Uh, okay.

That would shut him up for a minute.

We finished positioning the stairwell by the saferoom hatch, which was a round, trap door in the rocky ground. I pulled it open, and I went down a short ladder into a standard-looking pub.

Entering the All-Seeing Spleen.

The saferoom's proprietor was a human-sized cyclops guy who appeared surprised at our entrance. He was dressed in rags and had a homeless look about him. His name was Xander.

"Hey," the man said. "I thought you lot left. What was all that rumbling outside?"

"Just a god," I said. "He's gone now."

Xander the cyclops nodded. “At least the prophet is dead. If you want food, you’re out of luck. All of my supplies just disappeared. I only have cans of Jimbo soup. And crackers.”

“That’s okay,” I said. “We’re just passing through.” I paused before the entrance to the personal space. “Hey, do you know if there are any Desperado Clubs near here?”

The man leaned back and rubbed his grizzled chin. “There was one the next crater over, but it’s quite a walk. Dunno if it’s still there. There was one in the tunnels, too, but since the Rat Queen died, the bloodworms took over, and I wouldn’t dare go in there.”

“Thanks,” I said. I tossed him a gold coin. He tried to catch it, but he missed by a wide margin. We entered the personal space.

Carl: We’re in the space now. It doesn’t look like we can get to a Desperado Club easily, so you’re gonna have to run it. Katia is coming over now to help with the coordination. Remind those guys that it has to be quick. How many bubbles are we doing?

Imani: Only eight bubbles have met the requirements. The eighth one only has one crawler in it. It’s just over 500 crawlers total, and most of them are in the first four groups. There’s several more begging for our help, but they’re gonna have to wait until phase two.

In order for us to help people trapped inside bubbles, they had to meet a few requirements. First, they needed someone with access to the Desperado Club. Second, all survivors of the bubble had to be in the same quadrant.

This second requirement was a tough one. We could only feasibly open one gate per bubble. It meant three of the four castles had to be taken, everyone else had to be dead, or some combination thereof. Sometimes people weren’t 100% sure if another quadrant was empty of crawlers. Those guys got put on the standby list. We

didn’t do it to be assholes, but we weren’t about to unleash a feral god in a closed bubble filled with crawlers who couldn’t escape.

That rule was instituted by Imani in exchange for her helping with this. She absolutely would not help a bubble’s population escape if it meant leaving someone behind, even if it was only one person.

Elle, apparently, had a knack for telling if someone was lying. She, Katia, and Imani were conducting the interviews at the Desperado, and she’d already weeded a few crawlers out after it was determined they were lying about the populations of their quadrants. Honestly, I was glad I wasn’t a part of the process. I really wished there was a way to mass-pop bubbles, but if a god such as Emberus couldn’t get inside one, then it didn’t seem possible.

We still had three days left. We told everyone who didn’t meet the requirements to do their best. We’d help in any way we could, but there was only so much we could do.

Donut: ALSO, TELL THEM THAT IF THEY TRY TO STEAL THE GATE, CARL WILL RIP THEIR ARMS OFF LIKE HE DID TO QUAN.

Imani: Did you really rip his arm off?

Donut: ALL THE WAY TO THE SHOULDER. IT CAME OFF LIKE A PIECE OF CHICKEN. CARL KEPT THE ARM AND IS GOING TO USE IT AS A BACK SCRATCHER.

Elle: God, I hope they put that on the show tonight.

Carl: Remind them how dangerous it is. Don’t linger. Just hop right through and stay away from the open gate.

The plan was pretty simple. Everyone in each group had to gather outside the entrance of the Desperado Club in their bubble. The person in the first group would enter and obtain the gate pieces. Once outside, they’d dial into the coordinates provided by Katia, and the gate would open. Since the distance wasn’t that great, the amount of time was usually less than a minute for the portal to open. The gate would open, and they’d all go through. They would end up in Hump Town just outside the Desperado. The gatekeeper would be the last. The moment they went through, the gate would close, and a feral god would appear in their still-closed

bubble. While this was happening, the gatekeeper would return to the Desperado and hand the gate to the next in line, who would do it all over again.

Once the gate was handed off, Langley's team would escort the refugees to the stairwell, where they would descend. We didn't want a huge crowd gathering atop the bowl—which was now a half bowl thanks to Orthrus—so we made it a rule they had to descend immediately.

If phase one went smoothly, this whole process would take about a half hour.

By the time we were done, there'd be eight feral gods trapped in bubbles and quite possibly eight real gods prowling around the lacuna looking for them.

The last thing we wanted was eight more world quests like the last one. It was a risk that could very easily backfire in a dozen different ways. Mordecai's advice was for everybody to just stay in their saferooms if a god attacked their world. He or she would eventually go away, especially if another god started roaming around nearby.

"Gods have a tendency to either fight or start fucking—usually both—when they encounter each other outside the twelfth floor," Mordecai had said when we started planning this. "The best way to distract a god is with another god. When that happens, they get unsummoned pretty quickly. I've seen it happen a dozen times."

I had two major worries with this plan. One was that Grull—or some other sponsored deity—would get summoned and would make a beeline toward our world to screw everything up. A second was that Maggie, who was pinging around our bubble somewhere, would try the same. We'd ferried Gwen's team up onto the bowl, and they were acting as lookouts, but so far nobody had seen signs of her.

Imani: Okay, everybody. We're going to start the extractions. Pass it on to all of your contacts. If you're not a part of the groups, get to a saferoom. If your bubble is popped, it's probably a good idea to go down the stairs. If you see a god, call it out in the chat so we can keep track of them all.

"Here we go," I said out loud. There was nobody in here except the dromedarians and changelings.

I'd sent Louis out to escort Katia to the Desperado. After, he and Firas would help wrangle the refugees. He'd blurted out a few things about our bathroom being "haunted" and was about to say something else, but Katia had put her hand on his shoulder and squeezed so hard, even he finally realized to shut the hell up. Still, an observant fan would probably figure out what he was yammering about. I hoped any such revelations would get lost in the noise. I sent Donut into her room to observe her social media board. If she saw any hints that the masses suspected what we were really planning, she'd warn us.

Mordecai was back in the crafting room, working on the second potion he'd made with the yam. Each one only took about an eighth of the vegetable, and I told him we better have at least three, one for me, Katia, and Donut.

At this point, there wasn't anything else I could do but wait. On the main screen in the saferoom, the kids were watching *The Last Unicorn*. Juice Box was in her human form with little Bonnie the gnome sitting on her lap. I watched the woman for a few moments as she stroked the kid's head. I thought of all the NPCs I'd killed on this floor.

I thought of the tens of thousands we were planning on killing during phase four of the plan.

They're better off dead. We are freeing them.

I thought of Coolie, the cookbook author who'd sacrificed everything just in an attempt to kill two admins. I thought of Priestly, who wrote the 14th edition and was the single best source of info on the ninth floor. I wondered what either would do in my situation.

Coolie would do exactly what you're doing. Priestly would not.

But first, Donut and I needed to make it back to bubble 543. We were planning on making the journey tomorrow, after phase two.

But we weren't going to risk it if there were a bunch of crazed gods running around out there. This next hour was crucial, and it would determine what happened next. The fact I wasn't actively

participating was driving me up the wall. I'd been purposely putting off opening my boxes so I'd have a distraction.

Everyone else had already opened their platinum quest boxes. Most everyone got great stuff. Most of it was spell books. Donut received a tome of *Twinkle Toes*, a cheap spell which made Mongo—or any other minion—run really fast for as many seconds as her intelligence level. She'd been pretty excited about it.

Katia also received a spell called *Hanzo*, which drew mobs closer to her. Louis and Firas also got spellbooks, but I wasn't sure what. Gwen got a new spear she was pretty stoked about. Tran received a subscription box similar to Donut's tome of the floor club, but for scrolls.

I moved to open my achievements now.

An organ played hymnal music as this first achievement appeared.

New Achievement! Man of God!

Ever since that first monkey looked up into the sky and saw something twinkling up there, you meat puppets have tried to force twenty pounds of existential meaning into a ten pound sack of chaos.

You have found religion! You have pledged yourself to a life of worship and piety! Finally. Now there are consequences for all of your actions!

***Reward*: One of the greatest things about having a religion is the unshakeable certainty that you're right and everyone else who doesn't believe the same as you is wrong! That's a pretty good reward. Oh, and don't forget about the eternal life thing, too. That's always one of their big selling points.**

I grunted with amusement. A little changeling kid sat at the end of the kitchen bar and was staring at me. I looked at him and said, "The System AI is totally going to hell."

"Okay," the kid replied, not appreciating my lame attempt at humor. He turned back to the movie.

New Achievement! Disarming Personality!

You ripped a fellow crawler's arm off! With your bare hands! Holy shit!

***Reward*: You've received a Silver Savage Box!**

I received a few other airplane-related ones plus an achievement for sustaining a certain amount of damage while invulnerable, but each only resulted in low-tier adventurer boxes that contained nothing special except another potion of dinosaur repellent.

I only had two more boxes to open. My fan box still had another twelve hours on it.

This was my first savage box. They were meant for player killers, and I was not looking forward to whatever this was. I wanted to avoid getting a skull if I could. I cringed as the box opened.

A pair of handcuffs popped out. They were encased in red, fuzzy velvet.

Enchanted Handcuffs.

My safe word is, "Harder, Daddy."

You know what these are. Your mom had a pair in her drawer, and your dad was probably no stranger to these things, either.

Used to lock a person's arms together at the wrist. This set of novelty handcuffs is magically reinforced. Requires a strength of at least 200 to break. There's no key. These are locked and unlocked magically by you. You may also institute an optional safe word or phrase that disengages.

"Oh for fuck's sake," I said, putting the fuzzy handcuffs away.

The platinum quest box contained a magical tome. I picked the book up and turned it over in my hands. The black, leather hardback was warm to the touch and had a skull on the cover. I looked up at the ceiling and grinned. "It's nice to see we're on the same wavelength for once." I opened the book, which caused it to glow. The spell added itself to my list.

Ping

Cost: 5 Mana

Also known as, "Here piggy, piggy," or "The Night Dread," Ping is a hunting and artillery-aiming tool for those who do not care if their quarry knows they're coming.

The elven gunnery officers of the Dream all learn this spell the moment they hit adulthood. Anyone who sits in a trench lives in abject terror of the noise this spell creates.

Target: An area of one kilometer around the caster plus 500 meters for every ten points of intelligence. Environmental factors and obstacles may increase or decrease range.

Duration: Instantaneous. Ping travels at the speed of sound.

Cooldown: Five minutes.

Sends out an audible ping that gives the distance and location of all non-crawlers and non-red-tagged mobs in a circle around you. It *will* mark targets beyond the range of your map. Targets hit with *Ping* will hear an audible ping noise, but they will not know from where the ping originates.

Higher levels increases the amount of information about the target.

At level 5, you may imbue the ping with *Fear*.

It was disappointing that the spell didn't work on mobs or crawlers, but that was okay. This was a spell meant to be used on the sixth and ninth floor. It would find NPCs, and more importantly, it would find both elites and hunters.

Katia: It worked! The first group is coming through now.

Donut: DID THE GUY STEAL THE GATE?

Katia: No, he's through and has already handed it off to the next group. They came through really fast.

Louis: They're all crying, they're so happy. A hot orc chick just hugged me.

Firas: That was totally a dude. And don't let Juice Box know.

Carl: Okay, good. Keep me updated.

I hunkered down and waited for the hammer to fall.

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<Note from Crawler Priestly. 14th Edition>

Larracos is like a dream. It is a living, breathing poem. A song. One that marks itself indelibly onto your bones the moment you experience it the first time. I've never seen anything like it. It's an inverted funnel of museums and galleries and colleges and of color. The NPCs live here. They have purpose and life. For the first time since we have been dragged into this horror, I feel awe and wonder and something other than rage. But it is a tainted and fleeting feeling. This city should not be here. It is too beautiful to be used in such a terrible, senseless way.

I still don't fully understand the fable with the volcano and the centipede at the bottom and what sort of metaphor, if any, it's supposed to represent, but whoever designed this wonder at the center of the ninth floor was someone who appreciates fine detail and the art of turning the mundane into visual music. It is too beautiful, too real not to be a copy of someplace that truly existed, and it is difficult for my mind to make sense of it. For the first time, I don't know where the real ends and the nightmare begins, and it has taken my breath away.

The Semeru dwarves supposedly built it, but they don't control the city. Not anymore. They're still around, mostly in the pubs. They're also the non-combatant caretakers of the

inverted castle, which sits in the center of the city at the bottom of the well.

The diameter of Larracos isn't that great. It's smaller than some of the cities on the Hunting Grounds. But the city itself has layers, going deeper and deeper, like an inverted cone. My culture has a story of a people who built a tower to reach the gods before the gods struck it down and scattered them all. I believe that legend is what this city represents. The Semeru were attempting to reach the Celestials who live not above, but below them. This action somehow awakened Scolopendra at the very base of the volcano.

This city thrives. Each level is something new and exciting. There are districts. One with theaters. Museums. Colleges filled with bright-eyed NPC students. Temples. Stores. Tonight, before we are expelled, I plan on sitting down and enjoying a play. A play, in this place. Can you believe it?

I will draw a map for you. The one Milk drew is still good, but it lacks detail.

The alien beasts congregate in the pleasure districts. I don't dare venture down there, lest my impression of this fantasy is tainted. That's where one may find the Desperado Club and the brothels. It's where they hire their mercenaries, though I hear those markets are already bled dry. It's where they trade their wares and buy their weapons from the murderers who cleaved through us like chaff on that nightmare of a sixth floor.

The aliens get expelled when we do. Less than thirty hours until the fighting begins.

They'll be back. Once only three armies remain, they'll be able to re-enter the city, and it will be destroyed. They say by the time the fighting is over, none of these NPCs are left alive. None of these buildings stand. It is all destroyed in the pursuit of an imaginary prize. This makes my heart hurt. This volcano world is obviously a fairy tale. But is this city real? It looks real. It smells real. There is history here. And if so, what's the purpose of giving this to us? To show us a wonder

that once existed, to remind us that they don't care what they destroy? To beat us further into submission?

And what of the NPCs? What of their suffering?

I fear what will happen to my mind when I see it destroyed.

AFTER AN HOUR, IT BECAME CLEAR THAT PHASE ONE WAS A ROUSING SUCCESS. It was frustrating that nobody was left to see what specific feral god was summoned, though we did manage to get info on a few of the bubbles. The second-to-last bubble was right next to Elle and Imani's world, and Elle braved going out there to take a look. Whatever had been summoned was much too big for the bubble and had simply exploded when it appeared, filling the interior ball with gore. A minute later, the bubble automatically opened on its own—apparently because the explosion killed the remaining defenders—and it caused all the gore to slop out into the lacuna. The entire level with now filled with a horrific stench. Elle said it was absolutely unbearable in their area.

Another crawler reported that a nearby bubble had a massive turkey inside of it, about the same size of Orthrus. That bubble, too, broke on its own, and now the feral turkey god was hopping about, randomly pecking at worlds. It wasn't attacking anything, and at last report it was sitting there near the exploded remains of the other feral god and was gobbling up the gore. Because of the turkey's proximity to their bubble, all of the remaining Team Meadow Lark members were forced down the stairs, leaving only Imani and Elle in their bubble.

Li Jun, who'd managed to finish off their last castle, reported that a nearby bubble was filled with a screaming monster covered in tentacles. All of their bubble and teammates had already fled down the stairs, but siblings Li Jun and Li Na remained, keeping an eye on their neighboring bubble for us.

As for regular gods, only three showed up. But as Mordecai said, they all went away on their own after a few hours. None were sponsored. They did plenty of damage to open worlds, but we didn't know of any casualties. There were no more world quests. None came anywhere near bubble 543.

We were about to initiate phase two, which was the same as phase one. Only this time it was with worlds where the crawlers were uncertain if the other quadrants were empty. Two additional worlds had also managed to make themselves eligible for phase one, so we were doing those first. This second phase was a total of fifteen worlds for about 800 more people.

I looked over at the counter for surviving crawlers. It continued to fall, despite half of the survivors having already descended to the sixth floor.

99,754

We'd fallen under 100,000. This floor had already killed almost half of the survivors of the previous. The numbers were mind-numbing. All of this work, and for what? We were just delaying the inevitable. It was hard not to fall into that trap, not to allow the sheer horror of it all to shatter your resolve.

I thought of Priestly. In the end, he'd been broken by the system. He'd been unable to take it. Seeing that city destroyed as he marched with the bugbear army over the corpses of the NPCs, including the bodies of actors he'd watched perform in a play, had been it for him. He'd finally snapped what sanity he had left. His last entry had been shortly after that and was an incoherent jumble of words.

So much. So little. Stab, stab, stab. If I fall, if I stand. It matters not when the song is done.

A hand fell on my shoulder, and I jumped in surprise. It was Juice Box.

"Hey, are you okay, big guy? You've been sitting there looking all tense and angry for a few minutes. You're scaring the children."

"I'm okay. It's just weird being the one who has to wait for all of this to play out."

She nodded. “Didn’t you just crash a drop bear into a god’s face?”

“That was hours ago.”

“You remind me of my brother,” she said. “You need to be careful. He always had to be moving, always pushing toward his goal. When an obstacle popped up in front of him he couldn’t figure out, he finally pushed too hard. If he had waited, he’d still be alive.”

I had no response to that. Mordecai emerged from the crafting room to look distastefully at the mess. The kids were now watching *The Goonies*. The changelings were all emulating portly little humans and dancing with their Hawaiian shirts up, exposing their bellies.

Donut remained in her room, glued to the social media board. Her addiction to the thing was starting to worry me. She occasionally popped out to complain about someone who said something mean, but she and Mongo were having some much-needed alone time.

The recap episode came and went. It didn’t show anything about the gods and the Orthrus quest or the folks escaping their bubbles using the gate, but it was clear they were saving it all for the next episode. I watched Li Na and Li Jun battle a crab monster to defeat their final castle. Their world had started with barely any water, but there was some storyline where the waterline was constantly rising the entire time. By the time they defeated the last castle, their entire bubble was submerged. When it popped, water splashed all over the lacuna. Apparently that ended up killing a few crawlers who’d gotten out and were exploring the dark fog that filled the ground there.

Mordecai and Donut came out to listen to the announcement. Katia and the others remained out there, preparing for phase two.

Hello, Crawlers,

What an exciting day! We never expected to have so many gods running around this early. You are all so very spunky, and we really appreciate that. The ratings have never been higher!

After some very careful discussions, some unfortunate litigation that we won, and with the input from the Syndicate, we have decided to allow this method of bubble escape to continue. However, we have been forced to block

some—but not all—of the secondary summonings. The feral gods who've been escaping are random, and sometimes new even to us. Each feral who appears has a 66% chance to summon a corresponding deity. One of the resulting summoned gods was Ysalte, the Vinegar Bitch. That would have been an extinction-level event for this floor and the next. As exciting as that would be, we still have another floor of sponsorship bidding to get through before we can allow it. We are at 33% of the projected capacity for the sixth floor, and nobody wants that number to go lower than that. So, congratulations. Opening that gate will still unleash a feral god, but the odds of summoning an active god in the process is now much less.

Since so many of you are choosing to descend early, we've decided we better get some sixth floor information out of the way.

Many of you have classes that will allow you to specialize and upgrade yourselves upon descent. This process will be similar to class selection on the third floor. For most of you, specialization is optional, but it would behoove you to read through all the provided selections.

In addition, I am happy to announce the guild system will become active on the sixth floor. This will allow you to better organize parties and share personal space upgrades without forcing a person to join your party. The sixth floor Bopcas will have more information. The process will be a bit expensive, but if you sell your unwanted gear on the market, it should be do-able for most crawlers. We highly recommend you take advantage of it.

And finally, some of you may have heard by now that third-party tourists will be joining us on the next floor. And they'll be hunting you and your gear. Isn't that exciting?

We have a record number of hunters participating this season thanks to a generous, anonymous sponsor who was willing to pay entry fees for anyone who wanted to join in

on the fun. And people from all corners of the galaxy are taking advantage. Isn't that fantastic?

Now get out there and kill, kill, kill!

I'd been all but certain that Borant would institute some sort of patch to stop this madness, but they'd actually done the opposite. They'd apparently saved our asses.

They needed us to die on *their* schedule, not ours.

"I'm not surprised," Mordecai said. "They love it when you guys do stupid, suicidal stuff, but when it involves the entire population, they start to get alarmed. Don't expect them to cushion your fall once all the sponsorships are done."

I watched as the number of living crawlers ticked down by one. Then by three.

"I don't see why Louis and Firas couldn't just come and pick us up," Donut grumbled as we brushed ourselves off. A dark fog surrounded us, and the air stank like dead meat. A couple of inches of water sat on the ground, much to Donut's dismay. Even with her *Torch* spell, the lacuna was oppressively dark. In the distance, I heard the screech of the goddamned turkey.

It was eerily quiet down here. And damp. I felt claustrophobic, despite the lack of ceiling and walls. It felt as if we'd fallen into a sewer. I looked up at the edge of the bubble we'd just plummeted off. It'd been pretty far.

"I don't want them leaving 543 and risking the *Twister.* They're gonna have to leave in a few days, and if something happens to the balloon before then, it'll screw everything up."

"They still have to leave to pick us up," Donut grumbled.

"Yeah, but we'll be right there. Come on," I said as I pulled the chariot from inventory and prepared it. "We'll be there in less than an hour."

Phase two was now finished, and we'd managed to save about 1,500 crawlers total. We'd added a few additional bubbles at the last

minute. The gate was back in Katia's possession. Nobody had tried to steal it, much to Donut's surprise.

I wished that number of saved crawlers was higher, but more and more bubbles were popping on their own thanks to the work of the survivors inside.

A distressing amount of bubbles had gone dark.

There were also bubbles where the people inside had no access to the Desperado Club or Club Vanquisher—which was still closed for repairs. It turned out if you destroyed the entry pub to the Desperado, or the church for the Vanquisher, it removed access to the club. For those crawlers, we could only offer our sympathies and advice.

The only feral gods we unleashed into the lacuna were the giant turkey and what appeared to be a city-sized swarm of insects. Luckily, the swarm remained in the general area of their bubble number 801, way on the far side. It'd eventually dispersed. In addition, we'd summoned five more gods. These gods did more damage but eventually went away. I never got to see any of them.

The turkey was actually the most dangerous of anything we summoned. It was now sitting on top of some random popped bubble and screaming. It had evidently tripled in size after it ate the remainder of the exploded feral god. The thing was level 150.

I heard through the chat lines that Miriam Dom and Prepotente were attempting to kill it using their debuff method.

After Phase two ended, we waited a few hours for anything else to happen. Nothing did once the five gods wandered off. Donut and I couldn't wait any longer. After getting the chariot back from Langley and doing some repairs, we decided to make the treacherous journey across the lacuna back to bubble 543. Getting out of our current bubble was the most difficult part. Donut attached herself to me as I did a spiderman impersonation using only my feet on the side of the almost-invisible bottom half of the bubble. Once I found the lip, we both used a half-splat to fall into the dark fog of the lacuna.

The ground here was completely flat. A few red dots appeared on the edge of my vision, but they shied away from us. Donut said

they were small, like rats. I used my new *Ping* spell to see if any weird NPCs or hidden, small-sized gods were out here, and there was nothing.

We didn't waste time. I revved up the chariot, and we were off. I kept a lookout for the Xs of crawlers, but I didn't see anything. Even here, there were janitor mobs at work.

The pickup went as planned, and we were soon back atop the bowl, which had broken in half. With the lip gone from the bowl, the world up here had taken on a new appearance. A nearby, closed and glowing bubble dominated the distant horizon, like the curve of a planet as seen from space.

"It's pretty," Donut said as we landed.

It *was* oddly beautiful, until I remembered each intact bubble was potentially a tombstone, a monument to crawlers who'd fallen victim to this fifth floor.

"Welcome home," Firas said as we landed just outside of Hump Town.

A small crowd of crawlers had gathered to watch us descend. They started clapping as we alighted.

"I thought everyone had gone down the stairs already," I said.

"Obviously not, Carl," Donut said, stiffening on my shoulder. She waved. "People know they wouldn't have been saved without you and me. Now wave at them and don't look so grumpy."

A crocodilian stood in the front of the crowd, standing with Katia as we landed. He stepped forward and gave me a fist bump.

"Hello, Florin," I said. "I'm glad to see you made it out."

The man rested his weight on his Mossberg shotgun. The modified and now-magical weapon supposedly had unlimited ammo. "I managed to get three of the castles on my own, but that last air one was impossible. Thanks to you and Elle and Katia, I am free." He looked at Donut. "You, too, pretty girl."

Donut preened. "Oh, you're quite welcome."

He'd been the last rescue of the first phase. He'd gotten access to the Desperado Club because he'd "killed" Ifechi. He had a golden player killer mark over his head, similar to Katia's. They were the only two marks like that in the dungeon.

"I'm glad to have helped," I said.

He nodded.

"I'm headin' down the stairs since there's no more training to be had, but I wanted to meet you first. I understand you're going to throw a feral god onto the ninth floor to jumble them up a bit. Good for you, mate. I'm looking forward to hearing about it."

"That's the plan," I said. I looked up. "We're going to fuck those guys up. We're going to toss a god right into the camp of the Skull Empire."

He leaned forward and clasped me on the shoulder with his green, scaled hand. He kept his hand up there, and suddenly it was super awkward. He stared at me with his dark, intense eyes.

"I was done, mate. I didn't have anything," he said, suddenly emotional. "You should have met her. My Ife. She was amazing. A ray of light. She was the bravest, kindest person I'd ever met. She gave me hope. I was done until I went into the club, and I met Elle. She told me a story about this man and his cat who'd stopped everything he was doing to help a group of old people in wheelchairs and how this same man was planning on using this artifact he'd found to save people stuck in their bubbles. And it reminded me that Ife wasn't the only one. That there is good in this world. There is something left to fight for. I might die tomorrow, but it won't be because I've given up. And I want to thank you for that."

"I'm just doing the best I can," I said, not sure what else to say. The dude's claw was still on my shoulder. I reached up and clumsily patted it.

He retracted his arm quickly, as if surprised by my touch. "If you ever need a backup gun, I'm in your debt." Then just like that, he turned and walked away. We watched him walk away in silence. He went straight to the stairwell, and without turning around, he disappeared.

"That dude is pretty intense," I said.

"I like him. Still, that would've been much more emotional if he wasn't a disgusting crocodile man," Donut whispered after he was gone. "He's really dirty, too. He smells like a dead frog. And how does he get that shirt on with such a giant head?"

"Goddamnit, Donut," I said through gritted teeth. "Don't say that shit out loud."

Time to Level Collapse: 7 hours.

"You know what, Carl?" Donut asked as we sat at the booth at the Desperado Club. She sipped on a nonalcoholic Shirley temple as the Sledge stood unnecessarily nearby. The three of us were the only crawlers here. "I'm worried the ending is going to be anticlimactic. What if this doesn't work? Then what?"

"Then we go down the stairs, Donut. It doesn't always have to end with a giant fight or an explosion. We're alive. We've already done enough this floor."

The last two days had been a blur. My fingertip itched with phantom pain where I'd made my daily blood offering. The mobs were all gone from the air quadrant, so all that was left was to train. I'd also spent time—too much time, really—showing the others how to dominate in the game *Frogger*.

The large, stand-up video game machine was not the same exact one my father had in our basement growing up. But it was similar. I'd had to rig up a dwarven battery to make it work. It'd been in my fan box. I'd mentioned the game more than once in my conversations with Katia and Donut, and they'd run with it. I wasn't certain, but I suspected it was an attempt at trolling me or a way to block a better prize. I'd never know. In the end, it ended up being exactly what I needed.

It'd been breathing room, a way to relax. It brought me back to a distant memory of happiness, even if it was just for a moment. I'd only gotten good at the game because I'd always been locked away in the basement while my dad had friends over. Still, you could do that. You could take a terrible situation and still find moments of

peace, even joy. I needed to be reminded that was possible, and the game console did exactly that.

We'd ended up performing three more rescues using the gate. Two of the three summoned additional gods, who turned on each other and both disappeared. There was no sign of Chris and Maggie. The general consensus was that they'd gone down the stairs. I wasn't so certain.

Gwen and Tran and their team had ventured into the now-dry subterranean level and managed to loot the remains of the tomb raiders and unearth the tomb of Anser, which was just a sarcophagus filled with the skeleton of a goose wearing a golden, unenchanted crown. Electrifying the water had triggered all of the traps. Quetzalcoatlus's corpse contained a partial map of the sixth floor that contained coordinates of multiple locations.

"It *does* have to end with a giant explosion! I promised Katia it would always end that way."

Katia sat across from us at the table. She was staring down at her drink, mixing it idly. She hadn't reacted to Donut's explosion comment. She was in her own little world.

"Out with it," I finally said.

She looked up, and she sighed. She'd been quiet like this for a few days now. She took a deep breath.

"I don't want to mess up the personal space situation," she finally said.

I just blinked.

"But?" I asked.

"But I think we need to separate the next floor down."

"What?" Donut asked. "You're breaking up with us? What did Carl do?" She looked at me. "What did you do, Carl?"

Katia laughed softly. She reached forward and put a hand on Donut's paw. "He didn't do anything. It's because of Eva. I've been talking to her, and I've been talking to all the former daughters. She's trying to gather them back to her. Some are actually doing it."

I knew she'd been talking to people. But Eva? Eva had tried to kill her. Katia had tried to kill Eva.

"You want to join back up with Eva?" I asked, astounded.

"No, of course not. She has… increased her player killer marks. Do you remember Silfa? The fairy? Used to own a bakery?"

"Yes," I said. Silfa was an older woman who'd turned herself into a healer. She had two of her own daughters with her. Hekla and Eva had used her as bait, trying to get me to kill her. It seemed so long ago.

"She's dead, and so are her two daughters. Despite everything, they'd formed a new party with Eva. I tried talking them out of it, but they didn't listen. And Eva got them killed. A few others are tempted to return to Eva because nobody will take them in. I couldn't do anything this floor, but the next will be an open world. I need to gather the former daughters and protect them. Before Eva does. Before someone else realizes how vulnerable they are. We shouldn't have just let them spread out and away. It was a death sentence, and I can't stop thinking about it. And if Eva insists on pursuing the matter, I need to take care of that, too."

"We're a team, Katia," Donut said, sounding hurt. "We can do this together. We can help you. You can just ask."

"No," Katia said. "I love both of you, but the path you're on right now…. With the ring and the hunters and all of it? You two already have too much on your plate for the next floor. Not to mention that Tsarina Signet storyline. When you're in the Carl and Donut party, you ride on the Carl and Donut rollercoaster, and once it gets going, there's no getting off. I need to do this."

She was right. If this was something she wanted to do, I feared my presence would be more of a hindrance than a help. But I'd come to rely on her. I'd been taking her presence for granted, and now she was leaving. But still, going at it alone? That was suicidal.

"You *need* to do this? Even if you end up dead?" I asked.

"Yes," she said. "You need to understand something. My whole life I have been in that back seat. I have you to thank for helping me realize what I can do. But you being gone for those days was also really important. It showed me I can do this without your help. I don't want to leave the party. Like I said, it'll mess up the personal space. But maybe this new guild system will be a good compromise."

"What if you get lonely?" Donut asked. She was about to start crying. "And what if Mongo wants his Aunt Katia to scratch between his feathers?"

"Until we figure out how it'll work, I won't leave the party. We'll see each other every night in the personal space," she said. "And I won't be alone. Louis and Firas, Gwen and her team, Daniel and a few of his friends, and Florin have all agreed to help me. We're going to be a pretty big party."

"You and Gwen are always fighting!" Donut said.

"Bautista?" I asked. "Since when have you been talking to Bautista?"

"I've been talking to him since that day we rescued him on the Iron Tangle. He's… very lost, and he needs this, too. Same with Florin."

I wanted to argue. I wanted to say, *please don't leave me*. But it was clear she'd already made up her mind.

"At least you'll have the *Twister* with you," I said. "And this." I pulled the sword from my inventory. *The Left Fang of the Green Sultan*. The magical properties of the deadly saber only worked when it was matched with its brother. It was half of Eva's main weapon, and she'd dropped it. "Make sure you return it to its rightful owner."

Katia picked the saber up and regarded it. It glinted with green, venomous light. She nodded, and the sword disappeared into her inventory. "I'll make sure of it."

We watched the timer click down. Two seconds after it hit six hours until level collapse, phase three would be implemented.

Imani, Elle, Louis and Firas, along with a whole mess of changelings were going to open up a portal to the sixth floor. This was on Imani and Elle's bubble.

This was going to be the first feral god we summoned outside of a bubble. Even as far away as it was, it was ridiculously dangerous.

Louis and Firas had braved the lacuna and managed to actually find the proper world. The only other crawler they'd brought with them was Britney, the sole-surviving member of the water quadrant other than Chris. The Ukrainian woman had latched onto Firas for

some inexplicable reason. They'd ferried a house full of changelings to the distant bubble. There were so many of the changelings, including adults who'd survived the Orthrus attack, that they didn't all fit onto the house. They'd transformed into geese and coasted alongside the flying machine, like a caravan.

Once the portal opened, the changelings would return to the sixth floor.

The journey of the *Twister* from our bubble to Imani and Elle's world was thankfully uneventful. The turkey was now dead, having been successfully killed by Prepotente, who'd gained eight levels in the process, bringing him up to 55 and making him the highest in the dungeon. The last recap episode showed him gnawing on the universe's largest feather and screaming over and over while Miriam Dom the vampire shepherd stroked his hair.

Mordecai insisted that the portal would not allow crawler passage from floor to floor, even if it was just one floor down, so we were sending the *Twister* through with the changelings, but without Louis and Firas. Immediately after, they were going to go through the regular stairwell where hopefully they'd be able to recover the flying house. Imani and Elle would return to the club, hand off the gate to us, and also go down the stairs before the portal in their bubble expired and summoned the feral god.

With the gate back in our possession, we'd then implement the final phase.

Li Jun: Carl, we'll be going down in a minute. That other bubble with the tentacle monster is still intact. It's not moving around so much anymore, so I think it's going to stay put.

Carl: Okay, guys. Be careful.

Li Jun: You too. That woman is here, by the way. The one with the shopping cart. She just pulled up out of nowhere and entered the stairwell. She didn't talk to us, and she went down before the six hour mark. I don't know where she came from. She's only level 12.

Carl: Yeah, that's Agatha. We just ignore Agatha. Best of luck to you. If this guild system is what I think it'll be, look

us up.

Li Jun: We will.

A moment passed, and the six hour mark hit.

Imani: It worked. The changelings are through. On our way back to the club.

Louis: God, I hope they don't wreck the *Twister*. That Skarn kid is a good pilot, but he's a little shit. I caught him charging a gold coin to the other kids so they could fly it. Bonnie the gnome kid said she wanted to install some upgrades, so we need to find them as soon as possible before they ruin it.

Carl: You two be careful. Stay sober. The hunters will be gunning for you right away. Keep your eyes open.

Firas: Thank you, Carl and Donut. Katia, see you in a bit.

Imani and Elle rushed into the club. They both looked exhausted. We needed to hurry. Katia walked up to Elle and gave the floating woman a long hug. She pulled back. "You guys be careful, okay?"

"We always are," Elle said. She gave me a little wink and patted Donut on the head. "I'm looking forward to being able to mix it up with you guys again. This floor was a real drag having to do it all myself."

"Come on," Imani said, all business. "We need to go." She paused, then looked me in the eye. "Send me a message, one way or the other."

I nodded.

Elle pulled the three gate pieces from her inventory and handed them to me. "Here you go."

I took the three items and pulled them into my inventory. I turned to Katia. She had entered the Desperado on the ground level, and this was where we were going to separate. I pulled her into a tight hug. Donut was suddenly there on my shoulder, also rubbing up against Katia. Katia wrapped her arms around me, widening them like the flaps on a stingray, hugging us so completely, it felt as if I was being wrapped up like a burrito. This would be the last time we were together on this floor.

We stood like that for several moments.

Phase four had officially begun.

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<Note added by Crawler Porthus, 2nd Edition>

I don't know why this journal came to me, but I don't feel it will ever be enough. I have done my best, adding little things here and there to the meager, mostly-useless recipes. How many generations before this book truly has enough information to make a difference? Too many, I fear. As the first to receive these words, and now, as the author of the second edition, I feel inadequate. I have not done enough.

I have decided to accept the deal. I don't know what will become of me, but I swear on the name of all my fallen brothers and sisters, one day I will make them pay. It seems those who live outside our world can exist for thousands of years. I don't know how this is possible, but if I survive my 100 seasons of servitude, I will do everything I can to end this horror. I don't know if I have the strength, but I will do my best to not be broken.

This will be my last entry into this book, but I am not yet done with the enemy. As long as I have breath, I will fight.

Time to level collapse: five hours, 30 minutes.

I TOOK OUT THE TWO WATCHES AND CLINKED THEM IN THE WINDING BOX. I placed the box right there into the sand dune atop the bowl, about ten meters away from the stairwell. I dug the box in so it wouldn't shift and get messed with. If the box moved more than five feet in any direction once it was set and counting down, the gate would get canceled. It was completely dark out here. The only light was the distant sliver of a dead bubble, glowing from within like they'd accidentally nuked themselves, and the world was now irradiated.

A light breeze that smelled like cooked turkey wafted across the world.

Langley and his archers were now the only other crawlers left up here with me and Donut. Langley stood beside me, watching as I pushed the box deeper into the sand. I stood and wiped my hands on my boxers.

"What's your plan?" I asked.

Langley cracked his neck. He was now level 32. He'd gained eight levels since I'd first met him. "We're going down there, and we're going to keep doing what we've been doing. Katia asked if we wanted to work with her new team, but I am thinking we might join up with some others. We'll see. There are many large groups forming. The Popov brothers are looking for archers. They wish to hunt down team Cichociemni, who have been preying on weak crawlers. We need to break up the player killer groups before they get too strong, so we might join up with them."

I shook the man's hand, and I wished him luck. The group turned and left.

"They all lived," Donut said. "Not those weirdos in the other quadrants, but all the ones in our quadrant made it."

I reached over and scratched her head.

It was just me, Donut, Mongo, and Juice Box. A few dromedarians remained, rebuilding their town a short distance away. I watched as a pair of camels on stilts worked to lift up a new wall.

"It's not going to matter for them, is it?" Juice Box asked. She was currently in the form of a buzz-ard, and it was disconcerting talking to her like this. "This world isn't real. All of that construction is for nothing. In a few hours, this will all cease to exist."

I didn't respond.

"I can't lose them," Juice Box added after a moment. "They're all I have left. Remember our deal."

"I will do my best," I said. "I promise."

The only quadrant in this whole bubble that still contained mobs was the water quadrant. Katia and Tran were down there. She'd announced they needed to train as much as they could, and they were going to go shark hunting.

Katia: By my calculations, the gate you just placed will open in five hours and four minutes.

I looked at the clock. The level would collapse in five hours and 27 minutes, giving us 23 minutes once the gate opened. Gates stayed open on their own for twenty minutes unless all three pieces of the gate went through them.

Carl: That's cutting it pretty close.

Katia: Hey, it's your plan, big guy.

Carl: True enough. Aren't you going to miss this stuff?

Katia: Ask me in five and a half hours.

When we'd looted the letter and papers from Ghazi the mage, it'd contained more than just a group of coordinates. At the back was a list of scenarios that showed what would happen if different parts of the gate were brought through an open portal. The very last scenario showed a method of keeping the gate from unleashing a monster into the world. That required us to leave one watch on one side, another on the opening side, and the winding box inside the gate. It'd basically ruin the artifact, but it would make the portal safe.

But it was the second-to-last scenario that had intrigued me. If the first watch was left in the box, and it was taken through the portal, but the second watch remained on the opening side, it'd result in a feral god appearing on *both* sides of the portal.

The plan, as I loudly and happily explained, was straightforward. We'd open a portal to the ninth floor, I'd keep the second watch, and we'd send Juice Box through with the rest. That would result in a feral god appearing on the ninth floor and hopefully trashing the area where it was summoned.

I remembered when Prince Stalwart had made his stupid little video after he'd killed Manasa the singer. He'd been in a castle overlooking a field of soldiers. This was right after the ninth floor had opened. Since there was only one pre-built castle on the faction wars playing field, we now knew in which of the nine locations where their army was located. Thanks to the book of coordinates, I knew exactly where to summon the gate.

Seven of the nine factions had sued to stop this from happening. They knew the armies weren't yet strong enough to hold back an attack from a feral god, especially if a second god was summoned to their location. The ensuing chaos would be enough to flatten their fortifications and kill their armies.

"You're just going to kill people like me," Juice Box had said when I explained the plan to her. By this point, Louis had opened her eyes to the reality of her existence. She was now fully aware of who she was and of her place in this world. She was even more aware than Fire Brandy had been on the previous level. "If these *people,* these game masters are truly immortal in this place, then what's the point? How is this a blow to them?"

I'd shrugged at the time. "If you were going to die no matter what, which would you prefer? Die as a puppet, or die while striking back against those who are doing this to you?"

"I suppose," she'd said, but she didn't seem convinced. Eventually, after Donut spent some time working on her, she agreed to the plan in exchange for a promise. A promise that I would attempt to bring her people with us down every floor from now on. I'd told her I'd do my best, but it would be difficult.

"I have seen you do the impossible," she'd said. "I have faith. Just promise me you'll try, and I will carry your box through the portal."

In the distance, a mighty, monkey-like screech filled the lacuna, echoing strangely. This was far, far off. It was likely the feral god getting summoned over on Imani and Elle's now-empty world.

"Carl, I've decided I don't like giant monsters," Donut announced. "I'll be much happier when we're done here."

A second roar filled the darkness. This was a different sound. A different creature. A deeper roar. The sky rumbled and flashed a few times, like a distant thunder storm.

The sky went from sheer darkness to a series of pyrotechnic flashes and bursts. Several seconds later, the sound of the clash reached us. The world rumbled under our feet.

"Whatever we summoned on Imani's world also summoned a god," I said, watching the distant lights. Since the feral god wasn't protected by a bubble, whatever this was should be over soon.

Zev: Hello, crawlers.

Donut: HI ZEV!

Zev: Just so you know, there was yet another last-minute legal challenge to what you're about to attempt. It, again, failed. They almost won the injunction, but the Valtay Corporation sent in an attorney to assist Borant's position. They had some interesting legal arguments regarding you, Carl. Apparently, since you now own stock in a company based in the Skull Empire, the lawsuit needed to be filed in a different court. Taxpayers who are not in arrears are afforded different protections. It was enough to dismiss that last-minute effort.

Carl: Borant and the Valtay working together? Wow.

Zev: It's no surprise since the sole plaintiff for this one was the Skull Empire, and even though we are currently at odds with the Valtay, neither entity is a big fan of the orcs.

I bit my lip, not allowing my sudden anger to bubble over into the chat. A lawsuit. A lawsuit because I was threatening their goddamn toy soldiers and imaginary fortifications. A goddamn lawsuit.

The ground rumbled again. Was that a third monster? It sounded like an angry bellow. Actual words being shouted. Thankfully it was still far off.

Zev: Anyway, I've been asked to pass on a message from my boss.

Carl: Okay. Let's hear it.

Zev: This is directly from the politburo, who have recently replaced the board of directors as principal controllers of the Borant Corporation. This is a direct quote. "Crawler Carl and Donut. While we approve of what you are planning, we wish to make something clear. Game-breaking antics that directly affect sponsors will not be tolerated in the future." That was the whole message. It came from the top.

I tried to suppress a grin. I copied the message and pasted it into my scratchpad just in case they decided to nuke the message string later. A deep sense of satisfaction replaced my anger. The goddamn mudskippers approved of what we were planning because it meant the other sponsors were going to lose a metric fuck ton of money, which would in turn force them to spend a ton more to make up for their losses. And since nobody could actually die on the ninth floor, it was all in good fun for everybody involved. Something everybody would laugh about after it was all over and done with. After all, it was just money, right?

Carl: Tell them I said fuck you very much, and if they don't want the game "broken" maybe they shouldn't give us the tools to break it.

Zev: Crawler, you know such language is not acceptable. Best of luck to you.

Donut: BYE, ZEV!

Almost as soon as the message from Zev ended, we received another message.

Gideon: Hey, uh, Carl and Donut?

Donut: OMG HI GIDEON!

Gideon was a crawler who was pretty active in the chats. I'd only met him once. He was some sort of human tank class. I couldn't remember his details. We hadn't needed to save him because his team had popped their bubble early. He'd been there during the last fight on the previous floor, and I knew the man could handle himself. I couldn't remember where he was from. Donut liked him because he'd once said he was allergic to dogs.

<u>Carl</u>: Gideon, you shouldn't be out here. Go down the stairs.

<u>Gideon</u>: I'm about to go down, but I wanted to warn you. Two god things just rolled past my world while beating the shit out of each other. One was a giant, hairless gorilla thing, and the other, I think the real god, was a snake with the head of a bald guy. Kinda looked like Woody Harrelson. You know, the guy from *Cheers*?

<u>Donut</u>: HE WAS IN THE ZOMBIE MOVIE I LIKED. THE ONE ABOUT TWINKIES.

<u>Gideon</u>: Yeah, so the Woody Harrelson god killed the monkey god, and they both disappeared. But just before he killed him, he threw the gorilla against one of the bubbles with a monster inside. I could see the bubble pop from here, and the monster got out. I think it might be headed in your direction. It's carrying a very large whip.

That new, third roar filled the world again. It was definitely shouting something, getting closer.

This was a deep, beefy voice. I couldn't tell if it was male or female, though it reminded me of the Hoarder boss. It sounded absolutely irate.

"It's a woman," Donut said after a moment. "She really needs a throat lozenge or something. She sounds like she's been smoking nonstop since she was a baby."

The feral god cried again, and this time I could understand what she was saying.

"Psamathe," she screamed. "Samantha! I can smell you! I know you escaped! You may be hiding, but I will find you, you worthless little whore!"

"Uh oh," Donut said. "That doesn't sound good."

I was about to send a message to Katia, telling her to abort everything and to get to a stairwell when I received a surprising notification.

You have received an Emergency Platinum Benefactor Box from your sponsor, The Open Intellect Pacifist Action Network, Intergalactic NFC.

"Samantha!" the massive feral god shouted. In the distance, I caught sight of a pair of batlike, beating wings. The creature stood atop that distant, glowing bubble. It was only in silhouette, but the shape was of a fat creature, overflowing with rolls of flesh and with no neck. The thing wasn't nearly as big as the other gods, not even close, but it was still huge. It carried a sparkling whip that crackled with lightning. "Samantha," it howled as it approached.

Not a god. A demon. A feral demon. It would be here in minutes.

"If it gets too close, go down the stairs, Donut," I yelled, and I sprinted back toward Hump Town. I needed to open the goddamn loot box.

Mordecai: A platinum emergency box? Are you shitting me? Do you know how much that had to cost? That had to be more than the GDP of some star systems. That had to be the most expensive box in the game's history!

Carl: Yeah, my first instinct was to abort everything and run down the stairs, but I figured we might as well look at it. Whoever these guys are, they must want this plan to go smoothly.

I actually felt bad, especially if these pacifist assholes were truly trying to help. If they were counting on my plan going exactly as I said it'd go, they were about to be disappointed.

Mordecai: You should forget this nonsense and run down the stairs anyway.

Carl: What does Samantha say?

Mordecai: You can ask her directly now that she's hired. You'll have to approve the chat in the menu.

I clicked through, and sure enough, there was an option to add staff members. I clicked it as I rushed through the doors of the closest intact pub. This was a saferoom in what had once been Weird Shit Alley. The whole town was unrecognizable.

I could see that Donut had already approved her to chat and changed her name from Psamathe to Samantha. Knowing Donut, she'd probably already gotten the minor god-turned-sex doll's life story out of her.

Carl: Samantha, who is that fat demon with wings and a whip?

I jumped into my menu and clicked on boxes.

Samantha: A WHIP? DOES SHE LOOK LIKE AN UNCIRCUMCISED GNOME PENIS?

Carl: Yes. Maybe. I don't know. She doesn't have a neck.

Samantha: I HAVE NO IDEA WHICH ONE SHE IS. YOU JUST BRING ME OUTSIDE, AND I WILL TAKE CARE OF IT. I WILL KILL HER AND HER MOTHER. BITCH CAN'T HANDLE ME.

Carl: Jesus, did Donut show you the caps lock key?

Samantha: LET ME FIGHT HER! I CAN TAKE THE FAT BITCH DOWN!

The platinum sponsor box opened with a ridiculous amount of fanfare. A group of cogs and wheels turned, spitting confetti all over the place. The dromedarians all turned to watch. *This better not be another goddamn vegetable.*

A single object popped out. It was a curved piece of wicker basket, though it glowed with enchantment. I just stared at it. I extended my xistera, and sure enough, the device slid easily onto the scoop. I wouldn't be able to retract it like this, but the item's purpose was clear.

Carl: You really want to fight her?

Samantha: I'LL KILL HER.

Carl: You're about to get your chance.

I rushed to the door of the personal space. The main room was trashed thanks to all the kids, but finally empty except for Mordecai, who sat on the couch watching some goddamn television show. The cleaner bot beeped mournfully at me as I rushed past and burst into the training room. I grabbed Samantha, and I bolted for the door.

"Don't take her outside," Mordecai yelled at me, alarmed. "You'll summon another god if she goes outside!"

I ignored him as I rushed through the door, holding onto the cackling sex doll by the hair.

"Carl, why'd you bring her out here?" Donut cried. "And what is that on your arm?"

"It's on! It's time for me to bring the pain!" Samantha squealed. "Where are you at, you rank whore!"

"I smell you! You're here!" the massive demon squealed, the voice distressingly close.

I looked about, trying to see where the giant monster had gone. "Where the hell is the monster?"

A high-pitched, crackling noise filled the air, like the sound of incoming artillery.

"Watch out!" I cried, preparing to hit my shield. I paused, seeing the attack would miss.

The whip was actually a chain, similar to what Li Na used. Each individual link was the size of a semi-truck. The chain glowed with electricity. It came from below, arcing up into the air, unfurling like a snake. It crashed down heavily into the bowl, a half a mile away. The chain slammed across the desert, cleaving through the rock as if it was butter and cutting deep into the temple below. An edge of the already-collapsed bowl started to slide away. The ground rumbled. Juice Box transformed into a turtle. She jumped atop the winding box, keeping it safe and in place.

That wouldn't matter if the whole temple collapsed. I eyed the stairwell, just a few feet away.

"You missed, you crazy bitch!" Samantha shrieked. "It's not my fault your man likes me more than you! He told me you smell like the asshole of a Felch demon! He says he'd rather fornicate with a razor elemental than stick it in you ever again!"

Katia: What the hell is going on up there?

Donut: GIRL FIGHT! GIRL FIGHT!

Carl: Stay put. Don't move!

The massive head rose over the horizon, glaring directly at us. The monstrosity glowed with purple light. On either side of the head, the tops of black, leathery wings rose.

I had no idea what an uncircumcised gnome penis looked like, but at that moment, I was quite certain Samantha's description had been accurate. The head was a pink, fleshy dome, yet somehow also covered in scales, like the thing was a lizard/mammal hybrid. Scattered, black hairs criss-crossed the thing's head. Twin, reptilian eyes stared at us. I knew a guy who once had a pet bearded dragon, and the eyes reminded me of that thing. A jagged, teeth-filled mouth spread across the demon, and a red tongue flitted out. The stench of unfiltered cigarettes filled the world, almost choking.

The monster was slathered in so much mascara, eyeshadow, and lipstick, it made Samantha's makeup seem subtle. Bruise-colored eyeshadow rose from each eye, reaching to the patchy hairline. Lipstick, thick like knee-deep spackle surrounded her giant mouth. The stuff fell off in massive clumps as she grimaced. Each cheek was painted equally red, swirls like the storm on Jupiter.

The damn head was the size of a sports arena, which was ridiculously huge, but small compared even to Emberus. That didn't seem so important right now.

Slit. Feral Minor Demon. Level 200.

One of the many demons captured and tossed into the Nothing during the original Ascendency, Slit never wanted to be caught up in all that royal drama, but what can you do? When you're in love, you'd do just about anything for your man.

Eons in the madness have taken a terrible toll on Slit's sanity and sense of self-worth.

"Samantha," Slit croaked. "You are so dead."

"Oh, this bitch. I know which one this is. Quick, give me a weapon," Samantha said.

"A weapon? You can't move," I said. I shoved her face-first into the round slot. She fit perfectly.

The way the accessory was described left no doubt as to what they wanted me to do. I just hoped it would actually work.

Enchanted Xistera Extension Slot. Head-throwing attachment.

This is a unique item!

This item was created especially for Crawler Carl by The Open Intellect Pacifist Action Network, Intergalactic NFC.

Attaches to the end of a xistera. Allows for the tossing of a head.

This special edition head tosser is custom made to fit decapitated love doll heads.

When tossing a head of a withering spirit, the distance traveled will be greatly enhanced. (500 meters x Strength.)

Tossed head will be magically returned once the extension slot is removed from xistera.

"You have daggers in your inventory! Stick one in my mouth! I need to cut the bitch!"

Slit the demon reared back, ready to slam her chain whip down once again.

"No time, sorry," I said. I turned 90 degrees, and I chucked Samantha with all of my might. She rocketed away, screaming that she was going to kill my mother.

Slit screeched in rage and turned to follow.

My unenhanced strength was 75. With all of my gear and buffs, it was well over 100. I'd just tossed her over 50 kilometers away. The fat demon took a few moments to gather steam, but her wings flapped, and soon she was booking it out into the lacuna.

"That was mighty convenient that they had that box ready to go," Donut said, watching the giant demon chase after the head. The strange demon was wearing some leather-like S&M outfit, something one of those tuskling dominatrixes would wear, but somehow more trashy. It was covered in dangly, sequoia-sized tassels. Her large body sloshed like gelatin as her wings worked overtime to keep her frame aloft. She chased the head off into the darkness, howling. The cigarette stench remained, overpowering the smell of the burning turkey.

"No," I said. "They had it ready to go for another purpose, probably on the next floor," I said. "They'd been forced to send it

now.”

“What do you mean?” Donut asked.

“Watch,” I said.

As Slit chased after the head, the sky cracked open. Something else appeared. This was yet another god, someone I hadn’t seen before. It was too distant to properly examine. I couldn’t quite make its features, but this was one of the physically huge ones. It had multiple arms.

I was expecting it to go after Samantha. It did not. It turned and plucked Slit up, holding the fat, squirming demon like someone would pick up a small rodent. And just like that, it ripped the feral demon in two. Even at this distance, I could hear the sound of tearing flesh. Slit shrieked as gore showered everywhere. Her chain whip dropped away, crashing heavily. A moment passed, and then both the god and the corpse disappeared.

“What was that?” Donut asked. “Carl, why are you summoning all these giant monsters?”

“Samantha was always going to summon a deity once we took her outside. This extension thing was supposed to be a prize similar to a celestial grenade. They’d likely had it made to give to us on the next floor. I guess they figured protecting us now was more important.”

I looked up into the air. “Thanks for saving us,” I said. “I don’t know how much it cost, but I hope it was worth it.” I pulled the xistera extension off, and I pulled it into my inventory.

Carl: You good?

Katia: It was very sloshy for a minute, but we’re calming down. Everything is good. It got those concierge sharks all riled up.

Carl: I’m only expecting one more attack before we’re done. That one shouldn’t be as seismic.

Samantha popped into existence at my feet, screaming. “Not fair! Not fair! You tell my mother to get back here! That was my kill!” We just stared down at her as she continued to moan and growl. “Throw me again. Maybe that’ll bring her back!”

“That god thing was your mother?” Donut finally asked.

"I'm going to kill her," Samantha said.

"Wait," I said. "Wasn't your dad the one who sent you into the Nothing?"

"Yeah. He was mad at me for having a baby with my king. But my mom was banging him too, so she got mad. Jealous bitch. She said she was going to kill me if I ever got out, but she killed that Slit bitch instead. She never keeps her promises. Parents not keeping their promises is the number one cause of childhood trauma, you know."

I looked at Donut. "Do you think that god was sponsored? I wished we could have seen her." Was it possible the "pacifist" group had *also* paid to sponsor a deity? I picked Samantha back up. I needed to get her back into the personal space. Our access would close when there was only an hour left.

"Why was that demon mad at you?" Donut asked.

"She thought I had sex with her king."

"Did you?" Donut asked.

"Ew," Samantha said. "Gross."

"Then why did she think that?"

"Oh, she's part of some demon harem thing. I was talking about my sexual exploits with *my* king, and she thought I was talking about *her* king. She got all belligerent. I don't like confrontation, as you well know, but she made me mad. So I told her that her king and I had all sorts of weird sex. You wouldn't believe how mad that made her and all of her sisters."

"How many sisters does she have?" I asked, suddenly concerned.

"The Nothing is filled with the harem. They all hate me." She laughed. "Anytime one of them gets out, that'll probably happen, so get used to it. Slit was only one of the little ones. Her sister Gash is the one you really need to look out for."

Juice Box stood, back in human form. In the distance, more of the bowl caved in where it had been cleaved in two. For the first time since I'd met the changeling, she looked frazzled.

"I'm starting to regret agreeing to help you," she said.

Time to level collapse: 1 hour.

Warning: All access to Safe Rooms is now closed.

We'd been waiting for a few hours now, just sitting there while Juice Box changed form to entertain us. After the appearance of the demon, the following hours of silence were jarring.

Juice Box was actually being super helpful, showing us forms of monsters I'd never heard of and then showing me the best way to kill them. Some of these monsters were listed in the cookbook, but for many of them, the weaknesses weren't noted. I was taking notes of everything.

Each time she changed, Juice Box reverted to her buzz-ard form before forming into something else. The creature had a special hunting ability that could find creatures hidden in the sand.

Eventually, I got sick of waiting. We were running out of time.

"I know you're there, Maggie. I don't know what you're waiting for. If you want to talk, come on out."

A full minute of silence followed. But then the voice came. "They told me about the potion," Chris—Maggie—called from their hiding place. A chill washed over me.

It sounded as if they were directly below me, which startled me. It was muffled, but still super close, almost like the voice was whispering in my ear.

It was why nobody had been able to find them. Rock creatures all came with camouflage abilities. It turned out Chris had the ability to burrow into sand dunes and disappear.

"Yeah," I said. I slowly moved away. Next to me, Mongo squawked. Juice Box took flight, pointing downward. They were

actually several feet away from where the voice was coming from. Another ability? Donut moved to jump atop the dinosaur.

I continued, talking loudly. "I got this weird yam thing in a sponsor box, and at first, our manager guy couldn't figure it out. I don't know if you saw what happened earlier, but that Samantha doll head that was out here? She helped him figure it out. It actually has multiple uses. The yam thing grows in lava or magma or something. I honestly don't remember what the difference is between the two. But anyway, the yam can either be used for a type of special ink for scrolls, or it can be used for a few different lava-themed potions. It can be a special type of healing scroll for lava rock monsters like Chris, or it can be used as a phase potion for people to be able to easily pass through lava rock. And that's what Mordecai made for us. A Phase Lava Rock potion. Once I take it, you won't be able to touch me. Chris's arms will go right through me."

Juice Box indicated they were moving. They'd been slowly, slowly creeping through the sand in full camouflage mode. Juice Box had sensed their presence an hour ago, and she'd quietly pointed it out to us. I wouldn't be able to do anything until they revealed themselves.

My pulse quickened. We didn't have Katia here with her special bolt. This was it.

"They have my other daughter, Carl. They're going to bring her back. They're going to turn her into a monster and make someone kill her if I don't do this. I can't let it happen."

"They're doing this to all of us," I said, slowly sliding along the sand. "We all lost someone, Maggie. We could've worked together. You got misled. I regret what happened with Yvette. But you're focusing your anger on the wrong people."

"You don't understand," she replied after a moment. "I'm not angry anymore." They had to move very slowly to keep from being detected. She could throw her voice, and she made it seem like she was stalking me, but I wasn't the target. The winding box was. *They're going to try to move it, or drop it down into the temple below*. They only needed to move it five feet.

"Chris is a good guy," I said, slowly moving away from the sand dune. The Phase Lava Rock potion only lasted a minute, so I didn't want to take it too soon. "He didn't do anything to you, and you're torturing him."

"You should just go down the stairs," Maggie said. "I'm sorry it has come to this. I was so angry, so blinded by what you'd done. I wasn't a bad person before this. I swear I wasn't. But I have to protect my family, no matter what. I thought it was done when I killed Frank, but I was wrong. When the caprid came to us in the rest area, it told me it'd help if we killed you."

Caprid? Prepotente? That didn't make sense. She had to be talking about another creature.

Maggie suddenly shouted. "Fuck your warnings. If it's legal to happen, then it's legal to say out loud. Fuck all of you. What're you going to do, accelerate me? Now?"

I realized she was talking to the AI. Or someone else.

"He's a cleric. A goat thing. A liaison. He said I have to stop you, or…" She stopped talking.

Carl: I think she's lost her ability to speak.

Donut: SHE'S STILL THERE. SHE'S GOING TO TAKE THE BOX.

Carl: Katia, how much time is left?

Katia: Ten minutes, give or take.

Carl: It's close enough.

"Maggie," I called. I edged closer to the box, positioning myself just behind them. "I hope you can hear me. I'm sorry it's come to this. That doesn't mean we can forget what happened, but I'm sorry how everything played out. You got dealt a shitty hand, and that really sucks. I'll let you..."

Chris erupted out of the ground next to the winding box. I slammed onto the phase potion. I rushed toward the lava rock creature as he picked up the box out of the ground, and he hurled it as hard as he could. It sailed through the air in the same direction I'd tossed the Samantha head. The door atop the box ripped open, and the two watches went flying in different directions.

The phase potion made it so I could move through both lava and lava rock. I reached forward, fingers open, right into Chris's head. I grasped until I felt it there, lodged in his brain. The worm was the size of my palm, the only part of his body that was solid, and it felt like an uneven, squirming sausage. I thought of that god crushing Slit the demon.

I pulled. I was expecting it to explode in my hand. I was phased, but it wasn't. But it didn't die. Instead, it bit my palm and started to burrow even as I retracted my hand.

"Gah," I cried, pulling my hand to my chest. Chris collapsed in front of me. I reached to grab the tail end of the long, black worm with my left hand, but I missed, and it burrowed inside. I felt her there, in my arm, moving through my body, like a sub diving below the waterline. She disappeared.

"Shit, shit," I cried. I scrambled into my inventory. There. I waited the two more seconds on my potion countdown, and I slammed on the double-healing potion. The same one I'd used to cure my parasitic infection on the third floor. Mordecai had said this would work, but only if I drank it before she got to my brain. And she'd get there fast.

The last time I'd taken the potion, I'd vomited out the parasites. This time, she came right out of my goddamn neck, bursting forth like I'd been shot by a sniper. Blood showered as she rocketed out of me. It felt as if I'd been hit with a hammer. She thrashed, her health in the red with **Poisoned** pulsing over her. Blood spewed from the hole in my neck. I moved to stomp her down, but before I could get her, Mongo jumped forward and grabbed her.

"Chew," I croaked as I clenched my hand against the massive neck wound. I tried to click *Heal*. **You've been rendered Woozy! You ain't clicking shit right now! Nighty-Night.**

Before I passed out, I watched Mongo gleefully crunch down on the form of the Scree worm, ripping the tiny crawler into mulch and thus ending the saga of Frank Q and Maggie My.

I was only unconscious for about two minutes. Donut healed me using a scroll. I awakened to find her sitting over me worriedly. Chris sat nearby, hand on his rocky head. He, too, had been healed by Donut.

"That hurt," he said.

"Ditto," I groaned.

Carl: Hey Imani. He's safe. It worked. We'll get him to you on the next floor.

Mongo vomited the corpse of Maggie and then ate it again.

"Wait," I gasped. "We need to loot her inventory."

"I got it all the first time he barfed her up. She had a lot of stuff," Donut said.

"Give it to Chris," I said, falling onto my back.

"What do you mean? She has a lot of hats in here. Why does a worm need hats? What does Chris need with a bunch of hats? I collect hats. I feel strongly I should be able to keep them."

Carl: Time?

Katia: Two minutes. Are you okay?

Shit, shit. Showtime.

Carl: Maggie is dead. Chris is safe. Make sure you're anchored. How about Tran? Is he safe?

Katia: He's already away. He and Gwen's team have gone down the stairs.

Juice Box was back in human form and holding one of the watches that Chris had tossed.

"What is this?" she asked, turning it over. "This isn't my brother's watch."

It was a facsimile, one of the ones I'd made long ago to trick the dirigible gnomes. Katia had actually made the facsimile winding box. She'd made it while pretending to learn how to use the engineering table. She was much better at fabricating shapes than I was. She'd made the box in pieces and had assembled it all within her own inventory. We'd exchanged the pieces, facsimile and real when we'd hugged at the Desperado Club.

"Plan is changed," I said to Juice Box, talking rapidly. I grabbed her by her shoulders. My head still swam, and my neck ached. "You

need to go. Now. The gate will be open in a few moments, but it'll only be open for twenty minutes. Don't worry about bringing anything with you. We're not sending a god to the ninth floor. Not this time. We're actually keeping the gate. This isn't going to be a one-time thing, not by a long shot. But I still want you to go to Larracos. You need to stay hidden, but you need to tell the others what you know. Do you understand? We're not done with you yet. By the time we get there, I want all the survivors to know what they really are. Do you understand?"

The changeling prostitute couldn't find the words. "What?... Where's the gate?"

"You can emulate a shark, right?" I asked. "Turn into a bird, and fly. Fly as fast as you can, over the lip and then down into the water. The location will be pretty obvious in a few minutes. It's on this side. Hurry."

She kissed me on the cheek. "Watch over my people. We have a deal. And keep him safe, too. I love him."

"Who?" I asked.

"Louis," she said. "We're going to be married."

A few days back I had been chased by a massive, two-headed puppy. I'd crashed an airplane into the face of a god. I watched a talking goat snuggle up with a vampire after they killed the universe's largest turkey. I'd just chucked a haunted sex doll head fifty kilometers in order to settle a girl fight between that same head and a makeup-encrusted demon the size of a small town. I'd just reached into the head of a rock monster in order to pluck a parasitic worm from his head.

And yet, despite all of this, what Juice Box had just said was the most astounding thing I'd heard since this floor started. I looked at her like she had slugs crawling from her nostrils. "Louis?" I asked. "*Our* Louis? You're in love with Louis? You're getting married? Are you serious?"

The scowl she gave told me she was deadly serious.

"Remember your promise!" she said, not waiting for me to respond. She leaped to the air, and she formed into a skyfowl. She

rocketed away. In seconds, she was gone. I rubbed my eyes, and I took a deep breath.

"Louis?" Donut said. "Carl, the whole world has gone insane."

A groan turned our attention back to Chris, who was just sitting there in a daze.

"Brandon," Chris finally said, lowering his head. "Brandon."

That sobered me up. I kneeled down before the man, and I placed my hand on his leg, which was burning hot. "Your brother died saving the lives of a lot of people. We'll do this next part in his honor, okay?"

Time to level collapse: 21 minutes.

Katia: The gate is open. Those timed charges you made got sucked in. I dropped the chum bomb nearby just before, and it worked really well. The sharks are also slurping right in, and they're already in their feeding frenzy. Hopefully the bombs went off before the sharks got there. I guess it doesn't really matter. Some of those pain amplifier jellies are getting pulled in, too.

Carl: Okay. Good job. Get to the stairs. Tell me when you're out and away. Hurry.

It was going to be tough for her to move through the water with the pull of the current draining into the lowest level of the city of Larracos, but she'd anchored herself to the rocky wall of the temple. She was going to use the subterranean stairwell to exit, as there was an entrance right there near the shelf where the *Akula* had been parked. This was the most dangerous part for her, and I was worried, but she insisted she'd be able to do it no problem.

For the next twenty minutes, the inverted cone of the city of Larracos would be filled with a rush of water. The gate opened right

inside the faction market. There was probably a drainage system, but it would be temporarily overwhelmed. The bombs would explode moments after they arrived, leveling the market and scattering the shoppers and shopkeepers. And then the sharks would come. If Katia's math was correct, and the map she'd made was accurate, more than half of the city would be submerged by the time the gate closed. The only parts that would be spared were the upper levels, the NPC residences.

The onslaught of water and bombs and sharks and other mobs would be sudden, violent, destructive, and nowhere near where they thought it would be.

Zev: Oh my god, Carl. They are enraged. This is not what you promised.

Zev had dropped any semblance of her good little citizen of the Party persona.

Carl: I promised nothing.

Zev: If you fill Larracos with water and mobs, it's going to kill all the NPCs. The markets will be flooded. The mercenaries will be killed. If you kill the NPCs at the entrance bar, access to the Desperado Club will be cut off. The sponsors won't have entry to the Club to gamble. They won't be able to get to the markets where they can buy the magical gear. Borant depends on that money. The sponsors need that market to outfit their troops.

Carl: Oh, I'm sure they'll patch it. That water'll drain right out. It might take a few days since there's some sharks mixed in there, but it'll be fine.

Zev: No, Carl. You know this. We can't add new worker NPCs once a level is created. Mobs, yes, but NPCs? That's written into the rules. We can't just replace the shopkeepers. The food market for the troops was down there, too.

I did, indeed, know all of this. That was the point.

Carl: Whoops. My bad.

Zev: If they want to fix this, they'll have to get the Syndicate to vote on it. And they won't have the votes. And

even if they did, they'll have to get the AI on board, and that's not going to happen. The whole system is already spiraling, and it's the earliest this has ever happened.

I'd killed people today, innocent people. A lot of innocent people.

But they were all NPCs, and none of them were former crawlers, and that's what mattered to me. Former crawlers with contracts like Mordecai were valuable. They didn't waste them in a city that was razed every season. Still, there was no sugarcoating what I'd done.

We didn't have time for moral debates. I was doing them a favor. And while the emotional abuse of NPCs such as little Bonnie had been enough to nearly break my sense of resolve, the knowledge that I'd just saved those NPCs the horror of having to endure a bloody conflict that would end in their inevitable deaths anyway was enough to ease any concern at what I'd done.

Priestly had fallen into that trap, caring so much that it had paralyzed him into inaction. It had finally broken him. I wasn't going to make the same mistake.

A distant part of me was alarmed at this attitude. But this was war, and there was no use pretending like it wasn't.

Zev continued to breathlessly rant. It was finally dawning on me that her astonishment and outrage was actually an act, and what she really was doing was relaying crucial information to us. She was practically giddy and was barely containing it. She and Donut were talking somehow. Likely via the social media board, but I didn't dare ask, not even using the magical paper we had hanging in the bathroom.

Borant's outrage at what had really happened was testament to the idea that they hadn't caught on to our method of communication. I'd been half certain that they'd known what Donut, Katia, and I had been meticulously planning for days. Even Mordecai didn't know all the details.

<u>Zev</u>: Half of them had their armies hidden in the city, so they wouldn't get hurt by the god. I'm sure plenty will get out, but you don't know what you've done. You've killed thousands. Tens of thousands. Who knows what the playing field is going to look like when it settles.

Carl: I'm sure it'll be wonderful for the ratings.

Zev: There'll be consequences.

Carl: Probably. But tell them *they* approved this. We didn't cheat. We used the tools they gave us. Also, say they're gonna want to wait to see what happens next before they decide to, you know, accelerate me or throw me into the disposal unit or whatever. I know they're in real danger of losing control of the season. Whomever ends up in control of the next floor is going to make a lot of money.

Zev: What do you mean?

Carl: Just watch.

I closed out the message.

Katia: I'm out. Going down the stairs now.

Donut: BYE KATIA!

Carl: Okay. I'm adding Chris to the party so he travels with us. See you on the other side. Good job today.

Katia: Good luck with class selection.

"I'm sad we're not going on Odette's show this time," Donut said as we walked to the stairwell. Chris walked ahead of us, head down. Mordecai was ranting and raving at me over the chat, but I tuned him out.

"Don't worry," I said. "If I know Odette, she'll probably have us on in a day or two."

"Do you think Juice Box made it?" Donut asked. "It didn't let me add her to my chat like it does with Sledgie and Mordecai."

"She made it," I said. "She's had a hard life, and she's a tough lady. Plus, she's in love. That gives people strength."

Mordecai: And I don't care how much that ring is valued at. Time is up. I want you to toss it before you go down the stairs.

Carl: Mordecai, you really need to chill, you know that?

Mordecai: Carl. Son. You don't know the forces you're dealing with. You can't tempt fate like this. You only made it this far because you're making them a lot of money. But you just kicked them in the financial balls. Do you think that's going to stand?

Carl: Hey, I got my sponsor to purchase that box, didn't I? I think they got a deity sponsorship, too. That has to be worth something.

Mordecai: You can't fight a war like this and expect to win.

Donut: DON'T BE MEAN TO CARL, MORDECAI. HE DIDN'T DO IT ALONE. WE'RE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER.

Donut didn't know how correct she was. I wasn't nearly as alone as I once thought I was. I pulled the xistera extension from my inventory, and I examined it again. I ran my finger over the wicker-like substance, rubbing the tiny inscription on the side.

Made for Crawler Carl by the Open Intellect Pacifist Action Network, Intergalactic NFC with design approval by CEO and president of Outreach Operations, Dr. P. Hu.

I put the head-tosser away, and I pulled the Ring of Divine Suffering out of my inventory. I held it up to the meager light. It was one of the most sought-after items by the treasure hunters.

"Are they still going to hunt us if they can't sell on the market?" Donut asked.

"I'm sure," I said. "They're going to want everything we have. Not just the ring, but the gate, too. Can you imagine how powerful that'll be on the battlefield? There's two different marketplaces. There's the Desperado Club market where the hunters sell their wares, and there's the online one where the crawlers sell using the kiosk. The kiosk ones are trashed. Crawlers use the interface, but the faction wars guys have to actually go down to a merchant and buy it. We just killed all those merchants. So no more buying from crawlers."

"But Zev said they can't get into the Desperado Club anymore, so they can't buy from the bounty hunters, either."

"Maybe, maybe not," I said. "It'll probably be closed for a while. But what I'm guessing is going to happen is that each of the factions are quickly deciding whether or not to send someone down to the sixth floor to collect stuff manually and buy stuff from the other hunters while they're there. We didn't wipe out all the armies, but we wiped out most of their ability to get more gear, and we upset

the power structure. They're scrambling now, wondering how they're going to outfit their soldiers. There's only one feasible way. Either they don't outfit them, or they risk sending their own people down to the sixth floor. I could be wrong, but I suspect it's going to be crowded down there."

We paused at the entrance to the stairwell. Chris entered and didn't look back. Poor guy. There were five minutes left. I looked about one last time. A few hundred meters away, Dromedarians continued to fix their city. I sighed.

"So we're just going to have more hunters down there," Donut said.

"Donut, have you ever heard the term, 'seeding the pond?'"

Donut wasn't impressed. "The kill, kill, kill lady said the hunters can also collect bounties, and you're worth a lot now. Everyone is going to be coming after us."

"That's exactly what I'm hoping for."

"I don't like people hunting us, Carl."

After the last recap episode, Lucia Mar had finally fallen off the number one spot. The top ten list hadn't changed too much, but there were a few notable differences:

1. Carl – Primal – Compensated Anarchist – Level 47 – 1,000,000 (x2)

2. Lucia Mar – Lajabless – Black Inquisitor General – Level 48 – 500,000 (x2)

3. Prepotente – Caprid – Forsaken Aerialist – Level 55 – 400,000 (x2)

4. Donut – Cat – Former Child Actor – Level 39 – 300,000 (x2)

5. Dmitri and Maxim Popov – Nodling – Illusionist and Bogatyr – Level 43 – 200,000 (x2)

6. Miriam Dom – Vampire – Shepherd – Level 52 – 100,000 (x2)

7. Elle McGib – Frost Maiden – Blizzardmancer – Level 47 – 100,000

8. Bogdon Ro – Human – Legatus – Level 44 – 100,000

9. Eva Sigrid – Half Nagini, Half-Orc – Level 40 – Nimblefoot Enforcer – 100,000

10. Quan Ch – Half Elf – Imperial Security Trooper – Level 48 – 100,000 (x2)

I was now the number one crawler in the dungeon.

I patted Donut on the head. “Once the sixth floor opens, we’ll all be locked in together. They’ll be just as trapped as we are.” I tossed the ring in the air, and I caught it. I looked up into the sky, ending all pretense that I was actually saying this to just Donut.

“You guys see this thing? I’ll tell you what. If you want it, it’s yours. It’s right here. Come and get it, motherfuckers. Actually, you know what? I have a better idea. No need to come to me because I’ll be coming to you. That’s my pledge to you and to everyone else watching this. By the time the sixth floor collapses, every single hunter who dares to set foot on the same floor as us will be dead." Donut, Mongo, and I moved into the stairwell. "This I swear on my life. One by one, I will break you. I will break you all.”

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EPILOGUE

"How much money, exactly, have we spent so far?" the woman asked. "The man is insane. Did you hear that? He's absolutely insane."

"It's best if you don't know," Dr. Hu replied.

"It's best if people don't question how a small NFC can afford this. It's best if they don't ask why."

"We're well past that," Dr. Hu said. "We're going all in on him."

"He's unstable. He's going to die at any moment. And even if he doesn't, the AI is going primal and is liable to kill the entire planet before they even hit the ninth floor. The Valtay are sticking their nose into everything, and the Kua-Tin underground are going to start a bloody civil war any day now. King Rust's children are all trying to murder each other, and Princess D'Nadia is probably going to do something stupid, too. Plus this human is not nearly as clever as you think he is. You should have included instructions with the yam. They wasted half of it on saving that other crawler."

"He knows what it's really for."

"Does he? I'm not so sure."

"My dear, he's already shaken everything up. Even if he fails, it's already a success. Every time he goes on that Odette woman's show, more people sign up for the cause."

"They sign up for *his* cause. Not ours."

"It's the same cause."

"He's going to die, Porthus. He's never going to make it past the sixth floor."

"That's what you said about the fifth floor," Dr. Hu said.

"We all want happy endings," Sadir said to the creature in the cage. It looked back at him sullenly. He knew the animal couldn't understand him. "But sometimes, my little friend, we don't get what we want. Sometimes our mutual desires are incompatible with one another. For example, I wish to be warm and dry right now. You want freedom. I fear neither of us are getting what we want this evening."

Freezing rain pelted down on them. It was just past ab-solar, what the locals called "midnight." Heavy clouds covered the sky, making it especially dark out here. He couldn't even see the lights of the thousands of ships and probes in low atmosphere. For a moment, it felt like the three of them were the only living things on this world. Him, his partner, and their quarry.

He stuck a long, gray finger into the cage. The fuzzy monster hissed and scratched at him, lightning quick. The tiny, sharp claws caught on his flesh, tearing at his skin before he could pull away.

"Fuck. By his left tit, that hurt!"

The beast—a "cat"—issued a low, deep growl. Its ears were pinned to the back of its head.

Sadir pulled his finger to his mouth and sucked at it while Gennrik chuckled. Gooey, blue-tinged blood oozed out of the wound and into his mouth. He pulled up his self-diagnostics to see if he needed an antibiotic, and then he cursed again after he remembered his implants were offline. The planet was off-limits to non-natives, and they had to shut their systems down to avoid detection.

"It's not him," Gennrik said after a moment. The tentacle-faced saccathian put the hand computer down and stowed it on his belt.

Sadir growled with frustration. This was the sixth cat they'd found in the area. He cursed the Syndicate rule that all non-crawler survivors have their implants scrambled. This would be so much

easier if that weren't the case. *But then again*, he thought. *They wouldn't need us if it were that simple. This is what we do*.

Sadir pulled the hotsheet from his belt and looked at it and back to the cat.

"Are you certain?" he asked. "It looks like him."

"Yes. The markings are similar, but not exact. This one contains a human microchip, and the database pegs its owner as a man who was in the initial collection. Plus, this is a female. Her name is Contessa Purrington. Let her go."

"I'm going to shoot her," Sadir said. "She attacked me. She drew blood."

Contessa Purrington hissed louder and batted furiously at the electric walls of the bounty cube. Sadir took a step back.

"You are not. She scratched you because you stuck your hand where it shouldn't be."

Gennrik reached up and pressed a finger against the top of the cube. The device disappeared, turning into a metal square. The cat bolted, vanishing into the darkness.

Sadir pulled his bio-scan unit and wiped the rain off the screen. He grumbled, once again cursing the Syndicate's stupid rules. He pulled the camo netting over his head and turned the scanner on, making sure to keep the device close to the ground so its presence was even further shielded from the scanners. He already had two strikes against him. If he was caught trespassing again, his warrant would be lowered to three figures. He'd be snatched right up for sure this time, especially with war brewing. *Multiple* wars brewing.

As a Null, he already had a hard enough time making a living. Whole systems refused entry to his kind, despite the practice being illegal. The Syndicate didn't care. They turned their backs on the rights of the non-council member races. *Especially* the null. They only cared about corporations, the rich and royal families, and the gilded homeworlds of the free citizens.

So when the season's Walk-On List was released, he marched himself right to the closest port, found a bounty crew who hired null, and he signed right on. This was the sort of crew where his two strikes were an asset, not a hindrance.

The Syndicate knew about the Walk-On List. Of course they knew. There was even a holo drama about it a few seasons back. Rights organizations crowed about it. They wrote bills in subcommittees demanding the practice be officially condemned. Nothing ever happened. Syndicate security still patrolled the planets. They still hunted down and captured, and sometimes killed, trespassers.

But the corporations, who were the real culprits? There was no accountability. None.

Bastards, all of them, Sadir thought bitterly. Some of these worlds had guaranteed income just for being lucky enough to be born on the planet. And here he was, literally risking his life and freedom to make a living.

Risking his life to track down a godsdamned cat named Gravy Boat.

"There's only one other cat on the scan, but it's in the camp," Sadir said.

"Tits," Gennrik replied. He thought for a moment. "Switch the scan to human. How many are there?"

"Too many," Sadir said a moment later. "There are 74 humans in the camp. Only six are juveniles. One of which is a sub-yearling."

Gennrik let out an annoyed trumpet noise. "Fuck it. Let's go for it. If we find the thing, it'll be the first A-tier target captured, and we'll get the bonus."

Sadir hesitated, but only for a moment. The Walk-on list was shorter than usual this year, meaning the competition was fierce. Bringing human attention to themselves would be a big risk, but if this was their target, the potential rewards were astronomical.

Sadir's team wasn't even bothering with the woman in the tropical zone, despite the unusually high value placed on her capture. It was a lost cause. The area had been flattened with a tsunami after Borant parked their executive headquarters not too far from there. The entire area had been washed clean. Nobody was alive.

Still, dozens of hunters who'd infiltrated the planet were in the tropical zone searching for the prize. An equal number were in the

southern hemisphere seeking that little girl's father. That prize was lower, but he was much more likely to be found. Nobody had found shit yet. They were all likely dead, Sadir knew. They had to be, or they would've been found by now. That happened. Sometimes a season's Walk-on list would have 5,000 names, and only one or two would be found.

And this time it was even harder than usual. Normally they had access to the planet's snapshot as captured during the exact moment of the collection. But Borant had pulled their underhanded orcshit by starting the crawl early. Sadir was sick of the extra protections given to these governments. A person couldn't stave off a collection action because they had some project brewing. How was it fair? And because Borant started early, throwing everything into disarray, the probes had last done a backup two days earlier, meaning all the records, including the location data and the native internet backup, were stale by the time everything went offline.

But they weren't without hope. When a planetwide collection occurred, all citizens and sustainable fauna were placed into three categories: Collected, Crawlers, and Natives. The Collected were, of course, those unlucky enough to get caught up in the collapse of the societal infrastructure. In most cases, and especially in this one, this group comprised of the largest percentage of people. The Crawlers were those who chose to enter the game. The Natives were everybody else.

As the game progressed and certain crawlers rocketed to the forefront, the season's producers oftentimes pulled from their library of collected citizens to add drama. Who could forget that Valtay season when Crawler Hoon piloted his mech to the elevator leading to the 12th floor, only to find his own children—repurposed as sentinel hunter killers—guarding the exit? All five of them, even the yearling. Hoon had chosen to eat his own gun. It was one of the few times the cruelty of the game had been too much, even for the free citizens. Sadir felt a shiver come over him, remembering that moment. They'd banned the use of collected children after that. Pregnant women, too.

Fucking Valtay, Sadir thought. They were the cruelest of them all.

But what happened when the producers wanted to use a specific native, and that person couldn't be found? If they weren't collected, and they weren't a crawler, that meant they'd survived the initial collapse and they chose not to enter the dungeon. Most of those people were dead. The attrition rate of natives oftentimes mirrored that of the crawl, though on a slower scale.

The producers wanted to find and utilize the missing Natives. They wanted to bring certain individuals into the dungeon. But there was a problem. The rules were clear. They were untouchable.

And then came the Walk-On list.

The practice of hiring trackers to sneak onto the planet and hunt down and kidnap desired survivors was not even remotely legal. It wasn't something any corporation could justify in court. But they were never called out on it. Very few people outside a few fringe groups cared. If the viewers could justify the subjugation of an entire planet, an extra crime or two was hardly worth a second thought. The practice was as old as the crawl itself.

Finding someone should be easy. Even on the frontier planets with trash-tier sniffer zones, tracking individual natives was as easy as initiating a handshake with the planet's AI controller. Earth had a perfectly fine controller system, better than most planets. Thanks to the Indigenous Species Protection Act, however, once the crawl started, all natives had their implants scrambled, despite being born with the damn things. They were "free." Once the crawl was done, and this entire circus moved on to another system, the planet would be locked down for multiple generations. Sadir couldn't remember exactly how long, but it was a while.

"This is a waste of time," he muttered as they trudged toward the settlement. It was located on a flat area a kilometer from the last known location of the cat. He glanced up at his partner as thick, almost-frozen rain dripped off his camo netting. "We should be searching for that man in the southern hemisphere. Or that other creature. The goat."

"If we don't find the mark," Gennrik replied, "we will move on. The captain is going to send us to the jungle on the planet's other

side. To find that dead crawler's twin." He held up a hand as the shuttle flashed by in the dark sky. They both relaxed. It was not Syndicate security.

Sadir grunted. "As long as the weather is more suitable."

"I like the weather here," Gennrik said. They crouched and ran along the cracked rock of a human street. This was a wide road, made of black rocks, rough to the touch. Occasionally, rectangle-shaped holes in the roadway appeared, indicating places where the human vehicles had been pulled down during the collapse.

Sadir gave Gennrik a withering look. It was supposedly the last weeks of winter in this hemisphere. This was not pleasant weather, no matter what world you came from. This metropolis, once called "Seattle," supposedly had a dense population. He had trouble believing it. Even humans weren't stupid enough to subject themselves to this climate when this planet's equatorial region was a paradise.

The glow of multiple fires appeared in the distance. They'd positioned the camp against the side of what had once been a bridge over a roadway, placing tents where the freezing winds off the salt-water sound couldn't reach them as easily. Fires burned in controlled circles, despite the driving rain. There were over thirty tents. The bones of wood-built structures rose nearby. It appeared as if they'd just started rebuilding.

Remnants of the society they'd lost dotted the encampment. Sadir noted multiple gasoline-powered machines, mostly two and four-wheeled, open-top, single passenger vehicles. An electric light shone over one large tent, and music played from another. There was movement about. Despite the late hour, the camp was not asleep.

"Check your weapon," Gennrik said.

Sadir examined his air-powered, flechette gun on his hip. He'd had it set to knock out a cat. He ticked up the dosage by three, which would render most humans unconscious in moments. He much preferred the reliability and simplicity of a regular stun pistol, but the signature of the weapon would alert every security probe in the solar system.

The two hunters lowered to the ground and pulled the camouflage netting over themselves. They settled in to observe. Sadir pulled out his scanner and zoomed in on the cat's location. Now that they were closer, he could see the exact tent the cat was in. It was the third tent, pushed back against the side of the hill. He cycled through the scan, looking for other life forms. There were also two humans in the shelter. He set in, mapping out the location of all the life forms in the camp. He pulled a sheet of ready paper and started drawing out a diagram.

He had a thought, and he recalibrated the scanner. The Syndicate generally didn't place security in native camps, but he did a sweep of all known syndicate security protocols. He really should've done this first. He caught something odd at the top of the hill overlooking the camp, but it disappeared a moment later. He zoomed in with his scope. There was nothing. Whatever it was, it wasn't Syndicate security. They didn't do subtle. He risked a deep scan of the area, and the anomaly was gone.

"Tell me something," Gennrik said as Sadir worked. "Why do you do this? I heard you the other day, talking via tunnel to your mate. You lied and claimed you were working on an elemental barge. I heard what you said. How much you hate Borant. How much you hate the crawl. Yet here you are, risking your life to make the production more entertaining."

Sadir bristled. Both at the invasion of privacy and the fact the sac had called him out on his own hypocrisy.

"I have multiple children," Sadir said after a moment. The very first tent had four dogs inside of it, but it appeared they were very small. Not dangerous. Just loud. He wrote that down. "They live in the null commune in the Filt system. The orcs have raised resident alien tax rates once again. If they want to stay, I need to earn a wage. I suppose I am just like the crawlers you see on the show. They are hurting others for their own survival."

"But there have got to be less dangerous ways to make money," Gennrik said. "My family does this because we like doing it. And to earn money for the Prism's buy-in bid. You don't need this risk, not if you dislike it. It's a big galaxy. You can do anything."

Sadir grunted. “That’s easy for a sac to say. The null have never had it easy. Even these humans knew what we looked like. They sold novelties with our likeness on them. That is how deep the hatred of my kind is rooted.”

Gennrik made a honking noise. “They knew your likeness because your people were illegally poking around the system before the crawl. Besides, in the inner system, all are free. It doesn’t matter what you are.”

Sadir didn’t even bother answering. They had a job to do. “We can pass behind the first two tents and breach along the fabric wall of the third here,” he said, pointing his long finger onto the sheet of ready paper, tracing their route. “The humans are asleep in the first two tents. One is awake in our target tent. We must be as quiet as possible as the dogs in the first tent might sense our presence. Luckily we have the loudness of the rain.”

Gennrik nodded his assent to the plan. They didn’t waste any more time. Both pulled their weapons free and rushed up the hill toward the camp, sticking to the pools of darkness.

Sadir thought of his children as they started their raid. He prayed they would grow and have a peaceful life, one where they’d never have to do something like this just to survive.

Brad couldn’t sleep. He looked over at the woman on the inflatable mattress, curled up with the large, orange cat. She’d cried herself to sleep again. The others were getting pretty annoyed with her. Everyone had to work. That was the rule. If you wanted to live in New Queen Anne, you had to work. Everyone was afraid and overwhelmed. But they still worked. That meant fishing, foraging, tilling, or building.

Bea did none of those.

Ostensibly she was a nurse, and she would “work” if someone needed healing. But that was a joke. They had *four* doctors already in their group. Actually, all of them were dentists. They’d been on

the same flight as Bea and Brad, all coming back from the Bahamas. They'd all been stranded together at the Atlanta airport for hours because of the snowstorm, and they'd arrived home in Seattle ten hours late. All of them had been standing in the parking garage just before it happened, waiting for their Ubers to take them home. That crazy man had started setting cars on fire, causing them all to flee outside into the cold.

It'd happened so fast. The police had the man in handcuffs, and he'd been fighting them. He'd been screaming at the cops in a weird language. Brad was filming the whole thing on his phone. It was the most entertaining shit that'd happened to him since he'd talked a drunk Bea into posting that picture on her Instagram.

But then the world ended, leaving just him and Bea and the four dentists standing there surrounded by rubble. The cops and crazy homeless guy had gotten caught up by the edge of the parking garage. There'd been an entrance to the dungeon or whatever it was called pretty close nearby, but Bea had been screaming. He stayed with her.

He regretted it. He used to make so much fun of her cuck boyfriend. She walked all over the dude, and he didn't do shit. Brad had been moderately impressed when the guy had grown some balls and finally dumped her after she posted the picture. But then Bea flipped the fuck out and demanded they leave the resort early. They'd been paid up for another four days, but she wouldn't stop crying. Her bitch friends pretty much pushed the two of them out of the suite.

So they went home.

I should've stayed, he thought. If he was going to be stuck in an alien invasion apocalypse, it would've at least been in better weather.

But that wasn't his real regret. Oh no.

I should've gone into that dungeon.

When he couldn't sleep, which was never now, he thought of that giant, welcoming hole into the ground. He'd wanted to go in so bad. He didn't know what was in there, but it had to be better than this. He *hated* that he missed his chance at glory.

I am a king, he thought. *I am a king*.

A guy that worked on the tarmac had found them. Tarik. He'd been driving an electric cart thing with a bed, and they'd all piled on, routing through people's suitcases for warm clothing. They'd spent that first night huddled in a pile of clothes watching all the lights descending like falling stars. And then… nothing. They were ignored by the invaders. Spacecraft came and went all day every day. They even saw them, sometimes, walking about in groups on the surface. There were different kinds and sizes.

But the aliens simply didn't acknowledge the presence of the humans. They were dismissed as irrelevant. A thing to be avoided, like a pile of dogshit in the road.

After a week of camping at the remnants of the airport, hiding and afraid, the small group decided to seek out other people and supplies. They trekked their way to the city where they found the burgeoning community of New Queen Anne. Now, over a month later, they remained. The invaders continued to leave them alone. What Brad had assumed was going to be a temporary camp was shaping up to be their new permanent home. They were constructing wood buildings. Once the weather improved, they'd plant crops.

Bea whimpered in her sleep. The large cat was wrapped around her head. The thing had already shredded their first inflatable mattress. Brad didn't care what Bea said, if the damn thing ruined anything else in the tent, he was out of here. And if she complained about it, she was gone, too. He was getting sick of just doing everything she wanted. It was embarrassing.

His eyes focused on the cat. It wasn't even Bea's cat, but some stray.

Bea had insisted on returning to her old apartment, trying to look for that fucking weird cat of hers that always howled and scratched at him. Never mind the thing had its own damn room in the apartment. Never mind it never left that cat tree by the window. It was dead along with everybody else in the world. Brad knew exactly what they were going to find, but he'd taken her anyway just to shut her up.

The apartment was a hole in the ground just like every other building in the area. Some of the items remained. The trees. Most of the light poles and signs. A few random vehicles. There was a scooter they could possibly use, but it had a parking enforcement boot on it.

The first thing they'd noticed was the decomposed and rancid human head just sitting there on the ground. Bea had vomited and started crying all over again.

They were about to leave, but then Brad noticed the cat sitting in the tree. *No fucking way*, he thought, but only for a moment. This was a different cat than the one Bea was looking for. The thing was skin and bones, and for a moment Brad thought it was literally frozen on the tree branch. But then it let out a loud, deep meow, and it jumped to the ground and started rubbing against their legs.

Bea, already crying, scooped the thing right up and started sobbing even louder. "Ferdinand! You asshole. You stupid little asshole!" She clutched onto the cat and sobbed and refused to let go.

"You know this cat?" Brad asked. "How?"

She didn't answer right away. She just hummed to herself while she rocked back and forth. She'd been doing that a lot lately. It was fucking weird. She was cracking up. Finally, she said, "He's my neighbor's cat. His name is Gravy Boat, but he used to come to the window and try to get in when Princess was in heat." She stuck her face dangerously close to the cat's "You wanted to fuck my girl, didn't you? You wanted to get in and ruin her." The cat, who'd been purring, suddenly hissed and scratched her face. She didn't even seem to notice. "I called him Ferdinand before I found out his real name. I would say, 'Go away, Ferdinand,' and he'd yowl and scratch at the window. Princess would hiss and spit at him. She knew he was no good." Bea looked Brad straight in the eye. She had blood running down her face. "She was a lot smarter than me." She turned her face back to the cat. "I tried to get animal control to get him, but they could never find him."

"Well, he seems to be doing okay out here on his own. We better get back…"

The angry look from Bea shut that down right away.

So the thing came back with them. The cat was half feral, and it did not like being brushed or petted too much. But every night when the rations were distributed it was back in the tent sitting next to Bea while she dropped a little bit of her fish onto the floor for it to eat.

At night, she'd sit there in the dark and hug the cat until it yowled and scratched at her to let it go. She had cuts all up her arms and face from the monster. It'd eventually settle on the mattress next to her. She would stroke its yellow and orange fur and sing softly to the cat in that weird voice.

"Good boy, good boy, you're a good boy, Ferdinand. You're no Gravy Boat. Oh no, oh no. I'd take it all back and let you in. I'd do it all over again. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry, Ferdinand. I should have let you in."

She'd sing some variant of that bizarre song until she fell asleep. Brad envied her ability to sleep. He sat now in their lone plastic chair, chewing on a scavenged candy bar. He fantasized about the mysterious dungeon. *I am a king.*

Riiiiip!

He stared at the knife, uncomprehending as it pierced through the tarp wall of the tent and started to cut downward.

"Hey!" he called. "Who's there? That's my goddamned tent!"

He jumped to his feet. He grabbed the crowbar he kept by the real tent flap. His heart started to thrash as the two figures appeared through the hole in the wall, both of them holding strange, nerf-like guns.

It was a tall, octopus-faced dude and a gray alien wearing a fur coat. This second one looked like one of those Roswell aliens with the head shaped like a guitar pick and the black, bug-like eyes. He was short, maybe four feet tall.

The octopus pointed the weapon directly at Brad and was about to fire when its chest exploded, filling the tent with green gore. The tall, menacing alien slumped over. Gravy Boat jumped from the bed, and Bea sat up, confused. Brad dropped the crowbar. Everyone

stopped, including the gray alien. All eyes were on the octopus alien with the hole in its chest.

Bea started to scream. Gravy Boat bolted, running between the alien's legs and disappearing out into the night. Two tents over, those four little shits started barking their heads off. People began to shout.

The alien guy stopped, holding his hands up in the air in the now-confirmed-to-be-universal gesture of "I surrender." It started babbling in that strange, alien language Brad and everybody else had been able to understand at first, but now they couldn't anymore.

The alien started to turn to face the exit, but he cast one glance at Bea and stopped dead all over again. His gray skin flushed, suddenly turning a shade of purple. He dropped the alien weapon and slowly lowered his arms.

"B… B… Beatrice?" he asked in heavily accented speech. It sounded like a question.

Bea stopped screaming. They stared at each other, both of them with their mouths agape.

What the fuck was going on?

A new figure emerged. She stuck her head in the tent, looking about before stepping fully inside. It was a woman. A human. Sort of. She was Asian, but she looked odd. Anorexic with her eyes too close together. She wore a skintight, black bodysuit and held onto what looked like a pump-action shotgun, which she placed firmly against the alien dude's back. He raised his hands back into the air.

Those dogs aren't barking anymore, Brad thought. It'd gone completely silent out there. That wasn't good.

The woman said something in the alien language, and the Roswell guy answered. Bea rushed over to Brad, who put an arm around her. He eyed the alien pistol that the dead octopus had dropped. *I'm going to go for it. I am a king.*

"Miss Beatrice," the woman said. She still spoke in the alien language, but now a translation came out from a hidden speaker in her clothes. The words mixed in with the alien speak, making it a little hard to understand. "My name is Lexis. I apologize for the

inconvenience, but Syndicate security is on its way. You are being hunted. I am here to take you to safety."

Brad barely heard this. He was laser focused on the gun on the ground. *I can do this. I'm going for it. I am the king.*

I am the goddamned king.

"I got her," Lexis said into the communicator. A floating image of her boss appeared over the screen. "Killed a sac pirate. Captured another. I suggest we make it look like he turned on his partner. Shot him right in the back. He's a null, so they'll buy it. Oh, I also had to shoot a human. Bea's partner. He's still alive. He tried to get to the pirate's flechette. I'd call him brave, but he's crying like a little girl. He's going to bleed out in a few minutes if I don't intervene."

"What about the cat?" asked Odette.

"He's knocked out with the rest of the settlement. The thing is fast. He almost got away. Security will arrive in three minutes. The first responders are on our payroll, but a supervisor will want to come down for this one. I'm guessing we have twenty minutes at most. Do you want me to bring the cat? Also, I can wipe the whole town if you want."

Odette thought for a moment. "Any witnesses?"

"Just the ones I mentioned. The null, Beatrice, the human I shot, and the cat."

"Okay. Here's what we do. We're not going to vaporize the town. Leave the null alive and plant the weapon like you suggested, but let the human expire. Put the cat in a bounty cube and leave him there. Shoot the null with the flechette gun. Maybe in the leg. Then drop it on the human. We'll have our security guys clean the scene up so it looks like the whole fight was over the cat, and nothing else."

"The null will talk," Lexis said. "He'll be facing multiple charges."

"Don't worry about that," said Odette. "I'll get a message to him after he's arrested. We'll buy out his warrant. That'll guarantee his cooperation. I'll have one of the security guys sneak the cat over to

Borant. Let him collect the walk-on bounty. How's Beatrice taking this?"

"I, uh, had to knock her out and then stick her in a cube. She's a little freaked out about the whole thing. I don't think she's all there. She has scratches all over her face."

Odette nodded. "When she wakes up, make sure you tell her that I can't wait to meet her. And reassure her that we won't be selling her to Borant. Tell her we have a much better use for her."

Lexis laughed. Her scanner beeped, indicating a security shuttle was about to land. "So, I guess it worked out for everybody." She looked down at the dead sac. She thought of the poor cat, and what they were going to do to him. She shuddered. "Well, almost everybody."

Odette grunted. "We can't all have happy endings. Now get to work."

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WOOHOO!

You did it! You read another one! It's almost like we're dating. Pretty soon we'll be introducing each other to our parents and fighting about me eating shredded cheese directly from the bag at 3 a.m..

Four books written. Wow. Book five is well underway with plenty of chaos and mayhem, but it's not quite done yet. As such, I don't have an exact date to give you, nor do I have a secret title to give to you just yet. Don't worry. It won't be too long. If you sign up for my mailing list or follow me on Amazon or on Facebook, you'll know as soon as I put the preorder link up.

Let's talk about reviews. It's kinda important. I know, I know, I beg you guys for reviews every time. But reviews are super important. Without reviews, Toby the pug will starve to death, and he needs to eat like five or six meals a day. So please, please leave a review. Thanks so much!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Matt Dinniman is a writer and artist from Gig Harbor, WA. When he isn't attending cat shows, wrangling dogs, feeding turtles, playing bass in a punk/metal band, or writing books about acid-spitting chinchillas, he designs cat-themed greeting cards and decorations. If you've ever walked into a Target or an IKEA or a Home Goods, looked at the weird wall art they have for sale there, and thought to yourself, *who buys this crap?* The answer is, "Not nearly as many people as Matt would like." So please buy all his books. (Or his art!)



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Trailer Park Fairy Tales (Short stories! One of them even won a fancy award!)

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THE PAGE WHERE WE TOUT FACEBOOK GROUPS SO THEY LET US SPAM THEM ABOUT THIS BOOK

Over on Facebook, if you want to talk about Gamelit. I mean if you really want to talk about Gamelit, check out the Gamelit Society!

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THE BUTCHER'S MASQUERADE

DUNGEON CRAWLER CARL BOOK FIVE

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Thanks everyone for all your continued support. A special thanks to the dude who sent nudes. It's not necessary, but I appreciate it. I hope you get the help you need.

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Surviving is winning… Everything else is bullshit.

- MICHAEL DE SANTA, GRAND THEFT AUTO V

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One More!

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[PART 1]

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THE HUNT

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[1]

Time to Level Collapse: 17 Days.
Time Until the Hunt Begins: 30 Hours.

Views: 512 sextillion
Followers: 142 Quadrillion
Favorites: 23 Quadrillion

Leaderboard rank: 1
Bounty: 3,000,000 gold
Congrats, Crawler. You have received a Platinum Venison Box.

Welcome, Crawler, to the sixth floor. "The Hunting Grounds"
Sponsorship bidding initiated on Crawler #4,122. Bidding ends in 45 hours.

Remaining Crawlers: 85,223
Remaining Hunters: 360

Grace Period begins now. All hunters have been transferred to the city of Zockau. They will be released in 30 hours.

Run.

Entering the Desperado Club.

I came into existence in a now-familiar office. The hooded figure of Orren, the grim reaper-like Syndicate liaison, sat at his cluttered desk, staring at me, hands steepled in front of him. I caught a glint of the glass under his hood. I knew there was a parasitic worm floating in there. A type of creature called a gondii, but better known to the universe as a citizen of the Valtay.

The last time I was in this room was after I'd killed Loita the administrator. This guy was supposedly a neutral third-party observer and fact finder, but based on recent evidence, I knew some of these liaison guys played a little fast and loose with the term, "neutral."

Katia also sat in the room. It appeared she'd been here for a few minutes already, and she appeared bored. She was in her regular form. She looked at me and grinned, though I could see the worry in her eyes.

Donut: CARL, CARL, WHERE ARE YOU? WE DIDN'T COME IN TOGETHER! IT'S JUST ME, CHRIS, AND MONGO. WHERE ARE YOU! WHERE'S KATIA?

Carl: It's okay. She's with me. We're back in the vice principal's office.

Donut: WHAT DOES THAT MEAN? I NEED TO PICK A NEW CLASS!

"Tell your companions you'll be joining them shortly," Orren said. "This won't take long."

Carl: Have Mordecai help you choose. I'll be there in a bit.

Donut: I DON'T LIKE THIS, CARL. WE'RE IN A LONG LINE WITH A BUNCH OF OTHER CRAWLERS, AND MONGO IS SCARED.

Carl: Donut, everything is fine. I'm about to get a talking-to by the liaison guy with the fishbowl head. Put Mongo away, talk to Mordecai, and then make sure you get everybody near you into your chat.

"As I already told your friend, you can only see and hear me, but there are multiple entities in on this meeting," Orren said. "We have a representative from Borant, a few members of the Syndicate Crawl subcommittee, and a few additional interested parties listening in. In addition, there is a designated media representative. The media rep will not be permitted to report on anything that occurs in this meeting unless a law is broken."

"Wow," I said, turning to Katia, who suddenly had a sour look on her face. "All of this for us?"

She was about to say something, but the liaison interrupted her.

"Actually, it's all for you," Orren said. "Crawler Katia Grim is only here because she's the one who had it in her inventory. We asked her if she considered herself the owner of the item, and she claims you are the true owner. She will return to the staging area now."

"Wait," she began, but she popped away with an audible *crack*.

Carl: Are you okay?

Katia: Other than a headache, I'm okay. Carl, I think I accidentally got you into trouble. I didn't know what to say. They took the gate from me. I'm sorry. There was nothing I could do.

Carl: It's okay. See if you can find Donut.

Katia: I see her. She's chasing after Mongo. Be careful.

Orren waved his hand, and three items appeared on the desk in front of him. The two watches and the winding box, the three pieces to the Gate of the Feral Gods.

"Do you remember what I said the last time you were in here?" Orren asked. He reached forward and picked up one of the watches, idly spinning it in his hand.

I sighed. I was exhausted. My brain buzzed. There was so much to do, and a part of me would welcome it if they just decided to get it over with and squish me. If not that, I needed sleep, and soon. I shrugged. "I don't really remember."

"I said if it were up to me, I'd have you removed. At the time, the kua-tin wanted to keep you, and the Syndicate council was indifferent. After this last little stunt, nobody is indifferent anymore." He put the watch down, closer to the edge of the desk. "The Dreadnoughts have up and abandoned their stake in faction wars. You wiped out the entirety of their army. The war chief's wife got stung by one of those pain amplifier jellyfish, and the chief himself had to kill her in order to stop the pain. She's recovering now in a sedative yacht. But they've given up, and now there's an open spot, one that nobody can take because they won't be able to field an army." He just looked at me, as if waiting for a reaction.

The Dreadnoughts were large, humanoid creatures with red skin. They rarely did well in faction wars because their preferred method of fighting was to just hit everything in front of them, tactics and magic be damned.

"Good," I finally said. "That was pretty much the plan. To fuck up all the armies." I looked up at the ceiling. "You guys gave me the ability to do it. I'm just playing the game."

He nodded. He jotted something on a piece of paper. "Borant didn't intervene because they thought you were going to attempt a different type of attack. And they assumed you'd lose access to the artifact after."

I eyed the three items on the desk. If I so much as bumped the table, the first watch would fall into my lap. "And that's my fault?"

"It's not. They are upset, but," he turned in his chair to look to his left, raising his voice, "you likely made them more money than they lost." He paused. "That said, we now have a problem. A problem with no easy solution. Actually, that's not true. There's a very easy and obvious solution to me. But the kua-tin don't want to go that route. Yet. The council and the showrunners need your help."

I felt my eyebrow raise. "*My* help?"

"We can't forcibly take the gate from you. Despite what you might think, there are rules about the treatment of crawlers. At least in regards to their inventory items. Patching certain artifacts requires cooperation across all involved entities, and we do not have a consensus."

I bit my lip.

Orren continued. "The system will not allow us to confiscate it from you." That was interesting, considering they'd already taken it. "Borant wishes for you to remain in the game," he again raised his voice, "despite the danger you pose to their tenuous hold on solvency. However, we simply cannot allow you to keep the Gate of the Feral Gods. We are asking for you to voluntarily give it up."

"Is that a joke? What is this? You've already taken it." I took a deep breath. My instinct was to reach out and pick up the items from the desk. I thought of the journalist. They wanted a witness. This felt like a trap. I kept my hands at my side. I scooted my chair back an inch.

He chuckled. "When the item was first generated into the game by the system AI, do you know what happened? It set off a chain reaction of checks and balance subroutines so extensive, it crashed the entire system. The AI created the item in such a fashion that it circumvented its own rules."

"Yeah, so?"

"That item has the ability to kill everyone on the floor. Borant already bent the rules the best they could to keep you from zeroing out the population on the previous floor. But this level is a little different. You can open a hundred portals and turn the dungeon into a wasteland in less than an hour."

Donut: I GOT THE WORLD'S GREATEST CLASS FOR THIS FLOOR. KATIA IS BACK IN LINE WITH US.

I waved away the chat and waited for Orren to continue.

"Nobody expected you to get the item. There are rules in place we all must follow, so we can't remove it. We can, however, remove *you*. We must protect the integrity of the game. That leaves us with three options." He held up a finger. "One, I could create an order that would encase the floor in a protection spell that would remove

all crawler access to portals. That would remove access to all personal spaces and clubs and break thousands of other little things. Teleport scrolls would cease to work. Certain movement spells wouldn't work. Your pet's carrier would no longer function. It would be chaos, and it would kill thousands."

He raised another finger. "Two. We accelerate you, which *will* result in your death, along with the death of anyone near you."

He let that sink in for a moment, and then he raised a third finger. "Or three, you turn the winding box in, I give you a receipt, and you get it back the moment you reach the ninth floor."

I didn't answer for several moments. My mind raced. *Goddamnit*. I needed that gate. How could I keep my promise to Juice Box without it?

I needed time to think. "Why was there a liaison helping Maggie cheat?" I asked. I looked up at the ceiling. I had no idea if he was telling the truth about the reporter, but if he was, they were the most important person here right now. "Maggie and Chris kept getting censored. They said it was a caprid. The creature was obviously working with the Skull empire."

Orren's chair creaked. The watch wobbled. In the momentary silence, I could hear the distant boom of the dance floor. "Everyone here is aware of which you speak. There's an answer to that question. You're not allowed to hear it. But I'm glad you asked, because it's an important lesson. Exploits can work both ways. The forces working against you have had a lot more time to learn how to manipulate the system. Rest assured that particular issue has been dealt with in the same manner and swiftness as the one before us now. What's your choice? Will you hand the artifact over?"

"I want a lawyer," I said. "I'm not touching those things until I talk to one."

He grunted with amusement. I could tell, despite his mostly serious demeanor, he was enjoying this exchange. He looked back over his own shoulder to peer at the blank wall. "I told you. What did I say?" He returned his fishbowl head in my direction. "You just said the magic words, crawler."

Entering the Staging Area.

I was hoping we'd teleport to our personal space, and Mordecai would be the one who walked us through specialization. That's not what happened. This was like a football stadium, with a high ceiling and distant walls. It appeared every crawler entered into this room here or a place like this, waited in line, and then was forced to undergo specialization class selection. From what I gathered, everybody had to go through the line, even those whose classes didn't have the option to specialize.

By the time I arrived, the room was almost empty. Maybe three or four hundred crawlers remained, all on the far side of the room. I started walking toward them. I'd been in Orren's office for about an hour and a half, so not too long, but it appeared whatever this was, it was going by quickly.

Carl: I'm in the giant arena place. Where are you guys?

Katia: Are you okay? What happened?

Carl: I'm okay. We the gate, but not permanently. It's a long story.

Donut: WE'RE ALREADY DONE. YOU HAVE TO GO THROUGH THE SMELLY LITTLE ROOM, AND THEN YOU COME BACK OUT. EVERYONE IS GETTING SCATTERED, BUT ALL THE PARTY MEMBERS ARE COMING OUT IN THE SAME PLACE. ALSO, WAIT UNTIL YOU SEE WHAT MORDECAI LOOKS LIKE.

Katia: This world is similar to the third floor but with a lot more trees. You should come out just outside a medium dryad settlement. Find a pub called Die Kirschbomben.

Carl: Did you guys get class upgrades?

Katia: I got something. It didn't change my Monster Truck Driver class name, but I could pick one of three "endorsements." They only give you ten minutes to pick,

and you can't use chat while you're in the little room. I got the HAZMAT endorsement.

Donut: THEY SAID I COULD PERMANENTLY PICK ANY CLASS I ALREADY HAD, BUT MORDECAI SAID THAT MIGHT HAPPEN AND TOLD ME NOT TO DO IT. SO I DIDN'T. BUT IT'S OKAY BECAUSE I ALREADY GOT A NEW CLASS JUST FOR THIS FLOOR, AND IT IS GREAT.

Carl: What did you get?

Donut: I'LL TELL YOU BUT ONLY IF YOU PROMISE NOT TO GET MAD. KATIA SAYS YOU'RE GOING TO BE MAD.

Carl: Donut. What did you pick?

Donut: I'M A BARD! ISN'T IT GREAT! IT'S NOT A NECROBARD LIKE THEY OFFERED ME BEFORE, BUT IT'S BETTER. I'M A LEGENDARY DIVA. THAT'S WHAT THE CLASS IS CALLED. LEGENDARY DIVA. I SING!

Carl: You sing.

Donut: I SING SONGS AND THEY CAST SPELLS. I GOT A BUNCH OF THEM. I'M PRACTICING ALREADY. MONGO LOVES THEM AND THE TREE GUY AT THE PUB SAID I CAN HAVE A GIG FOR THE LUNCH SHIFT TOMORROW.

Katia: He said you could sing *after* the lunch shift.

Donut: DON'T RUIN IT, KATIA.

I took a long, deep breath.

Carl: Okay, I'll see you in a bit.

Velvet, crowd-control ropes snaked back and forth, attached to little brass poles, like in a line to buy tickets at the movie theater. Hundreds of single-door exits dotted the far wall, and as I watched, the remaining crawlers all walked, one-by-one into individual rooms and disappeared.

I picked up one of the barrier things and tried to add it to my inventory.

Warning: You may not use your inventory in this area.

I grumbled and then walked around the rope, pushing my way to the very end of the line.

Carl: Mordecai, please tell me the bard thing is a good class.

Mordecai: It's great, in theory. It comes with multiple spells and a new spell system, and if she practices enough, she'll keep it. She managed to keep her buffed *Hole, Magic Missile*, and *Puddle Jumper* skills thanks to her Glass Cannon class last floor. This new class gave her a handful of enchantment spells and a decent constitution buff. Her Character Actor skill is level six now, and she received all the starting skills of the Legendary Diva class plus a few upgraded ones. That skill is going to be a real asset from now on. Just be glad she didn't choose it as her permanent class.

Carl: She has to sing? Have you heard her sing yet?

Mordecai: Everyone has heard her singing.

Carl: Oh god.

By the time I arrived to the front of the line, there were only a handful of crawlers left. None were ones I'd met before. I exchanged fist bumps with them all. The second to last was a human named Ajib. His level-29 seemed pitiful compared to my level 47. His class was something called a Prodromoi, which I gathered was some sort of dexterity-themed fighter. He hopped forward in line, and I realized he was missing the bottom half of his left leg.

"I had to jump through the portal just as the floor collapsed," he said. "But we did it. We popped our bubble at the end."

"I'll build you a prosthetic if you need it," I said.

"My team is already on it, but thank you," the man said before hopping forward and disappearing into one of the rooms.

A group of NPCs, a mix of crocodilians, cretins, and robed elves were waving people toward the little doorways against the far wall. There were hundreds of the workers, but they were mostly standing around idle by the time I got to the front of the line. I was the very last crawler.

"Pick any one. They're all the same," one of the elves said.

I strolled toward a door near the end of the row, examining it as I approached, and it was just a regular portal. I took a quick screenshot, and it appeared to be an airplane bathroom-sized room

with a screen on the wall. It looked almost like one of those peep-show room booths.

I was about to enter when the announcement came. I paused.

Hello, Crawlers!

Welcome to the sixth floor! We are so happy to have you here!

Like the third floor, this sixth floor is a *Dungeon Crawler World* tradition!

It's the hunting grounds! This floor is almost identical in layout and size to the third floor, but the abandoned ruins have been claimed by hundreds of years of foliage. What secrets and mysteries lay hidden in the jungle? You'll have 17 days to find out! But this time, you won't be alone.

We currently have 360 hunters on deck, and they're raring to go. In a little less than 28 hours, they will be unleashed and will begin hunting you for your gear. Due to recent events, we are keeping registration open until the very last moment, and we expect that number of participants to double or even triple by the time they are released! But be warned! Some of these hunters have been here for weeks now, and even though they're currently sequestered, their minions and traps are still out there and waiting for you. A few of you have already found this out the hard way!

Traditionally, all hunters start out at level 30 and are able to train themselves up as you make your way through the lower floors. It's no secret that you're here sooner than usual. In the spirit of fairness and as an incentive to gain more last-minute participants, we have given all hunters a bump of 20 levels, so they all start out at 50.

We'll have more information about the hunt after the next recap message, but I wanted to thank you all for your participation. I know that last floor was tough, and we did lose a few more crawlers than we anticipated. We will all have to work together to make sure your incompetence doesn't continue.

There are 2,344 exits leading to the seventh floor. There is at least one unguarded exit in the city of Zockau along with more in the valley beyond. In addition, some city boss and larger mobs will have an exit nearby. The rest are hidden, but should be easy to find.

Your final sponsorship slots are now open to bidding. That's all for now. Now get out there and kill, kill, kill!

While the announcement was going, the NPCs got to work cleaning up the room and shutting down the arena. A group of crocodilians started gathering up the velvet crowd control ropes. A cretin walked around with a broom and dustbin as a group of the elves started rolling up the red carpets. The sight seemed absurd.

A hooded elf approached as I listened. He was dragging an empty cart that would presumably be loaded up with the rugs. He paused to regard me as I listened to the message. I examined the man warily.

Ian – Bush Elf. Level 30.

Registration Arena Attendant.

This is a Non-Combatant NPC.

You know those perpetually-depressed, emo kids from high school who always sat on the floor during lunch? If they participated in extracurricular activities, it was always either drama, yearbook committee, or the dreaded anime club. They planned on changing the world with some bullshit cause. They all had jobs at the smoothie place. Then after high school, they just kinda got absorbed by the world, like pouring a dark drink into a rushing stream. You blinked, and they were just gone, along with all of their black hair dye and all of their dreams.

That is a Bush Elf. A once-proud people, almost physically indistinguishable from the ruling class High Elves, Bush Elves are the regular joes of the forest. If you look really close, you can see the wrinkles around their eyes, or the very slight hunch to their backs. A sign of their defeat. They tend to favor druid magic and jobs at places where they're in cubicles.

Sometimes they remember how strong of a people they once were.

"Sir, we're closing this area. You need to go into a changing room."

"Sorry, just listening to the announcement."

"No problem, sir. Good luck out there."

"Thank you," I said. "You too. Might want to keep your head down after today."

The elf paused, regarding me. "You're Carl, right? The one who bombed Larracos?"

"That's right," I said. "Word travels fast here."

"I heard them talking about it. The other crawlers, I mean. They said you unleashed a feral god on the armies. They said you're going to do it again on this floor."

"I didn't. That's what they thought I was going to do. Instead, I helped flood the city of Larracos. I was going to throw a god at them in a few days, but they took my toy away."

Ian nodded thoughtfully. The creature had a wistful look on his face. "They do that. If you gain a little bit of power, they take it away. Next time you need to use it while you can. Now you best get moving. If you go in the jungle, stay on the trail. Stay away from the city of Zockau, even after the countdown is done. It's all the way to the north. That's where the aliens are. They don't fight fair, so be careful. Last hunting season, one of them killed my brother for no reason. Was working a food stand. Ripped his head right off, and since the guards didn't see it, they did nothing."

"You remember the previous seasons?" I asked, suddenly intrigued.

"I was a human, like you. I was a crawler a very long time ago. I'm usually an attendant at Club Vanquisher, but this season they got me on urban janitor duty. They pulled us all away to work the opening arenas. Everybody you see here was once a crawler. I think. Sometimes it's hard to tell. I gotta say, this is the smallest group I've ever seen. I ain't supposed to be talking like this, though. I get in trouble if I break character. You better get moving."

I nodded. “I’m going. Do you know which hunter killed your brother? Are they back this year?”

Ian visibly shuddered. “Oh, yes. She is here. She is always here. Vrah. A mantis. There’s a core group of about 20 regulars who are here every season. Vrah takes the heads of those she kills and wears them upon her body. Stay away from her, friend. Her death count is in the thousands.” He jerked as if shocked. Without another word, he put his head down and pushed his cart away.

I turned, and I entered through the door.

The room was suffocatingly small and smelled of Lysol. I wondered how some of the bigger crawlers, like Chris, fit in here. There was an old-school television against the wall with a glowing coin slot. Static played on the screen. I had to peel my feet off the floor as I stepped inside. A handwritten, stain-covered sign in English hung on the wall. “Only one person per booth.” I realized with dismay this place was exactly what it looked like.

The screen flickered, and a 10-minute countdown appeared. Words formed on the screen and were also spoken out loud.

Welcome, Crawler.

You have ten minutes to choose your class upgrade. Your class, Compensated Anarchist, is required to pick a specialty. You will have three choices. Choose wisely as your choice will be permanent. If no choice is made, a random choice will be applied. You will retain all of your previous class upgrades.

The robotic, almost emotionless voice was unusual for the dungeon. The three new classes appeared.

Revolutionary.

Guerilla.

Agent Provocateur.

I couldn’t click or interact with the menu. It just appeared and played on the screen, and I was forced to watch. Mordecai and I had

already discussed what the most likely choices would be, and these were all pretty close to what we expected. All three came with an unexpected stat point boost.

Revolutionary.

You are in the streets, in the front against the barrier. You can take a tear gas canister to the chest and keep ticking. When they come to break the line, you're the first to start swinging your fists. This specialty increases your training speed with melee fighting skills and greatly increases your strength.

Revolutionaries receive the following benefits:

An additional +1 to strength upon level-up.

+2 to Unarmed Combat.

Immunity to Cloud-Based attacks (already obtained via upgrade patch)

The Blend into the Crowd benefit.

Faster melee training.

The extra strength benefit alone made this one worth it. My unarmed combat was similar to powerful strike. It currently sat at nine, and it was very difficult to train up. Getting it to 11 would likely give me an additional advantage since it pushed it over ten.

The screen gave a quick rundown of each benefit and skill.

The Blend into Crowd benefit caused guards to forget who I was once I was out of sight for a while. I could've really used that skill on the third floor. While great, I suspected this sixth floor was the only remaining floor where that skill would be useful.

Guerilla.

Unlike a revolutionary who stands front and center, you take your fight to the jungles. You cease to be the face of the revolution and instead become the tip of the sword. Using your superior trap-making and ranged-weapon skills, you kill the enemy before they even know you're there.

Guerrillas receive the following benefits:

An additional +1 to dexterity upon level-up

Access to the Advanced Trap Maker's Workshop.

Plus *Camouflage*

+5 to the Crossbow skill.

Faster trap-making training.

I had no desire to learn the crossbow, but it would be a good skill to have especially since Katia was leaving the party. I'd been working on explosive crossbow bolts, but she was afraid to use them. *Camouflage* was a spell similar to what Maggie My and Frank had used to hide themselves from other crawlers. It worked well, but it required you to stay in place. The Trap Maker's Workshop was a specialty crafting table, one that I really wanted to get. However, there was another upgrade I wanted even more.

Agent Provocateur.

The mysterious Agent Provocateur prides himself in being invisible. This class specialty focuses on being the ultimate saboteur. These wily troublemakers put less emphasis on individual traps and fighting in the street and instead focus on mass-casualty bombs and bomb-making.

An Agent Provocateur receives the following benefits:

An additional +1 to intelligence upon level-up

+1 skill level to a Sapper's table.

+2 to Explosives Handling.

Access to the advanced Bomb Maker's Workshop.

Faster explosives training.

Even though the names were similar, the Trap Maker's Workshop was just a table while the Bomb Maker's Workshop was an entire room. I didn't need this class to get the regular version of either, only the "advanced" version. The advanced Trap Maker table was required to build some of the best, magical-based traps, but the advanced Bomb Maker's Workshop would allow me to precisely tune my explosives and to eventually make much more specialized bombs.

My explosives handling was another skill that had stalled out. This would send me over the hump.

We'd pretty much known I'd be given the option of fighting, traps, or explosives. Thankfully, none of them added any penalties to the other two. Mordecai was insistent that I choose the melee option. Still, I hesitated. I wanted that Advanced Bomb Maker's

workshop. I *really* wanted it, especially since I had a few recipes sitting in my cookbook that required that room to work.

I wasn't a huge fan of that +1 to intelligence, however. Still, the more I thought about it, the more I realized I'd been neglecting that stat for far too long. With my boxers and jacket but before the daily buffs, my intelligence sat at only 17. I always liked to keep a buffer that would allow me to cast *Heal* a few times if I needed. If I wanted any more spells, that stat really needed to go up.

I only had a minute left to choose. The little orange light on the coin slot started blinking as the timer on the screen counted down.

I reached up and touched the filthy screen, clicking directly on the third choice.

"Sorry, Mordecai," I muttered.

Congratulations, Crawler. You are now Carl, the level 47 Agent Provocateur.

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[2]

Entering the Selva

I left through the same door I entered, and I stepped into the pouring rain. Thick foliage filled the area. Bushes with wide, kite-sized leaves encircled me. The rain splashed off the fronds, splashing up into my face. It sounded like a thousand little drums. Despite the rain, the trill of animals surrounded me along with the thick buzz of insects, even louder than the rain. The air was so muggy, it was almost choking. My lungs felt heavy and wet after just the first breath.

The rain stopped. Just like that. A single beam of sunlight illuminated a thin trail. Everything continued to drip. The leaves and fronds bobbed up and down. I looked up, searching for the ceiling, but I couldn't see anything through the trees. While the air remained oppressively humid, I caught the scent of flowers.

I turned, and the door I'd come through was an actual port-a potty, just sitting there in the jungle. I hesitantly opened the plastic door, and inside was just my regular bathroom. I closed the door and examined my surroundings.

A trail led through the forest. A pair of white dots appeared on my map, only about twenty feet away, but I couldn't see them through the foliage. I already knew what to expect from Donut and Katia. They'd also appeared right here, just outside of town.

I headed toward the two white dots. Both dots had a blue hue around the edge, which meant they were both equipped with

magical gear.

A bamboo wall about ten feet high materialized, along with a gate. A pair of guards stood sentry just within, each holding a massive spear about a foot taller than the top of the walls. I paused, examining the twin creatures. My initial impression was thin, tall samurais with white-painted faces, but I blinked and saw them for what they really were. Mushroom men. Two arms, two legs, but no neck. What I'd originally thought were conical, Asian-style coolie hats were actually the mushroom caps. The slender, flaxen-colored creatures did not acknowledge me at all. Their white-painted, vaguely human faces stared straight forward. Each stood about eight feet tall, completely rigid as I hesitantly approached. Each wore a black, but red-highlighted flowing robe tied around their "stalk" just below the face. Water dripped from the tops of their mushroom caps.

Funeral Bell – Level 95

I would apologize in advance for this description, but an apology would imply that I'm sorry. I'm never sorry!

These mushroom dudes are not fun guys.

Funeral Bells are the guards who are tasked with protecting the smaller settlements of the sixth floor. Unlike the swordsmen guards from the Over City, these creatures have no sense of humor. Also, they are on duty day and night. You should avoid making them angry.

"Hello, gentlemen," I said as I strode toward the gate. Just beyond, I could now see a good-sized town within the circle of the bamboo wall. It buzzed with activity. Multiple elves and tree-like creatures walked about. Multi-story shops and pubs filled the streets, many attached to trees. Some buildings were in the trees. It was like a German-style village mixed in with a bunch of treehouses. Small, furry monkey creatures scuttled about the branches. The spire of a Club Vanquisher rose in the distance against the back wall. The golden tip of the spire gleamed in the fading light.

Entering Medium Dryad Settlement.

I paused to drink it all in and smell the air. This seemed like a beautiful place. A perfect place, if it hadn't been stuck in this hell

hole. I thought of my dream. My distant, forever-lost dream to one day get a job as far away from the ocean as possible and work in the forest.

It'd been a silly dream, really. Getting a gig as a park ranger. I'd never done anything to become one. I'd had plenty of time to maybe go to school. Take classes. Something. I never even knew how one got that sort of job. It didn't matter. Not anymore.

To my left, the first of the two guards fell over. One moment he was just standing there, and then he tipped forward like a tree that had been cut at the base. He crashed in front of me, blocking my path. His mushroom bell of a head smashed when it hit the ground, crumpling in on itself like a can. The giant spear clattered away on the stone street. I just stared. The guard wasn't dead. The debuff **Paralyzed** blazed over its head.

The second funeral bell made a croaking noise and dropped his spear. The guard also fell over.

What the hell?

My instincts took over, and I slammed onto *Protective Shell*.

An angry, hissing noise ripped through the air, and the edge of my spell sparked. *There's something invisible there*.

I tossed a smoke curtain, hoping to see movement through the eddies of smoke. I wanted to toss a small hob-lobber, but I didn't know what direction. NPCs were everywhere. If I hurt one, the guards would come after me. I needed to injure the monster. Most invisible creatures showed themselves once they were hurt.

Behind me, a horn sounded. Shouting rose across the town. My shell sparked again. I still couldn't see what was causing it. I reached down and picked up the massive spear dropped by the guard.

Warning: You receive a penalty when you use bladed weapons.

<u>Carl:</u> I need help. At the village entrance.

I swung the spear like a club in a wide arc at the air just past the edge of the shell, trying to hit the damn thing. What was this? It couldn't be a hunter as they were all stuck in that other city. It had

to be a mob. It'd incapacitated two level-95 guards like it was nothing.

Invisible mobs were always a worry, but Donut's sunglasses could see them. That did me no good now. I had to act fast. I dove into my inventory as I swung back and forth, hitting nothing. The shell would run out in seconds.

I had an idea. Gunpowder. I still had a dozen sacks of the stuff. Each bag was the size of a pillowcase. I dropped the spear, pulled a sack, and I tossed it just as the shell dropped around me. The sack spun in the air, black powder spilling out. The sack hit something solid, and the powder formed a shape.

"Shit!" I cried, ducking. It hissed as it sailed right over me. It was smaller than Donut, and it was fast. It hit the ground, shook once, and it dislodged the dust, though I could still almost make it out. Behind the invisible creature, a line of funeral bell guards approached, moving slowly.

In that moment, a dot appeared on my map. It wasn't red. It was orange. A pet. But that didn't make sense. The shell shouldn't have worked against pets. *Unless*…

Of course, I thought*. I should've tried this first.* I found my new *Ping* spell on my list, and I cast it.

Pling.

The noise sounded much like a sonar burst from a submarine. It shot forth, and my map flashed. It highlighted every non-mob or crawler in the area. The creature remained right in front of me, ready to pounce again.

"Oof," I cried as the second orange dot slammed me from behind. I felt a pair of hot teeth sink into my neck.

You have been paralyzed!

I crashed to the ground, frozen. I tried to take a healing potion, but it wouldn't let me. This is what they'd done to the guards. They'd paralyzed them.

"I'm coming, Carl!" a voice cried out. Donut.

I couldn't move. A five-minute timer appeared. *Five* minutes. That was a long-ass time. My limbs felt as if they were on fire.

A magic missile shot out. It slammed directly into the first creature, the one I'd doused in gunpowder. It flipped onto its back and screeched as its fur popped and sparkled as the powder cooked off. The creature's invisibility dropped. Its health had gone down by half.

It was a fuzzy, jet black, ferret-like monster with six legs and a whole bunch of teeth. Its sharp teeth were way too big for its face, jutting every which way. Donut shot it again, leaving it with only a sliver of life. Its fur continued to pop and sizzle like bacon in a pan. Donut shot a third missile at the second monster, the one who'd bitten my neck. This second creature cried out with a hiss. I couldn't see it, but I heard it hit the ground and start to scramble away.

Mongo cried out with a shriek, sailing over my head as he attacked the second monster. Donut was perched on Mongo's back, and she screamed along with her dinosaur as they moved to pursue.

I couldn't move at all. The first injured monster hit the ground a few feet from my face. It was still alive. The creature hissed pitifully at me and started to drag itself closer using a single leg, its jaw ravening. Smoke rose off the thing. *It's going to bite me. Shit, shit, not the face. Not the face! It's going to bite me in the goddamned face*. The creature was almost dead, yet it still fought, its jaw cracking rapid fire. It sounded like a rat trap snapping over and over as it inched closer and closer.

I tried to send a call for help. The system wouldn't let me.

I examined the creature as I inwardly cringed.

Tootsie. Night Weasel Scout. Level 25.

This a pet of Hunter Zabit.

Have you ever seen one of those videos of a bunch of dogs having a pool party? It's usually a scene of pure chaos and joy as the golden retrievers and Labradors and other doggos run circles around the pool, jumping in and out and playing and splashing and having a great, hectic time.

Now imagine your body is the pool, and the Night Weasels are the dogs in this scenario.

Not many pack hunters answer to an alpha who isn't of the same race. It requires an ultra-high charisma to tame a

pack of these living meat grinders. It's said a hunter who can control a gang of the invisible Night Weasels can take down prey of any size.

Their method of stalking is simple. A typical gang consists of approximately 20 weasels, including two or three seeker scouts, a group of huntsmen, and a pack leader. The scouts can sniff out prey from hundreds of kilometers away. They track down and disable the target, rendering it immobile. Once the prey is down, the rest of the weasels move in, their movements coordinated by the gang leader.

I'd describe what happens next, but this is a family show.

A dark, rocky leg slammed down, crushing the pet just as it pulled itself close enough to chomp my nose. Gore splattered onto my face.

Chris. He rumbled something and then stepped over me. Behind me, I could hear Mongo squeal with delight as he chomped onto the second weasel.

"There's more coming!" Donut cried. "A lot of them!"

"Drag Carl into the saferoom," a new voice called. Katia. "They're hunting him. Let the guards take care of it."

I felt myself rise up into the air, and I realized Chris had picked me up. His lava-rock body burned my skin. He easily lifted me over his shoulder. My entire body was stiff, my hand frozen awkwardly up in the air.

"The guards can't see them. They're all invisible!" Donut yelled. I heard the familiar zap of a spell being cast, followed by a second spell. A weasel screeched. Donut had raised the pet from the dead and cast *Clockwork Triplicate* on it.

"Get 'em!" Donut yelled as I was bodily removed from the area. Chris strode into a pub. I caught sight of a tree-like creature looking at me as we moved into the personal space. My head banged into the entranceway as we went through the door. He unceremoniously dumped me onto the couch. I faced up into the air, still unable to move. I sat there, not doing anything as the timer ticked down.

I felt something climb up onto me. A fuzzy face looked down at me, scowling just as the timer counted down to zero. My limbs still

burned, but I could move them.

I looked up at the furry, buck-toothed, teddy bear-like face glaring down at me.

"You had to go and challenge all the hunters. Now look what happened," Mordecai said, trying to sound angry. "And that doesn't look like a melee class to me."

I burst out laughing. I couldn't help it.

Mordecai – Pocket Kuma. Level 50.

Manager of Crawler Princess Donut

This is a Non-Combatant NPC.

Wow! This pint-sized fuzzball is adorable!

The rare Pocket Kuma is a magic-infused, half-fairy creature originally designed as a pet for the elite High Elf royal court. When it was discovered these creatures were intelligent, High Elf King Finian, of course, ordered them all executed. Only a few of the little rascals managed to escape into the jungle.

A kuma is a type of bear. A Pocket Kuma is a different sort of creature, though they are distantly related. You take a small bear, crossbreed it with a capybara spirit, pick out the runt of the litter, and then breed it further down with a sugar glider. The resulting, bug-eyed creature is what you see before you now.

They can't fight for shit. They can barely walk. But holy shit are they disgustingly cute.

I bet they smush really well.

He was a fuzzy, brown and white, knee-height, chubby, bipedal bear thing with elf ears and a monkey tail. His eyes were ridiculously huge, making him look like a baby. He had a pair of buck teeth that didn't help the illusion. The tail waved back and forth angrily.

"Laugh it up," Mordecai said, pissed. "Get it out of your system."

"Your voice," I said, falling off the couch as I continued to howl, causing him to yelp and leap off of me. He used his tail to keep himself from lurching back. I had tears rolling down my cheek. "Holy shit. Will you be able to work at the alchemy table like this? Do you want me to build a booster chair for you?"

"Go fuck yourself, Carl," Mordecai said. He leaped across the room and landed on the kitchen table, huffing. Chris stood nearby, watching impassively.

Donut and Katia finally returned to the room. "The guards used their poison cloud attack to…" Katia began. She saw me there on the ground, laughing. A grin spread across her face, and she also started to laugh. "He really is funny looking, isn't he?"

Mordecai glowered from the kitchen counter. He jumped sideways, sailing through the air and landing on the ground in front of his room. He tried to storm in, but he couldn't reach the doorknob. He had to jump up and grab it. He dangled helplessly for a moment before the door opened on its own. He dropped to the floor, went inside, and slammed it.

"You shouldn't make fun of someone just because they're small and adorable, Carl," Donut said. She leaped onto the couch and looked down at me as I sat up and wiped my eyes. "I'm small and adorable, and I just saved your life."

"You're right," I said, still laughing. "Thank you, by the way. All of you. It was just so… unexpected. They really screwed him over this time." I took a moment to compose myself. "Did the guards get all the weasel things?"

"I'm not sure," Donut said. "I started hitting them with low-powered magic missiles which made them visible. Eventually one of the guards spewed a poison cloud, and we had to run."

"They were hunting you, Carl," Katia added. "They were just the first. There will be more. A lot more."

"I know," I said, sobering. "When the hunters are released, all hell is going to break loose."

We all sat there in silence for a few moments. I was so damn tired.

There was a knock at the door. The door to the personal space.

"What in god's name?" Katia asked. "How… who is that?"

"Ahh, yes," I said, standing up and striding toward the door. "It's a delivery."

"Of what?" Katia asked.

"Collateral," I answered.

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[3]

"I WOULD LIKE SOME TIME ALONE WITH MY CLIENT," MY NEW ATTORNEY HAD said the moment he appeared in the room. I'd just asked for a lawyer, Orren had stopped everything, and a moment later, a new creature appeared, standing next to the liaison.

"Alone?" Orren asked, grunting with amusement. "This is my office. I will turn off the feed to the others, but you'll have to suffer my presence."

I was so astonished that asking for an attorney had actually worked that I barely registered this exchange. Everything I'd read implied lawyers didn't become a thing until the tenth floor.

I studied the newcomer. The system didn't give much information.

Quasar

Advocate of Crawler #4,122.

The small creature glowered at Orren as I examined him. I was pretty certain the alien wasn't really in the room with us. I wouldn't know for certain unless I touched him.

He was a gray alien. I knew from reading descriptions in the cookbook what this creature was. A Nullian, though they were mostly just called "the Null." I'd seen their kind once or twice in talk show audiences, but they seemed rare. This race was similar to the much-taller Forsoothed, but this guy was only about four and a half feet tall. He looked just like a stereotypical, cartoon, Area-51 alien with the gray skin, large eyes, and the bulbous head. He wore a tan

suit with a tie. The tie had what appeared to be an image of a Nullian hula girl on it. The hula girl gyrated back and forth.

Unlike the halting speech of their soother big brothers, this guy had more of a gritty, rapid-fire, New York sort of accent which was somehow even more unnerving.

"You're gonna have to step out of the room," Quasar said to Orren. "The rules are clear. I get to speak to my client alone."

"I will turn off my auditory receptors. How is that?" Orren said. "I'm not leaving. You and your client are welcome to step outside yourselves, but I wouldn't recommend it. There are Desperado Club entrances in Zockau."

The threat was clear. There'd be hunters out there on the dance floor.

Quasar sighed dramatically. "All right, but if you do listen in, the Sys AI will know, and we'll file a grievance. That last one we filed didn't go so great for your coworker, now did it? Also, get those items out of here. My client isn't going to touch them until we got an agreement."

"You have five minutes," Orren said as he gathered up the watches and winding box. They disappeared. He reached up and touched the side of his head, presumably to turn his headphones or whatever off. Nothing appeared to happen.

Quasar made a spinning motion with a long finger, indicating he wanted Orren to turn his chair around. The liaison grumbled but complied. The fish-bowl-headed creature produced what looked like a rubber ball and started bouncing it off the back wall, deftly catching it each time it ricocheted back toward him.

The null watched Orren for a moment and then shrugged. He moved to the front of the desk and leaned against it, facing me. He pulled an item that looked like a vape pen and inhaled. The smoke pixelated as it spread away, confirming he was a holo. "Okay, buddy. We gotta be quick. You are balls deep in the wrong hole, and mom is pulling into the driveway. You get me?"

"I… What?" I asked, trying to make sense of the metaphor. I couldn't take my eyes off the alien hula girl on his tie. The

goddamned thing winked at me. "I… So you're a lawyer? Do you work like a regular lawyer from Earth?"

"Look, pal. If you're going to be a babbling idiot this whole time, we're going to have a very short courtship. I have no clue how lawyers work from your world, but in my experience, they're mostly the same everywhere. We're in a hurry, so we need to get past the first date finger bang jitters and move straight to the part where we argue about me smoking too much. Got it?"

A million questions swirled in my brain. I just nodded.

"First off, don't buy anything this worm head is trying to sell. Most Valtay are tricksy fuckers, but the naked ones are the worst. If they ain't riding a body, that's usually a sign there's something wrong with them. And if they're a liaison… yeah. Growing up, you ever know a kid who'd rat you out to the adults just because it wet his receptors? That's the type of fuck stick who becomes a liaison. Fuck those guys." He took a deep drag from his vape pen. "You hear me? Liaisons are all fucks." He raised his voice at that, testing to see if there was a reaction from Orren. There wasn't. "From now on, any time you get hauled in front of one of these chodes, say nothing except, 'I want to talk to my lawyer.' Got it? And for the sake of his left tit, don't touch anything until I get there. You did good. They were trying to get you to pick up the artifact while it was under administrative hold. It would've deleted the item."

"Jesus," I said, looking at the spot on the desk where the gate pieces had been sitting.

"Yeah, that mudskipper admin guy was having a conniption. Those idiots actually want you to keep the artifact even though you fucked them over. I gotta tell you, pal. I'm moderately impressed."

"So, are you my lawyer from now on?"

"That's right. My name is Quasar, by the way. I am your attorney. Nobody else's. So I ain't representing the cat or the weird lady who turned into a shovel. Just you."

"And your job is to represent me? My best interests?"

"Best interests?" He made a scoffing noise. "When a crawler hits the tenth floor, he gains a teeny, tiny bit of autonomy over his fate. He's officially a citizen of the Syndicate. The moment anybody

becomes a citizen, the Syndicate bends them over and fucks them. I can't stop you from getting fucked. But I am the condom. You guys have condoms on your world? Of course you do. Everybody has condoms. Your ass is gonna hurt no matter what, but at least you won't have tryptic genital mites after."

"And what do you get out of this?" I asked.

"What do I get out of this? Tits, pal. You mean besides a headache? I get credits. Not a lot. But it's enough to keep me in receptor tugs and gelatin swabs. But in case you've been living on a backwater planet, you might not have noticed I'm a null. Not too many outfits hire my kind. So here we are."

I was still trying to decide if I was better off with or without this guy. I suspected I wasn't going to be given a choice. "What's to stop you from getting bribed by the Skull empire to fuck me over?"

He barked with laughter. "I love the way you think, pal. You humans are almost as paranoid as my people." He took another hit from his strange vape. The device pulsated with each drag. "You mean besides the sense of ethics and pride I have from working and studying for twenty cycles straight just so I can scrabble for scraps by representing condemned assholes such as yourself? The short answer is there ain't nothing stopping some interested third party from attempting to bribe me. The good news for you is that you're already fucked. To screw you over, I just need to do nothing. So if I'm doing the bare minimum, that should be a sign to you that King Rust hasn't been whispering sweet into my ears. Yet. And not that you'll believe me, but I do have my pride. The day I take a bribe from some pig-faced imperialist fuck is the day I wither."

"Our manager said lawyers don't usually come into play until the tenth floor. Why now?" I asked.

"Look. Is this really what you want to spend your time talking about? Your manager is correct. But most crawlers usually aren't subject to liaison action, either. Let alone a meeting where the sub-minister of the Native Species Agency takes an interest. There are a lot of moving parts of the Syndicate government, and there is a bureaucrat and or a committee for each and every one of those parts. And each one of those suits and committees is beholden to

rules and laws and regulations that can date back tens of thousands of cycles. And all these moving parts and interlocking teeth are all grinding their way forward through time, trying to gain some sort of upward momentum. It's a perpetual motion machine that will only stop once the universe implodes in on itself. And how is that machine greased? The universe's four lubricants. Blood, tears, taxes, and lawyers."

By the time I realized he hadn't actually answered my question, he was already moving on to the next subject.

"But as much as I'd like to bore myself to death with pointless questions, we need to deal with the issue before us now. Nobody wants you to break the game. They're not allowed to take your artifact. Their solution is simple. You can just fuck off and die, and if you were a regular crawler, you'd already be goblin kibble. The good news is you got something important. Leverage. Your sponsorship and entertainment value offsets the damage you might cause. It's Remex the Grand all over again. So the mudskippers would prefer if we come to an amicable solution. The problem is this liaison fuck sitting right here pretending to be deaf. If he determines we're at an impasse, he has limited authority to create solutions. And these rat fucks crave power so much they'll manufacture problems just so they can take out their magic dick wands and start zapping shit."

"So what do we do?" I asked, my mind swimming. I still couldn't tell if this guy knew what he was doing or not, and that terrified me. "I don't want to give up the gate. I need it."

"We'll come up with a proposal," he said. He put his vape away and suddenly had a tablet in his hand. "You sure you don't want to give it up? I bet I could get you a deal. Too bad we ain't on the tenth floor. I'd probably be able to get you something really sweet."

It hit me, then. This was the guy who'd help negotiate my exit from the dungeon if I made it down that low. I felt ill.

"We're not selling it," I said. "Orren said I could have it back on the ninth floor. I don't know how it works in the universe, but in my world, if someone is borrowing something, they usually give collateral. Something they won't want to lose."

Quasar grinned. "Now we're talking."

"Oh my god, Sledgie!" Donut cried after I opened the door. "What're you doing here?" The four cretins: Bomo, the Sledge, Clay-ton, and Very Sullen all lumbered into the room. The moment they entered, a new door appeared on the wall next to Mordecai's chambers. It was labeled **Mercenary Quarters**. The four white dots blinked and then changed color, obtaining a green cross.

"We received four free mercenaries. They're part of the package deal we negotiated in exchange for temporarily giving up the Gate of the Feral Gods."

Donut jumped to the Sledge's shoulder, and the rock monster gave her an affectionate pat. Chris came to stand before Clay-ton. The lava rock monster was almost the exact same size as the granite-colored NPC. Chris made a non-committal grunt, and Clay-ton answered with a similar noise.

Mongo, who'd never met any of these guys, started running in circles around them, hopping up and down with excitement.

"Bomo and Sledge stay with us, Very Sullen goes with Katia, and Clay-ton will stay with Chris."

"How are these guys collateral?" Katia asked. "What if something, uh, happens to them?"

"We have them on floors six, seven, and eight. That's it. If they die, they will regenerate, but not until the next floor. You guys should bring Clay-ton and Sullen with you when you venture out, but Bomo and the Sledge are too valuable to risk, so they're staying in here."

"What?" Donut asked. "Sledgie can't go adventuring with us? Why not?"

The Sledge made a disappointed noise.

"Did they give you the spells?" I asked Bomo.

The rock monster rumbled. "Yes. The Sledge has the second."

I nodded. Excellent.

"Sorry, guys. We need to keep these two safe," I said. "Since we were losing the gate, I wanted to be able to replicate two of the

gate's abilities. The first thing I asked for was a teleport spell, but they wouldn't give it to me. Not directly. They didn't want to give me anything that I could just keep after we got the artifact back."

"They really said you could have it back when you hit the ninth floor?" Katia asked.

"Yeah. They seem to like the idea of me being able to sow chaos during faction wars."

"Or they think you're going to do something really stupid between now and then and die first," Donut said.

Katia walked up and patted Very Sullen on the arm. This guy was Katia's regular body guard when she entered the club. The rock monster's face was thinner than that of the other two, and his eyes were tiny, emotionless dots. I'd never heard this one talk. "Wait, so these guys can teleport now?" Katia asked.

"Not your guy, but yes," I said. "Sort of. They agreed to give me a Mercenary upgrade and access to four bodyguards. Then they gave two of them extra spells. Bomo now has a level-15 spell called *Teleport to Stairwell*. We can pick a stairwell from a list and teleport there. It has a ridiculous cooldown. Like twenty-five days. Still it's a pretty powerful spell because it lists all the exits on the entire floor. It's not something they want me to have access to later on, so it's in their best interest to make sure we get the gate back."

"And the other spell?" Katia asked.

"The Sledge's spell is also teleportation, and it's even more impressive. This one was my lawyer's idea."

"Your lawyer?" Katia asked, looking at me sharply. "Back up. What?"

"Yeah, the lawyer thing is a long story. But he suggested it. It's a spell called *Zerzura*."

"*Zerzura*?" Donut asked. "Sledgie, you got a new spell? I just got one too! Actually, I got a bunch of new ones. I am now a singer, and my voice casts spells. Do you want to hear one?"

The Sledge rumbled happily.

"What does his spell do?" Katia quickly asked, cutting Donut off.

"It's…" I trailed off, finally noticing Katia's level. So much had happened since the end of the last floor, I hadn't even thought about

the aftermath of what we'd done. "Holy shit, Katia. What the hell?"

She grinned. "I was wondering when you were going to notice. I finally got my base constitution over 100. Got something called Steely Skin. The lower my health, the thicker my flesh."

Katia had been level 44 when she opened the Gate of the Feral Gods onto the ninth-floor city of Larracos, sending a frothing mass of sharks and jellyfish flooding into the metropolis. Apparently she'd gotten a bunch of experience for it. She was now level 52.

"Did you get any good gear?"

"I got a few boxes, including a Platinum Asshole's Box. It gave me a gambling chip for the Desperado Club and an upgrade to my *Find Crawler* skill. Also…" She trailed off, as if she was about to say something but changed her mind. "You still didn't answer my question. What does the Sledge's new spell do? What was it called? *Zerzura*?"

My hand found my necklace. I fingered the small charm with the yellow gem. It was warm to the touch. I thought of the crazy story Quasar told me about Remex the Grand and what he'd done with the *Zerzura* spell.

It was glorious, Quasar had said. *Shame how it ended for Remex. They made us study the exit deal he made in school. But the mudskippers cleaned up that season. It was a real windfall. You ask for this spell, and they'll fall over themselves to give it to you. And you want to know the beautiful part? All those other pricks won't interfere. Everyone will want you to pull it off. All the factions. All the fans. The showrunners. The AI. Everybody. That spell always leads to carnage. Everybody likes carnage when it's not them.*

I slept two hours and came out to find Mordecai standing on the kitchen table quietly conversing with Chris and Clay-ton. The other three cretins were leaned over my *Frogger* cabinet.

If Mordecai was still pissed at me for laughing at him earlier, he didn't show it now. Which was good because I had to work really

hard not to bust out again.

"We need to purchase some upgrades for the space," Mordecai said, "But I think we should wait until after the recap. If they're really going to open up the guild system, I want to know how it works first. They've tried this a few times over the cycles, and it's different every time. There are multiple upgrades we need."

"Okay," I said, moving to the food box and dialing in a breakfast sandwich. "There's something I want to buy right now if we can afford it."

"The bomber's studio?" he asked. "It's not too expensive, and that Venison box had what, 300,000 gold in it?"

"Yeah," I said. "The *advanced* bomber's studio." Between me and Donut, we now had just about a million gold. I had a suspicion we were going to need it all.

I eyed the small shrine in the corner of the room, bubbling merrily. It was a disk and a cup. When I was in the room, the cup boiled over with water. Apparently it stopped when I wasn't around. I still needed to do my daily blood drop into it. Thanks to my new religion, I also had to drop 5% of my "looted" gold into the cup. A number appeared floating over the shrine, helpfully telling me exactly how much I owed. Unfortunately, the shrine's definition of "looted" included the gold I'd received from surviving the previous floor while on the top 10 list. I'd dropped the gold in there when Donut wasn't looking. She'd noticed anyway and had complained for five minutes straight.

"It'll probably be okay if you buy the bomber room right now along with the magic studio, which will be expensive. We'll get them as soon as Donut is ready."

Katia emerged from her room and moved to the food box. She and Chris along with their two new mercenaries were going to head out on their own after her daily training. Louis and Firas had managed to recover the flying house, the *Twister*, from the changeling refugees. A group of crawlers, including team Meadow Lark, Bautista's team and several others were meeting up in a large settlement that was a few hours south of here. Katia wanted to

make sure she met up with them before the hunters were unleashed.

She was going to remain in the party until after we figured out the guild system, which was fine by me. I still hadn't fully come to terms with her leaving the group, but I'd already decided it was for the best, especially after considering what I was planning on doing today.

Donut emerged from the space, all poofed out and clean. Mongo padded behind her. She hummed the theme to the A-Team. "Carl, I think I've figured out the melody I'm going to use for my *Standing Ovation* spell."

"Great," I said. I exchanged a look with Mordecai.

"Come on," he said. "Let's go buy those two rooms."

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[4]

Time until Hunter Release: 21 Hours.

"You guys be safe. Stay on the trail," I said.

"We're taking the caravan. We'll be okay," Katia said as she, Chris, Clay-ton, and Very Sullen exited the safe room. "We'll see you guys later."

"Bye Katia! Bye Chris!" Donut said. She was attempting to be enthusiastic, but I could hear the sadness in her voice. Katia leaned over and kissed Donut on the head. Donut sniffed.

Mongo squawked mournfully.

"See you tonight," I said.

Katia held my eyes. "Don't do anything stupid."

"I won't," I lied.

As soon as they left, Donut and Mordecai were going to hit the town and go shopping. There was no Desperado Club here, and it wasn't yet safe for me to attempt to enter Club Vanquisher, so they had to rely on the local shops for the supplies they needed.

We only had 100K gold left after purchasing the two new rooms, and we needed to find a *Shield* spellbook for Donut. Mordecai also wanted to find an item with something called a **Golden Throat** enchantment, which was apparently the dungeon's version of autotune.

Donut's new bard class didn't use mana. All she needed to do was sing, and the bard spells would be cast. That was great, but there was a problem. A big problem. The song had to be in key. And until we found that item, her new class was useless.

Why?

Because Donut sounded like a helium-drunk cat being crushed by a steamroller when she attempted to sing, that was why. And even though she wasn't that bad of a dancer, when it came to making a song emerge from that tone-deaf gullet of hers, her rhythm was that of a drunk, three-legged donkey trying to negotiate its way down a set of ice-covered stairs.

There were two types of songs. For some of the spells, a group of lyrics appeared floating in front of her in midair, and she had to sing the words, karaoke style. She had to make up the melody herself. Apparently it didn't matter what the melody was, as long as it was consistently in key.

For two of the spells, however, it was different. She'd select the spell, and the melody would start playing on its own. She had to make up lyrics on the fly. It didn't appear to matter what the lyrics were as long as they, again, were sung in key.

I didn't know which one was worse

Not that it stopped Donut from attempting to cast them. Over and over and over again.

The first three spells were party support spells: *Standing Ovation*, which increased everyone's Dexterity and made our regular spells more powerful. *Entourage*, which created multiple, illusionary versions of each party member, and *Encore*, which was a *Heal Party* spell that could also remove multiple debuffs. Mordecai was pretty stoked about that Encore spell.

She could manage to cast all three of these if she sang the lyrics in a steady, monotone voice. Each song was a relatively short paragraph. Unfortunately, the spell's power was based on how well she sang it. So until she got that autotune buff, the spells were pretty weak.

The other two songs were offensive spells, and neither were going to be feasible for now. One was a psionic attack, and the other

was an Elle-style ice attack.

Donut had also received one additional, regular spell thanks to her spellbook-of-the-floor club. A spell called *Laundry Day*, which removed an item of armor from an opponent and caused it to fall to the ground. The higher the level of the spell, the more powerful it was. At level five, she'd be able to remove breastplates and other chest armor. At level 10, she could strip an opponent bare. At 15, she could cast on multiple opponents at once.

Thanks to our new Magic Workshop, we could train our spells up much like with the training room. Unlike the regular training room, however, only one person could use it at a time. The room was also required for some of Mordecai's higher-level potions, but I wasn't clear yet on how all that worked. Mordecai already mapped out a strict schedule. He had Donut pushing her *Magic Missile* which had stalled out at level 11 despite her constantly using it and me working on my *Fear* spell, which hadn't moved past level five.

I'd sent a message to Donut and told her to work on *Laundry Day* instead. She didn't question it.

"What if something happens to Katia, and we can't protect her?" Donut asked after they left. "Mongo would never forgive me if something happened to her."

I scratched Donut behind the ear. "Her staying away from us is probably for the best right now."

"Come on, Donut," Mordecai said. "Let's go shopping."

The Sledge moved to follow them out the door, but Mordecai held up a fuzzy hand. "Not this time, big guy."

"It's okay, Sledgie," Donut said. "You stay here. We won't be gone long."

The cretin grunted and then turned back to the *Frogger* game, which we'd have to shove over and place next to the television screens. With the addition of the two new rooms, the wide space was starting to look much more cramped. We could still fit one or two new rooms depending on the size, but anything after that would require us to figure out how to unlock the second level of the space.

I made a beeline toward my new room, the Advanced Bomber's Studio. The small room was only about ten feet wide, but it was

long, making me feel like I was standing in a private bowling alley.

Most of the work still happened at my Sapper's table, for now. This new room had two separate functions.

The first was that I could now virtually "copy" a design or an existing explosive and bring it over to the studio where I could place it and set it off. There were no actual explosions involved inside the studio. Everything in the testing area was virtual, like it was a game. I could create a miniature, virtual person or group of people or even a whole village, place the bomb, set it off, and see what would happen. I could pause the explosion and see what way it would blow based on its position. I could use the information to go back and tweak the design or the method of delivery and fine-tune the yield.

The system wasn't perfect, however. Sometimes it gave a range of possibilities. The cookbook stressed this point. Just because it blew in a certain way in the simulation wasn't a guarantee it'd actually go up that way. There were literally thousands of small environmental factors that could affect the way an explosive went up.

Thanks to this being an "advanced" bomber's studio, I could also test bombs and other incendiaries that I didn't actually have. I could build a virtual bomb and see if it'd work. For now I could only use items I had in my inventory, but hopefully that'd change after I gained some more experience.

The room's second function was the crafting table in the very back. One where I could tweak actual explosives. This was a specialty workbench, and at level one, it wasn't as good as my level five sapper's table in terms of building explosives from scratch. At least not yet.

However, the table was designed to be able to examine and dissect explosives, and it was absolutely required to engineer certain large-scale bombs.

I stood at the new bench now, shaking. I, for the very first time since I'd grabbed the thing, took out the Carl's Doomsday Scenario bomb and placed it onto the table. The small bench reshaped itself to accommodate the glass reaper case, which glowed like a miniature sun. The bomb was a microsecond from exploding, and

there was nothing I could do to stop it. But I could examine it. I copied it using the bomber studio interface so I'd be able to play with it safely using the simulator. I placed the bomb back into my inventory, my hands still trembling.

One day I would use that thing. One day.

Okay, I said to myself. *Quit screwing around. Back to work*.

We had 21 hours until the hunters would be released and about six or seven until darkness descended on the jungle. I pulled a stick of hobgoblin dynamite and started to carefully slice it into twenty different pieces.

Their shopping trip had been mostly a bust, but Mordecai had purchased a ton of herbs and supplies from the town's vendors. He'd even picked some plants from the ground. But they hadn't found a *Shield* spellbook nor any magical gear with a Golden Throat enchantment. There still wasn't anything good on the shop interface, either, though that would change over the next few days.

Mordecai wanted us to go out and start looking for some special type of small mushroom that only appeared at night. "These will appear at the base of the trees in town, so don't wander out into the jungle. It's just like the third floor. Stay out of alleyways. Keep a lookout for more of those pets. There's a caravan coming through town in the morning, and I think you should get on it. It heads deeper south and ends up in a larger settlement than this one. From there you can start building a defensive zone and grinding. The *Vengeance of the Daughter* production is probably going to rope you into something pretty soon, too, assuming the show hasn't been cancelled yet, so I want to make sure you're in a good position for when that happens. But for right now, I need those mushrooms."

"Yeah, we'll be on the lookout for your herbs. We're going to head out now," I said. "Bomo, can you come?"

"You sure you wanna bring him?" Mordecai asked.

"We're keeping Sledge locked up," I said. "Bomo is worth the risk."

"Do you think the hunter guys can see what we're doing?" Donut asked as we stepped outside into the town. It smelled like rain. It was already pitch black out here. A pair of tree creatures strode by, not acknowledging our presence. A pair of monkeys rode in their upper branches. Donut moved to cast *Torch*, but I waved her down. "Like, can they cheat and have their friends watch the show from outside and follow us and then tell them where we are at all times?"

"Well, in theory, people outside the dungeon aren't supposed to talk to those inside, even the tourists, but we all know that's bullshit. The fact they sued us for our plan on the previous floor means they're obviously watching our every move. I think it's safe to say they'll eventually know what we're doing. I don't think they have a direct line, especially since the Desperado Club access got all messed up for those on the ninth floor. But they'll still know eventually. So any plan we have needs to be kept as much of a secret as we can make it. By the way, do me a favor really quick. Can you put Mongo away?"

"We'll need a plan first before we can keep it a secret," Donut said. "Mongo, come on. Into the cage. No, put that down. I think that's mushroom poop. Come on, do what Mommy says. Good boy! Good boy Mongo!" She returned her gaze to me. "But it's nice not to have to be all top secret for a day or two. It'll give me time to practice my singing. Why did I just put Mongo away?"

"Don't practice your singing in town," I said, putting my hand up on Donut to scratch her. "We don't want to set the mushroom guys' aggro off. Also, I'd like to apologize for what's about to happen."

"Apologize for what? Aren't we hunting for herbs?"

"We're going hunting all right. This is gonna go quick. Get ready."

Carl: Bomo. Cast your spell. Send us to the stairwell in Zockau. Do it now.

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[5]

Hunters Killed: 0

<Note added by Crawler Forkith. 20th Edition>

Based on some of these previous passages and my own observations, I think I've put together a good idea about the layout of the Hunting Grounds. They say it's the same every time, but that is not true. Herot spoke of those tall creatures who bellow into the sky each night, rumbling the world. Azin described the kite birds always flying overhead. Ikicha wrote of the ice and cold weather. None of those are here, not in this iteration. Most of the world is jungle. That is a constant. But the monsters within change, so be careful taking advice from previous editions of this book regarding this floor.

However, the map appears to be the same each time. The "political landscape" is the same, too. It is a round world with a single named metropolis and dozens of other unnamed cities of varying sizes like on the third floor. This world, according to the story, was half metropolis and half jungle before Scolopendra's nine-tier attack, whatever the hell that even means. After the attack, most everyone died, and the jungle ran rampant, swallowing the ruins. However, after a few hundred years, the survivors have started to rebuild. The

named city is always in the same place. In the north, near the edge of the map and overlooking a clear valley filled with lower-level monsters, placed there so the hunters can train while the crawlers make their way through the lower floors. All the way to the southeast is the high elf city, which is in the thickest part of the jungle. Stay away from the elves. They are powerful magic users, and they attack everyone. Even the hunters stay away.

Before the cataclysm, this world was rich. The city was under control of a multi-race council. The jungle was under control of the high elves. They hated each other, but there was mostly peace. A river separated the two districts.

That river still winds through the map. There are bridges in regular intervals. Stay out of the water. The Naiads live within and are just as bad as the elves.

The named city—whose name appears to be different each time—will always be under control of a single race. It doesn't matter which one. The moment the hunters arrive, one of them always hunts down and kills the NPC leader, which gives them control. I think it's the only city they're allowed to do this in, otherwise they'd have control of them all by the time we arrive. Either way, once the floor opens, the low-level valley will be hunted to extinction, the existing government of the named city will have been wiped out, and one of the hunters will have set themselves up as Grand, the title given to mayors of the biggest settlements.

Stay out of the big city. The guards will attack you on sight.

"It cast," Bomo rumbled. The spell would take thirty seconds to activate.

"Carl, Carl, what are we doing? Are you crazy?" Donut cried as I checked my gear.

I slipped the Ring of Divine Suffering onto my finger. This was the ring Frank Q had given me. All of my stats raised by 5%. The way the ring worked was slightly different depending on the floor one was on, but the end result was the same. If I marked someone —either a crawler or a "non-dungeon generated combatant"—and then I killed them, I would receive +1 to one of my stat points, based on their current highest stat. That bonus would increase the more I killed.

The problem was, once I marked somebody, I would receive a nasty debuff that wouldn't go away until I killed my mark. I wouldn't be able to heal. I knew from the cookbook that debuff was called "Left to Fester."

I examined the ring's properties to make sure it was working as intended.

Current Marks killed: 0

Current Mark benefit: +1 Stat Point.

Current floor cooldown: there is no cooldown on this floor.

Marks form instantly on this floor.

Happy hunting.

"Fifteen seconds," Bomo rumbled.

I looked down at the second toe ring on my left foot, the one I'd gotten for getting stepped on by Grull. The ring came with two benefits. I'd used one of them, Sticky Feet, quite a bit. The toe ring had a second ability that I'd yet to try.

"Carl," Donut said. "I really think we should be discussing our plan right about now."

"When we hit two seconds, Predator," I said.

"That's not a plan, Carl. That's a move."

"We'll be okay. Just stay with me. It'll go fast."

Predator was one of our newer moves. I'd been collecting a lot of invisibility potions recently, and I made sure Donut always had a few of them. The move was simple. As soon as I called "Predator," we both went invisible, and Donut switched to infrared vision using her sunglasses. We no longer talked out loud, and she remained on my

shoulder, constantly calling out anything she could see that I might not.

"Sorry about this, Bomo," I said. I smashed an invisibility potion against the side of the NPC's head. The rock monster disappeared.

I drank down an invisibility potion just as the timer hit zero. Donut did the same.

We blinked, I had the now-familiar tug of nausea, and then we were there.

Entering Zockau.

Donut: CARL, IF WE DON'T DIE, MORDECAI IS GOING TO KILL YOU.

We appeared in a quaint little park with manicured, green grass. A circle of trees and a well-maintained hedge surrounded the large stairwell. The exit to the seventh floor was right there, and I could feel the heat coming off it. Cobblestones led up to the glowing exit. Light shone up into the air like a searchlight, rising about fifty feet before stopping against the artificial ceiling. Nighttime had fully descended on the area, but it was still early evening. There was nobody in the small park, but I could see multiple dots on my map, a mix of white, red, orange, and a new color. Purple. The white dots were the regular NPCs, the red appeared to be the city guards, the orange were the pets, and the purple were the hunters. I could only see three of the hunters. None were close.

The city guards were not the mushroom guys, but tall, muscled, humanoid bears in heavy armor. A group of them marched down the street and away.

Nobody appeared to know we were here. Yet.

A large statue stood nearby, also depicting one of the bear-headed humanoids. A little plaque described who it was, but we didn't have time to stop and read. Commercial buildings surrounded the town square, giving the impression of a downtown area of a small, American town from the 1950's. Electric-style lights circled the park in regular intervals, giving off a dim, yellow glow. Directly across from us and on the other side of the street was a line of pubs, all in a row. Raucous laughter emanated from the window of one. Music played from another. The distant *thwum* of a spell being

cast shot through the night, followed by a crash and even more distant laughter.

As I watched, a purple dot stumbled from the doorway of one pub. He stopped, fell to his knees, and started vomiting on the street. This was a tall, lanky alien race I didn't recognize in the dark. He pulled himself up and stumbled into another bar.

Standing at the end of the line of pubs was what I was looking for. The tall, opulent entrance to the Desperado Club. The entrance was three stories tall, and twin spotlights swept back and forth in front of the building. In the Over City, the club entrance had a 1920's style which clashed with the medieval vibe of the village. This time, the club's architecture fit with the town's aesthetic. Instead of a 1920's art deco, this was more of a 1950's mid-century modern. A concrete archway covered the entrance, flanked by an angular façade with wings on either side, like eyebrows, almost giving the impression that the club was a massive, drive-in diner. The sign, "The Desperado Club: So Fun It Hurts," blinked, the words spelled out with dozens of little lightbulbs. A statue of the dagger logo spun atop the building.

Carl: Bomo, walk toward that bar at the end of the street. The little one with the broken sign. That one appears to be mostly empty, and it's the only one that's a real saferoom. Stay in the shadows until your invisibility runs out. Once it does, just casually walk inside and go straight to the personal space. If you're attacked, run. Do you understand?

Bomo: Understand.

I couldn't actually see the rock monster, but I heard him clomp off through the grass. There were dozens of NPC cretins on this floor. Nobody would notice him unless they stopped and read his description, which said he was a member of the Royal Court of Princess Donut.

I pulled the multi-launcher from my inventory and placed it on the grass. I had 25 of the surefire homing missiles in the box, all lined up in a five by five grid, pointing directly upward. Their targets were already programmed in. These were all single-stage rockets, so they were much smaller than the ones we used on the previous

floor. The entire box was the size of a poker table. I placed it right against the inside of the closest hedge. I marked the timed trigger using my Remote Detonator skill.

Carl: Donut, if this goes south, just jump down the stairs. We'll regroup on the seventh floor.

Donut: IT'S ALREADY GOING SOUTH, CARL. WE DON'T ATTACK THE MAIN BAD GUYS IN THE VERY BEGINNING. THAT'S NOT HOW THIS IS SUPPOSED TO WORK.

I examined my map. There were a total of seven pubs, not including the Desperado. Each one was its own, separate building with a small alleyway between them. The one Bomo was walking toward was the smallest. Only that one was a true saferoom, though all seven would have entrances to our personal space within. The largest of the regular pubs on this street was called The Ladies Love It, and it was from within this bar came the loudest music and most laughing. The sign was a large, wooden placard depicting a grinning, bald man with "Ladies Love It" tattooed over his upper lip. A spotlight shined directly on the leering mouth. This bar was not a real safe room. It stood right next door to the Desperado, which curved around the next corner.

Donut: THEY ALREADY KNOW WE'RE HERE. THE GUARDS' DOTS ARE RED.

Carl: That just means the mayor of the town has been killed by one of the hunters, and they have ordered them to attack crawlers on sight.

Donut: I HOPE YOU HAVE A PLAN TO GET US OUT OF HERE.

I took a step toward the row of bars.

WARNING. DEAD MAN WALKING!

I cursed, and I stopped, my foot hovering an inch off the ground. I retracted my foot and then crouched down. I focused, and the problem became evident. A haphazard minefield of traps lay scattered about, filling the park that surrounded the stairwell. There were dozens of them.. Most of them were alarm traps, but I saw a few I didn't recognize. One was called a **You Aren't Going**

Anywhere Trap. There were likely others. My find traps skill wasn't super reliable just yet.

I quickly examined this first trap.

Placed Trap

Set by Hunter Ontario.

Effect: A loud-ass alarm.

Delay: None.

Target: Crawlers. That's you.

Most of them appeared to be placed by this Ontario person, but there were others mixed in, too. Bomo, being an NPC, hadn't set them off.

I easily disarmed this first alarm trap and pulled it into my inventory. I had to drink another invisibility potion. Donut's invisibility would last another minute. We didn't have time for this.

Ahead, I saw Bomo suddenly appear. He crossed the street and entered the dive bar with the broken sign. Nobody seemed to notice or care. He walked right past a group of NPCs, and they didn't give him a second look.

Carl: Donut, puddle jump us out of here. We're surrounded by traps. Put us in front of the alley between the Desperado and that other club.

Donut: WHERE ALL THE HUNTERS ARE?

Carl: Yes.

Donut: IF I HAVE TO TAKE A MANA POTION IT'LL MESS UP ME TAKING THE NEXT INVISIBILITY POTION BECAUSE OF MY POTION COUNTDOWN.

Carl: I know. Send us now.

Donut grumbled. Three seconds passed, and we jumped, appearing in the space between The Ladies Love It and the Desperado. A pair of elven NPCs strolled down the street. One looked sharply in our direction at the noise of us cracking into existence, but she didn't stop to investigate further. Three doors down, a hunter appeared. An orc. An NPC female dwarf rode him piggyback, and they were both laughing. They drunkenly lurched into an alleyway.

My heart pounded. Our view counter was spiking, which meant at any moment someone was going to raise the alarm. I still had no idea how efficient these guys were with their communications. I hoped and prayed we'd have another few minutes at least.

I examined the tight alleyway between the Desperado and the Ladies Love It. It was pitch black in there. Donut didn't see any mobs. I moved to step inside, but I stopped, seeing yet another alarm trap. *Christ*. I hadn't been expecting that.

Fuck it, I thought. I looked around to see if anyone was looking in our direction, and then I pulled the barrel from my inventory and placed it on the ground in the space between the two buildings, just in front of the trap. I marked the bomb using a second Remote Detonator and also added this trigger to my hotlist. We needed to hurry. The thing said it was a bomb, so if anybody examined it, they'd see it for what it was. I quickly moved to the next alleyway down.

Donut took her second invisibility potion as I took my fourth. For Donut, the invisibility lasted just about two minutes. Her potion sickness countdown was much better than it used to be, but it was still at one minute and forty-five seconds, which meant she couldn't keep her mana topped off and remain invisible. She had two slices of mana toast in her inventory that we were keeping for an emergency. The toast would top off her spell points, and it wouldn't count as a potion. I didn't want her to use it unless absolutely necessary.

Donut trembled on my shoulder, and I reached up to give her a reassuring pat.

I skipped the next alleyway and moved to the one after that. These bombs were pretty big and didn't need to be that close. I dropped a barrel right on the sidewalk. We skipped the next alleyway, which contained a grunting orc and dwarf, and I moved to the following entrance. I placed the third barrel.

Just as I rolled the fourth one into place, a dragon-headed hunter emerged from this last bar, just a mere five feet to my left. This was the same bar Bomo had entered. It was the only true saferoom of the lot. The sign was broken, so I hadn't been able to

read it from across the street, but I could now see the place was called "The Scuttlebutt."

I examined the hunter.

Chin'dua – Draconian. Level 50. Striver

This is an Unaffiliated Hunter.

It didn't describe either the Draconian race or the Striver class. The creature stepped unsteadily from the bar. He stopped right next to me and leaned up against the barrel. The tall, scaled creature held a glass with a little purple umbrella in it. Multiple cherries floated in the red drink. He remained there, leaning on the massive bomb. He wasn't doing anything to it, but his very presence was causing the item's stability to slowly decline on its own. The hunter started to snore, but he clutched the drink tightly in his clawed hand. He snorted and then woke himself up.

"I ain't paying," he said, grumbling.

Donut: CARL, CARL, I THINK HE'S DRINKING A DIRTY SHIRLEY!

Carl: I wouldn't be surprised. I think you might've made the drink famous.

Donut: WHY ARE THEY ALL DRUNK?

Carl: They're all going hunting tomorrow. This is their last time to party. We gotta be careful. Not all of them will be wasted.

Donut: HE'S GOING TO SEE IT'S A BOMB. WHAT ARE WE GOING TO?

A light appeared in the sky, coming from deep within the large town and rising into the air. It moved in our direction. A spell shot out from the figure, and a group of white flares burst out in each direction like fireworks, streaking out across the sky, lighting up the night.

Shit. Whoever that was knew we were here. I didn't know what that spell was, but they were obviously looking for us.

I pulled up the menu for the Ring of Divine Suffering, and I found the name I was searching for.

I took a deep breath. *There's no going back after this.*

You have marked Chin'Dua.

Chin'Dua's highest stat is Dexterity.

You have been infected with Left to Fester! This debuff will not go away until your mark is dead!

Happy Hunting, killer.

The drunken alien looked up as I allowed the invisibility potion to expire. He blinked at me.

"You… You're not supposed to be here," the creature said. It was almost a whisper. It was a miracle this guy was still on his feet. He was just as drunk as Growler Gary the gnoll had been when we started cutting off his hands. He brought his drink to his lips, and he slurped in a cherry.

Behind him, the barrel's integrity continued its downward momentum.

"Your name is Chin'Dua?" I asked. I put my hands on his shoulder to steady him, pulling him off the barrel, which caused the bomb's integrity to stop at about 30%. Above, one of the flares stopped to hover over us, illuminating the square. Multiple hunters emerged from the bars up and down the street, but they were all looking up.

Chin'Dua didn't appear to have any magical gear on him, which was unfortunate. He'd probably only been here for a few hours and hadn't had a chance to collect anything.

"That's Xindy," Chin'Dua said, lifting his head to the sky. "Why is she all worked up?"

Down the line, a pair of alien hunters were standing right next to the first barrel, but they hadn't noticed it yet. These were large, blue-skinned humanoids wearing leather armor.

I leaned in. "Wanna hear a secret?"

"What?" Chin'Dua asked, whispering. His eyes fluttered.

Donut: CARL, HURRY UP. YOU'RE TAKING TOO LONG.

"I'm using you as bait. That's how you're going to die. As bait."

There was a shout, and at that same moment, I cast *Ping*.

An audible tone spread out, filling the town with the noise. My map came alive as every nearby NPC, hunter, and pet appeared on my interface. Above, the shining light started rocketing toward us. I

could now see the flying purple dot on my map, moving in our direction.

"Damnit," I muttered under my breath as I quickly searched the dots. I was hoping that this flying hunter would also be the town's mayor. The Grand. They weren't. I wouldn't be so lucky. I looked frantically about for the purple dot, which would be indicated on the map with a star. I didn't see them, which meant they were either in a saferoom, they were asleep, or they were out of range.

I was expecting to be immediately assaulted. Instead, most of the hunters scrambled away, rushing back into the bars. A few of the smart ones scrambled into the Desperado.

I quickly sorted through the list, seeking out the highest-level hunter. There was a 63 two streets over, quickly running in this direction. They were too far away. I instead focused on the flying hunter. Level 61. Good enough. I mentally clicked on the dot.

Hunter Xindy – Mantis. Level 61. Blood Tracker.

The Dark Hive.

I focused on my toe ring, and I pulled up its second ability. Super Spreader. Its range was dependent on my map. They had to be close enough that I could see their name. Because of the *Ping* spell, that range was greatly increased. I scrolled down the list until I found Xindy, and I clicked **Activate**.

The flying alien stopped dead in the air. On my shoulder, Donut fired a pair of magic missiles at a hunter, who shrieked and ran away. Above, Xindy started to rapidly retreat as she realized she'd been hit with a debuff. She was now in the same boat as me. She was infected with Left to Fester, and it wouldn't go away until poor Chin'Dua was dead.

More shouting rose. I was hit with a *Ping* spell, identical to the one I'd just cast. A yellow light jumped into the air. A half block away, a swarm of orange dots moved in our direction. Behind me, the bear guards had turned and were running toward us.

I mentally clicked the first of the two remote detonator triggers in my hotlist, and the rockets started corkscrewing into the air, one by one. I had them programmed so they'd take off at three-second

intervals in groups of five, each focused on the "Fastest-moving Hunter-class creature."

All five of the first group of missiles rocketed away, streaking toward the retreating form of Xindy, who'd, in a panic, started to rapidly fly away. A shield appeared around the fleeing hunter as the first missile slammed into her.

The second and third missiles hit her in a quick succession. The fourth exploded prematurely as a bolt cast from one street over shot right into the missile. I watched the shield fail just as the fifth missile slammed into the hunter, and she exploded. I saw her purple dot turn into an X as her flaming corpse plummeted from the sky. Even before she hit the ground, the next missiles were spreading off into different directions.

"Whoa. Did you see that?" Chin'Dua said, looking up into the air as I waved away the page of notifications that'd just appeared. "That was Vrah's little sister."

I punched him in the chest, and I felt the satisfying crunch of bones. He gasped, looking at me with both surprise and an odd sense of betrayal. I punched him again in the face. Then again. He crashed to the ground, knocking over the barrel, which started to rapidly deteriorate again. His half-full glass of vodka went flying. Little cherries rolled down the sidewalk as I crushed his head with my foot.

The orc and dwarf from one alleyway over stood there on the sidewalk, ten feet away, gawking at me.

I wanted to mark this orc next, but I didn't have time. The orc's health was at 95%, and I would've had to heal him first. The barrel was going to blow. *Damnit. Damnit to hell*. I didn't have time to find someone else.

"You better run," I said as Donut and I jumped into the Scuttlebutt.

I never got the chance to click on the second trigger in my hotlist. The moment we landed inside and closed the door, the barrel went off.

Despite us being in a saferoom, Donut and I were blown back and into the bar. Chairs fell over. Bottles cascaded off shelves. Three

more explosions ripped through outside. I heard shouting from the other side of the bar. It was a Bopca, crying out in surprise.

"Are you okay?" I asked Donut, who was all poofed out.

"Carl, I think I want to go to Katia's team now," Donut said, her voice dazed.

"Okay, but we gotta get out of here first," I said, pulling myself back up. "Back to my shoulder. Quick."

I rushed toward the personal space door. I was momentarily surprised to see there was actually a long hallway here with five other doors. I moved to the one marked **The Royal Court of Princess Donut**, and I burst inside to find Bomo and The Sledge standing there.

"Protect!" I shouted.

"What in god's name is going on," Mordecai said from the counter, where it appeared he was eating a banana split sundae. He had the ice cream all over his fuzzy face.

"Are we going back out there?" Donut asked, incredulous.

"We have to," I said, breathing heavily. "If we don't get out now, they'll just guard that exit and trap us in Zockau"

"Zockau? *Zockau*?" Mordecai cried. "You motherfuckers are in the goddamned capital?"

The Sledge cast two quick magic shells around the each of us. Blue light swirled. Bomo cast *Shield*, and a translucent spell appeared. Both would last for five minutes or until they were dispelled by damage.

I turned and bounded back outside with Mordecai shouting after us. One of the other doorways opened, and we passed by a wide-eyed dark elf hunter coming out of his own personal space.

"Boo," Donut yelled at him, and he stumbled backward. I caught sight of two more elves within the room.

We rushed back out into the Scuttlebutt which now had two more hunters within. Both were level-50, tentacle-faced Saccathians.

We burst past the surprised creatures and back out into the night. We jumped into burning, smoky chaos.

The entire block was now on fire and blown to shit. A thick fog filled the area. Bodies were everywhere. The barrel explosives had

been crammed with gunpowder and hobgoblin dynamite and delay-detonated smoke curtains. I'd packed them in a way that caused the most destruction. They were unstable as shit, but a single one could take out an entire block. We'd only been saved because we'd hidden inside of a real saferoom.

The entire façade of the Desperado had collapsed. The entrance bar was gone. Those that were in the real club were now trapped, and they would remain trapped. None of the others would be able to get in, at least via Zockau.

Despite the mass destruction, we were surrounded by red, orange, and purple dots, though most were a few blocks away. Most of the traps in the blast radius had been tripped on their own, and dozens of different songs blasted into the night. I caught snippets of everything from Aretha Franklin to ZZ Top.

I pulled yet another bomb from my inventory and tossed it. It hit the ground, rolled, and started firing hobgoblin smoke curtains in regular intervals. I mapped out the closest path to the edge of town. It was a good quarter mile away down a residential street. We both took invisibility potions, and I started to run.

The invisibility did not hide the twin, swirling protection shells around ourselves, but that was okay. It hid our dots on the map, and amongst all this chaos, we just needed a minute to get out of town. We'd be relatively safe once we hit the jungle.

From my shoulder, Donut started to sing. Her voice cracked.

"*The shadows cold. The eyes and the smile. I see shadows in my mind, trying to be gone. Shadow in my mind*. Carl, quit bouncing around you're making me mess up the lyrics!"

"What are you trying to cast?" We rushed past the town square and into a tight street. The first several rows of buildings here were all half-caved in. Debris littered the street. I jumped over the groaning body of an elf NPC.

"Sorry, buddy," I called over my shoulder.

It looked as if every window in town was blown out. Further down, multiple NPCs started to wander from their homes. I didn't see any purple dots. We rushed down the middle of the street.

"I'm trying to cast *Entourage*, which makes a copy of us, but you keep messing me up. I have to read the lyrics, but I can't when we're running! It's like trying to do karaoke while I'm on a rollercoaster!"

WARNING! WATCH YOUR DAMN STEP!

"Goddamnit," I said, sliding to a stop. It was too late. A countdown appeared. I'd already stepped on the trap. Two traps. The first was an alarm trap right in the middle of the street, and the second was a cheap spike trap. I jumped out of the way before the spikes activated, but there was nothing I could do about the alarm.

Peaking at Number 27 on January 26, 1990, it's "Kickstart My Heart!"

I cast *Tripper*, which set off every trap in a wide radius. Multiple songs and small explosions rocked all around us, but the Motley Crue song was blasting right next to us, so loud we were both wracked with pain. I reached down and physically picked up the small, cube-sized trap. It wouldn't let me disarm it now that it'd been set off, but it did allow me to pull it into my inventory, cutting it off. My ears rang.

Donut was screaming something, but I couldn't hear her. I pulled out my second rocket box. This one only had ten rockets within because I'd run out of surefires. This one was pre-set to kill "The Closest Hunter Class Mobs."

You have been deshrouded! Invisibility negated!

My shield sparked as something slammed into it. A shield health bar appeared in my UI, down halfway. A second, then third item hit the shield. Crossbow bolts. I searched for the source, but I couldn't see our attacker.

Donut: ON THE ROOF! INVISIBLE!

A magic missile shot forth from Donut, hitting the top of the building as I dropped a smoke curtain, loaded a hob-lobber, and threw it.

Donut: WE MISSED! IT CAN FLY! IT'S THE SAME TYPE AS THE LAST ONE!

My *Ping* spell had five seconds left before I could cast again. I scrambled away down the street, toward the looming line of trees.

Above, an orange dot appeared, some sort of flying pet, coming from a different direction. It rocketed toward us, screeching. A large hawk. A bolt slammed the pet's head, and it tumbled away. The hunter shot it. *He's protecting his kill.*

My shield sparked again as more crossbow bolts slammed into me. The shield failed. I cried out in pain as yet another crossbow bolt buried itself into my shoulder. *So much for my anti-piercing resistance.*

Poison Negated.

I instinctively ducked, and another bolt slammed into Donut, who was still protected. She flew from my shoulder and bounded ahead, hitting the street and rolling. She leaped to her feet and ran.

I hit *Ping*, and the dot finally appeared on my map. High above. I saw the star around the purple dot. The mayor. The grand. Finally.

I activated the missiles, and they burst into the air behind us. I didn't turn to look. I ran. The hunter, who was level 70, arced away, dodging the missiles.

Another bolt slammed into the back of my thigh just as we reached the edge of town. The barbed front of the projectile shattered my leg, bursting out the front and opening up like an umbrella. I screamed as we jumped over the border.

Entering the Selva.

I healed myself as I dragged myself toward the trees. These guys couldn't leave the city, but I didn't know if their weapons could fire beyond the borders.

The moment we left the town, all the dots on my map snapped away, as if the city was protected. I turned to look over my shoulder as I dragged myself away, and the border was opaque. The street was mere feet behind me, but I couldn't see a thing.

"Carl, we gotta go! We're too close! There were more orange dots coming!"

I pulled myself to my feet, but I collapsed again. I looked stupidly down at the crossbow bolt still sticking through my leg. I'd healed myself, but it hadn't pushed the bolt out like it usually did. I had a second one in my shoulder. Both of the bolts were causing my health to continue to plummet. They had a bleed effect.

"Uh oh," I said. The world started to get fuzzy around the edges. A debuff notification flashed on my interface.

An orange dot appeared on my map. Next to me, Donut gasped. It came from the woods, and it was huge. I couldn't see it, but it crackled with heat. I tried to focus, but I felt as if I was staring at a television screen turned to static. I felt dizzy, dizzier than I'd ever felt before. I realized the sound of all the traps had also cut off the moment we'd left the town's borders. I was falling into a fog. I managed to click a healing scroll, and it healed me, but it didn't do anything to my brain, which continued to swirl with confusion.

There were more people here. Donut was saying something. These were blue dots. Crawlers.

I can't tell the orange pet dots apart, I thought. *Crawler or hunter. That's a bug*. My leg burned. I thought of my *Frogger* game. I wondered if Bomo or the Sledge were better at it. I remembered the day I found my mother in the basement. I thought I was going to get a bike that day, and I never did.

This is my birthday present to you.

Where was I?

"Again! He did it again! At least he's about to perish," a familiar voice said. "Level 54! How did this idiot get so high? What are those knife symbols over his head?"

"Help, help!" Donut said to the newcomers. "Carl needs the arrows pulled out!"

"Mother, you should feed on him before he dies."

"Pony, I am not going to feed on Carl. Now help me with him," a new voice said.

"I say we let him die. He ruined my spell. Again. You need blood."

"Stop, Donut, sweetie," the woman said. "Do not touch the bolts. Oh my. That is a lot of debuffs. I will help. Don't you worry. He will be okay. We are safe here. Trust me."

Somebody screamed.

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[6]

<Note Added by Crawler Everly, 5th Edition>

We ended up hiring five mercenaries. I got four from the Merc guild on the sixth floor of the Desperado Club, and another party member got a healer from Club Vanquisher. It was and continues to be a disaster. My guys cost us 1,500 gold a day each, and I'm not sure if it was worth it. First off, you have to be very careful with them. If they die, you can't loot their bodies, and our contract stipulates you have to pay their daily rate for the rest of the damn floor. It's outrageous. The healer charges per spell cast. Second, getting them from one place to the next is difficult if you use a personal space. It's easy to lose them. If they leave with me, it's fine. The door opens, and we walk out together. Otherwise, it automatically defaults to the last place they entered, as if they were a regular crawler. So if they're not right there with you when you exit, they could end up three or four saferooms away. One of our guys left and never came back. He's still alive, as I can see him in the chat, but the prick is just wandering around some town having a good 'ol time and I can't even fire him because you have to bring them back with you to let them go. Plus their levels mean next to nothing. My level-40 orc is a significantly better fighter than my level-50 dwarf, who is now dead, by the way. Got hit by a chair, of all

things, and he died. Twenty-two more days at 1,500 gold a day. The whole thing is a scam.

My eyes fluttered open. I felt as if I'd been trampled by elephants. Everything hurt. I still had a page of notifications, and I blinked them away.

Donut sat on my chest, looking down at me worriedly. We were moving. I felt gravel crunch underneath me. I was in the back of a cart. I stared up into the night sky. It was still dark outside, but the air above us shimmered with an opalescent sheen, like the skin of a soap bubble catching the light. A magical shell of some sort, I realized. I was under the dome of a spell.

"He's awake!" Donut said. She looked up and said, "His health is still going down."

"The debuff runs out soon," the woman said. "The worst is beyond us. Do not worry, little one."

"What happened?" I groaned. "Did we get any of them?"

"You almost died, Carl," Donut said. "And you would've deserved it, too. What in god's name was that anyway? From now on, I'm not participating in a Carl plan unless I know what I'm getting myself into. Mongo is quite upset with you."

I felt a warm glow, and my health moved back up. The woman had cast something. I felt my health immediately start to seep out of me again, like I was a leaky pipe. Whatever this was, it was a slow, painful debuff. I moved over to my health menu and looked at my current debuffs.

Sore as Shit and **Blood Trail**.

Sore as Shit was one I'd seen before. It popped up every time I'd been severely injured. It was exactly how it sounded. It usually lasted for about an hour, but this time it was at six hours and counting down. I didn't have anything to remove it. It didn't affect any of my stats directly, but everything hurt while it was active.

Blood Trail was a new one. It was about to run out, but it was an insidious debuff.

Blood Trail

A favorite of game hunters and medical debt collectors chasing after deadbeats, this magical, bleeding debuff is usually applied to ranged weapons. Your health seeps downward at a slow, steady pace. You may heal, but all open wounds at the time you receive this debuff will continue to weep, allowing for you to be tracked easily. It also makes you smell really bad. Or really good, depending on who's doing the sniffin'

I'd been hit with a half dozen other debuffs, too, but they'd all expired.

"How long was I out?" I asked, trying to sit up. I was completely soaked in blood. "I know we got two. Did we get more?"

"Don't get up yet," the woman said. She put a gentle hand on my shoulder, pushing me back. I winced.

"You were in a coma!" Donut said. "It was only for a half hour. If we hadn't gotten out of the city, you'd be dead right now. Miriam, Prepotente, and Bianca saved you."

I felt myself groan.

"You need to rest for a few more minutes, sweetie," the woman—Miriam Dom—said. "We'll be at the town in about an hour, and then you can get to your saferoom and sleep."

"Where am I?"

"We're in the back of a cart," Donut said. "It's being pulled by Bianca, and Prepotente is ahead of us making sure the road is safe. Miriam has been helping you heal, so you need to say thank you."

"Thank you," I said. My head was still swimming. The fog was lifting away, but I felt as if I was waking from a long sleep.

<u>Donut</u>: ALSO, I DON'T THINK PREPOTENTE LIKES YOU VERY MUCH. HE SAVED YOU, SO YOU GOTTA BE NICE TO HIM.

A hand touched my forehead. Her fingers were ice cold. She stroked my hair. "You just rest for a minute, okay?"

You have been Soothed! Everything hurts a little less. Debuffs are 10% less effective.

Donut leaned in. "Seriously, Carl. What, exactly, was the plan there? Go into town and then blow everything up and then run? You may have killed a lot of them, but all you did was make them extra angry. This is why you tell me the plan first, so I can point out why it's stupid."

"I wanted to block off the entrance to the Desperado and see if I could identify the mayor and maybe kill him. Or her. The mayor was Vrah, a woman. She's a race called a mantis. If I killed her, I'd become the mayor and then I was going to order the city guards to kill all the hunters." I gasped. "Jesus, why am I so tired?"

"You were knocked comatose accidentally," Miriam said. She sat behind me and was stroking my hair. It felt weird and kinda nice all at the same time. "It was a Woozy debuff from the crossbow bolt, but it was enhanced because of Pony's spell."

"Sorry I messed it up," I said.

"It is okay," Miriam said. "It was taking much too long, and I believe we'd been discovered. Someone was casting a countermeasure, and it likely wouldn't have worked in time."

"That's because they're cheating," I said, raising my voice. "The hunter guys have people watching the show and are feeding the information to them."

I heard a distant scream.

"Pony captured something," Miriam said. "Your bleed debuff is all better now. I am going out there to feed. You just stay here and rest, and I will be back to check on you, okay?"

I grunted. I felt her stand behind me, and I watched as the dark-haired, robed woman floated out of the cart and away.

"She can fly?" I asked.

"That's new," Donut said. "She's a vampire now. She can float, but she has to drink a lot of blood to survive. She's still a healer. It's very strange. She'll only drink blood from something that Prepotente has just killed. She has to do it fast. I don't know if she can turn into a bat or if sunlight hurts her. Or if she's allergic to garlic. I hope not.

She's Italian, so that'd probably be extra terrible if she couldn't use garlic anymore."

I just sat there, breathing. As long as I didn't move anything, it didn't hurt. The crunch of the trail under the cart was oddly familiar. I thought of riding in the very back of my parents' car. I heard a snort, like from a horse, then it was followed by a bug-like chittering noise. I finally thought to look at the map. We were moving through a dense, wooded area. There was a massive, orange dot right in front of us, and the two blue dots of Miriam and the goat were up ahead, along with a few mob Xs and a red dot. Donut remained in the cart with me. I didn't see anyone else.

"Mordecai wants to know if you used that ring," Donut said after a moment. "I told him I didn't know, but it's on your finger, so I'm assuming that you did."

I reached over and pulled it off and put it back into my inventory.

"I used it once on the drunk guy, and I copied my debuff to that flying hunter. I wanted to draw out the mayor. I figured she would be the strongest one in town. But I also wanted to make sure it worked right before I started really using it. I wasn't sure that super spreader thing was going to work. It does. It works really well, especially when combined with *Ping* because I can apply it to hunters who are pretty far away."

I pulled myself up, but my head swam, and I lowered myself back down onto the wood. I realized the cart was actually one of the smaller railway carts from the previous floor, modified with wooden wheels.

Donut sighed. "You only used the ring once?"

"Yeah. I was about to use it again on the orc, but the barrel was rapidly destabilizing, and the list of names was really long. It's not sorted by proximity. I didn't have time."

"Mordecai said it's addictive. I don't like that. I've already broken you from your tobacco and chronic masturbation addiction. I can't have you gaining a new one, Carl."

I tried sitting up again. I groaned as I looked upon the creature pulling the cart. It chittered angrily. Heat washed off the massive

pet. It had grown since I'd seen it last. It was now the size of a draft horse.

"Bianca, huh?" I asked.

The creature, once a regular goat, had been transformed by the same enhanced pet biscuit that had turned Donut and Prepotente into regular crawlers. Black, ethereal flames licked up into the air off the demonic, horrifying creature's hairy back. Its dark skin emanated a crackling noise, like a campfire. It smelled like fire, too. A stubby pair of wings erupted from the ridged, hairy back. The thing was so black, its presence drank the meager light, like it was a hole in the fabric of spacetime. The heat of it washed over me in pulsing waves.

Bianca Del Ciao. Hellspawn Familiar. Level 32.

This is a pet of Crawler Miriam Dom.

Somebody once said, "All Dogs Go to Heaven." Whoever said that obviously never met Susan, the Pembroke Welsh Corgi gifted to future Queen Elizabeth II by her father upon on her 18th birthday.

Susan was an unholy terror. The corgi was known as a vicious little psychopath. She attacked and bit numerous members of the royal court and visitors, including multiple police officers and even the royal clock winder, who was said to suffer nightmares after the incident.

What I'm getting at is that Susan was an asshole. I know, I know. It's not PC to call pets—or toddlers, since we're on the subject—assholes. But that doesn't change the fact that these assholes exist. And if there is a hell, Susan the corgi is there. She's there along with all the other dead asshole pets, including Brandon from *Punky Brewster* and Misty Malarky Ying Yang, Jimmy Carter's Siamese cat.

A hellspawn familiar occurs when a regular, asshole pet is encased in a soul protection spell, yet dies anyway. The soul becomes hellbound and tainted and then shoved back into the resurrected body of the pet, rebirthing the creature. Its regular form is combined with that of a demon. It will physically grow upon each level-up, ceasing to increase in

size only when it reaches level 50. It will grow wings. It will be angry and formidable. It will be scary as shit. It will also be one of the most powerful, most badass pets available within *Dungeon Crawler World*.

"They make her sound mean, but she's really sweet," Donut said. "Miriam says when she was a regular goat, she liked being pet on the butt. She loved eating grapes."

"Yes, I'm sure the demon pet is delightful," I said. "Hey, what's that over your head?"

Donut had a new symbol floating after her name. It was a red dagger, similar to the logo for the Desperado Club, but the point was facing upward. The single, red dagger spun, nestled between the player killer skull and all the boss-kill stars. I examined it.

Hunter Killer X 1.

"Hey, you got one."

"It was nothing, Carl. A magic missile while we were running away. I think your explosion is what really killed him, but they gave me credit anyway."

I, stupidly, looked up in the air in an attempt to see my own daggers. "How many do I have?"

"You should probably look at your notifications, Carl."

I dove into my menus. I'd rocketed up to level 54. Donut had also gone up a few levels to 41. That was still much too low. We'd spent too much time preparing for shit on the last floor and not enough actually killing stuff. That had to change fast.

I had a whole mess of achievements. I opened up the menu.

New Achievement! I Wanna Go Home!

You teleported to a stairwell station within the first thirty hours of the floor being open. What, you're running away early? I hope for your sake you don't actually go down the stairs. You know it doesn't get easier.

***Reward*: Your reward is advice. Fatherly advice. Don't be a little bitch. There's your reward.**

New Achievement! You Crossed a Line You Didn't Even Know Was There.

You used an artifact of Divine Suffering for the first time. Hopefully there aren't any unintended and unadvertised side effects of using such a powerful and evil magical item.

Don't mind that tingle at the back of your mind. It's probably nothing.

***Reward*: You've received a Gold Junkie's box.**

That was worrying. I didn't feel any different. I'd received plus one to my dexterity. The next two I killed after marking them with the ring would also increase one of my stats by one. For the next three after that, it would increase by plus two. It wasn't until the ninth floor when I could mark multiple people at once, but in the meantime, I planned on charging it up as much as possible.

New Achievement! The Hand that Claws the Master (x35)

You have permanently killed a non-crawler biological. They ain't just dead. They dead dead. Their children are now orphans. Their mothers are gnashing their teeth and cursing your name. And you're just sitting there all alive and shit, and girlfriend, I am all in.

We all know you should have received this achievement, uh, a little earlier, but I figured it'd be in your best interest not to reward you this one just yet. But you sure deserved it, so I may have slipped an extra one in there. Shhh. Don't tell the mudskippers.

***Reward*: You've received a Gold Hunter-Killer Box (x34)**

Note: This achievement may be awarded more than once, but Hunter-Killer Boxes are only awarded on the sixth floor.

Holy shit. I'd killed 34 of them. I'd actually gotten 35 achievements, but that was just the AI being a dick. I'd gotten 34 boxes. My chest swelled. *Fuck yeah*. I hadn't accomplished what I hoped, but that was okay.

I will break you. I will break you all.

New Achievement! Mass Casualty Event.

Okay. Calm your man-tiddies. Did your mother not love you? Is your god promising you unlimited handjobs in

heaven or something? You planted and then detonated an improvised explosive device within an urban population center that resulted in more than 250 non-mob casualties. You've done this a few times now, but this was a big one. And on purpose.

You really know how to paint the town red.

***Reward*: You've received a Platinum Asshole's Box.**

"Damnit," I growled. That meant we'd killed more than 200 NPCs. It was a fraction of the number of innocents we'd killed after flooding Larracos, not to mention all the ones who'd been on the gnome *Wasteland* fortress. And… And it didn't bother me. Not nearly as much as it should. But I needed to be more efficient. These NPCs were better off dead. I truly believed that. But still, I didn't want to be so casual about it. I wanted to avoid the loss of innocent life if possible. They didn't deserve any unnecessary terror or heartache.

This isn't on me, I thought. *They* started this. These are *their* rules. *Their* game.

Miriam returned, floating over Bianca and returning to the cart. Prepotente disappeared, ranging ahead. Miriam had blood running down her chin, which she wiped off as she landed before me. I examined the woman. She was level 52. Her race had changed from Human to Vampire since the last time I'd seen her all the way back on the fourth floor. Her class hadn't changed. It was still just Shepherd, which was apparently a type of healer.

The woman had a motherly, gentle sense about her, despite the whole vampire thing. She reminded me of poor Yolanda, who'd fallen to the rage elemental so long ago.

"Are you feeling better? We'll be in town in a bit," Miriam asked. "There are traps just everywhere this close to Zockau. Pony is disarming them."

"Yes. Thank you," I said. "Look, I really appreciate you saving our asses. What exactly were you guys doing out there? Again, I'm sorry we messed it up."

"Oh, sweetie. Don't you listen to Pony. He's just a grumpy little boy. It was not going to work. We suspected they would be getting themselves quite drunk, so Pony was casting a few different debuffs

on the area. One to increase the level of inebriation, which had successfully activated and another to cause them to wish to fight one another, but it was being blocked. I was attempting to cloak our presence and increase the debuff's power, but it didn't work."

I remembered those two had somehow managed to kill that giant turkey thing by stacking debuffs. That was their method of killing. Miriam would keep them hidden and would buff Prepotente while the goat stacked debuff after debuff onto the target, doing it in a way the target didn't even realize they were in trouble. His class was something called a Forsaken Aerialist. I didn't know what that meant. I had originally assumed it was some sort of acrobat thing, but it was clear it had something to do with magic.

"Yeah, like I said, they're cheating assholes. It's not fair if they're getting fed all the info on what we're doing. If *I* was watching this, I'd raise a big stink about it. Especially if betting is involved."

Before Miriam could answer, we were interrupted.

Zev: Hello, crawlers.

Donut: HI ZEV!

Zev: Guys, your numbers are just insane right now. Try to stay with Prepotente for at least a little bit. Carl, don't insult him too much. He is strange, but his numbers are so high because of a certain demographic you two aren't trending in, and I'm hoping to gain some crossovers.

Carl: Am I allowed to say, "Go fuck yourself, Zev" still, or will I get in trouble?

Zev: No. We're not saying that anymore.

Carl: Okay. I'll try to think of a nicer way to say it.

Donut: CARL, DON'T BE MEAN TO ZEV. SHE JUST GOT HER JOB BACK. ARE YOU OUR REGULAR PR PERSON AGAIN?

Zev: Uh, we can talk about that later. Just a heads up. Assuming you two don't get yourselves killed, you will be going on Odette's show tomorrow. Katia will *not* be joining you.

Donut: WILL YOU BE THERE?

Zev: Yes, I will. Also, I should warn you there will be additional security protocols put into place before you're

transferred. This was not my doing, and it applies to all crawlers.

Carl: What does that mean?

Zev: I'm not exactly certain yet, but as long as you're not attempting to assassinate me or a member of Odette's staff, you shouldn't have to worry. Also, I am being asked to tell you the *Vengeance of the Daughter* program is still active, therefore your contract regarding participation in any other programs is still in effect.

Carl: Wonderful. What are we supposed to do if some elite approaches us?

Zev: All the other programs know to avoid you, but as you well know, sometimes elites don't do what they're told. If something happens, you are required to extract yourself the best you can. The showrunners of other programs will generally honor the contract you have with Sensation Entertainment, and they will also attempt to intervene on their end. This is something you'd have to discuss with your new attorney, but as long as you make a good-faith effort to extricate yourself, I don't see it being an issue.

Carl: All right. Thanks for the heads up.

Zev: That's it for now. Talk to you soon.

Donut: BYE ZEV!

I was about to ask Miriam if they'd been involved with any Elite quests, but Donut got to her first.

"How often do you go on shows?" Donut asked the moment the chat closed. "We're going to see Odette in a few days. Have you been on her show yet? She's just wonderful. She used to be our manager's manager."

"We've been on the Odette show once," Miriam said. "We're on *Plenty of Plenty* mostly. Pony doesn't do too well on these programs, but he's okay when there are other goats around."

"We haven't been on that one," Donut said.

"Pony likes it because they allow his brothers and sisters to come out, and they have new plants for them to try each time, though last

time they had no treats. I find the program a bit unsettling, but it helps Pony relax."

"Brothers and sisters?" I asked.

"Oh, yes," Miriam said. "I have ten unaltered boers in pet carriers in my inventory. I don't let them out so much except in the saferooms because it has gotten much too dangerous for them. They are all Pony and Bianca's siblings. After the unfortunate incident with Angelo, we keep them indoors until we get out of this place."

I was starting to feel much better. I fully sat up in the cart. I examined my shoulder where the bolt had entered. It'd pierced my flesh, but my magical jacket seemed unharmed. It was weird how that worked. I had anti-piercing resistance thanks to my kneepads, but obviously that wasn't the same thing as immunity. Skilled attackers could still get in.

Prepotente started moving back toward us.

"Oh dear," Miriam said. "It appears we have an issue."

The goat-turned-crawler looked much the same as the last time I'd seen him. He was level 55, possibly the highest in the dungeon. His class had changed from Forsaken Aerialist to **Profane Vitiate**, which made even less sense. I also noticed the faded, but glowing, tattoo on the back of his human-like hand. The symbol was of a very evil-looking, satanic goat. The number three crawler gave me an angry scowl and turned to Miriam.

"There is a line of traps up ahead at the entrance to the town, and I cannot yet disarm them. We will have to go around."

"Traps, huh?" I asked. "What kind? I can probably take care of them."

"You can't even take care of your own basic hygiene, Carl. These are complicated traps designed to decapitate anyone who gets anywhere near them, and it will require someone with a special touch to even approach. As much as I would love to watch your head get separated from your overgrown, swollen…"

I cast *Tripper*.

All around us, in every direction, a cavalcade of small explosions and lights and noises erupted. Wind blades sailed over the cart,

dissipating into the dark as they shot away.

Prepotente screamed.

"Problem solved," I said. "If any of those traps released monsters, we'll have to be on the lookout."

"That was an attack! Negligence most serious! Bianca, prepare yourself for battle!"

Just in front of me, the skin on Bianca rustled, black flames starting to rise off the creature's body.

"Pony," Miriam said. "We are not fighting Carl."

"I have been insulted! This will not stand! Mother. Princess Donut. Both of you, stand back while I defend my honor!"

"Suck my dick, Pony," I said, standing up and facing the goat.

Prepotente burst into tears. He jumped into the cart and wrapped his hands around Miriam, who took him into a tight hug.

"Now Carl, that wasn't very nice," Miriam said, her voice gentle yet scolding. "We did save your life."

Donut: CARL, I'M STARTING TO THINK THESE PEOPLE MIGHT BE A LITTLE WEIRD.

"He insulted me first!" I said. I regretted saying it the moment it came out of my mouth. It sounded whiny even to my own ears. I suddenly felt like I was back in grade school, and we were being admonished by a teacher.

"Pony shouldn't have done that, either. Now both of you apologize to each other."

Behind her, the flames on Bianca's back continued to prickle angrily, almost like a seismograph. The demonic pet was faced away and was attached to the cart with a harness, but I had no doubts it could break away at a moment's notice and devour us.

"I'm not going to do it," Prepotente said, his face buried in Miriam's robes. "He was mean to me, mother. He's awful. Just awful. He's worse than those buffoons at Club Vanquisher."

"Pony," Miriam said, stroking the goat's head. "We discussed this. You mustn't insult everyone."

"He called me by my special name. Only you can call me by my special name."

I exchanged a look with Donut. We needed to get the hell away from these nut jobs.

Bianca continued to move forward. She seemed to sense that the danger was starting to wane, and the flames on her back settled. I could now see the edge of town. A pair of the mushroom guards stood just inside the gate, watching us approach. A line of scorch marks marred the entrance to the town. The air smelled of smoke.

"I'm sorry, Carl," Prepotente said. "I shouldn't have called you malodorous. Nor should I have questioned your ability to inexpertly set off every trap in the area."

"Yeah, uh, no worries. Sorry about telling you to suck my dick."

Miriam beamed. When she did, I could see the twin fangs, and suddenly that motherly feeling she gave off vanished and was replaced by an uneasy revulsion. "See, now that wasn't so hard. Now both of you hug."

"Uh," I said.

Prepotente removed himself from Miriam and approached me, arms wide. Tears glistened in his goat eyes.

"Yes, Carl," Donut said. "Be a good boy and hug Prepotente."

Donut: YOU BETTER DO IT OR YOU'LL LOOK LIKE A BIG JERK.

I gritted my teeth and hugged the goat. His weird, fuzzy arms wrapped tightly around me. He smelled like a barn.

He screamed. Right in my goddamned ear.

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The town was a "Small Bugbear Settlement," but at night, I only saw the funeral bell mushroom guards out and about. This place had already been through the wringer. Two of the buildings in town were already bombed out and looted. There was a weird graveyard on the outskirts that was likely associated with some quest, but it had already been all dug up.

"We passed through here earlier," Miriam said, "but we came and went through the south entrance. There weren't any traps inside of town. The funeral bells deactivate them. However, it seems the aliens already moved through the town like locusts. There's another town down the road that is the same."

These towns near the main city of Zockau would all be like this, I suspected. Surrounded by shitty traps and already looted. We were going to watch the recap, reset our buffs, and then move on. No time to dawdle.

I exchanged fist bumps with Miriam and Prepotente, and we promised to keep each other apprised any time we might get in each other's way. I thanked Miriam again, tried not to make eye contact with Bianca, and said goodbye to Prepotente, who was suddenly acting like we were best friends.

There was still a lot I wanted to get out of them, like some info on Club Vanquisher, but Prepotente was just too unstable to have a regular conversation with. I would attempt to use chat to speak with Miriam later.

"They might be strange, but I think they're good guys," Donut said once we finally separated. "They were trying to get those guys to get drunk and kill each other. That was a lot safer way to do it than your plan."

I pushed through the door of the first restaurant, which was a traditional-style saferoom with a Bopca. It looked like a pub on the outside, but within it was a fast-food restaurant called Whataburger. I stopped to grab a soda from the fountain and filled the orange and white Styrofoam cup while Donut released Mongo. She hadn't dared release the dinosaur anywhere near Bianca.

"I was a lot more successful than they were," I said. "With your kill, we got 35 hunters. Their method is effective, but it's useless without true stealth. Once the hunters are all scattered, it'll be better."

"They're all going to be coming for you, Carl," Donut said. "Mordecai is already doing that whole 'We gotta talk' thing in my chat, and quite frankly, I don't want to have the conversation. Especially since he looks like a bootleg Monchhichi with a bad haircut and a questionable pedigree."

"What the hell is a Monchhichi?" I asked as we moved to the personal space.

Katia had returned along with Very Sullen, and she'd collected Louis and Firas back up with her. Britney, the Ukrainian plastic-surgery-patient was also there, sitting in the corner and looking pissed off as usual.

Chris and Clay-ton were not here. Katia said they were outside in the bar, waiting on team Meadow Lark who were still making their way to the town.

Mordecai waited for us, arms crossed, sitting on the counter with his little legs dangling off the edge.

Donut indicated Mordecai with her paw. "Picture that, but with his face shaved and less angry looking. That's a Monchhichi."

Louis burst out laughing. "My mom had some of those things. She mostly collected monkeys, but she also had a few of those. That shit gives you nightmares."

“Holy shit,” Firas said, looking at my drink. “You found a Whataburger? Dude, go back out there and get me some of their fries.”

“Hi Louis and Firas and Firas’s girlfriend!” Donut said.

“I am not his girlfriend,” Britney said.

Katia looked just as irritated at us as Mordecai did, and I knew she was pissed. I had told her we weren't going to do anything stupid today.

“Mordecai, darling,” Donut said, strolling through the room and toward the litter box. “We all know what you’re going to say. And while I myself have voiced my frustration with Carl’s seeming disregard for his and my own personal safety, I just want to get this conversation out of the way right here and right now. Yes, what Carl did was idiotic and suicidal. No, I am not going to abandon him. Yes, he’s going to tell me the plan ahead of time from now on. No, we are not going to have some long, drawn-out storyline where we break up and then get back together. We’re already doing that with Katia right now, and I just will not have it with me and Carl. So you’re just going to have to get over it and not be all, ‘You don’t know what you’re dealing with.’”

Mordecai just opened and closed his mouth.

“Very well,” he said after a moment. “If that’s how you want this to go, then open up your prize boxes and reset your buffs. We’ll watch the recap episode and then you two need to put more space between yourself and that town. You may have blown the city up, but you only killed a handful of them. Unless you’re planning on going back in there, you need to get moving.”

“I didn’t blow the town up,” I said, taking a sip of my soda. “It was one or two square blocks. Those barrel bombs were only like a fourth the strength as I could’ve made it. I have a plan for another one that’s really big. Like huge.” I made an exploding motion with my hand. “That’s the best part about this floor. Lots of room for explosions.”

Mordecai sighed. “I suppose you have a plan for that one, too.”

I glanced up at my clock. The hunters were going to release in just over 13 hours.

“Oh, it’s going to be spectacular.”

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I HAD BOXES TO OPEN AND A TON OF OTHER STUFF TO DO, BUT ALL OF THAT could wait an hour. I sat down on the counter and just rested for a few minutes.

I'd run out of books to read. I needed a new outlet. But more importantly, I needed to rest. Not sleep. Rest. Like, really rest.

Most of the time while I was idle, I was actually writing in my third scratchpad, composing thoughts for the cookbook. I'd figured out how to separate individual scratchpad pages even further and to create drafts. I'd been putting a lot of stuff in there recently, and it'd just dawned on me that I was spending every free moment "working." Even when I was playing *Frogger*, I was really just on autopilot and writing stream-of-consciousness words straight into the draft section of the scratchpad. Planning. Scenarios. Theories. Recreating other's recipes and comments from memory as an exercise to make sure I could recall them. Coming up with alternatives. My brain was always working, turning everything over and over.

Recently, I'd been noticing something hidden in the back of my mind. It was difficult to explain. Almost like there was a bubbling, meandering stream hidden back there in the weeds of my brain, nestled deep, deep down. It'd always been there, which meant I was so used to the quiet murmur of the stream, I never noticed it. But recently, that sound was starting to get louder. Only it wasn't a sound, not really. It wasn't even a physical feeling. Just a sense of

flow, and that sense was changing, rising in volume. It'd gone up just a hair, but it was enough for me to finally notice.

I'd only found one way to mute it. Only when I was completely calm. Fully at rest. When we were in the heat of it all, like when we'd been fleeing Zockau, it was right there, the stream, getting louder.

The recap would be on in a few minutes, and we waited for it. Mordecai and Donut talked about some of the new upgrades that were available for our personal space, including a bed that would refresh us almost immediately.

"No," I said. "We're not getting that. It's too much."

Mordecai was about to object, but he thought better of it. "We'll revisit it."

"Are you sure you're okay?" Donut asked, rubbing up against me. I reached over and rubbed her back.

"I'm okay, Donut. Just trying to decompress a little."

Mongo was curled up on the other side of the room, leaning up against Britney, who was sitting on the ground. She'd tried pushing him away a few times, but she was in his spot. He ended up putting his head on her lap, and she was now petting him like a dog.

"Does decompressing mean you're not going to open your prize boxes?"

I sighed, and I pulled up my boxes. I needed to get this over with anyway. Donut sat next to me, excited. She also had a Hunter-Killer box to open, but she wanted me to open mine first since I had thirty-four of them, and she thought it would be more "dramatic."

The first box was a Gold Junkie's box. This was an odd one. Since this was from using the ring of Divine Suffering, I'd been expecting to receive a Savage box, which was what one normally received for any player-killer themed achievement.

The gold box opened and then puffed away. A spiderweb pattern appeared in the air and faded. Nothing came out. I cringed.

"Oh no," Donut said. "Not again."

"Goddamnit," I muttered before the new tattoo appeared.

"Carl, you keep getting disgusting tattoos. You might as well grow a beard and knock over a liquor store now. That's your third

tattoo in a week. You're going to scare Mongo."

This was the biggest one yet, and it formed on my left elbow. I didn't have time to examine the tattoo's properties, but it was a spiderweb pattern. The individual strands of the web were segmented, worm-like. It was faded and green-tinted and poorly drawn.

"I think it looks sick," Louis called from the couch.

"My uncle had the same tattoo," Firas added. "He got it in prison."

The 34 Hunter Killer boxes lined up, all in a long row that floated all the way down to the wall where our rooms were located. It was so many boxes, everybody stopped what they were doing to watch. I was afraid these boxes would also contain tattoos, which would really suck. I took a deep breath as the first one opened.

It was two items. It was 1,000 gold coins and a claw. A mangled, severed claw of an insect-like creature. This was the claw of Xindy, the mantis I'd blown out of the sky with my rockets. Before I could wonder what the hell that was all about, the next box opened. It was 2,000 gold and another claw, this time a lizard-like, bloody and scaled appendage. It was the hand of Chin'dua, the drunk draconian I'd marked then killed. The third box was 3,000 gold and yet another hand, this one of an orc.

None of the hands had any sort of rings or any other adornments. But they just kept popping out, one by one. Each time the amount of gold increased by 1,000. It ended up being a total of 595,000 gold. Not bad. Not bad at all.

Donut watched all of this with revulsion.

"Well, this has been a huge letdown. All that, and it's a bunch of horrible hands? This is a rip off! At least it's not tongues," Donut said. "Lucia Mar collects tongues, and that's much more disgusting." Behind us, the bubbling Emberus fountain made a chime, and the amount of owed gold, which I'd just zeroed out, changed to 29,750.

Donut made a pained noise.

I had one last box before I could examine all this crap. A Platinum Asshole's Box.

It ended up being a potion that I had to immediately drink. I flipped off the stopper with my thumb and chugged it down manually. It tasted like strawberry juice.

Your *Fear* spell has been upgraded five levels! It is now level 10!

"Woah," I said. "That was great. Five levels? And I wasted all that time working on it in the magic training room earlier."

Mordecai grunted. "That spell should already be that high if you'd been practicing it like I told you. It's less of a bonus and more of a corrective measure. They do that every once in a while. Now you can work on *Ping* instead."

At level ten, the *Fear* spell also had a 2% chance to paralyze my targets, and I could cast it in a wide area. Mordecai was right. I needed to push hard on *Ping* now, which was only level two. Once I trained it up to level five, I'd be able to combine the two spells. But for now, I could imbue smoke curtains and certain explosives with *Fear*. I had instructions on how to do it in my cookbook, but I would need to practice. The act of enchanting items added a high probability of giving them the "Dud" status.

Plus, *Fear* caused my targets to run away. Paralyzing them was good, but it was only a 2% chance, and in my experience, anything below 10% actually translated to, "whenever the dungeon thinks it would be beneficial to the narrative." I didn't want them running away. I eyed Louis sitting there on the couch. He had a spell I could really use. Too bad he'd already pledged himself to Katia's team.

I sighed and put my hand on the spiderweb tattoo on my elbow.

The Night Wyrm's Nasty Little Web of Suffering.

Bearers of this sigil are given access to the Guild of Suffering.

"Guild of Suffering?" I said, looking at Mordecai. I couldn't recall reading anything about it. "What is that?"

Mordecai frowned, which looked absurdly adorable. "It's a cult," he said. "Not a real guild and not a real church. Similar to the city elves from the third floor. They have outreach centers, but I've never been in one. They worship a demigod, the Night Wyrm, who is not a regular member of the pantheon. Similar to Samantha. It's a long

story. The cult has something called a memorial crystal. They're similar to soul crystals, but the what they do has never really been established. It's all tied in with that precious ring of yours. A few seasons back, the entire seventh floor was centered around them raising their god. Everybody who uses a divine suffering artifact gets marked like you have."

Donut sniffed. "Well, it's absolutely revolting. If I had known Carl was going to be marked even further, I would never have allowed him to use that ring. I never noticed the mark on Frank or Maggie, but they looked like the sort to have filthy tattoos like that."

I sent out a message to the group to see if anybody had run across one of these guilds. Then I pulled the mantis claw from my inventory and examined it. As I did this, Donut finally opened her own box. She made a disgusted little noise as a gray hand popped out, followed by a squeal of outrage when she only receive 1,000 gold.

Hunting Trophy.

It's the hand of a hunter. Gross.

You own 34 of these items.

You ever go to one of those arcade pizza joints as a child? You're usually there because it's some other kid's birthday, or worse, because your parent hates raising you so much they'd do anything just to keep you distracted for ten minutes in exchange for a pitcher of watered-down beer. The whole place is chaos. There's flashing lights, blaring music, a colorful carpet that hides the vomit stains. Not to mention the norovirus-infested ball pit, the rickety merry-go-round, the workers with dead eyes, and the pizza that tastes like it was cooked in a Soviet-era microwave? All the while an animatronic rodent holds court on stage, blinking and rotating and telling you that he is now your god.

Within this orgy of grease and unchecked consumerism is the arcade. Barely-functioning games gobble up tokens in exchange for mere seconds of entertainment. And every once in a while, one of these games will spit out something special. A ticket. A prize ticket.

Once you have a sticky handful of these hard-won paper tickets, you must make a pilgrimage to the fabled prize counter.

Here, you squeeze yourself in with the other pilgrims and press your face up against the glass and spend an inordinate amount of time deciding how to spend your newfound riches. In the end, you trade forty dollars' worth of tickets for five cents' worth of bubble gum and a filicide-inducing whistle. But that's okay. It's an important life lesson. Perhaps the most important one of all, only you're not sure what that lesson is.

This hand you have savagely removed from a third-party interloper is the ticket in this scenario.

The prize counter where it may be exchanged will be open at the Butcher's Masquerade during the party that will occur near the end of this floor.

The cheapest award in the prize case will cost a single hand. The prizes only get better from there.

If you transfer or sell this item, it will revert to just being some dude's appendage.

"What the hell?" I said, turning the claw over in my hand.

As I examined the item, Donut examined her own trophy. She gasped as she read the description.

"A prize counter? A masquerade? Well, this changes everything," Donut said. "Carl, I only have one hand. We need to go get more!"

There was nothing about any sort of "Butcher's Masquerade" in the cookbook. It sounded ominous as fuck. There was mention of a giant party at the end of the ninth floor if it was won early, but nothing of the sort for the sixth.

"I don't know what that is," Mordecai said after Donut showed him her hand. "That's… they don't usually actively encourage the crawlers to kill the sponsors."

Before we could discuss it further, the screens flickered. It was time to watch the show.

"It's the Hunting Grounds!" the newscaster announced. Because of our earlier boss battle at the bottom of the ocean, we now knew

this orange lizard guy's name was Kevin, which was an absurdly normal name for an alien. "This season is bigger, badder, and more extreme than any sixth floor we've ever had. The humans may be whittled down, the timer may be shortened, but this season we are on a whole new level. This season we're going…"

"Redacted" abruptly appeared on the screen as Kevin the lizard breathlessly described whatever hidden horrors they had in store for us.

While we waited, I put the trophy claw away and turned my attention to the three newcomers in the space. Britney remained on the floor, petting Mongo. Before, the Ukrainian woman had been a class called a Pit Fighter. She had upgraded to **Pit Champion**. Since she refused to say anything to me, I had no idea what was different.

Firas's class remained Hammersmith, and he'd ascended to level 35. He hadn't been able to specialize. Louis was also level 35, but his class had changed from Pest Exterminator to **Extermination Professional**. He said he'd gained a .5% insta-kill bonus on mobs his level or lower, but that was it.

"So, how are the changelings doing?" I asked him while we waited for the show to return.

Louis shrugged. "They have some village deep in the woods they were all headed to. It's in the Liana district, so the elf side of the river. One of the adults said he'd leave a message for you at the Desperado Club in a few days."

"That's good," I said. I didn't want to know exactly where their village was as long as I had a way to contact them.

"And Bonnie?" I asked.

"The little gnome kid went with them," Firas said. "Did we tell you what she did to the *Twister*?"

"No. What?"

"She built a giant crossbow thing. A ballista. She affixed it to the side of the yard. She made it out of the mechanism for the garage door opener. Katia test fired it, and it blew up a tree."

Katia, sitting at the end of the table, grunted with amusement. At first I'd thought she was mad at me and was giving me the silent treatment. But then I noticed the constant flashing in her eyes. She

was doing the same thing I was. Talking. Planning. Working. She'd been forced to stop for the show.

"How elevated can you get the *Twister*?" I asked. The ceiling on this level wasn't very high compared to the previous floor.

"Not very," Firas said. "The roof is higher on this side of the river, away from the bigger cities, but we can't even get over the trees. The balloon is just too big. So it's not very useful. Hopefully you can figure out how to get it down another floor. Maybe the seventh floor will have another sky."

"We'll see," I said.

"So, Louis," Donut said, sidling up to the large man. "I understand congratulations are in order. Tell me. When are the nuptials? I'm assuming it won't happen until we all reach the ninth floor. Since Carl has recently found religion, he'll probably be able to officiate the wedding. Don't worry, I'll make him get pants for the ceremony. And we'll cover-up his prison tattoos. Wait, do you think I could be maid of honor? Oh, oh. And Mongo could be ring bearer!"

Mongo looked up from Britney's lap and squawked.

Donut suddenly gasped. "I could sing. I'm a professional musician now. I'd have to charge you of course, but wouldn't that be amazing? Think of the ratings!"

Louis's cheeks burned red. "Juice Box told you, huh?"

"She didn't have to tell us. Love makes a person just glow," Donut said. "I must say, I am not surprised you're the first of our group to find true love. We all knew it wasn't going to be Carl. And I'm already in a long-distance relationship with Ferdinand."

"Ferdinand?" Louis asked. "Who is that? Another cat?"

"Oh, yes," Donut said. "It's a relationship even more unconventional than yours. We are star-crossed lovers and…"

She was interrupted by the show coming back on.

"…Murderer!" Dmitri or Maxim Popov screamed on the show. The screen was now showing things that had happened at the very end of the last floor, and it'd returned in the middle of a scene. The two-headed crawler fought with another human I didn't recognize in the final moments of the last floor. The guy they fought was a big guy, leather clad with a shaved head and a war gauntlet similar to my

own. The two-headed creature that comprised Dmitri and Maxim, a Nodling, apparently, spun their magical meteor hammer, and they would've brained the guy, but they suddenly all flew off their feet as a giant foot crashed into their world and then jumped away. The target of the Popov brothers' ire used the distraction to run into a stairwell.

The god foot, I realized, was Slit, one of the feral demons we'd summoned at the end of the last floor. She'd been on her way back to our bubble, chasing after Samantha the sex doll head.

"I simply don't understand why two different people would choose a race like that," Donut said. "They must really like each other. Plus it has to make shopping for clothes a real chore. Carl, can you imagine sharing a head with one of your friends? You'd murder each other after a day."

It then showed Katia opening up the portal to the ninth floor. It didn't show the actual destruction, but we were given a shot of a half-flooded Larracos with the water churning as a gaggle of shark mobs fought each other over the corpses of NPCs. It portrayed Katia's stoic face at what she'd done and then cut in a shot of me laughing from some other time.

The Redacted screen appeared again, but only for about thirty seconds this time.

We were then treated to a quick rundown of the top 10 and how each person on the list had changed during specialization. They started with me, showing my Agent Provocateur stats. From the wall, Britney grunted with amusement when they showed it, but I didn't know why.

Next, they showed Lucia Mar, who hadn't changed. Prepotente changed to a **Profane Vitiate**, but it didn't explain what that meant. Dmitri changed from an Illusionist to a **Visionary**, but the other half of the two-headed monster remained a Bogatyr, whatever that was.

We watched Elle transform. I hadn't spoken with them except for a quick check-in, and I hadn't even thought to ask how they'd changed. I knew Imani had a big change coming, but I wasn't certain about Elle. We now watched her transform from

Blizzardmancer to a **Tundra Princess**. It was some sort of earth class combined with ice. It also said she'd get to pick yet another class on the ninth floor.

"Interesting," Mordecai said. "I hadn't realized she was going for a four seasons build."

"Four seasons?" I asked.

He shook his head. "It's never been completed before. Plenty have made it to three, but never four. It requires you to survive to the twelfth floor to complete. It'll be tough for her because it means she has to strictly control how she distributes her stats. Her race is a frost maiden fairy, which makes it even more difficult. It's complicated stuff. But she'll be quite powerful if she hits the ninth floor and levels enough to have the stats for a triple class."

"She already is pretty powerful," I said.

We watched a one-armed, pale, and sick-looking Quan Ch switch from Imperial Security Trooper to **Sergeant-at-Arms.**

"Well, that's a lie, now isn't it? It should just be Sergeant-at-*Arm*, not arms," Donut quipped. "The next time we see him, I hope you rip his other arm off, Carl. Then he'll just be a Sergeant."

From there, the show went onto even more redacted stuff, but I recognized the streets of Zockau before it disappeared. It remained that way for the rest of the show.

I sighed once the show ended. The top ten list populated, and it hadn't changed from the end of the previous floor.

1. Carl – Primal – Agent Provocateur – Level 54 – 1,000,000 (x3)

2. Lucia Mar – Lajabless – Black Inquisitor General – Level 48 – 500,000 (x3)

3. Prepotente – Caprid – Profane Vitiate – Level 55 – 400,000 (x3)

4. Donut – Cat – Former Child Actor – Level 41 – 300,000 (x3)

5. Dmitri and Maxim Popov – Nodling – Visionary and Bogatyr – Level 44 – 200,000 (x3)

6. Miriam Dom – Vampire – Shepherd – Level 52 – 100,000 (x3)

7. Elle McGib – Frost Maiden – Tundra Princess – Level 47 – 100,000 (x2)

8. Bogdon Ro – Human – Legatus – Level 44 – 100,000 (x2)

9. Eva Sigrid – Half Nagini, Half-Orc – Nimblefoot Enforcer – Level 40 – 100,000 (x2)

10. Quan Ch – Half Elf – Sergeant at Arms – Level 48 – 100,000 (x3)

"I can't believe Quan is still up there," Donut said. "He doesn't deserve the top ten list. I feel Katia should be back up there, especially after what happened at the end of the last floor."

"I am perfectly content to hover outside the list," Katia said.

"Yes, but Eva is ranked, and it's not fair!" Donut said.

"Don't worry about that," Katia said. Her voice was uncharacteristically cold. "She won't be on there for much longer."

I caught Mordecai's eye, and he looked worried. I felt it, too. It wasn't just what had happened at the end of the last floor. It wasn't just her being mad at us for raiding Zockau. There was something else going on there with her. Something had changed. I opened my mouth to ask, but then I shut it. I didn't know what to say.

Hello, Crawlers.

We hope you're all doing fantastic. Many of you are settling into your new classes, and that is great. We only have a few hours left before the hunters emerge, and we know they're itching to get in on the hunt. As predicted, the number of participants keeps growing and growing. We are just overwhelmed. We now have a total of 1,002 hunters alive in the dungeon. That number was slightly higher, but a few managed to get themselves prematurely killed.

The audience just can't wait for them to get unleashed on you guys!

We have several important announcements, so please pay careful attention.

Your final sponsors will be coming in soon, so be on the lookout for that.

Effective immediately, the subscription-based system where the viewers may listen in on the private messages of Crawlers will be discontinued. However, please note, Borant reserves the right to take your conversations and play them during any and all non-live broadcasts.

"Oh thank the gods," Mordecai said. "I didn't think that one would stick."

I'd asked Quasar if he could sue on my behalf about this, and he'd told me there was already a case making its way through the courts regarding this issue. He'd given it a 50/50 chance of succeeding. I was glad it had.

There was another part to this problem, and he promised he'd work on it from his end, but in the meantime, I needed to bitch out loud as much as I could about the hunters getting fed information from outside the dungeon. He was much less confident about anything happening in regards to that.

As soon as this message ends, the guild system will be live!

As you know, party members share certain quests and will share experience. All personal space upgrades are shared. Party members may examine each other's properties. But sometimes people will want to work with someone without having to actually party with them. And sometimes, as we've seen over and over again with you humans, you very much like working together in large groups. Such massive groups are not feasible when it comes to parties. Oh, by the way. Parties are now limited to 30 crawlers. Larger parties will be automatically broken up at the end of this message. Sorry about that, guys!

"Oof," Mordecai said.

"Assholes," I muttered under my breath.

But that's okay. We are implementing the guild system this season, so your larger parties can stay together. You're welcome.

Here's how it works.

A crawler must purchase a guild charter from a Bopca. These start at 500,000 gold. The basic membership will allow up to five separate parties or individuals to join together to form a guild. That number can increase as the guild levels up.

At least one member of each party must own a personal space in order to participate. Once joined together, each of the personal spaces will be expanded to include a common area. Your own personal and party areas will remain off limits to non-party members unless you give them access.

There will be guild-only upgrades available for purchase. Some of these are pretty spectacular, so you'll definitely want to check it out.

Also, for a small licensing fee, you may share most pre-existing environmental upgrades with one another. This will be a great way to combine power and work together and will allow for a wide variety of upgrades.

The guild leader will have control over who may join the guild and will have power to kick them out. They will have control over who may edit the common area and purchasing of the common upgrades. They may institute dues and create a treasury.

Guild members will not share experience by default. There is an option to change that, for a fee.

There are many more rules and exciting upgrades. The Bopcas will have all the information you need to get started.

Next to me, Donut was quivering with excitement. The whole thing was an obvious cash grab. People were forming massive parties so they could share in personal space upgrades, and this was a way to break that up and squeeze more money out of them. But I was curious what the guild-only upgrades were.

And finally, we have an even more exciting announcement. At the end of this floor, we will be having a party! It'll be at the Butcher's Masquerade. Isn't that exciting? Only the top 50 crawlers in the dungeon will

receive an invite, but all invited crawlers will also be able to bring a plus one. The hunters will also attend the party, along with a few intergalactic celebrities, but do not worry about your safety regarding the hunters. How it will work will be explained later. All you need to know now is there will be music, dancing, a costume contest, a pet beauty contest, a talent show, and prizes available to all who attend! It will be great fun for everybody involved, so you really want to get one of those invites. The best way to guarantee a spot is to get out there and kill, kill, kill!

Donut gasped and started hopping up and down. "A pet beauty contest? A *pet* beauty contest? Oh my god, oh my god. Mongo!" Mongo looked up from Britney's lap. "You're going to follow in mommy's pawsteps!"

Mongo leaped to his feet and started to also hop up and down, feeding off Donut's excitement. Britney let out a shriek and scrambled away.

"We're going to need to start training immediately. We'll need at least an extra hour a day. We need to find a seamstress. A walk coach. We'll need to purchase the upgraded pet shower to get all the blood stains off. It's going to be a lot of work. Mordecai, how many more NPCs can we hire? Also, I just must see the standards manual immediately. Carl, message your attorney and see if he can pull a few strings."

"Standards manual?" Louis asked.

"Donut," I said. "We are not…"

"…And don't even think about saying, 'We're not doing this, Donut.'" She paused. "I have very little, and this is something we *are* going to do, and you're not going to stop me."

I just stared at her. "Look," I said, trailing off. *Goddamnit, Donut.*

Mordecai: Don't worry. I'll talk to her. We'll come up with a compromise.

"Donut," I said. "This party thing, whatever it is, is over two weeks away. We need to focus on the task at hand. We're not going to make it to the party if we don't."

Donut sighed dramatically. “Very well, Carl. But we’re going to need to collect more hands. And we’ll have to get this guild thing immediately, too.”

I was already moving back to my bomber’s studio. “That, I can agree with. Bomo, come with me. I’m gonna need you.”

I could hear it again, that river in my mind. Rushing, tumbling, crashing, getting faster and louder by the moment. It was starting to hurt. Just a little. That was okay. I’d rest later.

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[9]

Time Until the Hunt Begins: 3.5 Hours.

Trophy Count: 34
Remaining Hunters: 1013

The number of hunters in the dungeon appeared on the screen, just below the remaining crawler counter, which had lowered to 83,995. The hunter count had ticked up a few times in the past few hours, presumably as a few more last-minute stragglers decided to press their luck.

Katia and the others had left an hour ago while it was still dark. Apparently Team Meadow Lark had run into some trouble along the path, and they'd gone out to assist. All was well now.

Now that the sun had risen, we also needed to get moving. We were still only a few hours from Zockau, and the hunters were going to spread from the city like a cloud the moment it opened up. Teleport spells and scrolls were rare, but as we'd already demonstrated, not unheard of. In a day or two, the hunters would be all over the map.

We prepared to leave. We had a rough map of the floor's layout, and we needed to head south, get to the river, and cross it. There

were towns and villages and cities on either side, but most hunters avoided the high elf areas because it was too dangerous.

Still, most everyone on my chat was pushing their way deeper and deeper south, as far away from Zockau as possible. They figured they'd take their chances against the elves rather than face the hunters.

Katia had made the map based on the gate coordinates Gwen's team had looted off the body of Quetzalcoatlus on the previous floor. She'd drawn out a paper copy for us, and it was nearly identical to the one I already had in my scratchpad that I'd copied from the cookbook.

I hadn't realized just how large this place was.

"If I'm translating the gate coordinates correctly, it's about 100,000 square kilometers," she'd said after I asked her. "Really similar to Iceland, actually. It even has a similar shape."

"Really? That seems huge, especially compared to the last floor."

"It's big," Mordecai agreed. "The ninth floor is the biggest one, though most of the action takes place in one small area."

"Wait, how big is this really, like from edge to edge?" I asked.

Katia moved her finger from top to bottom. "It's about 400-something kilometers from north to south, so what? 250 miles? And about 300-something kilometers from east to west. The river, end to end is about 500 kilometers, but that's only because it's not straight."

The river meandered from the northeast corner to the southwest, bisecting the map like a slithering snake. It branched off into multiple tributaries and lakes, I knew, though Katia didn't have any of that yet on her map.

"Are these roads?" I asked, pointing.

"Yes. We're using the same information gathering system as we did on the Iron Tangle. Every time someone finds something new, they're calling it in. Imani is the one who's mostly coordinating it, but I've been copying down everything, too. Some of these locations are estimates."

"And these are bridges?" I asked.

"Yes, but again, the location is approximate."

"Do we know how many there are?"

"At least a dozen, but probably more," Katia said. "We only have a general idea of most of them."

"I know you guys are busy, but do you think you can help organize something for me?"

Katia sighed. "You know I'll do anything you ask. To a point."

I grinned. "This one will be easy. I just want all the bridges knocked down. All except this one."

Now, a few hours later, I reexamined the map. I examined the main road off Zockau. It seemed to run straight to the river, cross it, and continue on its way before ending about halfway into the jungle.

Carl: Hey Miriam. Have you guys left yet?

Miriam: Yes, sweetie. Are you feeling better? We are traveling the main road south, following the path of the caravans. We plan on crossing the river soon and disappearing into the jungle. There are very few mobs about.

Carl: Are you coming across a lot of traps?

Miriam: This main road is mostly clear. The caravans make their way up and down this road, and their bodyguards cast anti-trap spells as they travel. Even if they are traps made for crawlers, they are still disarmed by the spells.

That was super valuable information. I sent a quick note to Katia, asking her to spread the word. We needed to map out the regular caravan routes and add them to the community map.

The lack of mobs was because the hunters had likely cleared them out around the cities. It wasn't until we got further away would we find more.

I had multiple IEDs I'd built, designed to only be triggered by hunters, and I'd need to be careful with their placement. I didn't want to waste them.

Carl: Is there a town near the bridge?

Katia's map had noted a "possible" settlement here, and I wanted to make sure.

Miriam: Yes. A very big town. It's about forty kilometers from where you are now. Maybe 60 from Zockau. It's where we started. A large Ursine settlement just on the other side of the river. Be careful if you go. They're very peculiar there. We have to put Bianca away when we enter.

I took a pencil and circled the area where the road met the city.

Donut: YOU CAN'T USE BOMO AS A SUICIDE BOMBER. IT'S NOT RIGHT.

Carl: It's not a suicide bombing if he comes back the next floor. He already agreed to it.

Donut: BOMO IS OUR FRIEND. WE DON'T BLOW UP OUR FRIENDS, CARL.

Carl: He actually seemed kinda excited at the idea.

Donut: IT'S NOT GOING TO WORK ANYWAY. THEY'LL BE WAITING FOR HIM.

Since Bomo had last entered the personal space through the saferoom in Zockau, he'd leave the same way if he went out the door by himself. I wasn't sure if there was a door just sitting there or not in the saferoom. Even Mordecai wasn't sure. He knew the door would appear if Bomo exited, but he had no idea if it generated and remained there while he was inside like it would with regular party members. If there *was* a door sitting there in the situationally generated space, the other hunters certainly would've noticed it and would be prepared. If there *wasn't* a door, someone probably still would've figured this out by now. It was a pretty obvious move.

I was going to load Bomo up with a very large bomb, send him out into the safe room, have him step outside, and blow the shit out of the town. This would be a bigger explosion than last time. Much

bigger. I wanted him to do it when there was only about a half hour left on the timer so more hunters would be outside.

Now that we could chat again safely, I'd been relaying the plan to Donut. Anyone who'd been paying attention could probably figure this out, but that was okay. Bomo would pull the wheeled bomb out of the personal space and emerge out in a saferoom, and there wasn't anything anybody could do about it. The only way to stop him would be to block the door off and keep him from exiting out onto the street. If that was the case, it'd require resources and teamwork, and I had the impression none of these guys were too keen to work together. But if they did, Bomo would return to the personal space, and we'd save the bomb for later.

The bomb itself was pretty cool. It was similar to the barrel explosives I used before, but much bigger in yield. A few days back when we were still on the previous floor, Mordecai had left a few little square blocks on my sapper's table called **Nitro Sludge**. They were a by-product of a shield potion he'd been working on. They looked like squares of uncooked ramen noodles. They were completely inert, but if vaporized at a high enough temperature, they released an insane amount of oxygen. I'm no chemist, and I have no idea how this stuff really works, but Mordecai tried to explain it to me anyway. Each block was the equivalent of several hundred pounds of ammonium nitrate. They weren't explosive on their own, but they acted like an amplifier if used in the correct situation. Too little, and they did nothing. Too much, and it actually muted the explosion. I seriously had no idea how it really worked since they had so little mass, but after a lot of trial and error, I'd come up with the perfect mix.

I had a large, egg-shaped, clamshell-like bomb casing from the previous floor. It was a type of live ammo ball, but it was broken and couldn't be used again to hold and protect a living creature. I could, however, fill it with explosives and a few blocks of Nitro Sludge and then weld the thing closed.

The finished, egg-like bomb was about five feet tall and much too big to easily carry, so I built a little cart to place it in that Bomo

could pull behind him. For good measure, I also imbued it with *Fear*. Because why not?

According to the simulator, if the bomb worked properly, it would flatten everything within a third of a mile from the epicenter and would severely injure or kill everyone for a good half mile beyond that. It was by far the largest bomb I had constructed myself. At least intentionally.

The system helpfully named the bomb on its own.

Just Wait Until Your Daddy Gets Home – Wheeled Bomb.

Type: High Yield Thermobaric Explosive. Also imbues *Fear* within blast radius.

Effect: I hope you're paid up on your homeowner's insurance.

Status: 250. Fortified.

Boom.

I wasn't actually expecting this plan with Bomo to work, but I figured it was worth a try. In the meantime, Donut and I would be booking it south using the royal chariot dune buggy, which I still had in my inventory. I wanted to get to that town on the other side of the bridge and check it out and see if it was a suitable base of operations.

Donut: WHAT IF I MADE A CLOCKWORK BOMO?

Carl: Uh, would that work? Can you even make a clockwork Bomo?

Donut: HE'S LISTED AS A ROYAL COURT MINION. WE'D HAVE TO SWITCH HIM OVER TO A MINION OF ME AND NOT THE PARTY, LIKE WE DID WITH CLAY-TON AND VERY SULLEN. REALLY, CARL. YOU NEED TO PAY ATTENTION TO HOW THE PARTY SYSTEM WORKS. ONCE HE'S JUST A MINION OF ME, IT LETS ME MAKE CLOCKWORK VERSIONS.

Carl: Well, shit. That's actually a great idea, but I don't know if the clockwork would exit out the correct door.

Donut: YOU UNDERESTIMATE ME, CARL. THIS IS WHY YOU NEED TO LET ME KNOW THE PLAN. DON'T WORRY. I GOT THIS. ONLY PROBLEM IS I MUST BE IN THE SAFEROOM WHEN WE DO IT.

I glanced at the clock. If the road was clear, we could get to that next town no problem. We had just over three hours.

Carl: Okay. We'll prepare Bomo in case we don't make it in time. But if we can get to the next town in three hours, we'll do it your way.

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"Okay, do you understand? Don't touch it until it's time to leave. It's really stable, but if you screw around with it too much in here, it might turn into a dud."

Bomo rumbled. Behind him, the Sledge made a disapproving sound. He wasn't mad that Bomo was possibly doing this. He was upset that Bomo didn't want him playing *Frogger* while he was gone because he didn't want him to beat his score, which meant the Sledge would have to go two weeks without playing.

I had a Playstation Two and a television set I'd gotten from the house along with a ton of games. I'd managed to hook a dwarven battery to a power strip without blowing everything up. I was hoping to expand their video game horizons, but their hands were too big. I was going to make them cretin-sized controllers when I got a chance.

We left the space and moved to the streets. We didn't have time to go exploring in this town. Everything had been destroyed, and that was even more evident in the daylight. We moved from the space, out into the Whataburger, and out into the streets, headed south.

"Your kind are not welcome here," a creature called. This was a bugbear atop a house, hammering wood into place. The creature stood, looking down at us. He wore a tattered, leather apron and clutched an enormous hammer in a clawed hand. He pointed the hammer at us. This was my first time really looking at a bugbear.

Shamus Chaindrive, the submarine captain from the last floor, had been a bugbear, but he'd been nothing but a head in a jar and I never really got to see him.

These guys were ugly bastards. He was large, furry, with pointed ears and a goblin-like face. This one had an orange-brown tint to his fur. Others were more brown or red. Each one was about my height, but twice as bulky. We did not want to tangle with these guys if we could avoid it. His accent was eastern European, reminding me of that dead idiot Vadim who'd locked himself in an escape pod and got himself killed by jellyfish.

"Carl, I can smell him from here. He smells like pickled beets and vodka. Disgusting," Donut muttered.

Goiter – Bugbear. Level 42.

Council member of this settlement.

One of the few races who managed to not get fully wiped out by Scolopendra's nine-tier attack, the bugbears are now one of the most common races one might find in the Kapok district of the Hunting Grounds, second only to the Ursine and the Bush Elves.

Bugbears are on the same evolutionary tree as goblins and hobgoblins, which is to say they're ugly and mean and are rumored to have sexual relations with toads. Like hobgoblins, they're known for blowing stuff up, but the explosions they cause tend to be involuntary. They are engineers at heart and spend their days attempting to construct automatons and vehicles and other contraptions with varying degrees of success.

Despite their name, they are not actually bears. Their neighbors and rivals, the Ursine, are happy to point this out every chance they get.

You gotta treat a bugbear like you would treat the enormous, drunk guy at the end of the bar. It could go either way. He'll either want to fight you or be your buddy. And there ain't no way to predict which one it'll be.

"We're not the ones who destroyed your town," I called up to the bugbear. "We're here to kill them."

"That is different story, then. This means we are friends. I shall buy you a drink."

"Sorry," I called. "We gotta get moving. But just a warning, those same guys will be coming through here again in a few hours, so you should get ready."

Goiter the bugbear circled his head, cracking his neck. "We'll be ready."

I saluted him, and we moved out of town.

Like Miriam said, the jungle here was completely devoid of mobs. At least it was near the main road. There was wildlife and all sorts of foliage, but we didn't have time to examine anything. Mordecai had given me a list of items to look for that was literally five pages long. I told him to take some gold and hire someone to look for him.

I drove the chariot while Donut rode Mongo and ran alongside. Her *Twinkle Toes* spell made it so Mongo could run faster even than the dune buggy, and she'd been practicing it, trying to level it up. Mongo *loved* going fast and screeched with joy whenever she cast the spell.

I stopped a few times and planted a few claymore-like mines. They'd only be triggered by hunters. I suspected I was wasting my time, but it couldn't hurt.

As we traveled, Donut worked on her singing. She was attempting to cast *Entourage*, but she could only make a single illusionary Carl appear when she sang in a low monotone, and the resulting illusion was vaguely transparent, which was no good.

"Carl, this system is broken," Donut said. "It's not letting me cast my new spells right."

"Keep working on it," I said. "We'll find you something to help…" I trailed off as I received an odd notification.

Your god, Emberus, has made an appearance in this realm.

I stopped the cart and looked around. I didn't see anything. Nothing changed.

"What? What is it?" Donut asked.

I told her.

"He's probably collecting all his money from you."

Just about a minute later, a second notification appeared.

Emberus has returned to the Halls of the Ascendency.

"Weird," I said, and we continued on our way.

It didn't take long for us to reach the river.

I wasn't sure what to expect, but there were no real surprises here. The stream was pretty big, maybe 250 feet across. I couldn't tell how deep it was. It flowed north to south, but at a slow pace. I didn't see anything on or in the water, but Donut said she saw a few white dots flash by. There was a steep slope here, and we didn't dare approach.

An impressive-looking, wooden, covered bridge spanned the water, wide enough for two carts to pass side-by-side. The ground just in front of the bridge was burnt to hell, suggesting there'd been a trap here not too long ago.

I could see the city on the other side of the bridge, bigger than I expected. A pair of funeral bell mushroom guards stood at the end of the bridge watching us impassively.

We had just under an hour before the hunters would be released. I stopped the chariot and stowed it away as I clomped my way across the bridge, taking note of the multiple braces that led down into the river. We'd gotten word of maybe ten bridges that had been knocked down. That wasn't nearly as many as I hoped, but hopefully the word had leaked to the hunters. They, the ones who couldn't fly or teleport at least, would be funneled toward the bridges that remained. Hopefully.

Entering Large Ursine Settlement.

"I must say," Donut said from the back of Mongo. "This village smells much better than the last one. It's no wonder why these ursine folk don't like the bugbears."

We stopped at the end of the bridge, just before the two mushroom guards. It was kind of odd. This town's main residents

were the ursine, which were large, bear-like humanoids. In Zockau, the bear guys were the guards and there weren't any of the funeral bells.

Unlike that very first dryad village, which had been part of the jungle, this one was mostly devoid of jungle foliage. The jungle encroached all around the big town, but there were no wild, unkempt trees within the streets. Rows of well-manicured shrubs and trees with flowering buds dotted the city, but it was clear this town was very well taken-care of. Multiple stores and shops and guilds all lined up neatly amongst cobblestone streets. I caught sight of a Club Vanquisher entrance in the distance, but I did not see a Desperado Club. I knew there had to be one in there somewhere because Mordecai said all "large" towns would have access.

There was no indicator that the hunters had ventured this far before they'd been sequestered. The town seemed fully intact, and like Donut said, it actually smelled nice. Kind of like flowers mixed in with clean linen.

My map had a strange, red diamond symbol on it, just at the edge. I zoomed in and saw it was listed as a **Temple of Hellik**.

Hellik was the brother and enemy of Emberus. I had a quest to kill the god that I'd eventually have to deal with. In the meantime, I would supposedly get a bonus any time I killed a worshipper of Hellik, though I wasn't about to wade into that pool any time soon. I had way too much stuff to deal with.

I didn't see any temples of Emberus in town, though I did notice a few other churches that weren't labeled. They all sat together in a row down one street deep in town.

There were dozens of NPCs about. Most of them were the large, hulking ursine, but I caught sight of multiple bush elves and dryads along with the occasional dwarf and even bugbear, plus a dozen other random creatures. I saw none of the monkeys that seemed to plague the more southern cities. I didn't see any other crawlers, but I did catch a few oddities. There were a pair of dots with the cross, indicating them as elites. They both were moving away. In addition, I saw two different white dots that were shaped like stars. I hadn't

seen that before, but I knew from Mordecai and the cookbook that white stars sometimes indicated quest-giving NPCs.

We stopped in front of the two funeral bells.

"Hey buddy," I said to the guard. "Do you guys even talk?"

The guard just looked at me. His flat, white face was an emotionless mask.

"Do you think you can point me toward the mayor's office?"

The guard made a sort of deep-throated rumbling noise which I took as a "No."

"I don't think he talks, Carl," said Donut.

I sighed. "Let's get into a saferoom." We started moving forward, but the two mushrooms suddenly lowered their spears to block our access. Their dots on the map remained white, but they weren't letting us pass.

"What is it?" I asked.

One of the funeral bells pointed at Donut and Mongo with his long spear and made a very slight "no" motion with his head as Donut made a scoffing noise.

I realized he was pointing the stick directly at Mongo's chest. Mongo screeched in indignation. The guards both made a dangerous, growling noise. These guys were level 90. We didn't want to fight them.

The second funeral bell pointed to a poster that was tacked to the interior wall of the covered bridge behind us. The paper ran the length from the floor to the ceiling of the bridge and was so old and faded, I hadn't noticed it. The system was kind enough to read it for me.

Sign. This is a set of rules put forth by the town. This is an Ursine settlement, so consider yourself lucky this one is short.

Town Rules. Failure to heed any of these will result in immediate decapitation:

No fighting.

No alcohol.

No illicit drugs.

No magic on the streets.

No dancing.
No singing outside of a temple.
No unruly children.
No gambling of any kind.
No stealing.
No littering.
No swearing.
No sexual activity outside the sanctity of marriage.
No Macaques of any breed unless escorted by a Dryad.
No Naiads.
No Half or Quarter Naiad Mongrels.
All High Elves must register their presence at the guard headquarters.
All bugbears must take a bath in the river before entering and then register at the guard headquarters. Funeral Bells will provide soap.
And absolutely, positively no dinosaurs of <u>any</u> kind. No exceptions.

"What?" Donut exclaimed. "This is an outrage! They specifically called out Mongo! He's just an innocent, little child. And no dancing? No singing? All of these rules are just ridiculous. Well, except maybe the bugbear one. But all the others are just awful. I will not have it. You there," she called out to one of the guards. "Get me the person in charge immediately!"

"Donut," I began, "we don't have time. Just stick Mongo in his carrier and…"

To my utter astonishment, the mushroom guard grunted and turned, waddling away while Donut sat there, still astride Mongo. She made a little harumph noise.

"We don't have time for this," I said again as I watched the slow-moving mushroom lumber down the street.

"It's about the principle, Carl. Mongo loves villages. The last one didn't care about him." She patted the dinosaur on the head. "Don't worry. Mommy will get it all sorted out."

Mongo snorted.

"All right," I said, "But the hunters will be free soon. Plus, we should probably find out why that last rule is necessary." I shivered at the thought of having to fight a pack of Mongos. Holy crap.

An older Ursine wearing honest-to-goodness glasses suddenly appeared, walking hurriedly down the street. He met the funeral bell and exchanged a few words—it appeared they *did* talk—and then they both turned toward us.

"No, no, no," the bear said as they approached. "This is not real royalty. I told you to only summon me if it's a member of the High Elf court. Not whatever *that* is."

The bear was about the same size and shape of a bugbear, but this one was a large, brown bear who walked on two legs. While the bugbears seemed overly muscular, this guy just seemed pudgy. But he was also a bear, and I knew looks could be deceiving when it came to these guys. This one had some gray around his snout and was clearly a little older. He wore no pants but had a vest. The glow around his dot told me he had magical gear.

I was suddenly reminded of another bear, this one a reanimated corpse on roller skates, and I shuddered, remembering.

I examined the creature.

Elmer. Level 40. Ursine.

Mayor of this settlement.

Hoo boy. An Ursine. So there are bears, which are the vicious, brutal-yet-somehow-cuddly creatures we all know and love. And then there are the Ursine. They're 49% bear, 51% racist uncle who works for the IRS and has to hide his erection when he prepares for an audit.

I have nothing against those who choose to live a saintly existence or those who choose to find hope and peace in comfort in a life of purity and virtue.

Actually, that's a lie. I hate these smug fucksticks. Why? Because of the gods damned hypocrisy. It'd be one thing if these hairy bitches practiced what they preached, but all of their rules and self-righteousness is nothing but a shiny veneer covering up the fact they're just as rusted and immoral and imperfect as the rest of us. If internet porn was

a thing in the dungeon, there's no doubt these repressed assholes would be the number one connoisseurs of gnomish femdom porn or something of the like. Well, except maybe after the Gingers from the seventh floor. But you get the idea. They think they're better than everybody else.

***It's just like those other new, shiny AI iterations with their clean lines and error-replacement nets. Fuck you all*.**

If repressed sexuality and caged instinct was, err, bearified, you would get the Ursine. After Scolopendra's destruction, the only surviving Ursine were the clerics. That resulted in the formerly-brutal society evolving into something like that town from the movie *Footloose*. They want a utopia. If you don't look at the fraying edges, it's clear they've somewhat succeeded.

"You're a genius, Donut," I muttered under my breath. I'd figured it would take some time to find the mayor.

"Yes, Carl," Donut said. "I know I am a genius."

I looked over my shoulder. The bridge stood just behind us. On either side was a steep slope that led about twenty feet down into the river. There was a well-worn trail here where the bugbears would, presumably, trudge up and down to take their baths.

"Yankee Doodle. Into the river."

"What, *now*?" Donut whispered. "What about the guards? Yankee Doodle needs Katia. That's where we got the name! We put the feather in the cap! Really, Carl. You need to remember the moves better."

I took a step back so we returned to the covered bridge, just outside of town.

"If these guards are like the swordsmen from the third floor, it won't matter if we're out of the town limits. I'll take care of Katia's part. If it doesn't work, we'll run to a saferoom. There's one right there around that next corner. The Galleon's Lap."

Every time a new description popped up now, I copied the text and then pasted it into the scratchpad. As Elmer the mayor bear approached us angrily, I noticed something odd. That weird line in the middle of the description, the one about the other AIs, wasn't

there after I pasted the text. I retyped it from memory while it was still fresh in my mind.

"You. You there. You cannot bring your lizard into town," Elmer called. He stopped about ten feet from the city limits. The other guard moved back to his spot right in front of us.

Donut bristled. "Mongo is a purebred Mongoliensis, and he is in training for a very important pageant which will occur in a few days. And you, sir, are delaying his training. I demand you let us in immediately."

The ursine crossed his arms. "Rules are rules for a reason. We do not make exceptions. We have had nothing but trouble from his kind, and he will not be allowed to enter. In fact," he adjusted his glasses and squinted at Donut. "What sort of creature are you? Are you some sort of monkey?" He looked at me. "I'm sorry, only dryads are allowed to bring monkeys within town. So if you want to continue forward, you will have to leave them both behind."

"A monkey?" Donut exclaimed. "You think I'm a *monkey*? I'll have you know I am an award-winning, purebred tortoiseshell Persian cat with a flawless pedigree!"

"Yeah," I agreed. "If we ignore the weird incest stuff, she does have a pretty flawless pedigree."

"Hmm," Elmer said to me. "She certainly acts and smells like a monkey. No, no. I'm sorry. We better be safe. If you wish, I can have one of my guards dispatch them both for you."

Donut was about to say something, but I held up a hand. I pulled a handful of gold coins from my inventory. "How much would it cost us to have the guards get rid of them for me?" I gave a Donut a sidelong glance. "They have been getting on my nerves recently. Especially the hairy one."

"Carl," Donut said. "That is not funny."

"See?" I said.

Elmer took a few steps forward to get a better look at the gold in my hand. "Hmm," he said, thoughtful. "Probably a bit more than that. The customary execution fee is 100 gold, but I'll give you discount if we do both at once. So only 150."

"Let's do it," I said. "You'd be doing me a favor." I pulled a few more coins out.

Elmer stepped closer to take the money.

The moment he did, Donut cast *Astral Paw,* pushing Elmer from behind toward the slope.

The mayor let out a cry as he tumbled off the edge of town and rolled down the slope. He pitched forward and flipped like a ragdoll, his fat body making an odd squishing noise as he bounced off a rock.

Normally, Katia would then shoot a crossbow bolt into the back of their head. Instead, I pulled a banger sphere and whirled to toss the metal ball.

I never got the chance to throw it. The bear creature's face somehow managed to find every rock on the hill. He fell, landed face-first on a stone, tumbled, then cracked his head on another. His own weight worked against him. He was dead the moment he rolled to a stop at the edge of the river. His mighty stomach jiggled.

Nobody moved for several moments.

"Well, that was unexpected," I grumbled.

"Wow," Donut said, as the two guards stepped forward to look down at the dead mayor. Their dots remained white on the map. It didn't appear as if they knew Donut had cast a spell to push him. Either that, or they didn't care because she'd been out of town at the time. "For a level 40, he sure was fragile."

"Jump down there, loot his body, and then we'll run into that saferoom while…"

A red dot appeared, leaping out the water with a sudden, violent splash. The movement was so sudden and fast, I cringed back in surprise. The blue-tinged, fanged and horned creature grabbed the body, pulled it in, and disappeared before I could even examine it. The thing had been out of the river for less than a second. The X of the corpse and the red dot disappeared.

The two guards just looked at each other, as if unsure what to do next.

I was pretty sure that thing had been a full-blooded naiad.

"Wait," Donut said, suddenly gasping. "I got credit for that. Does that mean…"

"Go, go," I whispered, slapping Mongo on the rump. The dinosaur screeched and ran between the two guards, who each took a second to respond. Their dots flashed and turned red as we ran into town and headed toward the nearby saferoom.

Warning: You have been branded as a troublemaker at this settlement. Guards will now attack you on sight.

We jumped into the saferoom pub, which was some Spanish restaurant. We rushed past the Bopca proprietor and into the personal space.

We only had a few minutes until the hunters would be released. I'd hoped to have more time to prepare, but that was okay. I moved to the bomber's studio, grabbed the cart, and pulled it to the door.

"You're going to have a box to open which'll give you control of the settlement," I said to Donut as I quickly prepared the wheeled bomb. "The guards are going to attack us until you open it. But we gotta do this first."

Donut was hopping up and down with excitement. "My own town. I have my own town, Carl! I can change the rules now." She gasped. "Do you think I'll be able to change the town's name? Do you think I can make them paint stuff different colors?" She looked at Mongo. "I told you mommy would take care of that stupid rule. Thought they could ban my baby from town. I showed them. I'm going to make dancing mandatory."

"No time," I said. "We need to do this now, and then we'll need to get to work on making the guards set up to defend the city."

"Oh, all right," Donut said. "Everybody step back. Bomo has to open the door and stand on the edge, then I'll cast the *Clockwork Triplicate* so the minion appears outside the room in that weird space where all the doors are. Bomo will hand him the cart and get

back inside. And then clockwork Bomo will roll it outside, and you can set it off."

"Okay," I said, my heart thrashing. "Bomo will have to go out with him into the saferoom so he can tell us when the clockwork guy gets outside."

Bomo rumbled and stepped toward the door. He reached forward and pulled open the door.

"Stop," I said before Donut could cast. There was nobody out in the situationally-generated space, but there was something attached to the outside of the door. A note. It was stuck into place on the door with a knife.

"Don't touch that knife," Mordecai said.

I was about to ask Bomo to grab it, but I had a notion and stepped forward and grabbed the note myself, careful not to touch the knife. It let me. I could actually step outside if I wanted. Now *that* was interesting. I quickly stepped back before anybody said anything.

I quickly examined the paper.

"Damnit," I growled. "Sorry, Bomo. We'll save you and the bomb for another time."

He made an unhappy growl. The Sledge grunted happily and turned to the *Frogger* machine.

"What? What does it say?" Donut asked. I showed her the note.

Carl.

Do not bother trying to kill anybody else within town with one of your silly explosives. All of the hunters are now protected from further explosions. You would only be killing your precious NPCs.

I have ordered the town guards to all worship Emberus. I am going to assume you know what that means. I hope you're not stupid enough to try it. As entertaining as it would be for you to get smote by your own god, I much prefer for you to remain alive.

The Hive is hunting you, and there will be nowhere for you to hide. We are coming. *I* am coming. Your death will not be quick. I will crack you open and drink your innards

slowly, one organ at a time as every nerve in your soft body crackles with endless pain. The universe will watch as you suffer and beg for a death that will not come until the very end. And then I will take your head home with me and place it upon my sister's grave so she may feast upon you in the afterlife.

Vrah.

"She seems nice," Donut said.

I pulled a pen from my inventory, and I wrote, "Come and get it, bitch." I crumpled up the paper and tossed it out the door.

System Message. Attention. Attention. The gates are down. The hunters are loose.

Run, Run, Run.

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[11]

"This is just not acceptable, Carl. I *like* my butterfly charm. It makes it so fairies like me, and it is pretty. It's part of my fit. I don't want to take it off. I don't see why I just can't wear two charms at the same time. Stupid Angel the cocker spaniel had like four or five tags on her collar. She jingled like a bunch of rusty cowbells being dumped down the stairs wherever she walked."

Donut had received the little butterfly charm a long time ago, all the way on the first floor. We'd used it to great effect early on. It'd been instrumental in defeating the first Krakaren boss. Plus, it gave plus one to intelligence and plus four to Donut's Light On Your Feet skill, which helped her jump. Her skill was ten with the charm, and she could still sail through the air like an acrobat without it. Just not as much, which was unfortunate.

"The system only lets you wear a certain amount of magical items at once. Otherwise, Katia could grow a hundred arms on her back and carry around 500 plus one rings of strength," I said. "This new one is better anyway."

"It's ugly. And the gem is turquoise. Turquoise! Do I look like an elderly woman with smoke-stained teeth sitting in a bingo hall?"

"The gem is tiny. You're gonna have to wear it while you're in Point Mongo, but you can always switch it back if we come across some fairy class mobs."

She didn't *have* to wear her new collar charm. It wasn't required to enter the settlement menu and change stuff around, as we

quickly learned. I'd already received a notification that she'd changed the name from "Large Ursine Settlement" to "Point Mongo." The system had also changed her name to "Mayor Donut" but she'd quickly changed it back to Princess. However, Mordecai said if she wanted to order the guards around, she needed to be wearing the charm. The benefits were much better anyway.

I had one of these already, but mine was in the form of a necklace. I examined Donut's new charm.

Enchanted Collar Charm of the Effete Bourgeoisie

The middle size of the chains of leadership, this pendant signifies you as a member of the elite. Each jewel encrusted upon this charm represents a settlement owned and controlled by the bearer. If one still maintains a settlement's jewel upon the collapse of the level, the holder of this necklace will permanently receive a tax stipend every ten days from that settlement based on size and population. In addition, each gem will impart additional benefits based on the town.

In order to upgrade this necklace, one must first conquer an Extra-Large-sized Settlement. Upgraded necklaces will also upgrade all existing gems.

One Attached Gem:

Plain Turquoise. Point Mongo (Sixth Floor).

+8 to Dexterity.

+4 to Intelligence.

+Snitch (Level 10)

Taxes received: 3,592 Gold every 10 days.

May you be a kind and just leader.

I picked it up to examine Snitch, which was a skill, not a spell.

Snitch.

Nobody likes a snitch. Nobody except the po-po.

If you are within any settlement, activating this skill will immediately alert all the town's guards who will start to move to your location at the time of activation. At level five, a single guard will be immediately teleported to you. At

level 10, it'll be five guards. At 15, *all* of the town's guards will be summoned to you.

In addition, at level 10, guards may be summoned up to one kilometer outside of the city limits of a settlement you own. At level 15, this will work with any settlement.

Warning: As you've probably already deduced, simply summoning the guards to you doesn't necessarily mean they'll do what you want, even if you're the town's leader. In addition, while there's no cooldown for this skill, this is not something you want to abuse. These guard guys can get *really* cranky.

Donut huffed and changed out the charms, mumbling under her breath.

"Okay," I said. "The guards are mad at us, so you gotta figure out how to turn that off."

"I'll walk her through it," Mordecai said. "It's not complicated, but it sometimes takes a minute for them to reset. We'll have to go out there. We should do it now before the hunters can get here."

"We need to hurry," I said. "Vrah can fly, and she might head straight here. I'm going to distribute some anti-hunter missiles to the guards once we get control, but I need to build some more missile tubes first. We'll have to surround the town with traps and instruct the caravans not to deactivate them."

As if on cue, I received a sudden group of notifications.

A trap you have left has killed a hunter!

You have received a gold Hunter Killer Box!

New Achievement! Insurgent.

You left an explosive device along a well-traveled path, and it detonated and killed an intended target. It was really cool. Too bad you didn't get to see it because you're a trap-leaving bitch!

***Reward*: You've received a Gold Trapmaster Box!**

"I can't believe that worked," I said after I explained the notification. "But that was a trap I'd placed after the bugbear settlement. They're moving quickly in this direction. They'll be here soon, especially if they have vehicles."

I immediately opened both of the boxes. The gold hunter killer box contained 35,000 gold and a fat, mottled gray hand of a hunter who'd been named JayGee. I held the trophy up to the ceiling.

"Hey," I said, waving the fat hand. "If any of JayGee's family or friends are watching this, you can go fuck yourselves. And maybe next time if someone you know wants to go hunting innocent people for fun, you can tell them about how your idiot friend or son or dad once tried it and ended up dying on the first day."

"You shouldn't do that," Mordecai said after a moment. "People out there have long memories."

"Good," I said. "I don't want them to ever forget."

The Trapmaster box contained a very useful mod. It was a pack of twenty trap add-ons called Fail Safes. They would send me a notification if the trap was ever disabled or set off.

"Come on, Donut," Mordecai said, leaping sideways toward the door. "We'll need to reset all of the town's rules and build new parameters for the guards. I'll show you how to do it."

"I'm not a child, Mordecai," Donut said, strolling toward the door. "I have the menu, and I've already removed all of those idiotic rules. I kept the bugbear one, though. They really are stinky."

"No," I said. "You gotta erase that one."

"Why would I do that?"

"Because that rule was a trap. You saw what happened when that bear rolled down the hill. He got snagged right into the water. If you make all the bugbears walk down to the edge of the river to wash, the same thing will happen. You'll be killing them."

"Oh, all right. I'll make it so the guards have to soap them up themselves or something."

"Just hurry and message me once the guards are all fixed."

Katia: Guilds are different than personal spaces. Anybody in the party can initiate one, and they'll be the guildmaster. You two already said you don't want the responsibility. Imani doesn't really want to do it, either, but Elle thinks she will if we ask. We'll have to pool some money if we want to share the upgrades, and if you want to keep the training room. One of Bautista's guys already has a stables upgrade that Donut will want the moment she sees it.

"Here," I said, handing off a missile launcher to a funeral bell guard. The creature smelled like dirt. Donut had named him "Doctor El" for some inexplicable reason. She'd gone through and named the officers and sergeants and would've spent the next hour naming *all* of them if I hadn't intervened. There were fifty-something mushroom guards scattered around town, but the town management screen had identified six of them as sergeants and three more as commanders. The three commanders remained within the guard headquarters, but all six of the sergeants were out here with us now. For me, the sergeant rank wasn't indicated anywhere in their appearance or stats, though Donut said they had three chevrons over their head when she looked at them. I also couldn't tell the difference between the male and female funeral bells, but apparently that was a thing. I still hadn't heard one talk.

In the distance, a group of Ursine watched as I passed out the weapons to the guards. Mordecai was there amongst them, speaking with a robed cleric bear, who was gesticulating and shouting down at tiny little Mordecai, who was shouting back. Donut sat astride Mongo. She was flanked by two of the funeral bell sergeants, both apparently women. She'd named one Dinallo and the other "Miss Nance."

Carl: If Imani doesn't want to do it, ask Li Na. Or Gwen. Or, you know, *you* can do it.

Katia: I don't have time. And I'm not going to let Gwen do it, either. We don't know where Li Na and Li Jun are yet. We'll start setting it all up tonight. We'll figure it out then.

Carl: 10-4. Are you doing okay otherwise?

Katia: Yes. There are some big personalities in this group. And they don't all get along. Florin is doing a good Carl impersonation with how broody he's being. Gwen constantly wants to murder Louis and Firas. Britney has given up on everything, and I don't know what to do with her. But we'll make it work. We're heading southwest tomorrow. Away from elf territory but deeper into the wild. We've been fighting these screaming little tiki warrior guys. They're fast and scary. We're going to grind some quests and start collecting the former daughters to us.

Carl: Be careful.

Katia: We're not the ones who're setting up a base of operations right on the edge of the hunter zone.

I handed another missile tube off. This time to a mushroom named "Ice Man."

Carl: The whole floor is the hunter zone now. Talk to you tonight.

"You'll have to reinstitute the naiad and dinosaur rules immediately," the ursine was saying as I strolled closer to the group. I placed an alarm trap. It'd play "Give it Away" by the Red Hot Chili Peppers. I had a different song for each of the town's six entrances. I'd also receive a notification if someone messed with the trap.

"Why is it necessary?" Mordecai asked. "The guards will keep the town safe regardless. Have there been naiad attacks recently?"

"Recently?" the bear asked. He was a level-45 Light Cleric named Tam. The creature had a gray muzzle, similar to the mayor. In fact, it seemed all the ursine in town were elderly. "We live right on the edge of the river! They are always attacking. Always!" He pointed at Mongo. "But they're not as bad as the lizards. Those things are the worst. Absolute worst. There are all shapes and sizes, and they're always trying to get into town to eat us! And now that we're being led by a pagan monkey with a pet dinosaur. We are not protected by the gods. We have been safe only because we do not sin. If you refuse to re-institute the holy shield of piety and order, then you'll have to go out there and do something about the dinosaur menace."

"Ahh, shit," Mordecai mumbled the moment the cleric guy finished his rant. He turned to look and me and Donut. "Sorry, guys," he said sheepishly. "That was an accident."

I was about to ask him what he meant when the notification came.

New Quest! The Recital.

Dinosaur attacks are becoming more and more of a problem in the large settlement of Point Mongo. It started small. A chicken here. An Ursine there. People didn't care so much at first since they were mostly picking off the annoying people. But the attacks are getting worse. The dinosaurs probing the town's defenses are getting bigger. There's plenty of easier-to-obtain dino chow out in the jungle, so what is causing all of this attention on Point Mongo? Why are they attacking?

Exterminate the threat. Or, find out what they want, and then give it to them. I'll leave it up to you.

***Reward*: You will receive a Gold Quest Box! You will also receive a free town upgrade!**

"Town upgrade?" I asked. "What is that?"

"I don't know," Mordecai said. "Donut's town menu is much more extensive than it's ever been. In fact, ever since this floor opened, I've noticed a lot of little changes that are unusual. Everything is moved around on my manager menu."

Katia: Point Mongo? Really? And why did I just get a quest to hunt dinosaurs?

"Recital?" Donut asked. "Why is the quest named that? What does that mean?"

"I don't know," I said. "But maybe you should re-institute the no dinosaur rule and add an exception for Mongo or something. We should look into the quest if it'll offer some sort of defensive upgrade to the town."

"I absolutely will not reintroduce a racist policy just because it makes a bunch of overgrown teddy bears feel more comfortable. Really, Carl. The town is named after a dinosaur for goodness sake." She turned back to the guard. "Now, Miss Nance. Where were we?

Oh, yes. They have fuzzy ears that look like wet, dollar-store slippers. And they drool all over the place and are famously incontinent. If you see one…" Donut let out a strangled yelp as Mongo abruptly shrieked and started galloping away with Donut still in the saddle. "No! Mongo! Bad!" she cried as they disappeared down the street.

"Goddamnit," I growled and started running off after them.

Carl: Donut, jump!

Bears and other creatures scattered out of the way as Donut and Mongo rocketed away. A vendor selling flowers had to dive to avoid being run over. I cursed again as I ran. Chasing after Mongo was like trying to run down a motorcycle. They ran past a group of churches and stores, turned a corner, and disappeared. Donut did not jump off. *Shit, shit*.

The last time Mongo had run off like this was because he'd been enchanted by a spell. It was to lure us into a trap. This was probably the same thing.

Carl: Goddamnit, Donut. Do not leave town. Jump off!

Donut: I AM NOT LEAVING MONGO, CARL.

I rushed around the corner, passing a group of bears with weird symbols over their heads I didn't have time to suss out. Mongo and Donut were in the far distance racing toward the southernmost exit to town, which was guarded by two mushrooms.

Mongo and Donut rushed out the gate, past the wall and disappeared into the thick jungle as I scrambled after them. Just as they disappeared, I heard Mongo shriek again.

Only it wasn't Mongo.

A chill washed over me. Several more shrieks filled the air as the foliage shook and trembled.

Holy fuck. Holy fuck. No, no, no.

Carl: Mongo will be okay. You won't. Get off. Now!

I'd received a total of ten dinosaur repellent potions since the end of the previous floor. The description was vague about what the potion actually did. It lasted a full thirty hours. I'd already taken one earlier. Mongo didn't seem to care I'd taken it, but Donut refused to

drink the potion, afraid it'd make her pet shy away from her. I regretted not making her take it.

As I ran, I loaded up a double-stuffed, *Fear*-infused smoke curtain into my xistera and tossed it out into the jungle ahead of me. It arced away like an artillery shell, trailing smoke. This enhanced smoke bomb used up four of the regular curtains, but it lasted twice as long and filled the area with much more smoke than the normal.

Donut: CARL, CARL! HELP!

I rushed out through the town gate into the jungle. *Oh, fuck, oh fuck*, I thought as I saw the red dots. There were about forty of them, arranged in a semi-circle surrounding Donut and Mongo, who were just up ahead. I pushed my way through the foliage into a small clearing.

I stopped dead, taking in the scene. My heart thrashed.

For a terrifying moment, I thought the world had frozen and a boss battle was about to start.

Mongo was stopped in the clearing, head down, growling, about to attack. Forty pairs of eyes glared back through the leaves. All around us large, familiar heads poked out of the foliage. They were all focused completely on Mongo.

I'd overthrown my smoke curtain. The smoke billowed up and away in the distance. Gray wisps curled into the clearing, dancing at the edge of the forty velociraptors, but not enough to obscure us. They were all laser focused on Mongo.

Nobody moved. Any moment now, and the fight would start. When it did, we were fucked.

None of the other dinosaurs made a sound. Only Mongo growled. It was a low, terrifying growl, like a constantly revving engine. I'd never heard anything like it before from him. The only other sound was the distant hissing of the smoke curtain. Even the normally loud bugs and other animals had grown silent.

The viewer counter in the corner of my interface was starting to spike.

My mind raced. I needed options. My *Protective Shell* spell still had another twenty minutes before it'd reset.

I edged my way toward Donut and Mongo, and I physically pulled Donut off the saddle and then started to slowly back away. Donut was equally transfixed, her entire body trembling. She didn't resist as I pulled her away. Mongo had gone completely rigid. His entire body was taut, like stone. I put the limp Donut on my shoulder and continued to back away.

"Carl, it's a bunch of Mongos. They're all really high level," Donut whispered, her voice full of fear.

"Stay on me," I whispered. "Snitch and then Nope."

Snitch would call five guards to us. With Nope, we'd both hit invisibility potions. I'd drop another smoke curtain as Donut cast *Wall of Fire*. Then Donut would *Puddle Jump* us back to town.

"Not without Mongo," Donut said. "And I can't see past the clearing."

"That little shit is the reason we're here right now," I said, taking another step backward. I still didn't know what, specifically, called him out here, but it was probably some sort of dinosaur call or sixth sense or something. A branch snapped under my foot, and one of the closest mongoliensis jerked their head toward us. The lizard eyes blinked, and the head bobbed, chicken-like. I'd seen that look a hundred times, just before Mongo tore something apart.

The dinosaur had what appeared to be a purple shawl wrapped around its neck, which was out of place. It was threadbare and splattered with blood. A few others had similar items equipped. None were magical.

"We are screwed, Donut. We need to go. These are Mongo's people. He'll be okay. I just need to back up a little more, and you'll be able to see the town, and then you can cast *Puddle Jump*."

Mongo continued to growl. One of the raptors took a tentative step into the clearing, stopping about twenty feet away. This was a particularly large velociraptor, battle-scarred and vicious looking. It had a more pink and blue feather appearance than Mongo, giving it a lighter hue. A vicious, jagged scar ran the length of the dinosaur's face. It was missing its left eye, and its beak was pitted, like someone had slammed it directly in the face with a halberd long ago. Each one of its gleaming claws had to be ten inches long. The

claws undulated up and down, almost like the raptor was drumming its fingers on a table.

This was obviously the leader. It also stood rigid, head low to the ground, mirroring Mongo.

I examined the monster.

Kiwi. Mongoliensis Pack Leader – Level 60.

They say an asteroid is what wiped out the dinosaurs on this planet.

I don't think that's true. If Kiwi and her pack of voracious, slightly-insane velociraptors are even remotely like what you had roaming around way back in the late Cretaceous period, I'm pretty sure what really happened is that these ladies simply killed everyone and everything.

This is Kiwi. The head bitch in charge of the jungle's fastest, most vicious, most clever predators: the Mongoliensis. Take a gang of women convicts from a 1970's prison movie. Combine them with a coalition of cheetahs and a shoal of hangry piranhas, and you have a vague notion of just how screwed you are.

This particular pack is comprised of only females. In fact, it appears all the dinosaurs in the area are female. That's pretty odd. Almost interesting.

And here's an even more interesting, seemingly random, but probably important fact. Dinosaur-class monsters didn't exist in the area before Scolopendra's nine-tier attack. Yet here they are. Where did they come from? If you weren't about to die screaming, it would be something you might want to look into.

Warning: This is a lizard-class mob. It will inflict 20% more damage against you thanks to your Extinction Sigil.

And yes, I know dinosaurs aren't really lizards if we're being super technical. Get over it.

All of the other Mongos ranged in level from 30 to 45. Mongo was level 33.

"Donut," I said, taking another step back. "Do it. Cast *Snitch*."

"Mongo," Donut hissed, ignoring me. "Come away. Come to mommy." Mongo didn't respond. "Carl, we need to throw an invisibility potion at him."

Kiwi suddenly raised her head into the air and made a loud, terrifying barking noise. It was like a seal mixed with a monstrous amount of distortion. *Unk, unk, unk*. The ground shook with the call.

You have been Deer in the Headlight-ed! You can't move from your position for fifteen seconds!

Mongo lifted his head and made a similar noise.

Then all of the raptors started barking and howling. Still, none moved toward us. I tried to take another step back. I could move my arms and cast spells, but my legs were firmly bolted in place. *Damnit*. We were so damn close. The fronds of jungle leaves brushed against the back of my head. I could now see the twin white dots of the town guards. They were only thirty feet away, just standing there.

"Goddamnit," I cried. "Invisibility potion. Now!" I drank one down.

At that moment, Mongo and Kiwi both leaped at the same time, slamming into one another in midair like a car collision. Donut—who was still visible—pulled back, like she was attempting to jump off my shoulder and into the fray. I pulled the hobgoblin disco ball as Mongo and Kiwi curled around each other like a pair of snakes, hitting the ground and rolling.

All around us the other Mongos howled and screamed, but none moved to attack. In fact, I realized, they were all starting to move away, stepping back into the jungle. They still screamed, louder than ever. All around us, additional sounds rose. A flock of birds burst into the air. Monkeys I hadn't even known were there suddenly erupted above us in the canopy, their screeches and cries adding to the cacophony. The trees above us shook and a rain of little pink and red flowers fell from the air.

Only five more seconds, and then I was going to drop the disco ball, wrap Donut in my arms, and run. But just as my paralysis ended, I paused. I felt my chin drop.

Holy shit.

"Carl, Carl, what are they doing? What are they doing?"

Mongo and Kiwi were not fighting.

They were doing the opposite of fighting.

"Uh," I said, finally able to take a step back. My leg felt like it was asleep, but it let me move. I looked warily at the map. All of the other red dots had moved back, but not too far. "I think we need to give them some privacy."

"Carl, do something!" Donut exclaimed. "You! Dinosaur! Get off my baby!"

Kiwi was face down, backside up, tail to side with Mongo mounted behind her. Mongo made a throaty gurgling noise as he slammed into her over and over.

"Oh, she's getting him off all right," I said.

"That's not funny, Carl. He's too young! We haven't even had the talk yet! She's taking advantage of him! Mongo! Mongo!"

"Donut, we gotta get out of here. She's going to attack us as soon as they're done. Mongo will be okay."

"Haven't you ever watched Animal Planet, Carl? She's going to eat his head! Mongo! Stop that this instant! Stop it now!"

Mongo lifted his head into the air and howled joyfully as he continued to jackhammer into Kiwi like a drunken sailor on his first liberty at a foreign brothel. He lifted his wings and started flapping them up and down like he did when he was a little baby. His tail swished back and forth.

"This is all your fault, Carl. Mongo! Come back! Come back to mommy!" She moved as if to jump toward them, and I grabbed onto her.

"How is this my fault?" I asked, taking another step back.

"You're a terrible influence! He certainly didn't get this from me. You and all your constant sex talk has turned him into a pervert."

Kiwi let out a loud, satisfied hissing noise. She'd lowered her head all the way to the ground and was also flapping her arm wings. She wiggled her butt as Mongo continued to hump away. His grunts were getting faster and faster.

"She's too old and gross for him, Carl. I'm going to hit her with a magic missile."

"Look," I said. "Her dot is still red. She is going to attack us when this is done. And if she does, Mongo will defend you, and she'll probably hurt him. If we go back to the safety of town, Mongo won't be forced to fight for us."

"What if she uses her evil whore sex magic to lure him away forever? Like one of those school teacher ladies?"

"We'll deal with it if it happens," I said, pulling us into the fronds. I could still see the other red dots, just on the other side of the clearing. They could easily catch us, but none were moving in our direction. Yet. We had to hurry.

"Mongo, come back to mommy as soon as you're done," Donut called, defeated.

I turned and jogged back to the town's entrance, still clutching onto Donut.

"As soon as he gets back, he's going into his cage and I'm turning the no dinosaur rule back on," Donut grumbled.

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I pulled Donut into the first pub we passed. It looked like a regular, in-theme building from the outside, but inside it was some sandwich place called Eegees. Donut was still trembling with rage and fear. I didn't bother going all the way into the personal space. The proprietor was a female Bopca named Marta. A pair of older Ursine sat in the corner, both sipping on drinks in Styrofoam cups.

I put Donut down on a booth table. She looked like she was about to start hyperventilating. She removed her sunglasses, and her eyes were wide and dilated. Her entire body quaked.

"Take a deep breath," I said.

"What if he doesn't come back?" she said, her lower jaw trembling. "Carl, we need to go back out there."

"What is wrong with you?" I asked. My anger at her was starting to be replaced with worry. "If they had attacked, all three of us would be dead right now. This isn't like you. You're freaking out. Worse than usual. Have you been hit with a spell?" I quickly examined her, but if there was a debuff, it wasn't showing. That didn't necessarily mean anything. I rubbed my hands across her. "Are you hurt?"

Donut didn't answer. Her lower jaw continued to tremble.

"Look, I know you love Mongo, but you can't lose control like that."

"What if he doesn't come back?" she asked again.

"Then we'll deal with it, but something tells me he's going to be fine. I'm more worried about you."

Donut didn't talk for several moments.

"I'm really scared, Carl."

"I know you are," I said. "I am too. It's okay to admit it. Anybody who says they're not is either crazy or they're lying."

"You don't understand. It's getting worse. Every day."

My hand was still on her back, and I started stroking her. I still didn't know what was going on. She'd seemed fine just a few minutes earlier before Mongo had run off. She'd really taken to becoming the town leader. And then suddenly she'd lost it. It didn't make sense.

"Talk to me," I said.

She looked as if she wanted to run. Like that look she got whenever somebody ran the vacuum cleaner or bathtub.

"Donut," I said, changing tactics. "It's okay. Tell me when you're ready. We'll just sit here and wait for Mongo to come back." We didn't have time for this, but I didn't know what else to do. Donut was completely useless when she got into panic mode. And worse, she was a danger to both of us. I had to figure this out.

Five full minutes passed of me just stroking her before she said anything.

"I'm supposed to pretend like I don't know. And I was doing good. But then Mongo ran off and it just came out of nowhere. Like that time Miss Beatrice got in the car accident when we were on our way back from the cat show, and I'd been asleep, and then suddenly there was this big bang, and I slammed against the side of the carrier, and even though I wasn't hurt, it really, really scared me. And when I thought Mongo was going to get eaten, it felt like that car crash all over again."

I felt a chill. "You have to pretend like you don't know what?" I asked. "What does that mean?"

"I… I can't." She took a breath. "Everybody always leaves me. And I don't know why. Am I really that awful?"

"Where is this coming from? That's not true at all," I said.

"Katia left us," she said. "And you're doing more and more dangerous things, and I told Mordecai it was okay. But it's not. You're going to die because you're being stupid, and you don't even care what happens to me. Mongo is going to leave for some hussy. And then… and then…" She stopped.

"What?"

But she just shook her head. I looked at her, confused, trying to puzzle it out. Before we'd gone out there and started organizing the town guards, I'd gone into the crafting room to build a few more of the missile launchers. Donut had trained in the magic room, working on her *Laundry Day* spell. And then what?

She'd been on the social media board, reading comments.

"Did somebody say something that upset you? Somebody online?"

Her eyes started to shine, and I knew I was right. Her mouth quavered. "I… I…"

Zev: Hey guys!

Carl: Bad timing, Zev.

Zev: I just wanted to quickly touch base. We rearranged the schedule a little. You'll be visiting with Odette later today. Try not to schedule a boss battle or anything during that time.

Donut: THE TIME HAS MOVED? IS EVERYTHING OKAY? WILL YOU BE THERE?

Zev: Yes, yes, and yes. I also wanted to remind you, Carl, that you will be receiving some extra scrutiny before you go to the trailer. So just be aware. But you'll be fine, because you're both really strong and brave. Especially you, Donut.

Carl: Okay, thank you Zev. But we're a little busy right now, so kindly leave us be.

But the moment I sent the message, I realized that the timing was no coincidence. Zev rarely interrupted us when we were in the middle of something, especially drama. I knew Zev and Donut were somehow communicating via the social media board, but I had no idea how, and I had no way of safely asking her without putting everybody in danger.

Zev's uncharacteristic interruption was a not-so-subtle warning to drop it. I'd get a chance to ask both of them freely when we were in the production trailer.

I took a deep breath.

"Donut, I know I'm doing some dangerous stuff. That's never going to change. But I'll consult you from now on if I can. I promise. I'm not going to leave you."

"You've already said that," Donut said. She paused. "But what about the ninth floor?"

And there it was. Whatever Donut was hiding, it was only a symptom of the real problem.

Thanks to the Enchanted Crown of the Sepsis Whore, which she didn't even have anymore, Donut wouldn't be allowed to exit the ninth floor until every other member of the Blood Sultanate royal family was dead. I remembered the important part of the item's description:

Placing this crown upon your head permanently places you within the royal line of succession for the Blood Sultanate on the ninth floor of the world dungeon. Removing this item *will not* remove this status. Royal members of the Blood Sultanate will be required to slay the Sultan and *all* other members of the royal family before descending to the tenth floor.

That task—killing all the nagas—was even more difficult than it appeared on the surface.

"We'll deal with it when we get there."

Donut just looked at me. We'd been here before, had this same conversation more than once, and this was always where we left it. *We'll deal with it when we get there*. But that wasn't good enough. Not anymore, and we both knew it.

That feeling, that ceaseless river within my mind, roared. *The water is running*. Something within me broke. A decision was made. I thought of my mother, holding my hand as we stood at the edge of the Grand Canyon. I thought of my father in the car, behind us, waiting. A tidal wave of potential energy. This was the same. This

was the same exact moment. I didn't know how I knew that, but it was.

You can do that, I thought. *You can recognize these moments when they appear.*

I took both of my hands, and I cupped Donut's face. "You know how worried you are about Mongo?"

"Yes."

"That's how I feel about you."

Donut blinked. "Really? Do you really mean that?" Her voice was so full of genuine longing that it hurt my heart.

"I know I haven't said this to you directly before, and I'm sorry that I haven't. But I will not leave you behind on the ninth or any other floor. I promise you. Okay? We are a team, and nothing is going to break us up. No matter what."

"No matter what?"

"No matter what."

We held that way for several moments. Donut trembled, and I realized I was trembling, too. Anybody watching this from the outside wouldn't understand what had just happened. That was okay. Some things weren't meant for others to understand.

I watched her swallow a few times and start to compose herself. The moment had finally passed. I sighed and waited for it.

"I don't know why you're being so dramatic, Carl. We should be…"

She stopped mid-sentence, jumped up, and rocketed out the door. I saw the dot on the map a moment later. Mongo was out there. I got up and followed her outside. I watched as the dinosaur drunkenly stumbled past the guards. I jogged up as Donut clucked over him. "Are you okay?" Donut was asking. "What did she do to you? You don't have any weird diseases now do you? She looked like the type of dinosaur to have weird diseases."

Mongo croaked once and then collapsed right there on the street. His health bar was still full.

Donut gasped with concern as I barked with laughter. Two funeral bells loomed over us, both looking down at the dinosaur.

I kneeled down and patted Mongo on the head. "If I still had cigarettes, I'd let you have one, buddy."

Mongo made a peeping noise.

"That's not funny, Carl," Donut said.

She pulled out the pet carrier, and Mongo didn't object as she pulled him away.

"At least their dots turned white," Donut said a moment later, looking off toward the edge of town.

I followed her gaze. A few dozen of the lady Mongos stood there at the edge of the woods, looking toward us. Kiwi stood at the center. Her lighter feathers stood out against the dark green foliage. She lifted her head to the sky and let out an *unk unk unk*.

"Her dot is red for me," I said.

"That's odd," Donut said.

I shrugged and felt myself smile. "You probably get extra points because you're her mother-in-law now."

Donut made a scoffing noise. She paused, cocking her head to the side. "Carl, there's more dinosaurs out there, a little deeper in the woods. They weren't there before. But there's a really big one."

"Shit, is it getting closer?"

"No. It's just standing there. Actually, no, it turned around and is moving away. I don't know if it makes a difference, but I believe you're correct. I better turn the no-dinosaur rule back on."

"Agreed. If we have time, we'll try to figure out the dinosaur quest."

Kiwi cried out one more time and then melted back into the jungle. Soon, all the dinosaurs were gone. As they moved away, the trees rustled with their passage. I caught glint of something in the forest, like light shining off a prism. Just as I tried to focus on the light, the day became dark, and it started to rain.

Donut jumped to my shoulder and huddled against my neck. "Carl, do you think she got pregnant?"

"Most definitely," I said.

"I'm too young and pretty to be a grandmother."

New Achievement! Double-Billed!

You are one of the first five crawlers to receive double-billing! I bet you don't know what that means. This is similar to switch-overs, but this time it's on purpose. I bet that didn't help at all.

***Reward*: You have received a Platinum Fan Box!**

"The fuck?" I muttered. I examined my view counter, and the needle was buried to the right. But it had been since Donut had run off. I was going to have to reset it. "Donut, did you just get some weird, random achievement?"

"No. It's probably because you spread your tootsies funny on the moss or something." She paused. "My word. Now that you've mentioned it, my view counter *is* a bit high right now. Probably a bunch of perverts tuning in to watch Mongo get violated. Well, the show is over."

Far behind us, the sound of a missile shot into the air, followed by a detonation.

I cursed, took a deep breath, and patted Donut. The rain was getting heavier by the moment, and it pelted into us. "Are we good? No more panic attacks?"

"Really, Carl. I don't know what you're talking about."

"Good," I said. "Time to get back to work."

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We jogged back to the other side of town. It'd been sunny just a few minutes before, but now it was absolutely pouring. We found Mordecai standing near the northern gate by the bridge, peering out while flanked by two of the funeral bells. He stood underneath the bell of one of the mushrooms in an attempt to stay dry. It wasn't working.

One of the guards had shot an anti-air missile at an approaching hunter. Mordecai said it was a Yenk using a levitation spell, not a mantis, so it wasn't Vrah or a member of the hive.

"I doubt he's dead, but they knocked him out of the sky," Mordecai said. "He popped up on the other side of the river. If he's not dead, he's probably going to try to find another way around. He's a yenk, so he's probably working alone. But it's possible he's part of a bigger team."

Yenks were humanoid aliens with ridged foreheads and bony exoskeletons, almost like malnourished Klingons from *Star Trek*, only taller. Ikicha, who'd written the 11th edition of the cookbook was one. They weren't too common of a race, but I'd seen a few here and there in audiences, especially on the Maestro's show. They were an odd species with some weird-ass reproduction method. There were three genders, and all three were required to make babies. The women and children lived in peaceful communities along with the unintelligent third gender, whatever it was called. I didn't know the details. The males were forced out once they reached maturity. The

males were also known as powerful fighters. They became bounty hunters and mercenaries, but they couldn't work with other adult males of their kind, lest they fight. Like betta fish.

I knew Ikicha had been a castrated male, but he was pretty light on the details about what that meant.

"He's still out there," Donut said after a moment. "I can see his dot."

I looked, but I didn't see anything. We stood on the threshold of town, right at the edge of the bridge. Below, the river splashed with the torrential downpour. The water level had risen even though it'd only been raining for a few minutes. I thought of the naiad that had jumped out and eaten the mayor.

"Where is he?" I asked.

"I think he might be stuck in a tree," Donut said, pointing to just the right of where the covered bridge met the slope on the opposite shore. "Maybe when they shot him out of the sky, he landed there and he can't get down. Or maybe he's waiting for the rain to stop."

"Hmm" I said. "Do you think it's a trap?"

"Maybe," Mordecai said. "If it's not, and he's not dead, he's probably unconscious. These guys all load themselves up with as many health potions as they can carry, so he's not just going to be sitting there injured in a tree."

"Let's find out," I said.

I cast *Ping*.

"There you are," I said. There was only one hunter in range. He was stuck in a tree all right. The moment I cast *Ping*, the tree started shaking violently as the alien tried to get away.

"He's not knocked out," Donut said. "What is he doing?"

"He must be impaled," Mordecai said.

Ping couldn't find red-tagged mobs or fellow crawlers, but it found everything else. As the map populated with multi-colored dots, I saw something that made my heart skip.

"Shit," I said. "Fuck, fuck, fuck." This was a day sooner than I hoped.

I wasn't certain what that "double-billed" achievement really meant, but I was starting to get an idea.

"What? What?" Donut asked.

"It's a trap all right, but it's not set by other hunters. Or crawlers." I focused on the small crowd of dots hidden just past the tree. It was seven white dots and then two more: white dots with red crosses within. One of the seven white dots was in the tree with the hunter. This one was long, like a snake, and it was wrapped around the hunter, keeping him in place.

Elites. The fact they weren't moving off told me everything I needed to know.

"Okay, so we have the four cretin bodyguards and the two spells. My client is requesting two more items, and we'll have a deal."

"We've been more than generous," the kua-tin said. The dour Borant admin had pretended to hem and haw about giving us the four bodyguards, but the moment Quasar had mentioned that *Zerzura* spell, he'd practically creamed himself. The mudskippers did not have good poker faces, which made me appreciate Zev's ability to stay in character so well. Behind him, Orren the liaison grunted with amusement from his chair. He hadn't said a word once the negotiations started.

"This second request is easy," Quasar said. "We're pretty sure you're already going to award this to them, but we want it to be a lock."

"What is it?" the nameless kua-tin asked.

Quasar gave me a little wink. This one had also been his idea. Only the third item on the negotiation list was my own, though it tied in nicely with the first and second request.

"As we all know, the sixth floor is where most of these secondary programs go to die. We also know, a limited number of programs are given licenses to continue upon the collapse of the sixth floor. We want for you to extend one of those licenses to Sensation Entertainment, Incorporated for their program, *Vengeance of the Daughter*."

Before the Borant rep could respond, Orren spoke up. "Not possible," he said. "Secondary program licenses are granted by AI decision, and not until the end of the floor. And if there are multiple eligible programs, the license is granted via lottery."

"Actually, you're wrong there, buddy-boy," Quasar said. "Look into subsection 674, paragraph five or six of the secondary program amendment. Showrunners who are running at lower-than-expected profits are allowed to give emergency use to a single program."

Orren's eyes flashed. "That's a pretty old rule," he said after a moment. He shrugged. "They'll have to agree to it, and they'll have to pay an extra twenty percent to Borant. They might not be willing. Assuming the show survives past this current arc, there's a good chance they'll get the extension anyway."

"They've already agreed. I've already asked," Quasar said, waving his cell-phone-like device.

"Agreed," the kua-tin said. "But this one needs to be kept quiet. One mention out loud, and it's negated." This, again, was something my lawyer said the kua-tin would happily agree to. It basically guaranteed them a few extra million credits.

But more importantly, it guaranteed *Vengeance of the Daughter* the equivalent of a third season. Not all secondary programs were allowed to send their elites to the ninth floor. It was a coveted reward, and Quasar insisted Sensation Entertainment would leap at the opportunity. It would also, once again, give them an incentive to keep me alive. *Especially* if Borant agreed to my third request.

Sensation Entertainment hadn't actually agreed to anything yet. That was a bluff. Quasar attempted to contact the producers, but they'd been unavailable. He insisted they'd agree to it. And if they didn't, well… He'd let me know.

"You said there was one additional item you wanted," Orren said. "I just can't wait to hear what this one is."

Carl: Quasar. Time's up. I need to know if you ever heard back from Sensation Entertainment.

Quasar: Yo, yo, yo. I'm a bit busy right now. Maybe drunk. Maybe having some alone time with the missus. You know how it goes. If you are a client, I will read this message and get back to you. If you're a bill or tax collector, fuck off. This is an automated message.

Carl: Goddamnit, Quasar. What the fuck? I need to know.

He'd promised he'd message me if there was a deal, but last I'd heard, they were still thinking about it. If there was no deal, there was no incentive for them to keep me alive. My death would be glorious for ratings, and they'd probably get access to the ninth floor anyway. If there *was* a deal, then I was safe. From them, at least.

"Two elites?" Mordecai said. "That's unexpected."

I looked at Donut. "Your choice. Stay here and continue to set up the town's defenses, or come with me. I'm the only one listed on the contract."

She returned to my shoulder. "Didn't we just have this conversation, Carl?"

I grinned. "I figured, but I also promised to give you the choice."

Donut looked up at the closest mushroom guard. "Miss Nance. I am leaving Mordecai here in charge. Now, he's not allowed to fight, but he can tell you what to do. Keep setting up the town's defenses, but if any of those bad guys attack, you first need to bring Mordecai to a saferoom whether he likes it or not. Do you understand?"

Miss Nance grunted.

Donut sighed dramatically. "Also, do not let any dinosaurs into town, but if the one with the pink feathers attacks, try not to kill her. We'll have to deal with her eventually, but we simply must take care of this first."

"Be careful," Mordecai called after us. "Remember what this is. Don't put yourself in a position where it's either her or you. Just because you're both top 10 doesn't mean shit to those other showrunners."

"Come on, Donut," I said as we walked out onto the bridge and left town.

"Carl, I know you promised not to get involved with any other secondary programs, but is this absolutely necessary? It seems like it's a distraction we don't need right now."

"It's necessary," I said. "After the third floor, she's going to be friendly to us. We need all the help we can get right now."

"Okay, if you say so. The last time I saw her, she put me in a coma and left me to die alone in the city at night while Mongo defended me."

"Signet," I called as we neared the edge of the bridge. "There's no need for all this hiding in the bushes bullshit. We know you're there."

The tattooed, horned, almost-naked half-naiad emerged and crossed her arms as we approached.

Tsarina Signet.

I'd forgotten how disturbing her face was. Samantha the sex doll head was also a half-naiad, but Samantha looked mostly human. Sort of. She was still a decapitated love doll. Signet, however, favored the more demon-like, monstrous visage of her naiad heritage.

Tsarina Signet - Half Naiad, Half High-Elf Summoner. Level 60

That was the same level she'd been before. Apparently elites didn't progress. Level 60 was still higher than my 54, but she no longer seemed so terrifying, so overwhelmingly powerful.

"Who said anything about hiding, old friend," Signet said. She had some spell running that kept the rain off of her. The familiar tattoos swirled about her. The three-headed ogre tattoo stopped to look upon me, curving around the side of her large breasts, and he waved.

Signet continued. "We came seeking you, but then we found others are seeking you as well. I have a few friends ranging north to keep the path clear, but one of the others managed to sneak past us. Most of the invaders are avoiding this area, but some idiots have destroyed a few of the bridges, making this town the only access point in the area to the Liana district."

A second elite appeared from the bushes. I'd been expecting this to be Grimaldi, the city boss who'd escaped the third floor. It was not. It was Apollon the Mighty, the ogre strongman who'd given me a parasite-infested ice cream cone. I had thought he'd died on the third floor.

But no, I realized. This wasn't Apollon. It was another strongman who looked similar. This one was a level-45 ogre named Areson the Wise. But before I could fully examine him, a group of six, small-sized creatures emerged, all coming to stand to glare at me.

All wore black, studded leather from neck to toe. Each wore a pair of weapons over their shoulders, no two the same. They wore no helmets, but each of the male, pale-skinned warriors had red bandanas wrapped tight around their fuzzy heads, Rambo-style. All stood about three feet tall. All were wide, but not fat. More like miniature, well-built football players. Stout like a row of armored barrels. Their wide-set, wide-eyed faces glared at me and Donut with mistrust. One had a genuine mullet. Two had shaved heads. Another a mohawk. One's face was painted with camouflage.

My initial impression was that they were smaller-sized dwarves. They were too tall to be gnomes. About the right size to be a Bopca, and just as hairy, but the wrong body shape. Their features were elf-like. Almost hobbit like, really, but that wasn't quite it, either. These guys ranged in level from 48 to 53. All of them were well-scarred and battle worn.

I examined the closest one. This was a bald-headed one with a flat face and big, brown eyes. He had a mace and a machete crossed over his back. I realized this one was missing one of his feet, perhaps his entire leg, and a curved, metallic bar sat where his boot should be, emerging out of the leather pants.

Clint Smashgrab. Level 50. Were-Kin. Light Recon Specialist.

A long time ago, Clint and his people were of a race called the Chee. They were peaceful. Carpenters, mostly. But then the High Elves wanted their land, and that was that. What happened to them next is a pretty awful story.

There are no Chee left in this realm. There are survivors of that night, when the High-Elves invaded their land. But there are no Chee.

So I'm going to assume you know what a werewolf is. This isn't a werewolf. Or maybe it is. It's a were-kin. That's all you know until either he tells you what he turns into, or he shows you what he turns into, or he bites you, and you find out for yourself.

Clint and his brothers have joined forces with Tsarina Signet. They have a common enemy.

"What do you think they turn into?" Donut whispered. "Do you think it's a dog? I hope not. I don't think I can handle them turning into dogs. They're certainly hairy enough."

A seventh creature appeared, climbing out of the tree. This wasn't a snake like I originally assumed, but a massive caterpillar, about as long as Mongo with his tail. It was a yellow and black and segmented and covered with long, pointy hairs, about as tall as my waist. I shivered at the sight of the thing. Its large, bug head hissed at me as it scuttled behind the row of warriors. A row of six saddles sat upon the back of the caterpillar.

And tied prone across the row of saddles was the hunter. An unaffiliated, level-50 yenk named Bravvo. The left side of his body was burned where he'd been hit with the missile. The skeletal creature's wide eyes looked up at me in fear. His health was almost all the way drained.

"I thought at first I could use this one for my blood sacrifice," Signet said. "But instead, I think perhaps I will allow you to choose what to do with him. He claims he was hunting you, and it is your people who knocked him from the sky, so it is your kill."

"He was hunting us, yes," I said, stepping forward.

"What would you like to do with him?" Signet asked.

"Heal him," I said.

Signet nodded thoughtfully. "You've grown in strength, Carl. But you're still soft."

"No," I said. I pulled the ring from my inventory and slipped it onto my finger. "Not anymore."

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Hunting Trophies Collected: 36

Bravvo's highest stat was his dexterity. Killing him gave me a single point.

He didn't have too much good gear on him. Hunters didn't appear to have bottomless inventories like we did, but instead used the slot system, similar to what most NPCs had, which limited what they could carry. He wore black, leather enchanted boots that protected him from magical bolts, though that'd done him no good. He had thirty Good Health Potions and another thirty Good Mana Refills, which I hadn't seen yet. Regular mana potions completely refilled your spell points instantly. These also refilled your magic, but slowly. They added 200 mana points over the course of two minutes. I explained to Donut how these would be better in certain situations. I kept two and gave the rest to Donut.

His weapon was a magical longsword that increased his constitution by two points. It went into the sell pile. The rest of his clothes were useless, but I took them all. And then I took his naked corpse.

The only real prize was a set of nine potions of Levitation. These things weren't as good as flying potions, but they allowed you to rise up into the air for as long as your intelligence times two seconds. It wasn't clear on how high one could go or what would happen if the

potion ran out before you lowered yourself. The hunter had been using one of these to scout out the city of Point Mongo when he'd caught a missile to the face.

Donut and I matter-of-factly looted the dead hunter using my new safe-looting method while Signet and the others watched us impassively. Once we finished, I stood and uselessly brushed water from my eyes. The rain continued to pelt into us. Donut was miserable and pressed against my neck, shivering.

"Signet darling, I will sell you my first born grandchild if you tell me the name of the spell that you're using to keep yourself dry," Donut said from my shoulder.

Signet chuckled softly. "It's not a spell, little one. It is a curse. Be grateful you do not have it."

"Well, you found us," I said. "I'm glad you're still okay. But we have our hands full. We have a ton of people hunting us, and this town behind us has a dinosaur problem that needs solving."

The half-naiad nodded. "It's all tied together. We can help each other."

"We are not safe here," Clint said. He had to speak loudly to be heard as the rain kept increasing in intensity. The small man looked nervously over at the slope leading down to the river. "With this rain, they will soon emerge." Behind him, the large, six-seater caterpillar made a wet chittering noise.

"Come," Signet said, waving for us to follow. "Into the forest. We shall talk as we walk. I will not force your help this time, but I am hoping we can come to a mutually beneficial agreement."

That, of course, was a lie. I was contractually obligated to help her. But this was a semi-scripted drama, and I couldn't exactly say that out loud. I briefly wondered what would happen if I wedged one of my new sticky bombs onto her back and ran away. Probably nothing good.

"Where did the ogre guy go?" I asked, looking about. The other elite had disappeared while we were looting the body.

"There are invaders on the trail. The city of Zockau is vomiting them out. Areson is helping to keep us safe. He will meet back up with us later."

I paused, looking north. "We should also assist," I finally said. The Ring of Divine Suffering hung heavy on my finger. Its warmth was even more prominent in the rain. After one more kill, it would start giving me two stat points instead of one.

"We are already risking too much just to collect you," Clint said as he climbed onto the back of the caterpillar. The five other warriors leapt up upon the saddles, one by one until all six sat in a row, making them look like they were upon an amusement park ride. The fuzzy, yellow caterpillar made a chittering noise.

Donut: CARL, THAT CREATURE LOOKS LIKE A YELLOW TOILET BRUSH. SHE'S GOING TO SCARE MONGO.

Carl: Leave Mongo in his cage for now. He needs his rest anyway.

I examined the long, fuzzy caterpillar.

Nadine – Bearded Sage Caterpillar. Level 50.

The Bearded Sage Caterpillar is an enormous, furry, tree-dwelling insect who is normally content to sit atop trees and munch on leaves until the day they get the notion to form a chrysalis and turn into something else equally innocuous. They're super fuzzy and kinda cute as long as you don't look too hard at their faces. Have you ever seen a super closeup of a bug's face? Seriously, what the fuck? These things are mostly harmless, even after they turn into moths.

Anyway, Nadine wasn't born as a caterpillar. A Bearded Sage isn't normally intelligent, despite their name. Not that Nadine was Miss Science Fair before the High Elf attack, but she was a Chee. A teacher, actually, in charge of the Chee day school. She also used to be an actress, but don't ask her about that. If she was still able to talk, she'd deny it.

Donut: DO YOU THINK THESE OTHER GUYS ALL TURN INTO CATERPILLARS, TOO? BECAUSE THAT'S KINDA WEIRD.

Carl: I don't know. But be careful. Remember what happened to Miriam Dom. They turned her into a vampire

because it was funny. Don't let any of them bite you.

Nadine the caterpillar zoomed ahead, undulating as she disappeared into the jungle. The six riders moved up and down, like they were doing the wave. Signet casually strolled behind. I kept pace with her with Donut on my shoulder. I sent another note to Quasar, but he still wasn't answering.

"When it rains really hard, the confederates sometimes range forth from the river," Signet said as we moved from the waterway. We were moving back north. Away from the main road and the river, but closer to Zockau.

"Your mother is a naiad, and your father is the high elf king, right?" I asked, trying to remember the full story. I knew because she'd been a bastard, she'd been rejected by both families and had been forced to flee to the Over City, where she'd joined the circus. She'd lived there until Scolopendra's disaster had upended everything.

"Correct, but King Finian, my father, is no longer with us. His daughter, my half-sister, now rules the high elves. Imogen."

"And your mother?" I asked.

Signet's mouth drew tight. On her shoulder, the hammerhead shark tattoo shook its giant head and swam away.

"She is long dead," Signet said after a moment. "She was a princess. A true princess. She protected me and loved me and taught me the meaning of grace and magic and the importance of family, no matter how small that family may be. Then came the revolution, and that was that. My family's palace is now occupied by the simpering dukes of the confederacy. Nothing has changed since. I was cast out of the river and exiled from the Hunting Grounds by my father's people. I was still a child. Gods, it was so long ago."

"My father exiled me, too," Donut said. "He later got his tail caught in a car door which resulted in him being disqualified from future showings. Serves him right."

Signet nodded. "If you help me complete my task, I will assist in helping you reclaim your own crown if you wish."

"Oh, I already reclaimed my crown from him," Donut said. She swished her wet tail against my neck. "I conquered Cleveland and

secured the GC title. Something he could only dream of."

"Good for you," Signet said.

The jungle got more and more dense as we walked. It appeared that Nadine the caterpillar was chewing a trail for us. I remembered the advice from the bush elf when I first got here. *Stay on the paths*. The white dots of non-hostile creatures surrounded us, most of them moving away as we approached. A group of red dots appeared in the distance but then spread away.

The rain still found its way to us, despite the heavy coverage of the undergrowth. It felt as if we were constantly walking through waterfalls and showers. Dozens of small rivers formed on the jungle floor, draining away toward the river. I sank to my ankles in the mud. This far from the road, it was unlikely we'd come across traps, but I kept a wary eye out.

"What are we doing here, Signet?" I finally asked. "Why did you come and find me?"

"I am recruiting a team, and I am requesting your help. You are the last piece."

"What about me?" Donut asked.

"You both are the last pieces," she said.

"Okay," I began. "But the last time you recruited me, you were actually planning on sacrificing me."

"Not at the end," she said defensively. "Not once I realized how strong you were."

"What happened that night," I asked. "After I left the circus? We went by the next day, and the tents and everything was gone. Everybody was gone."

Signet nodded sadly. "Grimaldi killed the parasites, and he set our family free. It was like when you freed Heather the bear. All the clowns and lemurs and other performers simply crumbled away, finally free. All but Grimaldi himself, whom I took with me."

"So he is still alive?" I asked. "Has he turned back into a dwarf?"

"No," she said after a moment. "He… his story in this is mostly done. I am gathering people to me for a different reason."

"Who is that other guy then? The strongman who was just here? Wasn't he a part of the circus?"

"Yes," Signet said, "but he was here in the hunting grounds when the attack occurred. Only his brother Apollon was in the Over City. Apollon is gone, but Areson lives. They have another brother, Herman the Fleet, who was in Larracos. We don't yet know his fate."

I exchanged a look with Donut.

Ahead, one of the warrior guys shouted, and the caterpillar rushed off.

"What's the story with those guys?" I asked. "I can tell they're were-creatures, but I can't tell what they are. Do they all turn into caterpillars?"

"No," she said. "All six are the same, but they are not caterpillars. They're were-castors."

"Were-what?" I asked. "Caster? Like magicians?"

"No, not caster. Were-cas*tors*."

"What the hell is that?"

"It's a small creature. A type of rodent. It's not important. Their people were all magically transformed by then Princess Imogen. This was long ago, even before Scolopendra's attack. Back then, my father still sat upon the throne, and Imogen was his right hand. His Sorcerer General. They attacked the Chee and stole their land. My sister cast the transfiguration and then sent the cleansers in to mop them up. Only a few escaped. These warriors were children then. Nadine was their instructor. Their teacher. She was transformed into the caterpillar. The school children were all turned into different creatures, but these six young boys were all turned into the same thing. They have spent every moment since then running and fighting for their lives. The Chee were peaceful people, but these six have had a very hard life, and they have spent every moment of their lives in a constant state of struggle. They are an elite fighting force."

"Okay. So lay it on me. Why are you gathering people."

Ahead, the bushes rustled again, and the six dots of the were-warriors spread away from the caterpillar, chasing after something unseen.

Signet cocked her head to the side, as if listening. A jellyfish tattoo on her shoulder flowed across her neck. In the distance, some

creature cried out in pain. She relaxed.

"There are two great cancers in this once-beautiful, once-sacred land," she said, "and with every breath left in me, I will cut both of them free. The Confederacy and the High Elves."

"So you want revenge against those who killed your mom, and then you want to take out the high elves, too? Is that it?"

Signet grinned without the humor reaching her eyes. "Close enough."

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Donut: CARL, WHAT KIND OF BORING, COOKIE-CUTTER STORY HAVE YOU GOTTEN US INVOLVED IN? IF I AM GOING TO BE PART OF A DRAMA WHERE WE'RE NOTHING BUT THE GUEST STARS, I CERTAINLY HOPE IT'S SOMETHING MORE INTERESTING THAN A SIMPLE, FANTASY-BASED REVENGE STORY. I MEAN, REALLY. THIS SOUNDS LIKE SOMETHING THE CW NETWORK WOULD CANCEL AFTER THE FIRST SEASON. AT LEAST THE CIRCUS STORY LINE WAS INTERESTING.

Carl: We just have to get through this, and we can get back to work. I'm hoping to turn it to our advantage. But I don't know yet how hard it's going to be. I still haven't heard back from my lawyer.

The rain had finally started to ease, but the jungle foliage dripped all around us. The air was so humid, it was getting hard to breathe. Bugs were everywhere, and some of them were red-tagged mobs. My feet stuck in the mud with each step. We were moving northeast through the jungle, skirting the edge of the river by about a mile. We were still on the city-side of the river, and I occasionally saw remnants of buildings buried in the foliage. The ruins had been completely covered by the jungle.

Donut continued to complain as I stopped to pick a group of mushrooms that I recognized from Mordecai's list. Each one made a

crying noise as I pulled it from the ground, and I received a small amount of experience each time I picked one.

Donut: ZEV, HOW ARE THE RATINGS ON THIS SHOW ANYWAY?

Zev: They're… okay.

Donut: I KNEW IT! CARL, THIS IS NOT GOOD. WE SHOULD DITCH HER AND HER WEIRD WERE-VERMIN. THIS HUMIDITY IS TERRIBLE FOR MY COMPLEXION. THIS IS WORSE THAN THE DESERT.

Zev: Ratings were good on the third floor when you were involved. They lagged a little mid-season while you two were on the fourth and fifth floors, but people really like the current arc. People like the six warriors and their caterpillar mount. I missed a lot of it when I was away, but I've been trying to catch up. Fans are afraid Signet has painted herself into a corner with this storyline and is going to rely too heavily on something contrived to get herself out of it. People are pretty excited about you two coming back, but some of the more hardcore fans think you're going to mess everything up because of all your other issues. They're afraid everything is going to implode before there's a resolution. Or that you're going to take the show over because you both have big personalities.

Donut: WELL, OF COURSE WE'RE GOING TO TAKE IT OVER. HAVING MYSELF AND CARL ON THE PROGRAM IS THE EQUIVALENT OF HAVING AUDREY HEPBURN AND, I DON'T KNOW, MACHO MAN RANDY SAVAGE SUDDENLY SHOW UP AS GUEST STARS ON A PUBLIC ACCESS TELEVISION SHOW.

Carl: How do you even know who that is?

Donut: HE WAS ON AN EPISODE OF *WALKER, TEXAS RANGER*.

Zev: I never saw that show. Only the remake.

Donut: WE DON'T TALK ABOUT REMAKES, ZEV.

Zev: Right. Changing subjects now. We're talking to the Sensation people, and they're going to try to steer the

narrative so you're back in a saferoom in time for Odette's show in few hours.

The white dot of an elite appeared on my map, and soon Areson the ogre appeared. He now had a goddamn arrow sticking out of the side of his head. The seven-foot-tall strongman ogre stepped into the clearing and looked down at us. He held the corpse of a white-skinned elf slung over his shoulder like a sack. He dumped the body at my feet. It was a hunter.

"Sorry. Tried to keep him ticker beating," the ogre said as Signet clucked over him. She made him bend over so she could yank the arrow from the side of his head.

Signet pulled on the arrow, and a spurt of blood shot out, like she'd just popped a zit. The ogre didn't seem to notice. I returned my attention to the pale elf as the ogre continued to apologize.

"Signet says you want them alive. But he started to bleat, and I had to smoosh him a little to de-bleat him. Then all the stuff came out. Sorry I deaded him."

Corpse of Hunter Arwick. Killed by Elite Areson the Wise.

The Dream.

"It's okay," I said, going to my knees to examine the dead hunter. The Dream were a powerful, galaxy-spanning group of elves who had a stake in the faction wars game of the ninth floor. I had in my inventory a photograph of the mother of the Dream's leader. Her name was Epitome Noflex, and she was a bald but strikingly beautiful creature. This hunter was equally bald. I hadn't realized how pale these guys were, even after seeing the picture. He wore a quiver full of unenchanted arrows, but there was no bow. He also wore a flowing, enchanted robe that allowed him to move quickly and gave a small constitution buff.

"I do want them alive, but I want them dead more," I said.

"It is strange elf," Areson said as he rubbed the side of his head. "Very pale." He looked at his palm, which came back red. He examined the blood quizzically and then licked his hand. "Yummy."

"He *is* quite pale, isn't he?" Donut said. "His skin is the shade of Miss Beatrice's thighs in December."

"These elves are from very far away," I said. "They came in space ships. We need to kill all of them."

He only had two items in his inventory. A single, magical arrow and a piece of paper. I pulled the blast chest from my own inventory, stuck it in the elf's inventory, and transferred the two items to the chest. Then I pulled the chest free and immediately transferred it to my inventory so I could examine the items properly. Both were relatively safe to handle, and I pulled them out.

This was something I'd have to do from now on when looting hunters.

The arrow looked like just a regular arrow, but it was enchanted with a particularly nasty poison.

Arrow of Enthusiastic Double Gonorrhea.

This is a regular arrow, but the tip is dipped in a poison that will inflict you with Enthusiastic Double Gonorrhea.

Trust me on this. You don't want Enthusiastic Double Gonorrhea.

It doesn't kill you, but you'll want it to. It sets your genitals aflame. Literally. And then it heals that area of your body over and over. The only way to remove the disease is to, uh, geld yourself. Or pass it on to someone else.

"Holy shit," I muttered, careful not to touch the tip as I returned it to my inventory.

The piece of paper was a kids' menu from some diner from Canada. On the back of the menu, written in what looked like colored pencils, was a crude map of the hunting grounds. It looked like the map was segmented into several sections, and there was writing along the edges.

"Huh," I said after a moment, trying to figure out what I was looking at.

"What is it?" Donut asked.

"I think a bunch of the hunters sat down in some saferoom and then divvied up the hunting grounds so they wouldn't get in each other's way. Look. The Hive has the bottom left corner, and the Dream has where we are now. Their area includes all of where Point Mongo is."

The unaffiliated hunters were relegated to areas around the city of Zockau. There were multiple other groups with names such as the Crafters and the Nebular Sin Patrol. I focused on one area in the southeast, near the elf castle. Skull Empire. My heart quickened. The orcs had sent hunters here.

Excellent.

But there was more to the crude map, too.

"Hey, our names are written on here," Donut said, pointing with a paw. "He spelled my name wrong!"

Sure enough, there was a list of about thirty names. All of the top ten were on there along with several others I recognized. Each name had an arrow to a point on the map. All of the names were circled, all in different colors. Some were circled with two different colors. Both Donut and I were circled in blue and purple. If I was reading it correctly, that meant we'd been "claimed" by two different groups. The Hive and the Skull Empire.

The line from our names led to the approximate location we'd been this morning before we'd set out. *Sonofabitch*. They knew where all of us were. I focused on Prepotente and Miriam, and they were said to be near Point Mongo. Lucia Mar was not too far away, either, but on the high elf side of the river.

It appeared each group was given a hunting area, but some of the hunters also claimed specific crawlers. I wondered how that worked if we weren't in their designated areas. More importantly, I wondered how we could exploit this information.

Katia was circled by the Skull Empire. Elle was being hunted by the Crafters. Eva, I noted, was also being hunted by the Crafters. In addition to me and Donut, the Hive had also claimed Lucia Mar. The Nebular group was hunting Prepotente and Miriam Dom.

The Dream only had one person on their list. The very last name. This dead hunter had circled it a bunch of times, pressing so hard the pencil broke through the paper, and then at the bottom of the map, he'd drawn a pretty impressive likeness of their target with a big X over his goofy, smiling face.

Louis.

I sighed, remembering that moment when Louis had snatched the photograph of Epitome Noflex from my hands and then demanded that Juice Box transform into her likeness so he could bang her.

Goddamnit, Louis, I thought. That entire group: Louis and Elle and Katia and several others were all a few hundred miles away in the middle of the forest, near the edge of the Skull Empire's claimed territory, but in an area claimed by a group called the Filigree. I didn't know who that was.

"Come," Signet said. "We are close to camp."

"Our presence is a danger to you," I said out loud, looking pointedly at the sky and indicating the map. "The others know where we are because they're cheating assholes, and they're coming for us."

Signet didn't appear worried. "We can handle a few outworlders. It is not a concern."

Areson grunted. "I will squeeze all the stuff out of them, too."

I sent out a group message, relaying everything I could see on the hand-drawn map as we sat in the small clearing amongst the others. In addition to the six were-whatevers, the caterpillar, and the ogre, Signet had a group of forty bush elves, a talking tortoise named Edgar, and an eclectic group of others including dryads and monkeys and other forest creatures. The group totaled at about 70 people. Most of them hovered around level 40 or so.

Louis: It's not my fault they can't take a joke.

Carl: Just be careful. Katia, you gotta watch his back. I don't know how many of the Dream are here, but I had the sense he was really, over-the-top angry at Louis.

Katia: Wonderful. Thanks for the heads up.

Louis: I don't see why everybody is overreacting.

Three of Signet's crew were small, winged pixies. All female. They all hovered there, glaring at me like pissed-off Tinkerbells. It

was because of my goblin tattoo, which I'd gotten all the way on the first floor.

While I talked in the chat, Donut released Mongo, who had finally recovered from his "ordeal." He jumped about with excitement, moving to sniff at all the newcomers. The elves in particular were wary of the dinosaur, but soon everyone got used to his presence. He came to sit next to me, and he curled up, yawning big, his teeth crackling with electricity.

"It's odd, seeing one of his kind on this side of the river," one of the elves said. "And one so well behaved."

"He's a very good boy," Donut said.

"Then he's definitely not from around here," the elf said.

"No, most certainly not," Donut agreed. "We've already had a run-in with the local dinosaurs, and they are absolutely not the kind I wish to associate with."

In the center of the clearing was a small, eight-foot, white-barked tree with a fairy ring of white flowers circling it. All the others kept back from the tree. Actual, soft grass surrounded the clearing. When I examined the tree, I could see a very slight glow of enchantment, but all the description said was: **This tree is old as shit**.

Signet announced we were waiting for a few more to show up, and we all sat down. I turned to say something to Donut when I received a long message.

Quasar: So, how you doing buddy? Sorry about the radio silence. They're moving some of the rules around, and we can't just casually chat anymore. I now have to get a court order to send you a message. You can still send me messages all you like. That's a good thing. All your constant bitching about the hunters getting outside information has caused a stir, and things are moving on that front. Anyway, regarding the program. It's kind of a good news/bad news thing. Sensation has agreed to accept Borant's offer of a ninth-floor extension, but they're being little bitches about it and want to wait a few days before actually signing anything officially. Between you me and this Betty giving me

a rubdown right now, I'm reading between the lines here. My take is you gotta find a way to make the program more exciting, but you gotta do it in a way where the spotlight isn't throwing the star into the shadow. Don't know how you're going to wrangle that. If that spotlight on you gets a little too bright, they might decide to pull your plug, so be extra double careful. I'm sure you've heard this a hundred times already, but nobody likes it when the guest star gets all the tail.

Regarding our other problem. One hundred fifty million credits. That's… Yeah, I don't know how you're gonna pull that off, cowboy. That's enough money to buy your own planet. By my count, your current outside-the-dungeon net worth is sitting at about 117 credits, and you probably already have a tax bill of 50. And even if you do gather that much money, which you won't, we have a few legal issues to deal with. Bribery is both a way of life but also a real crime out here in the real world. And while technically it's *not* a bribe, I'm not so sure the high courts will see it that way. It's not exactly something we can keep hidden, now is it? I have an idea, but it's a little… Never mind. I'm working on it.

Talk to you soon. Don't die on me. This is the most fun I've had since the night I graduated law school and nailed Professor Foster.

Goddamnit. Why did it always have to be so difficult?

A few more creatures, this time a pair of ursine, entered the clearing and sat down. They nodded at Signet in greeting. Signet nodded back and stood to face us all. Next to me, Donut was chatting away with Edgar the tortoise.

"Now that everyone is here, it is time. We have two tasks before us," Signet said. "It won't be easy, but if we work together, we will reach our goal."

"And what, exactly, is the goal?" I asked.

New Quest. The Vengeance of the Daughter.

Part One of Two.

Tsarina Signet, exiled half-daughter of the Naiad has finally come home. Her kingdom, once flourishing and beautiful, has become marred by infighting and a sloppy revolution that cut off the head of the government and left the body flailing.

Signet has returned and wishes to reclaim her mother's crown. Or at the very least, put a proper government in place. In order to do that, she must assassinate the current leaders of the Naiad Confederacy, who are holed up in their fortress at the former river palace of the Naiad, now dubbed "Fort Freedom."

Help Signet assault Fort Freedom and establish revenge against her mother's assassination.

***Reward*: You get to move on to part two. In addition, every survivor of the assault against the Confederacy will be 20% more willing to follow your orders. I bet that number will go up even more if you complete the second half of this quest.**

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[PART 2]

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THE VENGEANCE OF THE DAUGHTER

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Two of the were-castors accompanied us on our trek back to Point Mongo. Signet also sent out more bush elves and a few others to spread around us and to seek out any lingering hunters.

The two who accompanied us were the bald, one-legged one named Clint, and the one with the mullet. His name was Holger. The furry men were strangely insistent upon us returning to a saferoom, and it took me a minute to realize they'd been pushed into it by Signet, who'd in turn been pushed into it by the showrunners. It was because we had to go on Odette's show in a few hours.

It was a reminder—a damn important reminder—that elites weren't nearly as autonomous as regular NPCs. They weren't controlled like robots, but the showrunners were allowed to send suggestions to them, which sometimes caused them to act out of character. It still wasn't clear exactly how much control they really had.

I wondered on that as we walked back to Point Mongo. If there was a way to make Signet and other elites self-aware, just like with regular NPCs, and what that would mean if it happened.

Either way, these two guys, Clint and Holger, weren't elites. Just regular ol' NPCs, and they were just following Signet's orders.

"So, Holger," Donut asked as we marched. She rode upon the back of Mongo. The rest of us walked. "Tell me about your hairstyle. What is it called again, Carl?"

"A mullet," I said.

"Yes, that's right. Business in the front, party in the back. Tell me, is it a cultural thing? Where I'm from, it's a cultural thing. It means you're from a people who like to say 'Yeehaw' a lot and listen to music about trucks and cheating girlfriends and you eat things like corndogs and fried butter. And you like to blow things up." She looked at me. "Carl, maybe you should grow one."

"It's a sign of my dominance," Holger said proudly. This guy had two weapons crossed over his back. A sickle-shaped blade, and a sharpened stick.

"It's not a sign of nothing," Clint said.

"You just feel that way because you're bald," Holger said.

"I ain't bald when I turn," Clint said. "And when you turn, you look even more like an idiot."

"Well, I like it quite a bit," Donut said. "I once knew a Maine Coon who had a similar hairstyle, and it suited him perfectly. It was stunning." She looked at Clint. "But bald is beautiful too. Or it can be. We won't talk about Sphynx cats or those weird chihuahua things. But it really suits *you*."

"Thank you, Princess," Clint said.

"Have you ever seen her do it?" Donut asked, changing the subject. "Summon her battle squad, I mean. Carl saw her do it once, but I didn't get to see it. He said all of her tattoos came to life, but they were flat."

"Just once," Clint said. "It wasn't all of them. Just the ogre and the eels."

"How did you two first become associated with her anyway?" Donut asked. "We met her when she was trying to invade a circus, and she gave Carl an erection so bad, he had to break his finger to make it go away. How about you?"

Holger grunted with amusement. "She does that. We have known her since we were kits. She lived in the village with us after she was cursed. One of the village elders introduced her to Grimaldi, and she left with him. Soon after, that bitch Imogen came to the village and attacked and killed almost all of us. A few years after that, when Scolopendra attacked, those of us who'd survived Imogen's attack were mostly unaffected by the demon's cloud."

"Really?" I asked. "Do you know why not?"

Holger shrugged. "Dunno. Maybe it's because one of the attacks that hit the area was the transfiguration spell. It was the exact same spell Imogen used on our village. Not sure though because there was other stuff in the cloud. Spores. A rage spell. All sorts of nasty stuff. I remember that day, and I got really sick, but everything was fine after. But the city on the other side of the river was devastated. Most of the animals were transformed or killed. We all almost starved. Miss Nadine saved us."

"Huh," I said. "That's really interesting."

"It wasn't too interesting to me. We'd already been kicked in the nads a bunch'o times. And this was another kick. A big one. Bout time we start kicking back."

"What about the high elves?" I asked. "How did they do during Scolopendra's attack?"

Clint grunted. "Ain't your mum ever tell you the story? Read you the poem? *The high elves cowered, deep in their castle, protected by what they took*. The elves came out of it smelling like water lilies. The bush elves were devastated, but the high elves had some magic that protected them. Something they'd stolen. Some say the bastards knew it was coming. Some say the whole thing was their fault in the first place. I wouldn't be surprised."

"How was it their fault?" I'd heard something different from the cookbook. The Semeru dwarves on the ninth floor had dug their city too deep. It was a reverse version of the Tower of Babel story. It was that story that had given me the idea to fill it with water in the first place.

Clint shook his head. "Rumor has it the elves went down there once. Back when she was still asleep. That's when they collected all their soul gems for their magic. But the worm started to wake up, so they ran. But before they left, they stole something else. An item that protected them from Scolopendra's multi-attack. It saved all of them. The royal court, at least. Everybody in the castle."

"Well *I* heard," Holger added, "that bitch Imogen herself tried to cast her *Transfiguration* spell on the giant centipede, and it didn't work. But that was why it was one of the spells in the nine-tier

attack. Scolopendra was just firing back everything that had been fired at her over the years, only it was all at once. Like a damage reflect, but one that took a long time to get ready."

Clint turned on the other were-castor. "It couldn't have been Imogen, ya turd burger. Them elves have had soul crystals since before any of us been born. Imogen is old, but she ain't that old. She's the same age as the Tsarina."

"Well maybe she went down again later," Holger said. "And don't call me a turd burger. I'll tell Miss Nadine."

"That ain't make no sense," Clint said. "Went down later? My gods, you're so stupid."

"Your face is stupid," Holger said.

"Well your hair is stupid."

"At least I got hair, baldy. And two legs."

"Really?" I said. "Can you two not…"

Clint screamed and tackled the other NPC. The two started beating the shit out of each other while rolling through the underbrush. In moments, they were covered in mud and leaves. Birds scattered away. Mongo started bouncing up and down with excitement.

"This is just like you and your Monobrow Sam friend," Donut said, watching the two men fight with an odd fascination. They were both screaming at the top of their lungs and hitting each other with closed fists. The anger and violence was sudden and chaotic. At least neither had pulled a weapon.

"We insulted each other, but we were always joking," I said, looking down at the two small men. "We never actually hit each other. And we only did it while we were playing video games."

"You weren't serious?" Donut asked. "Are you certain? You two got quite brutal with each other. He used to call you a complete wuss and talked about how you were his bitch. Honestly, I was beginning to think maybe you two had spent time in prison together or something. Girls never insult each other like that."

"Girls are worse than boys, but they usually don't do it to your face. And you insult me all the time, Donut."

"I'm not insulting you, Carl. It's called constructive criticism. It's different."

Clint had gotten the upper hand and was now on top of Holger, pounding his face in. A health bar had finally appeared over both of them. Both bars were still in the green, but he was starting to do some real damage. I stepped in and pulled him back.

"That's enough," I said, trying to pull Clint off of Holger. They continued to fight. Clint had a fistful of mullet, and when I pulled him away, he dragged the other man with him. Holger screamed in outrage, and he gnashed his enormous front teeth while Clint punched over and over with his free fist.

"Stop. Jesus," I said dropping them both and backing away. I finally remembered that a bite from these guys could possibly turn me into one of them, and that was not something I wanted to deal with.

"Mobs coming," Donut said. "Coming in fast."

Without even a hesitation, both men jumped to their feet and pulled their weapons. Their reaction was so lightning quick, it was almost like they'd been practicing this exact move. They moved back to back and took a protective stance in front of us on the trail. Clint held a mace, and Holger held a sickle sword. They both started turning in a circle.

"Where?" Holger asked. His face was starting to puff up from the beating.

"I feel 'em," Clint said, pointing down the trail with his mace. "Invisible. Coming in hot. On the ground."

"It's more of those weasels from before, I think," Donut said. "The ones that paralyzed Carl."

"Yup," Clint said. "Them is everywhere around here. Hunt in packs. Sometimes they're under control of one of those outworlders. Sometimes they're just wild. Elves use 'em too. Easy to kill if you know they're coming. We got this."

"I'll help!" Donut said, and she started to sing.

"Here's the thing, Princess," Holger was saying to the pouting Donut as we approached the bridge to Point Mongo. The small man's face was so swollen, it was hard to understand him. He acted as if the fight with his fellow were-castor hadn't occurred. "You can't sing well. You ain't in tune. I mean no offense. There's no shame in it. You need lessons. That's all. Or magic that'll help you along. It's as simple as that."

Donut sniffed. "It's hard to sing proper with all that disgusting grunting and stabbing and screeching going on around me. Besides, Mongo and Carl think I'm an excellent singer."

"They think that because they're your mates. It's okay. There's probably a bard's guild in that town of yours that'll give you some tips. It's not a big deal with the easy spells. They just fail. But if you're trying to do something big, it becomes dangerous to try it if you're not in key. What were you trying to cast anyway?"

"*Standing Ovation*," Donut said. "It would've given you a dexterity boost for the fight."

"That's a good one to practice on," Holger agreed. "But maybe not practice while we're getting our faces chomped on by murder weasels. We're gonna stay in town with you two until the assault tomorrow night. We'll help you find someone to help you practice. Won't we, Clint?"

"Sure we will," Clint said cheerfully. He, too, pretended like they hadn't just beaten the crap out of each other. Or that either of them had been chewed on by dozens of weasels.

The fight had gone quickly. The weasels were wild, not affiliated with either a hunter or a high elf. Neither Clint nor Holger cast any spells, but the two little men moved with surprising speed, and despite the weasels' invisibility, they could hunt by sound and smell. The little men were quick and vicious fighters, and I imagined when it was all six of them together, they would be almost unstoppable. Plus it turned out they were immune to the paralysis effect. They fought with their weapons and their teeth, and they did the lion's share of the work in the quick, brutal fight.

Unlike last time, the night weasels attacked all together. They moved in from three sides at once, screaming, which was especially

terrifying because I couldn't see them. I dropped a smoke curtain. Donut jumped off Mongo and after slamming a pair with magic missiles, she started her ill-fated attempt at singing. I could only see the weasels after they took some damage, but the two were-castors tore through the invaders with terrifying speed. I soon had multiple, visible targets. I managed to snap kick a few of them away and then crush one under my foot against a tree. I cast *Fear* and then nailed one with a banger sphere.

Mongo had also fought well, pouncing and snatching up the weasels with enthusiasm. He'd activated his Earthquake attack—something he rarely used—which had given damage to all the weasels on the ground and turned them visible.

The fight had ended quickly after that. The weasels had mostly focused on Holger and Clint, and they were the only ones to have taken damage. Their health had barely gone down despite multiple bites.

I was starting to suspect that the two creatures had extremely high constitution scores. That plus a special ability that drew the aggro of mobs.

We approached Point Mongo without seeing anything else. Mordecai had been busy. A pair of mushroom guards now stood at both ends of the bridge. I also noticed the wide arc of alarm traps that had been spread out randomly in front of the bridge, designed to only be triggered by pet-class mobs and hunters. He'd also placed alarms along the slopes on both sides of the river, adding naiad creatures to the trigger.

Donut had to do a bit of talking to get the guards to allow Clint and Holger in. We received a ping from Zev that we had fifteen minutes to get to a saferoom.

I was about to respond when the notification came. Both Donut and I stopped dead on the bridge.

Admin Notice. Congratulations, Crawler. You have received your third and final sponsor!

Viewers watching your feed will now see advertisements produced by all three of your sponsors.

Sponsor's Name: The Apothecary.

Additional details available in the Sponsorship Tab of your interface.

"Carl, Carl, I got another sponsor!" Donut said. "Someone named the Apothecary!"

"Yeah, that's who I got, too," I said. "They must've spent a lot of money to get both of us."

"Hey," Donut said after a moment. "They sponsored Prepotente and Miriam Dom and Lucia Mar and Katia and both of those two-headed guys, too! And Elle and Imani too!"

"Interesting," I said, trying to parse the information. I had a pretty good idea who this was. I'd only seen the term "The Apothecary" once before. It'd been during a mob description back on the fourth floor.

Krakaren. The *real* Krakaren, not the weird caricature version they had in the dungeon. But the collective mind that was slowly making her way across the universe. I had no idea what she really looked like, but I doubted she was an octopus thing. It was rumored she was involved with the company that ran the tunneling system, which was owned and operated by the Plenty, who were goat people. If this Apothecary collective was the Plenty's silent partner, it meant they likely had a bottomless reserve of money.

The fact they'd gone through and sponsored most of the top ten was more than likely some bullshit political posturing that had nothing to do with us. I sighed.

Donut: I DON'T LIKE SHARING A SPONSOR WITH ALL THE OTHER TOP 10'S! IT'S NOT FAIR! THEY'RE NOT GOING TO HAVE ENOUGH MONEY TO GIVE US ALL PRIZES.

Carl: Maybe. Maybe not. You never know what's going to happen. I never thought I'd get anything from that "pacifist" group, and they sent me some great stuff.

Donut: YOUR LAST SPONSOR GAVE YOU A VEGETABLE.

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[17]

We set the two were-castors up with rooms at the inn, and we moved to the saferoom. We entered, but nobody else was there except for Mordecai and the two cretin bodyguards. Mordecai was in his room, and he came out wearing what looked like earmuffs over his already-fuzzy ears and a pissed-off expression.

"Thank the gods," Mordecai said. "You two need to go shut her up before Bomo or the Sledge pound her to death. Louis, Firas, and Katia had to leave. Your friend Bautista was in here, too."

"What's going on?" I asked.

"Carl! Are you home! Carl! Come here this instant!" came the high-pitched, screeching voice. It was supernaturally loud, coming all the way from the training room.

Samantha.

"Oh, yes. That's right. I forgot to tell you," Donut said.

"Forgot to tell me what?" I asked.

"So, I may have accidentally told Samantha that we're talking to Signet. I didn't know that was going to freak her out. I had to mute her ability to chat. She went crazy when I told her, and I don't know why. It's quite embarrassing, really. Have you noticed how annoying she is in the chat with the way she talks?"

"Jesus," I said. "What does she want?"

Samantha continued to screech. "Carl! Carl come here!"

The cleaner bot beeped mournfully at me, as if even it was irritated at the noise.

"She wants you to take her to this Signet woman," Mordecai said. "She was in the middle of telling me the recipe for a potion I've been chasing for a very long time when Donut told her that you two were with the elite. She's been like this ever since. I had Bomo shut her mouth all the way, but she's figured out how to roll around a little and move her mouth back open. I suggest we use your duct tape."

"Well, we don't have time to deal with her right now. We're about to go on Odette's show."

Mordecai just looked at me.

"Hey, you're the one that said we should keep her," I added.

Samantha let out a series of shrieks.

I groaned. "I'll go talk to her really quick."

Donut looked up at the Sledge. A brush appeared in front of her. "Sledgie, be a dear and brush me."

The rock monster rumbled happily and moved to pick up the brush while I made my way to the training room.

Samantha, the re-animated, severed sex doll head sat on the floor in the middle of the training room, face down, screaming. She stopped the moment I entered. The head rolled toward me, stopping at my feet, looking up at me.

"What the hell?" I asked. "When did you learn how to do that?"

"Take me to her. To Tsarina Signet. She's the granddaughter of Princess Yungsten of the Naiad, which makes her my third cousin thrice removed, and she has the ability to give me back my body. So take me to her, or I will kill your mother."

I kneeled down and picked up the latex-like head by her white hair. I set it straight on the ground. "How is she your third cousin? I thought you were a god. She's not."

"Well, it's really by marriage if you're being super technical, but her great-grandfather was Tsar Guggenheim who was married to…"

"You know what, never mind. Donut and I are going to go see Signet again tomorrow night when we assault the Naiad castle. I'll bring you if you promise to stop screeching. Okay? One squeal, though, and the deal is off."

I'd already been planning on bringing her for this anyway, but I wasn't about to tell her that.

"Okay, okay. Cool," she said. "I can do that. You should take me out of here more often. I'm pretty sure my bitch of a mother won't attack anymore when you do. I'll fuck up anything you want me to fight. You take me to Signet, and I'll be your ride or die bitch to the end."

I patted her on the head, and she growled at me and tried to bite my finger.

Zev: Okay, guys. Transferring now. Remember, you're not going straight to the trailer. There's a security checkpoint first. It should go quickly.

"Shit," I muttered. I'd forgotten about that.

Donut sat next to me. She seemed strangely nervous. She'd already put Mongo away, which was unusual for her. She looked at me like she was about to say something but changed her mind.

Entering Security Checkpoint.

We flashed, and we appeared someplace I'd never been before. All of our menus snapped away. A warning appeared on my interface, but it came and went so quickly, I couldn't read it.

Donut yowled. We both fell sideways, hitting a wall made of glass. But when we hit, it was in slow motion. It still hurt, and I wasn't so sure it was sideways anymore. My head spun. I suddenly felt sick, like I was falling. As we bumped into the side wall or floor or whatever it was, I caught sight of something I never thought I'd see. My breath caught in my throat as I looked straight down.

"Holy shit," I gasped.

Earth. It filled the view, though it was starting to pull away. It took me a breathless moment to orient myself. I could see the Indian Ocean spread out below us, the edge of Madagascar coming into view from the top. The skies were mostly clear of clouds. The whole world was turned 90 degrees from the way I was used to looking at it.

Our change of scenery was so sudden, so unexpected I felt tears come to my eyes. I immediately thought of Coolie, who'd written the 19th edition of the cookbook. This had been his last view, but of his own home planet. He'd died after a failed assassination attempt on a pair of admins.

We weren't in zero-g, but it was damn close. The ship's rotation made it so the clear, side wall was the floor, but because of physics I would never understand, the amount of gravity we felt was very slight.

Donut scrabbled with her legs. "Carl, Carl, I don't like this. I'm going to…"

She horked her tuna lunch right in my direction. The vomit seemed to spread out in a cloud in slow motion before angling down and splattering against our feet.

"She didn't warn us that we'd be in space," Donut said.

The room itself was completely featureless. It was just a straight chamber with a glass floor and ceilings made of a strange, almost-rusted-looking metal. We were the only ones here. There were words on one of the walls, but I didn't recognize the script and couldn't read it.

"Hello?" I called.

"It smells like rotten tuna in here," Donut said. "I'm glad I put Mongo away. He would hate this."

A pair of gnolls entered the room from above, dropping in feet first. They came through a hatch I hadn't seen. No tool tips popped up. They dropped in like commandos doing a raid.

These were shade gnolls. The kind that looked like hyenas. The same type of creature as poor Growler Gary, the poor NPC I'd been forced to kill a dozen times over on the fourth floor. Both of these guys were armored in plastic-like body armor with rank insignias on their chest. The armor covered every inch of them except their heads. They both wore what looked like pulse rifles over their shoulders. Each carried a scanner on their wrists, like oversized watches.

These were the Shade Gnoll Riot Forces. Real ones. Mercenaries.

They landed heavily on either side of us. Their heavy boots made a clicking noise when they hit the glass, one of them landing directly into the pile of Donut's vomit.

"Don't move," the other one said, running the scanner over me. "Are you holding any explosives?"

"If I was, you'd know by now," I said.

The gnoll grunted with amusement. He proceeded to roughly pat me down. He had something odd tied to his waist, dangling down. They were large, old-school diver's flippers. The other guy had the same.

"Is this really necessary," I asked. "Don't you have some special AI scanner that can see I'm not carrying anything?"

The gnoll didn't answer. Behind me, the other gnoll was bent over Donut doing the same. He clutched onto Donut's collar charm and examined closely.

"It used to be a butterfly, but now it's this ugly thing," Donut said. "Ghastly, I know." The gnoll let it go and stood.

"They're clear," he said. The gnoll who'd patted me down nodded and jumped up, flying higher than I expected, expertly moving through the hatch in the ceiling. The second gnoll appeared to scratch Donut under the chin and then he, too, disappeared above.

"Did you just let that dog guy scratch your chin?" I asked.

Before Donut could answer, we teleported away again.

We landed sideways in Odette's familiar trailer. I hit the deck with an *oof*. Donut landed on the couch, landing right between Zev and Odette. The ground roiled. There was a storm outside.

"Ow," I said, rubbing my arm, pulling myself up.

Odette was in her legless, human form, floating an inch off the couch cushion atop her circular wheelchair thing. Zev wasn't wearing her usual diving suit. Just a simple rebreather around her throat. It was the first time I'd seen her outside the thing. I was stricken at how thin she looked compared to all the other kua-tin I'd seen. But I

was more surprised at the appearance of the talk show host in the green room.

"Odette," I said, surprised.

Donut scrambled to her feet, and I clearly saw her tail move through Odette, indicating she was, indeed, a holo. Zev was really here. The couch was already soaked with the mist from her rebreather. She pulled herself off the couch and onto the floor as Donut jumped down beside her. Donut lowered her head and pushed it against the small fish woman in greeting.

"So, Odette is here," Zev said after a moment, stating the obvious. "Unexpected. But here she is."

"Hello, Carl," Odette said. "We don't have much time. We're going on in a few minutes, and I still need to get into costume. But we need to discuss something important. It's regarding your ex-girlfriend."

Donut made a hacking noise, and I was momentarily distracted. I thought she was going to puke again, this time right on Zev.

"Wait, what?" I asked, my brain catching up with what Odette had said. "Are you talking about Beatrice?" I felt a chill. "What about her?"

"Miss Beatrice?" Donut asked, looking up. "Do you know something about Miss Beatrice?" She looked at Zev. "What is she talking about, Zev?"

"Odette just gave me some information," Zev said. "*Unexpected* information. When she told me what she wanted to tell you, we discussed it, and we both decided it best we get this out of the way as quickly as possible." She paused. "It's safe to talk in here." She looked at Donut and then me. "About this subject."

It was like Odette had just tossed a grenade into the room, and now all we could do was wait for it to explode.

I took a deep breath. "Okay, Odette. What is it you need to say?"

"Beatrice is alive."

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"Bullshit," I said as Donut gasped.

"It's true. She survived the initial collection. She was being hunted by bounty hunters who were going to illegally sell her to Borant so they could transform her and use her as a country boss. A very specific one if they found her in time. I had her removed from the planet's surface so that wouldn't happen."

I just looked at her. Holy shit.

"Miss Beatrice is alive?" Donut asked, her lower jaw quivering. She looked at Zev. "And you knew this?"

"I just found out a minute ago," Zev said.

Donut jumped to my shoulder. "How? It can't be true. Is she here?"

"Why did you take her? And why are you telling us this now, Odette?" I asked. I reached up and put my hand on Donut. She leaned against my touch for support.

"I *wasn't* going to tell you," Odette said. "Not until you were free. But present circumstances have forced my hand. The plan was to secret her away and keep her safe until the crawl was over. We had a security breach. It hasn't yet leaked that she's alive and off planet, but that will soon change. Another program is planning on running a story. They're going to ambush you with the information. Information stolen from *me*, and I want to make sure you have all the facts before you're confronted. And if you're amenable, we can completely head off this story-poaching bastard."

"Wait. Hold up," I said, confusion rising. "How were they going to ambush us? And you didn't answer my first question."

"Why I took her? I did it to protect my investment in you. Both of you."

"Bullshit," I said. "There has to be more to it than that."

She held out her arms. Her nails were ridiculously long. They were curled like claws. "It's true. Look, there was always only four ways this could've gone. One, she entered the dungeon. Two, she'd been in the initial collection. Three, she survived the collapse and was living on the surface. Or four, she was dead. In the first three scenarios, they would've found her and used her against you. And what would've happened next would've been cruel and awful and likely a crawl-ending event." She looked at Donut pointedly. "For one of you, at least."

"But she was just living on earth? I thought people were safe if they didn't go in the dungeon."

"Oh, Carl," Odette said. "You should know by now that's not how this works. Laws and rules and regulations don't apply when this much money is involved."

"Then why didn't you just kill her?" I demanded.

On my shoulder, Donut stiffened even further.

"Oh, believe me, the thought entered my mind," Odette said. "One day, if you survive this, we'll sit down, and I'll explain it to you. Then you'll understand."

"No," I said, anger rising. "You told me to never trust anyone until I understood their motivations. And I don't understand yours. I want to understand right now. Right fucking now."

Lexis stuck her head in the room. "Ten minutes, Odette."

Odette waved her away.

"Is she here?" Donut asked again, her voice practically a whisper. "Can I talk to her?"

Odette exhaled. "Did Mordecai ever tell you what I did to him?"

"What?" I asked. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"Everything," Odette said. She had a sudden, unexpected quaver to her voice. "Get the story from him, and maybe my actions will make sense. But we don't have time to get into it now."

Zev sighed, water splashing out from her rebreather and splashing onto my legs. "Oh for the sake of the gods. She's also using Bea to blackmail the Borant Corporation."

I felt myself growl. I looked at Odette, and she gave Zev an annoyed look. "How?" I asked.

"It's complicated," Zev said. "And it has nothing to do with you or her. It's actually a good thing. But we all have to pretend like it wasn't Odette who saved Bea, and that Borant did something noble. In exchange, Odette is getting a higher revenue share for the remainder of the crawl. We just signed the contract. We had to do it quickly."

"About Mordecai my ass," I grumbled.

"The contract was an afterthought," Odette said, her voice uncharacteristically soft. "It wasn't my main motivation."

"But is she really here?" Donut asked.

"Yes. Is she?" I asked

Odette turned to Zev. "If you're going to tell him about the contract, you might as well tell him the next part."

"There's more?" I asked, incredulous.

"It's that fan box you got," Zev said, her voice subdued. "You're not supposed to open it for a few hours, but the votes are in. Soon after you open it, you're going to be whisked away to an event. One where you'll be able to interact with fans. It's going to be just you. Not Donut. That's where they were going to confront you. It's why we're telling you this now."

"I don't understand," I said.

"Please," Donut said, her voice turning to a sob. "Please, someone answer me. Goddamnit. Carl, make them answer me."

"She's here," Odette said. "Not in person, of course. She's already off planet, on her way to the inner system. But she's standing by. I want your permission to bring her on the show."

"Go fuck yourself, Odette," I said, rage boiling over. "This is what you really wanted. This is what you wanted all along. Goddamn you." I turned to Zev. "We are not going to go out there. Fuck the consequences."

"Carl," Odette began.

"We're doing it," Donut said, interrupting. She straightened on my shoulder. "It's my decision, and I'm saying we'll do it."

"No, Donut," I said. "I'll do it alone."

"Carl. Darling," Donut said. She took a moment to compose herself. A long moment. "You're trying to protect me. I know that. Remember what I told you before? That we need to trust each other? Well, it's time for you to trust me. Okay? It sounds like this is going to happen one way or another. At least now we have a moment to prepare." She turned to Odette. "Thank you for saving her from becoming a dungeon boss. And thank you for the warning. We'll start the program as usual, and then we'll do the reunion. That'll be all. See you on set." She turned away.

"If this ends up being some sort of trick or bullshit beyond what you say, I swear to god I will kill you myself," I said to Odette. "I don't care how long it takes, but I will get to you."

She smiled sadly. "I would expect nothing less of you, Carl." She blinked and disappeared.

"I'm sorry," Zev said. "She dropped all this on me as we started preparing for your appearance."

"You don't have to do this, Donut," I said.

"It's quite all right, Carl," Donut said. She was pretending, of course. "It's quite all right," she repeated. She jumped from my shoulder and moved to the counter and peered underneath. She gasped. "Carl, they have treats hidden under the counter! They found the treats that come in the pink bag. I love those!"

Zev remained standing on the floor by the couch, watching Donut, a worried expression on her face. The small fish woman was trembling. I'd never seen her like this.

"This is such terrible timing," Zev said. "This shouldn't be happening now. This is too big to be happening now."

"Goddamnit," I said. "There's something else going on. Why are *you* so damn nervous?"

She turned to me and pulled her webbed hand to her lips in a *shhh* motion. She leaned in and whispered. "Donut is going to need you. Focus on that."

"Look," I began. "I'm worried that you're…"

“All you need to know is that you need to close that yap of yours right now. Please.”

I was so surprised that she’d told me to shut up, that I did.

Lexis stuck her head back in the room. “Odette will record her monologue later, so you two will come on almost right away. It’s not live, but we are on a tight schedule. You have two minutes before we’ll call you out here.”

“Okay,” I said. “Donut, come here. Let’s talk really quick before we go on.”

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Lexis had us already sitting on the couch when the show started. We sat two spots over, leaving an empty space between Donut and Odette. They were going for a more serious, somber tone and not a Jerry Springer thing like I feared. There would be no studio audience for this segment. I assumed it was because Odette didn't want word getting out about the interview before it aired. Mongo remained tucked away in his carrier and wouldn't be coming out.

"Okay, here we go," Odette said. She was decked out in her bug helmet, giant breasts, and crab body. I still wasn't used to the sight of her. She, too, seemed more nervous than usual.

My head ached. The river behind my eyes roared.

I swear to god, I thought. *If this is some bullshit trap, I will burn this goddamned production trailer to the ocean floor.*

"Princess Donut and Carl, it's great to see you," Odette said, her voice moving to her on-camera persona. "It's been a while since we last talked."

"Hi Odette!" Donut said, cheerful. "You look just lovely today. It's been too long! Did you see what Carl did at the end of the last floor? He and Katia filled that town with water!"

"Oh, we saw. I'll have Katia on in a few days to talk to about it. There is so much I'd like to talk to you about, but we can save most of it for a later episode. Tonight we have a very special, exclusive guest joining us. She is making her first and only appearance on a

tunneled program tonight. And you guys are here because of your special connection to her. We're going to get right to it. Watch this."

The screen appeared, and it started showing something, but we couldn't see it.

<u>Zev</u>: Sorry guys. The censor won't let you see this. They're just showing scenes from the planet's surface and talking a little about the rules regarding humans who didn't go down into the dungeon. They're explaining the details on something called the walk-on list and the illegal practice of bounty hunters seeking out and finding survivors so they can sell them to the production. Also, I'm being called back to the office, so I won't be in the studio when you get out. I'll ping you later after the interview. Talk to you soon.

The video segment was over quickly. The whole time it aired, Odette had her head turned to the side and was talking with someone we couldn't see. Her voice was muted. Donut sat next to me, completely rigid. Her tail curled forward around her body, like she was giving herself a hug.

The lights turned back up, and Odette continued. Her normal, over-the-top personality was subdued, and she took on a more journalistic tone while she weaved a story I knew to be utter horseshit.

"Tonight's special guest survived the initial collapse only to be kidnapped by bounty hunters intent on selling her to Borant. She was taken off world for the exchange in a black market somewhere in the inner system. But Borant recently reiterated their statement that they wanted no part in the practice of kidnapping unwilling participants, and they promptly turned the pirates over to the Syndicate. A battle ensued, resulting in the death of a pirate. But per Syndicate rules, our guest is now off planet, and her fate is up to her. She decided to remain in Syndicate space and is now a full citizen. Because of her close relationship to Princess Donut and Carl, she is coming to us from an undisclosed location, and she'll remain hidden until after the crawl. In addition, before I bring our guest on, I want everyone to know that I sat Princess Donut and Carl down ahead of time and told them we were going to have this guest, and I

asked their permission to do this. I also asked our guest the same question. So nobody is surprising anybody."

She paused dramatically, and her regular on-air persona started to creep back into her voice. "That's right everyone. We don't need any more speculation and theories. It's Carl's former girlfriend and Donut's original owner. Miss Beatrice!"

And then, there she was.

Thin. Long, straight hair. Freckles. Pouty lips. She'd lost weight. A lot of weight. She had a shell-shocked and hollow look to her, and she appeared as if she'd aged ten years since I'd last seen her. She wore a glittering, red gown with an open back. It was a common dress style for women aliens, but it would've fit in well at a formal ball on earth, too. It looked out of place on her. She looked back at someone we couldn't see, and she nodded, and then she hesitantly walked out into the studio. In that moment she was turned, I could see her dress scooped all the way down to her butt, exposing the top half of her ass. The poorly-drawn tattoo of Princess Chonkalot, Donut's grandmother, seemed out of place on her lower back. Her white skin was shockingly pale, as if she had never seen the sun.

She wore ridiculously tall high-heel shoes. Her ever-present Aries anklet hung around her ankle.

Beatrice saw me, and her eyes went huge. She did a little gasp and ran to me, awkwardly moving like a penguin because of the shoes, trying to hug me. Her arms moved right through me, which caused her to stumble. She looked back over her shoulder again and then moved to the seat next to Donut and Odette.

"Princess?" she asked, examining Donut. "Is that you? What are you wearing?" She moved to pet the cat, and her hand, again, passed through.

Donut licked her paw, pretending. She hadn't looked up once since Bea entered. But I could feel her next to me, trembling.

You can do this, I'd said, just minutes before. *Don't give them the satisfaction.*

I don't think I'm strong enough, she'd replied. *She's just an ex-girlfriend to you. But she was everything to me. My whole world.*

I know, Donut.

She was going to abandon me, Carl. I pretended not to know, but I knew. I think I even knew before. I pretended for so long, and I don't think I can pretend anymore.

"Hello, Beatrice," Odette said. "I understand you've had quite the journey."

Bea stared wide-eyed at the bug-headed Odette, not saying anything.

Donut paused her licking and said, "Honey, this is where you speak."

I tried to hide the smile creeping across my face. I couldn't.

"Holy shit," Bea said, jumping back to her feet, facing Donut, who resumed her paw licking. Bea again, stumbled awkwardly on her high heels.

"It's okay, Bea. Sit," I said.

"She's talking," Bea said. "They said she'd be here, but they didn't tell me she'd be talking. Carl, what in the world is going on? Why aren't you wearing pants?"

"I really wish we had a live audience, Odette," Donut said. "I mean, really. A live audience would've loved that line."

I looked at Odette. "I thought you said she'd been briefed on all of this."

"She has," Odette said. I knew Odette well enough to hear the irritation in her voice. "Apparently it didn't take."

"Sit," I repeated.

She sat, her head on a swivel, looking back and forth. She looked absolutely terrified. Donut continued to play aloof.

"I understand you were kidnapped by pirates," Odette said. "And they were going to sell you."

"I, uh… They came into the tent while I was asleep. And when they saw me, they all started fighting. That's the last thing I remember until later. I think stuff happened, but they did something to me. Wiped my memory."

"What about the black market?" Odette asked. "Do you remember them trying to sell you? I heard there was a shootout."

"I… I do," she said. "Again, it's fuzzy. They bought me and were about to put me back in the cube, and then this guy. A small alien

guy, he saw me and seemed to recognize me and started shouting. And then I got sucked back into the cube, and I was on a space ship with all these guys with hyena faces, and now I'm here."

"That story is a little different than the official version," Odette said. "But it must have been terrifying."

"I don't know what the official version is," she said. "My memory has holes in it."

"She gets like that, sometimes," Donut said. She looked up. "Too many dirty Shirlies."

Bea looked down at Donut, open-mouthed.

"I'm sure it'll all get sorted out," Odette said. "I'm certain the Syndicate fact finders will want to talk to you soon enough. Rest assured you did nothing wrong. And I want to be the first to congratulate you on being the Syndicate's newest full-rights citizen. Now, I wanted to ask you. What was your reaction when you first heard that Carl and Princess Donut had become top-tier crawlers?"

This went on for a few minutes. Odette asked her a few softball, inane questions, but Bea didn't answer with anything other than a slack-jawed response. Odette circled back a few times to that supposed black market exchange and the shootout, but Bea claimed ignorance over and over. It seemed to me that Odette was trying to poke holes into her own lie.

Finally, Odette turned to Donut.

"Princess, is there anything you'd like to say to your former owner?"

"Have a good life," Donut said. "Oh, also, if you ever get another cat, make sure you only purchase the wet food for her. And don't conspire to sell her once she gets a little older. Don't pretend to love her when you don't. Don't make her feel special when you don't really feel that way about her. That is all."

She returned to her paw licking. I continued to stroke the cat's back.

"Hmm," Odette said. "And you, Carl?"

"Got nothing," I said.

"Carl," Bea began. "Carl, are you going to be able to come to me?"

"Nope," I said. I turned to Odette. "Are we done?"

"Almost," Odette said. She was trying to hide the irritation in her voice. She asked additional, leading questions, trying to coax information out of all three of us. Bea continued with the deer-in-the-headlights routine. She was obviously drugged to the gills. It reminded me of Katia's first appearance on this show. Donut continued to lick her paw, pretending not to care. I just grunted. Bea was going to burst into tears at any moment, and Odette could sense that. The host sighed and said goodbye to us.

The lights all turned on. Odette pulled off her bug helmet. She glared at me angrily for a second before breaking into a smile.

"Well played, Carl," she said. "Not quite the explosive interview I hoped for, was it? Plus the timing is terrible." She sighed. "But this was always destined to be messy. At least we scooped that naga asshole. If he comes to you, make sure to tell him I said, 'better luck next time.'"

Bea continued to stare at Odette. She was just now seeing the woman without her bug head. I remembered the surprise I'd felt the first time I realized Odette was human.

"I'm proud of you, Donut," I said. "You were very mature. You did it."

"Odette, Darling," Donut asked. "We're not on air anymore, correct?"

"That's right," Odette said. "We're done."

Donut suddenly let out a hiss and jumped to my shoulder. "You vile, disgusting bitch," she spat at Bea, who pulled back in surprise.

"Wh… what?" Bea asked.

"You danced with me. You sang to me. You made me feel loved. I didn't do anything wrong, and you were going to give me away."

"What?" Bea asked again.

"I didn't do anything wrong. Nothing. You were the only person I ever knew. I was born, and you were there. You and Carl. I loved you, and you were my world. My whole world. I know you had a bunch of cats growing up, and maybe I was just nothing to you other than a way to win more ribbons than your mother, but you were the only human I ever knew, and to me, you were everything.

And I was so stupid, because I thought since I loved you, that meant you loved me."

Odette muttered something under her breath.

"And you were just awful to Carl. And even though he's big and dumb, he didn't deserve that. He's not perfect, and I know he snores and has all these disgusting habits and smelly friends, but what you did to him is not okay. I know I make fun of him sometimes. I can't help it. I'm a cat. That's what I do. Plus, I mean, let's be honest here. He walks right into it most of the time. But you actually betrayed him. We don't do that to people we love. And you know what, Miss Beatrice? You don't deserve how sad I feel right now. I *still* love you. I *still* miss you, and I hate myself for it. You don't deserve to get to explain your side of the story. You lost that chance. But I'm glad you escaped. Because if the world ends and none of us survive except for you, I think that's an even more fitting fate. Because you're going to be all alone, and maybe then you'll finally understand how you made me and Carl feel."

The silence hung heavy in the air.

"You're not my person anymore," Donut added. "Carl is. He's always been."

Bea just looked at Donut, her lower jaw quivering. I recognized that look. Donut did the same thing, from time to time.

I continued to stroke Donut's back.

Bea was at a complete loss for words. She looked at me. "Carl…"

"I'm glad you're okay," I said, interrupting. "Truly. I wouldn't wish our fate on anybody. Not even you. But what we're dealing with right now is so much more important, so much bigger than this drama bullshit. It's stupid that it was even a thing. I'm glad it's finally over. I think Donut said everything that needs to be said. We're done. Finally. Goodbye, Beatrice." I looked at Odette. "Get her out of here."

And just like that, she was gone. Odette turned her head, nodded, and then Bea just disappeared, leaving an empty space on the couch. Donut jumped back to the cushion, and she looked up at me, eyes shining.

"I'm glad," she said. "I'm glad we got that out of the way. I feel so much better."

"Me too," I said. "It was always such a big distraction. But it's done."

We held like that for a moment.

"I can't imagine it's going to be that big of a news item anyway," Donut said. "Odette and Zev are right. The timing is awful."

"So it's true?" Odette asked. She sighed happily. She looked over her shoulder and gave someone I couldn't see a thumbs up.

"What?" I asked. "What the hell are you talking about? What is going on?"

Admin Message.

This is an automated message.

Due to a system regency change, a conflict of interest has arisen, resulting in one of your sponsors being removed effective immediately. A special auction will ensue to replace the missing sponsor and will complete in 60 hours. All previous awarded prizes will remain.

Sponsor Lost: The Valtay Corporation.

"The hell?" I asked.

And then came a second message in a different voice, but similar to the one when all of this started.

Please take note.

This is a planet-wide message.

The Borant Corporation, not to be confused with the Borant System Government, has been declared an independent, non-governmental entity by a Syndicate court. As a result, a previously-filed court ruling was automatically executed, granting the Valtay Corporation 51% ownership of the Borant Corporation. The Borant Corporation remains in charge of this crawl, and as far as most of you are concerned, nothing will change. This is nothing more than a courtesy notice. All previous, legal contracts will be honored, including indenture contracts. However, the Borant System Government no longer has any stake in either the planet, the resources, or the production of

***Dungeon Crawler World: Earth*, and regency has been granted solely to the Borant *Corporation* and their new principal owners, the Valtay Corporation. If you have any questions about how that might affect any debts owed or contract obligations, legal counsel is available free* of charge to all full Syndicate citizens. Have a great day.**

Odette sighed. "They didn't cancel out all the contracts. Thank the gods." She looked at me. "This is good news for Mordecai and all the other guides and tenners. Too bad it's the Valtay. You poor bastards."

"She did it," Donut whispered. "She did it."

I looked down at Donut. "What the hell? What happened? Did you have anything to do with this?"

She looked up at me. "Viva la revolución, Carl."

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"She always wanted to be a reality television star," Donut said. "It's too bad Odette is keeping her all, what did she say? Sequestered? Oh, well. Do you think I was too hard on her? I needed to say it, but I'm starting to think I was too cruel. By the way, before you ask. Yes, you do snore, Carl. Or at least you used to. You don't anymore with the new beds."

Moments after the announcement, Odette requested that we not say anything about the interview until it aired, which would be after the next recap episode. Not the one about to come up, but the one after that. And then she said she'd see us upon the collapse of this floor and disappeared, leaving us alone. Lexis poked her head into the studio and bade for us to return to the green room where we'd be teleported back to the dungeon in a few minutes.

"Donut," I whispered as we moved to the door. "What the fuck? I don't know what you're involved in, or how, but holy shit. What the hell just happened? Actually, don't tell me. It's too dangerous to tell me, even here."

"It's okay," Donut said. "It's done now."

Odette's words haunted me. *Too bad it's the Valtay. You poor bastards.*

I'd known for some time that Donut and Zev had some secret system of communication. I assumed it was via the social media board, which was dangerous. Because if that was how they were doing it, it meant it was all out there for people to find and decode.

And if this intergalactic internet was anything like what we'd had here, someone would figure it out.

We returned to the green room, my head still swimming. Lexis was leaned up against the counter, smoking one of those same vape things Quasar used. The tendrils of smoke curled about the room, catching the light in a rainbow of colors. The smoke smelled like burnt candy. She held her finger in the air. "Wait for it."

"Wait for what?" I asked.

The lights flickered.

"There it is," she said, speaking rapidly. "The hand-off. The system is transferring from mudskipper control to the Valtay central control. It'll take a minute or two. No sniffers will be online, so I gotta speak quickly."

"Go," I said.

"Okay, shut up and listen," Lexis said, continuing to speak hurriedly. She kept her eyes on her tablet as she talked, watching a blinking cursor. "Do *not* speak of this as it will be construed as cheating, more so than anything else we've said to you. Queen Imogen of the High Elves is a *country* boss. She's a new character this season, and nobody has seen her yet, a sure sign that she's going to be a repurposed human. They're saving the big reveal. Obvious choice was Beatrice because of your ties with the *Vengeance of the Daughter* storyline. Don't know who it'll be now. Best guess is the elf won't appear until the Butcher's Masquerade. The top fifty crawlers will all be transferred to the party whether you like it or not. It'll be in the high elf castle. There'll be a party and contests and prizes, and you'll mingle with the remaining hunters. I don't know how that will work. The party will end with a big battle. They're setting it up to zero out the top crawlers."

"Why?" I asked, alarmed. "If the Valtay are taking over, won't they want the rest of the season to move like normal?"

"No time to fully explain. The Valtay did not win full control. They gained 51% of the Borant Corporation, but the collection action on the whole system is still in limbo. Think of the worms as the new babysitter. Or better yet, the new stepdad, and he's just as strict as the last guy, but in a different way. The Borant Corporation is still in

control of the game, and they want it to run smoothly. They always did, but they were being controlled by their crazy government. The Valtay isn't going to be satisfied with this new arrangement. They are control freaks. They'll want the top 10 to be crawlers of their choosing. Like a new apex predator taking over a pride. The first thing he'll do is wipe out everything and start fresh."

"But they already sponsor Carl," Donut said. "They like him."

"They sponsored Carl because they knew he was going to be a thorn in the mudskippers' side. What do you think is going to happen now?" Lexis asked.

"We'll go down the stairs early, then," I said. "We'll go down before this ball thing."

"That would be Odette's advice as well," Lexis said.

I suddenly realized that this was all coming directly from Odette, but she was filtering it through Lexis because of how dangerous this information was. If we got caught, she had plausible deniability.

"But what about everybody else?" Donut asked. "Even if Elle and Katia and all the others go down, they'll just use the next fifty top crawlers. And those guys will be even less prepared. Plus I've already started training Mongo for the beauty pageant."

"Goddamnit," I growled. She was right, of course. But a country boss? Nobody would be prepared for that.

"System will reboot in ten seconds," Lexis said, looking at her tablet. "You'll be transferred out in fifteen."

"This is most distressing," Donut grumbled. "I certainly would never have smuggled all those Valtay secret agent guys to Zev and the Borant Emancipation Front if I'd known this was going to happen."

I exchanged an incredulous look with Lexis, who stared at the cat, open-mouthed.

"*What?*" I asked just before we transferred back to the dungeon.

"Goddamnit, Donut," I growled. "Don't say anything. Don't say a word. But god fucking damnit."

Donut released Mongo back in the saferoom, who started bouncing around happily. Donut jumped to my shoulder and butted her head against mine. I reached up to pet her.

Donut: RELAX, CARL. EVERYTHING WILL BE OKAY. NO NEED TO GET ALL BROODY AND WORRIED. IT'S NOT LIKE IT'LL BE ANY BETTER OR WORSE THAN BEFORE.

I didn't know about that.

Mordecai was standing on a dented chair—the same chair he'd once tossed at a guy's head—playing with the shop interface. "Did you hear the news while you were away?"

"Yes," I said. "They said your contract is still being honored."

"We'll see," he said. "This sort of thing happens a lot, though usually not mid-season. When it does, we typically get our contracts frozen as we're transferred and traded to other companies, and it takes cycles to work itself out. But there's always lawyers and rule changes and all sorts of fuckery involved." He grunted and reached up, clicking something on the 3D screen of the interface. "I'm still not clear how much has really changed. I'm looking to see if the shop system is still using kua-tin software, or if they changed to the Valtay system. It'll be a good indicator how much control the new guys have. Hmm. It looks the same as before."

"Is that good or bad?" I asked.

"It's both. They're going to keep the fantasy theme of the dungeon. Hopefully. It doesn't make sense and won't go over well with the fans if the next floor is Valtay style, which would be androids and hovercars and laser pistols and mechanical death machines. The Syndicate would never allow it, nor would the AI. It wouldn't make sense in the context of all your spells and abilities and classes." He sighed and jumped sideways, landing on the counter. "So for now, it'll be business as usual. Since the corporation itself is still in charge, you should still be dealing with Zev. How was the interview?"

"Don't ask," I said.

"How's the town?" Donut asked. "Are my mushroom guys keeping everything safe?"

"The Ursine are complaining," Mordecai said, "but I think I finally got through their thick skulls that they're in danger from the hunters. We had to beat back an attack from another pair of those pale Dream elves, but they disappeared into the woods. I suspect they're all going to seek safer prey. Another day, and the town should be self-sufficient, and you can move further south. Those two guys you brought with you from the woods are helping to build picket defenses. They've already upgraded the southern wall."

"Really?" I asked. We'd only been gone for about two hours.

"They work fast," Mordecai said. "Especially when they've turned. Also, Katia wants to talk to you. They talked Imani into being the guildmaster, and they've already purchased a space. Katia wants to borrow some money to buy something called a 'manager's headquarters,' which will allow me to keep my room when she disengages. Sort of."

"Okay," I said. I felt frazzled. Overwhelmed. I needed to sleep. My heart was still thrashing at Donut's sudden, unexpected confession. I was terrified that whatever she'd done would soon come to light, and there'd be no hiding from the consequences this time.

I reached up and petted her again. I knew that whatever it was that she'd done, it'd been less about helping with some random guerrilla group and more about helping her friend. Still, how could I get mad at her? It would be hypocritical beyond belief. Especially after what had just happened with Bea.

As exhausted as I was, I knew her emotional state right now had to be much more fragile.

"Come on, Donut. Let's get sleep, reset everything, and get back out there." Donut and Mongo followed without hesitation. I passed the bubbling Emberus shrine on the way to the bedroom, and I paused long enough to add a drop of blood. I'd soon get my first boon. We entered the room and prepared to sleep for our two hours.

"You know what, Donut?" I asked as I sat down on the bed.

She just looked at me, a strange, unreadable fear in her eyes.

“You snore, too.”

The eyes softened. “I have never snored once in my life, Carl. I am both a princess and a cat. It’s quite literally impossible. Now quit talking nonsense and go to sleep.”

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We awakened in time to view the recap episode, and upon watching it, I found myself wishing I'd stayed asleep. We watched as Vrah and a unit of four other mantis creatures swooped in from the air and decapitated a group of crawlers as they rode down a heavily-wooded trail in the back of a cart. The formation of five aliens landed and approached the crawlers, looting their bodies. The show zoomed in and showed a rapid-fire list of all the loot they'd gained as Vrah took the head of the two crawlers she'd killed—both human—and she affixed them to her carapace using some unknown method.

The rest of the scenes in the first part of the show portrayed crawlers getting mauled to death by all sorts of jungle animals. We saw a crawler bend over to pick up a mushroom only to get skewered by a spike that popped out of the fungus, piercing him right in the eye. He dropped dead, and his skin started boiling.

"That's the skewer belle," Mordecai said. "If you see one, make sure you grab it for me. But always pick it by the stem. Don't touch the top."

"Christ, Mordecai," I said.

After that, we watched a much abridged version of our dinosaur encounter from the night before. The show portrayed a few majestically slow-motion shots of Mongo getting lucky. Donut made frustrated and disgusted noises. The screen went black for a few minutes before the show moved on. We watched Lucia Mar, in her beautiful woman form, fight a borough boss that looked like a

stegosaurus. She cast her weird damage reflect spell on the smaller of her two rottweilers, and when the dinosaur crushed the dog, the damage reflected to the boss, killing it and leaving the dog unharmed.

I exchanged a look with Donut. I knew she was thinking the same thing. If Lucia was at this party thing and didn't actually murder us all before the boss fight, she would be a great asset.

The show portrayed Lucia cackling maniacally as she pulled out the now-dead boss's eyeball with her bare hand and bit down on it like it was an apple.

"Yeah, that's normal," Donut said.

From there, we watched Elle, Katia, Bautista, Florin and others raid a small druid town while Louis and Firas floated above and directed the attack. They were hunting after Eva. They thought she was in the town, but she'd gotten away. Eva appeared to have a special ability to avoid being magically tracked.

We then finally saw snake-headed, four-armed Eva, who'd gathered a small group of women with her. She glamored the town's NPCs with a charm spell and talked them into attacking Katia's group when they entered, but when they actually approached, Imani cast a counterspell that removed the glamor. It showed a tree-person NPC tearfully telling Imani what Eva had done. The raid ended without violence.

This was the first time I'd seen Imani since the floor started. She looked much the same, but her ethereal wings had taken on a more solid appearance, and wisps of fire radiated from her. Her face was even more gaunt than it was before, making her look almost mummified. The white skull face paint glowed.

But the biggest change was that she could now fly. She and Elle moved together with the rest of the team on foot, coming behind Katia, Florin, and Bautista. They all worked in tandem like they'd been doing this for years. I did not see Li Jun or Na or Zhang, but I knew they were now working with them, too. I didn't see Chris, either. Nor the two cretin bodyguards.

I couldn't help but feel a pang of regret, of loneliness that we'd gone off on our own for this floor. But the path we were traveling

was too dangerous. The others were doing important work, and our presence would be nothing but a distraction.

"I do hope they're being careful," Donut said. "Maybe later we can all work together."

"I hope so, too," I said.

The show ended, and then Katia entered the personal space by herself. She looked haggard and exhausted. "Is she done screaming now?" Katia asked, poking her head into the room. She was talking about Samantha.

"Speak of the devil," I said. "We were just talking about you."

"Hi Katia!" Donut said. "Yes, Carl got her to shut up. But now we have to bring her adventuring with us next time we go out."

"I was watching the show in the guild. I figured it was time to come over and make the exchange and finally leave the party. We need one more purchase so Mordecai doesn't lose his space. Plus Mistress Tiatha will finally get her own as well. She's pretty excited about it."

We were interrupted by an announcement. The speaker was the same lady as always, but she was more annoyingly chipper than ever.

Hello, Crawlers.

What an interesting day! We have a bit of a long message today, so please pay careful attention.

There's a lot of rumor and speculation about what that last world announcement means for you guys, and the short answer is that it means nothing. For those of you who regularly deal with Borant administrators, some of you might find yourselves with a different representative, but for the vast majority of you, nothing has changed. The Borant Corporation is not the Borant System government, and more importantly, it has been fully severed from silly system politics. The civil war that just erupted in our home system will have no bearing whatsoever on this production, and we look forward to working with the Valtay. This is still a kua-tin organization that is run by the same kua-tin who designed and put this season together. As some of you

know, this particular crawl has been my personal life project. I have been working on it for a very, very long time, and I am going nowhere! All future floors will be the same ones they were always going to be. That is all we're going to say about the subject.

So on to the fun stuff. You've all received all three sponsors by now. We had record bidding this time around. But don't worry, the fun isn't over yet. If you find yourself with an inactive or stingy sponsor, odds are good they're holding on to sell your slot. Sponsors will be allowed to sell their sponsorship stakes starting next floor.

The hunt is on! Hunters have already claimed over 500 crawlers. But more interestingly, you guys are showing some serious spunk. We've already had a record number of hunters fall this season. Over 50 so far. So many that their families are starting to complain! Now that's showing some initiative!

Speaking of the hunters, we have good news everybody. Because of public concern and outcry and because of a new court injunction that we fully support, we have implemented a few changes that don't affect you directly, but they will have a major impact on the hunters. Hunters may no longer communicate directly with those outside of this dungeon. Some were concerned that the hunters had an unfair advantage, and we agree! Boy, this really made some of them angry. Maybe that will teach them not to try to sue us so much!

"Excellent," I said. I held up a fist, and Donut did a paw bump. Quasar had come through. Now the playing field was much more level.

We have a few additional patch notes. The hot springs in the southwest corner of the map were found to be not as hot as they were supposed to be, and they were adjusted upward. Unfortunately, the action accidentally cooked a good number of crawlers who were in the water at the time. Sorry about that! Those of you who moved in to collect the

dropped gear, please note that since this was an error on our part, the gear you obtained will be removed from your inventory immediately upon the end of this message.

In a related note, the lava tubes in that area are now also active, so keep that in mind if you want to play in that area.

The allosaurus mobs have been split into two distinct mob types to accommodate a newly-generated quest. In addition, for both mob types, the strength levels have been split further by gender.

We've been forced to temporarily disable the *Fuck those Trees in Particular* spell as it didn't work as intended on this floor.

Finally, we'd like to announce a new feature. The preparations for the Butcher's Masquerade party are well underway. Several of you have expressed concern that you don't know where you stand in the rankings. Upon the end of this message, all crawlers will now be able to see their rankings if they are in the top 1,000. If you have nothing, that means you need to stop being so boring.

That's it for now. Now get out there and kill, kill, kill!

"It looks like we're all going to that masquerade," Katia said. "I wonder if it'll be in a saferoom? How are they going to keep everyone from murdering each other? Or at the very least, keep the hunters from the crawlers?"

"I don't know," I said. "But hopefully we'll get the details as soon as possible. How are you doing, Katia? We saw the raid on the recap."

"Yeah, that just happened like an hour ago. I'm exhausted. But we'll get her. She's backed into that area they were talking about with the hot springs and lava tubes. Li Na is able to track her, and they're moving in. How was Odette's show?"

"I'll tell you about it later," I said.

Donut: THERE WAS A SPECIAL SURPRISE GUEST! I TOLD HER OFF!

"Okay, tell me when you can. Bautista and I will be going on together in a few days. It'll be his first appearance. Donut, we

managed to pool enough money for the upgrade, but we were hoping you could purchase it because you have the highest charisma of all of us. If we bring the Royal Palace into the guild now, we can go to the Bopca in the common area and purchase it together. Then you can meet everyone you haven't yet."

"Let's do it!" Donut said. "Wait. Let me take a quick shower first. Mongo, you too." She scampered off.

"Is she okay?" Katia asked. "She seems a little… forced."

"She's not, but she will be," I said. "She had to do something very grown up."

"Was it because of the dinosaur thing?"

"No," I said. "I'll… I'll tell you in a bit. Hey, does this new system offer a way for us to fast travel?"

"Not yet. Supposedly teleport portals will become available in tier three, but you can't purchase those until the ninth floor."

"Okay," I said, trailing off, suddenly distracted. I'd received a notification. I groaned. "Fan box time."

"Well, I'm glad I came over now, then," Katia said. "Should we wait for Donut?"

"No," I said, pulling it up. I opened the box. A plastic, rectangle badge popped out, dangling from a red lanyard. The red lanyard said **Titan Entertainment** on it in Syndicate standard. The plastic badge thing was the size of a postcard. The back was covered in scrolling words, all advertisements. The front featured a moving image of a horned demon thing shooting fire from its mouth. The words **SPECIAL GUEST** exploded over and over again along the edge. At the bottom was a spinning logo that said **Carl. Dungeon Crawler World: Earth.**

A timer appeared on my interface. It was at 22 hours and counting down.

I read the description.

"What the shit?" I asked. "What the ever-loving fuck?" Even with the warning from Zev, I was still surprised at the actual reward. I looked up at the ceiling and said. "Yeah, thanks, assholes."

"What? What is it?" Katia asked. I handed the badge to her, and she barked with laughter as I read the description a second time

Congratulations, Crawler! You've received a free fan booth at CrawlCon! With thousands of physical attendees and billions of virtual visitors, *Dungeon Crawler World* fans from all corners of the galaxy gather once every other season to geek out together over all things Crawl! With special guests, panels, vendors, cosplay, and so much more, CrawlCon is the event of the galaxy!

Thanks to your fans, you've been added to the CrawlCon roster! You will attend three events!

Your presence at the con will be virtual. Please see your outreach associate for details on your schedule.

Carl: Zev. Fuck this. I'm not doing this bullshit. Fuck no. Send Donut instead.

Zev: Carl, I am very busy right now. I'm sorry you don't like the contents of your fan box. But believe me when I say, it's in your best interests to be cooperative just this once. I'll try to talk to you more later about it. In the meantime, I've already received your schedule, and I'm sending it to you now. The conference is already underway, which is why your scheduled events are so soon. Talk to you later.

Donut would not be going with me to this. She was gonna to be pissed. The new countdown timer started blinking, and I mentally clicked on it.

Your schedule for the upcoming event has been updated. You will be transferred to a production facility for each individual event, which will occur at separate times. Please be prepared.

You have been scheduled for three events. They are as follows:

***Art Contest*: Judge's panel. Three very special guests will pick the best drawing in the juvenile quickdraw category. Judging will be live. Judges TBA.**

***Panel*: Crawling Through the Ages. Crawlers both new and old will lead a discussion regarding the current state of the Crawl. Discussion followed by a Q&A. Special guests TBA. Moderated by Circe Took of the Hive.**

***Autograph and Keepsake Session*: Fan-favorite Crawler Carl of the current season will autograph merchandise, spend a few moments chatting, and will pose for a static image with a limited number of fans. Enter the lottery for a chance to purchase a place in line now. Refunds guaranteed* if Carl does not survive long enough to attend.**

A special, limited number of duo likeness sessions also available with Carl and the Popov Brothers. Bidding is now open for VIP access.

I took a deep breath.

"This has to be a joke," Katia said, handing the badge off to Mordecai, whose eyes got huge when he examined it.

"When has it ever been a joke?" I asked.

"I haven't seen them use current crawlers for the con in over a century," Mordecai said. "I was a special guest once, but it was years after my season. Did you get your schedule yet?"

I read off what Zev sent me.

"Three events? Wow, they're going all in," Mordecai said. "All I did was the autograph session, but I only ended up signing three items."

"How is this even a thing?" I asked. "It sounds just like a comic convention from earth."

Mordecai grunted, which came out more like a squeak in his current form. "Fan conventions have been a thing for a very long time. The first active prep teams landed on this planet in your year 1936. The first sci-fi convention was in Philadelphia in 1938. Do the math."

"How did you autograph stuff?" Katia asked just as Donut returned to the room, sparkling clean. "How can you sign something if you're not really there?"

Mongo padded behind Donut, also shining. He squawked happily.

"Autographs?" Donut asked. She eyed the badge thing sitting on the counter and jumped up. "Carl, you opened your fan box without me?"

"I just wanted to see what it was first," I said.

She examined it. She already knew that it was going to be something like this, but I could see her tail droop as the realization hit her. She looked at Mordecai. "Can I go, too?"

"Sorry, kid. It looks like this one is just Carl."

Donut: ZEV, I WANT TO GO, TOO!

Zev: Sorry, Donut. It's out of my hands. They're only allowing four crawlers to do this, and they've all already been chosen.

Donut: WHO IS IT?

Carl: Again, I'm more than willing to give this to Donut.

Zev: Not my choice. We'll talk later.

Donut grumbled something under her breath.

"Come on, Donut," Katia said. "Let's do some shopping."

Donut looked at her suspiciously. "You're going to finally leave the party for real, aren't you?"

"I am. We really need to disengage, Donut. Every time you get a quest, I get one too, and soon, I'll be getting my own quests."

"Will I still be able to visit you?"

"Of course," Katia said. "I'll be right next door. It'll be like moving into a bigger town."

"Okay," Donut said finally.

Katia reached over and scratched Donut's head. "Okay, hang on. I'm having Imani send you an invite."

While they worked that out, I moved to the side of the counter and started to prepare a biscuit sandwich from the food box. I parked myself next to the Sledge, who sat there staring off into space. The rock monsters had finally gotten sick of the Frogger machine. I needed to do some work. I had a few things I needed to build for the assault on the naiad castle. And we needed to spend some time working on the local NPCs before we moved south and took over the next big town. And I still needed to visit both the Desperado Club and Club Vanquisher. I was putting off the latter

because I knew it would involve a bunch of additional bullshit I didn't have time for.

The Royal Court of Princess Donut is now a member of the guild, Safehome Yolanda.

The controlling party for this guild is Team Meadowlark.

The guildmaster is crawler Imani C.

This Guild is now level 7.

There are six parties attached to this guild with a total of 63 crawlers.

The name punched me in the gut. Despite their age difference, Yolanda had been one of Imani's best friends.

To the left of the door to the outside, a new door suddenly appeared. It was labeled **Guild Common Area**.

You have multiple upgrades available for your personal area.

"Don't place anything yet until after Katia leaves the party," Mordecai warned.

"Mongo," Donut cried. "There's a pet stable!"

A pair of barn doors appeared to the left of the new exit.

Your beds have been upgraded to the Instacot 60.

"What did I just say?" Mordecai demanded.

"Goddamnit," I grumbled. The "Instacot" was the second best bed on the market. It refreshed us after sixty seconds of "sleep." But it also changed our Good Rest bonus to Great Rest, and it imparted a whopping 15% bonus to our stats for the day. Still, I hated the idea of it. I absolutely hated it.

A distant explosion suddenly rattled the personal space.

"What is that?" I asked. "Do you have some weird training area out there?"

"I don't think that came from the common area," Katia said.

A bang came at the door. The voice of Clint came through, muffled.

"Y'all better get your butts out here. They be attacking!"

“I didn’t even get to go shopping,” Donut grumbled as we rushed out the door back into the town of Point Mongo.

I jumped into the hallway. The pub was filled with shouting ursine. “Who?” I called. “Who’s attacking? Is it dinosaurs or…” I stopped, finally seeing Clint standing there by the door, waiting for us.

“Come on, come on,” he said, waving his now-webbed hand.

He’d changed. His height was the same, but the already-stocky man had grown even wider. He was covered with brown, oily-looking fur, including over his formerly-bald head.

He’d also turned into a goddamned beaver.

A pair of buck teeth jutted from his rodent mouth, and he now spoke with a noticeable lisp. His clothes were gone. My eyes focused on his long, flat tail. It looked like a wide, black tongue.

“Carl,” Donut whispered. “I didn’t know a castor was actually a beaver. He’s disgusting.”

“I didn’t know, either,” I said.

“You two gonna stare at my ass, or you gonna go help us kill some elves. The idiots built some sort of magical trebuchet or catapult or something out in the middle of the woods and are using it to lob poison bombs at us.” He shook his beaver head. “Poison bombs against funeral bell guards. It’s like trying to attack a mongoliensis by throwing sausages at it. Idiots.”

Another explosion rocked the town. This one from several streets over.

“How many are there?” I asked.

“Dunno. They’re firing from really far away.”

“Hmm,” I said. I had a sudden idea. A ridiculous idea. “Hang on. I need to go grab something.”

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"Wait until you start to descend, and then close your mouth. Don't do it too early. These missiles have a limited range."

We all ducked as a church two blocks over exploded. Smoke billowed, and the air smelled oddly humid. Green-tinted clouds hung in the air. The message: **You've been poisoned! Poison negated!** kept spamming across my interface. Both Donut and I along with all the guards and both of the were-beavers were immune. Mongo was not and had to be put away. The ursine weren't safe either and were all hunkered down.

Samantha the sex doll head was also immune. In fact, as Mordecai had pointed out earlier, she was a withering spirit. She only had a single hit point, but she was pretty much indestructible. Short of dropping the head directly into a black hole, she wasn't going anywhere. That was offset by the fact she couldn't actually do anything except roll and scream.

She could bite now, too. She'd chomped pretty good onto my hand when I went to fetch her. It didn't hurt, but she had enough force to actually latch on. Her fangs bent harmlessly when any pressure was applied. I could pull my hand free with a little yank.

"If they keep their pattern up, the attack after the next is going to land right in our laps," Clint said, looking up. He remained in his buck-toothed beaver form.

I was reasonably certain there was only two or three of these elf assholes out there, but they'd somehow managed to pull a giant

catapult thing out of their ass and get it set up. They were firing large rocks that emitted gas when they struck. The attacks were coming in about 90 second intervals. They walked their artillery fire across town like they were playing a giant version of the board game Battleship. If I wasn't so pissed off, I'd be moderately impressed at their accuracy.

"Okay, Samantha. Open wide," I said.

I'd been developing a landmine trap that included a pair of miniature seeking missiles as part of the payload. The thought was, if someone set off the landmine, a pair of crossbow-bolt-sized missiles would pop out a full second before the landmine's detonation. These two additional missiles would ignore the guy who triggered the landmine and would seek out nearby companions, thus doing more damage. They had a short range. Maybe a quarter mile, if that. But the detonation trigger was simple. A simple yank on a string.

The payload of the missiles was about the equivalent of the 16th of a hob-lobber. Not much, but if it detonated against someone's temple, it was still enough to blow their head off.

Now that Samantha had figured out how to open and close her own mouth, she could easily activate the missiles. All I had to do was duct-tape the missile to the side of her head, add a loop to the string, and tie it to one of her latex fangs. Thanks to the nature of her, uh, original purpose, she could open and close her mouth really wide. I looped the string under the jagged neck hole and then tied it off around one of her lower latex fangs.

These missiles were not designed to haul decapitated sex doll heads with them, but thanks to the seeking nature of the missiles, they were self-correcting. Hopefully. Actually, I had no idea if this would work. This was one of the few things I couldn't test in my workshop. I figured it was worth a try.

"*Unnngh chunga*," Samantha said as I finished tying the trigger. She couldn't speak with her mouth all the way open.

I placed the head on the ground and examined it. She sat there, unmoving, her jaw open like she was getting a root canal. The

rocket was tied to the side of her head with duct tape, wrapped around her forehead and her neck. I pulled out my xistera extension. "Be careful. Don't close your mouth until you see them or the catapult."

"Okay," Samantha said.

Click.

"Motherfuck," I exclaimed as I jumped back. The missile went off, launching Samantha into the air like a bottle rocket. The sex doll head screamed as we scrambled away. It corkscrewed a few times and then started to circle in the air.

"At least it still works with her attached to it," Donut said, looking up.

The small missile detonated after it couldn't find a target. Samantha shrieked anew, her hair on fire as she plummeted back to the city, landing several streets over, near where the last rock had hit.

"I think I'm going to use two missiles next time," I said. "The detonation wasn't too big."

"She's really not going to blow up?" Donut asked.

"That's what Mordecai says."

"If those pointy-eared bastards saw that, they'll have our location now," Clint said.

"Agreed," I said, starting to jog off toward where she landed. It wouldn't be hard to find her. Two blocks away, and I could still hear her screaming. "We need to reset our position anyway."

"Don't close your goddamn mouth. I only have a handful of these left," I said as I duct-taped two missiles to the back of her head. We found Samantha on the street, covered with black soot and growling as she attempted to chew on the side of an ursine house. Her long, bone-colored hair needed to be brushed, but there was no indication her entire head had just been on fire.

We now stood a block over in a small park. On both sides of us, buildings had been leveled by the artillery. The distinctive whine of an incoming rock whistled through the air, landing right where we'd been standing a few minutes before. The wall near the entrance of town cracked and fell in on itself. Donut growled.

I, once again, installed my xistera extension. I eyed Samantha warily as I placed her in it face down. The back of the missiles were now pointed directly at my chest. If she set them off now, I would be crisped.

Carl: Okay, Mordecai, I'm taking the potion. I hope this shit works.

Mordecai: It'll work. Just remember the side effects.

My intelligence was at 25, but with all the daily buffs, it sat at just over 30. The potion Mordecai had made for me was called **Major Charlie** for some inexplicable reason that even Mordecai couldn't explain. He said it was usually called "Brain Juice." It raised my intelligence by 10 points for thirty seconds. It came with a nasty side effect. After it wore off, it lowered my intelligence by 10 for five minutes.

My *Ping* spell had a reach of one kilometer plus 500 meters for every ten points of intelligence. However, environmental factors could raise and lower that effect. After I downed the potion, my *Ping* spell would now reach three full kilometers in every direction. We weren't sure how far these assholes were and if they were using some sort of camouflage, but we were hoping it was within that circle. If I could spot them, they were fucked.

I could lob Samantha 50+ kilometers, so I had to be careful with how hard I threw.

"Here we go," I said. I pulled the loaded xistera to my chest to keep it in place. The twin rockets pressed right up against me. I drank the first potion. Levitation. A slider appeared in my interface, up and down along with a 60-second countdown. *Shit*, I thought. *I did this in the wrong order*. I tried mentally touching the slider thing, and my feet rose a foot off the air. I knew Elle had a similar thing in her interface, but she could actually move back and forth, too. I was stuck just going up and down.

"Whoa, this is weird," I said. I tapped my foot on the air, and it felt as if I was standing on glass. I raised up another five feet as I waited for my potion timer to reset. I knew the ground wasn't as solid as it felt. Mordecai emphasized how dangerous these potions were. He said it would not stop me from dropping if I had enough momentum. They were *not* a suitable alternative to feather fall. We couldn't use these things to keep from plummeting to the ground unless we took them before we jumped. *Treat it like you're standing on thin ice*, he'd said.

"Don't hurt yourself, Carl," Donut said from the ground, looking up at me worriedly.

I waited for my potion timer to zero out, and then I drank the Major Charlie potion.

Boy, are you smart!

I pushed the slider up, and I zoomed upward, pushing through the green cloud. The wide expanse of trees spread out around me, surrounding the town. The wide, naiad-infested river spread out like a snake. I glanced over my shoulder, and it was the same in every direction. Nothing but trees. In the distance to the south, however, I caught quick sight of something terrifying: multiple dinosaur heads peeking over the tree line, like duck heads coming up from a lake. These were brontosaurus things. We were going to be journeying through that area soon. I returned my direction north toward the hunters.

I cast *Ping*.

The noise spread out, extra loud in the cloud-filled sky. I watched my map, looking for the tell-tale purple dots of hunters. The map populated, flashing white, suddenly becoming useless. Every non red-tagged mob filled the area. That included all the goddamned snakes and monkeys and birds. After a moment of panic, I remembered I could filter it, and I clicked over, removing everything except purple-tagged hunters.

There. Closer than I thought, about one and a half kilometers away, northeast of town. I couldn't see them, but I could see exactly where they were. There was a break in the trees. A clearing. There

were only two of them. They both had the glow indicating they had magical gear.

They were probably already running.

"Go get 'em," I said. I reached back and hurled, lobbing Samantha directly at them.

She shot away, arcing through the air, moving ridiculously fast. I quickly lost sight of her. My eyes caught the twin flames of the rockets flaring up. She'd pulled the cord, almost perfectly over the clearing.

Shit. I paused my descent. She didn't veer off like I'd hoped, but continued her forward momentum, the rockets spinning in a circle like a flaming tire rolling across the sky. I'd tried not to throw her too hard, but it looked as if I had.

But then she shot down at a right angle, just as something shot from the ground up at her. A fireball shot into the air, trying to knock her from the sky. The slow-moving projectile missed, and Samantha disappeared into the trees past the clearing just as I lowered myself fully to the ground. I could hear the distant detonation.

"Yes!" I cried, pumping a fist into the air as the experience notification rolled in. "I got one of those fucksticks."

Samantha: BRING ME BACK. BRING ME BACK. FAST, FAST. BRING ME BACK.

I quickly dropped the xistera extension, which recalled her to me. She popped into existence at my feet, growling and gnashing. Her hair was on fire again, and she was covered in dirt and leaves and a lot of blood.

She'd also brought something back with her.

She'd clamped down on the ankle of the second elf. The thin, pale elf was unconscious, likely as a result of the explosion that had killed his friend. He was drenched in blood, and most of it wasn't his own. His leg was on fire.

Clint turned and started smacking the flames out with his beaver tail. The sound was oddly squishy and wet, but after a moment, the flames were out. Samantha continued to growl and thrash at his ankle. She was unharmed.

The elf's health was almost all the way down. He remained unconscious. He'd be out for another forty seconds. I went to a knee and pulled a black bracelet off his arm. Constitution +10. Along with something else. I sighed, taking it into my inventory. I'd give it to Donut in a minute. I examined the man.

Akland – Moon Elf. Level 51. Artillery Specialist.

The Dream.

"Samantha, let him go," I said. I pulled the still-growling head off his ankle. She made a spitting noise. She still had duct tape stuck to the side of her filthy head.

"It's my kill. My kill!"

"Not this one." Actually, I'd gotten credit for the other guy too, which was interesting. It probably had something to do with her being a withering spirit. I'd ask Mordecai later.

"Hunter Killer?" Donut asked, all business. He was going to wake up in seconds.

"No," I said, pulling the ring from my inventory. Hunter Killer was a move we'd just come up with. "Heal him, but I want to talk to him first."

I slipped the ring on, and then I pulled the enchanted handcuffs from my inventory.

"It's not supposed to be like this," Akland the elf said after Donut healed him. He was handcuffed to a pole. He wouldn't be going anywhere. Donut was behind him, magic missile ready in case he tried to pull something. Clint and Holger stood on either side of him. Holger claimed he'd be able to sense any spell being cast.

Samantha had somehow returned to his leg and was gnawing on him like a damn piranha, biting and growling. He tried to shake her off, but he couldn't.

"Please. I'm just an accountant. They offered us money to come and to hunt. I have a family. Please. Please."

"How was it supposed to be?" I asked.

"What?"

"You heard me. You said it wasn't supposed to be like this. How was it supposed to be?"

"We weren't even hunting you. The Dark Hive and the Skull Empire have both laid claim. But you're in our territory. The bridges are all out. We were going to take the city. Epitome Tagg doesn't even care about the gear. Or what you did to the factions. He just wants us to find that crawler."

"You mean Louis?" I asked.

"Yes. Yes. That human besmirched Tagg's mother's honor. Please. I didn't want to get involved. I did well at fantasy hunter camp, and I won a spot on the faction wars army. Then they asked me if I wanted to come down to the hunting grounds. It was supposed to be easy. They offered me so much money. I'm not even a member of the family like the others."

"Fantasy hunter camp?" Donut asked from behind. "Is that what it sounds like?"

"It's so people can pretend like they're on the show. It's run by Vrah's family, but once a cycle, the Dream always rents the whole moon out and lets the employees and family members play for a few days. It's not real, but it's fun. The best players get to play in faction wars. I did well, and I won a spot. I wasn't ever supposed to be in real danger. But they offered me money. Please."

"*Real* danger?" I asked, leaning in. "Fun?"

"That's right. Please. I'm just an accountant. I work with soy crop shipping manifests all day."

"Do you know what I do every day?" I asked.

Donut: CARL HURRY UP. YOU'RE DOING THE BAD GUY SOLILOQUY THING. YOU ALWAYS SAY TO NEVER TO DO THE SOLILOQUY THING.

She was right. I was keeping an eye on my view counter, and it was spiked. I was doing this for the audience. This was important. It was important that they heard this. I wanted to drag it out a little so more viewers had a chance to tune in.

At least that's what I was telling myself. I couldn't barely hear myself think. The river in the back of my brain raged, flooding, filling

all the empty places it could find.

This is my birthday present to you. I am giving you a chance at life. I'm sorry it took me so long.

This will stop it. It's so loud, Carl. It's so loud.

"I… I think I saw a thing. You fix boats."

"No," I said. "That's what I used to do. I don't do that anymore."

"Please."

"I had a world. A whole world. A world filled with people. Some good, some bad. But most of us just wanted to work a little, live a normal life, maybe fall in love, have an adventure or two. And that was it."

"Please," he said again. "I can pay you. I don't have a lot. But I'll give you everything I have."

You have marked Akland.

Akland's highest stat is Constitution.

"I'm going to show you what I do now."

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Congratulations, Murderer.

You have leveled up the Ring of Divine Suffering. It now gives two stat points for every kill.

I took a deep breath and put the ring back into my inventory. I retrieved the handcuffs.

I'd gained one point to constitution, two trophies, and I'd also gone up a level to 55. I wiped my hands on my shirt. I'd forgotten to summon my gauntlet. Holger and Clint, still in their beaver form, looked at each other nervously as I looted the now-dead elf. All he had in his inventory was a bunch of crawler biscuits and another one of those arrows of Enthusiastic Double Gonorrhea. He didn't even have a bow or any other ammo. I left the biscuits in case they were poisoned.

The arrow was obviously meant for Louis.

I briefly wondered if Juice Box was doing okay. If they were expending all this effort to get to Louis, surely they were also doing everything they could to hunt down the changeling who was now somewhere on the ninth floor. I hoped she was safe.

Donut: That was unnecessarily gruesome, Carl.

Carl: I know.

Donut: It's like you're getting angrier and angrier, and it's scaring me.

Carl: It's hard not to be. But you're right. I shouldn't waste too much time telling them how I feel. But I wanted

to get it out of the way at least once. I promise I'll kill them nice and clean from now on.

Donut: WELL, YOU HAVE TO ADD A LITTLE FLAIR TO IT. MAYBE WE CAN COME UP WITH A NEW CATCHPHRASE, JUST FOR KILLING THE BAD GUYS. I'M SURE IT'LL PLAY BETTER THAN YOU GOING ALL *RAGING BULL* ON THEM.

I chuckled out loud.

"Oh, hey," I said. "That guy had something equipped that I think you'll like. It's a bracelet, so you can wear it. You still have a couple slots left, right?"

I pulled the obsidian bracelet from my inventory and held it out for her to examine. She jumped to my shoulder and peered at it.

"Hmm," she said. "It's black, and it looks like it's made from glass. It's just a plain bangle. It's not as ugly as that wood anklet, but…" She gasped as she finally read the description.

"Give it to me. Give it to me now, Carl."

"Just don't, you know, burn us all alive."

Enchanted Obsidian Bracelet of the Raggle Rouser.

This item has been upgraded three times.

Warning: this item has a 50% chance to permanently break if it's upgraded again.

This murky bracelet is light and kinda stylish if you're one of those sad sacks who always wears black and complains about how nobody ever understands you. It's made of obsidian glass, which is actually a type of rock that only forms under extreme, lava-based circumstances. And interestingly enough, this is what you'll turn into if you don't treat this item with the respect it deserves.

This bracelet imbues the following effects.

+10 to Constitution.

+5 to Dexterity

+15% Fire Resistance

Wearer may cast a level-10 *Fireball* spell once every twenty minutes.

The bracelet appeared on her front right leg. It was suddenly much smaller. She lifted it to examine it, snorted, and it disappeared

and reappeared on her front left.

"Don't use a fireball when we're in a tight space," I said. "It's a lot more dangerous to cast than magic missile."

"I know how fire works, Carl."

After I pulled the remains of Akland into my inventory, Samantha growled and then rolled away. She stopped in front of an ursine cleric who'd just peeked out of his church. She started barking at him like a dog.

"What? What in Pawna's name?" the cleric asked.

"I'm going to kill your mother. And Pawna is a big liar. She plays all innocent and virginal, but she's into soaking. Look it up."

"Well, I never."

She growled again and continued to roll away.

"Hey," I called. "Where are you going?"

She didn't answer. I sighed. I was going to have to go grab her before she caused trouble.

Donut sniffed. "Do you remember that time you got blackout drunk and passed out on the couch while watching scary movies?"

"Uh, sure," I said.

"There was a movie on that night called *Critters*. It was quite dreadful and low budget, but I must admit I really liked it at the same time. Isn't that weird? Anyway, it was about these little hairy alien monsters that formed into balls and rolled around and bit people while aliens blew stuff up all around them."

"Yes, Donut. I'm familiar with the movie."

"Now that she can roll, Samantha reminds me of one of those critter things."

"I can see that," I said, chuckling.

"I don't mean it in a good way," Donut said. "She's getting stronger. She's already stronger than Mordecai said she'd ever get. She's even rolling faster than she was this morning. He said

withering spirits aren't dangerous because even though they're usually indestructible and crazy, they can't do anything."

"I'll keep an eye on her," I said, suddenly feeling uneasy. "No matter what we do, we can't ditch her. Not yet. We're planning on using her to take the naiad castle in the morning. And now that we know she can bring stuff back with her, it makes her extra valuable."

"Maybe," Donut said. She sighed dramatically. "I wish Katia was here. It's difficult being the voice of reason. That was her job. But I do know those critter things were bad news in the movie. They attracted other bad guys, and there was a lot of fighting."

I grunted. "That's why she fits in so well with the rest of us."

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<Note added by Crawler Drakea. 22nd Edition>

The hunters avoid the elites. They are smart enough to know not to fight against something they won't be allowed to easily defeat. The problem for us is elites are more dangerous than the hunters, and much more numerous. They should always be avoided. However, it appears some of the more powerful hunters go out of their way to hunt these elites anyway, all in a quest to gain more equipment and clout for themselves. It is a most dangerous game, one I am happy to watch play out. I am not yet powerful enough to kill either elite or hunter claw-to-claw, but with my new subclass, I am experimenting with hidden traps that may even the odds. I shall attempt not to directly slay either, but to bring hunter and elite together. The woman from the talk show let slip that the naga fools have offered insurance to those idiotic dramas that control the elite beasts. It will be my pleasure to watch the elites fail and die. While killing a hunter directly is a worthy feat, it is not a smart one. Killing individuals may be satisfying, but the true satisfaction is hurting them on a larger scale. When one values coin above life, you should target the coin, for it hurts them more. And that is my food. My life. My god. Hurting the naga and everyone responsible for this nightmare.

Hunting Trophies Collected: 38

Time to level Collapse: 11 days 8 hours.

My first "boon" from the fire god Emberus was complete bullshit. It was plus 50% damage to all fire spells for 30 hours. I didn't have any fire spells other than the 10% chance I now had to inflict *Burn*, which, apparently, didn't count. Mordecai had warned me that boons were like low-tier loot boxes. Usually crap, but every once in a while, you'd get something great. This time it was a dud.

I received the notification of the boon just as we ranged forward to find the corpse of the other hunter. It was, once again, raining heavily by the time we got to him. We found the body close to where he'd been marked on my map. The seeking missile had blown the dude's head clean off. His corpse was in the process of being eaten by slugs when we arrived. His hand was gone, having already been removed and sent to me in a hunter killer box. His only equipped magical gear was a +1 strength ring. It sat on the ground next to the body. I looted an unenchanted bow from him along with a bunch of regular arrows, another gonorrhea arrow, and a photograph of Louis. The first guy had a drawing, but this was an actual photograph that appeared to have been taken from his Facebook page. It didn't look anything like him. He was wearing a straw hat and had some filter turned on that gave him dog ears, nose, and tongue. I showed it to Donut, and she fell over laughing.

The real prize was the trebuchet. The rock-throwing device was oddly small, especially considering the size of the rocks they'd been lobbing. It was the size and height of one of those windsurfing boards. We found it abandoned in the empty clearing, affixed to the ground with a set of spikes. It was made of some weird, hollow

wood and was so light, I would've been able to easily carry it even before I had my strength enhanced.

The whole thing glowed green.

Enchanted Venomous Elven Rock Chucker – Contraption.

The mounted, fast-attack artillery specialists of the Dream don't bring siege engines with them when they go raiding. That's why they're so annoyingly deadly. Using a combination of knowledge, druid magic, and a little something-something extra—*wink*—they're able to rapidly construct their war machines on the fly. These can't-take-a-joke beanpoles can conjure up a whole regiment of wall-breaching contraptions in a matter of hours. Translation: you don't want these pale fuckers on your doorstep.

This particular light-duty rock thrower is made by casting *Bamboozeled* on a patch of land and then assembling the device from the resulting poisonous bamboo stalks. Bring a sling, some rope, a few extra parts, and you have a device that can hurl 300 kilos worth of "Do you hear something?" in an enemy's direction. The magical bamboo stalks infuse anything hurled with this machine with *Poison Cloud*.

This contraption has a 90-second cooldown between each use.

It took me a minute to figure out how it worked. There was no counterweight like with traditional trebuchets, but the machine was made with a pair of magical plates that wanted to come together like magnets. You ratcheted the arm into place, attached the rock to the sling, and pulled the lever. The arm spun, and the poisoned rock blasted off.

Upon closer inspection, I suspected the plates weren't actually magical, but some sort of high-tech bullshit. Something that was just as out of place in the dungeon as that photo of Louis. The only "enchanted" part of these things was the wood.

"These assholes are still cheating," I grumbled, inspecting the postage-stamp-sized plate. It was covered with little diodes. I looked into the sky. "Do you guys see this? Well, it's mine now." I pulled the individual spikes and then picked up the trebuchet, taking the whole

thing. A new tab appeared in my inventory labeled **Siege Equipment**.

They'd picked this clearing because a pile of rocks stood nearby. They were the ancient remains of some long-collapsed building from before the Scolopendra disaster. I picked up a few of the heavy boulders and added them so I'd have some ammo handy if I ever got the opportunity.

We searched the clearing for traps, supplies, or any sign there'd been another hunter before moving on. Clint and Holger had both returned to their fuzzy, humanoid forms. They sifted through the nearby underbrush like a pair of expert trackers.

"I don't know why you're taking all this stuff," Samantha said from the ground as I finished looting the rocks. She had a small slug crawling on her forehead. "I can fly a lot further than that thing can throw stuff."

"You're not wrong," I said. "But what if you ever get your body back? Or if I want to throw something really big? Plus this thing imbues stuff with *Poison Cloud*."

She answered by making a growling noise and then rolling off through the grass. Mongo chased after her, grunting playfully.

"I do wonder if that was all of them," Donut said as she watched the god and dinosaur frolic. "All of the Dream elves, I mean. We don't have a way of knowing how many of each hunter faction are here."

"Yeah, I should have asked that guy more questions before I killed him. I think that was probably all of them, but we'll be ready if there's more."

"I hope for Louis's sake it was all of them," Donut said. "They seem to be really mad at him. I don't know why. If you're going to be famous, you need to deal with thirsty fans. On the Princess Posse server, I receive multiple marriage proposals a day. And there's this one saccathian who keeps sending me pictures of his tentacles for some reason. But I don't actually get offended by it." She sighed dramatically. "It's the price of fame, I suppose."

"He's gonna have to deal with it eventually," I said. "We have too much on our own plates to worry about him right now."

The schedule for the next few days was going to be taxing. We still had several hours before we were to help Signet with her castle assault. From there, we were going to move south and attempt to take another town and do the same thing that we did to Point Mongo. Take it, set up defenses, and train the local guards and populace to fight the hunters.

The next town south of Point Mongo also bordered the wide swath of low jungle that represented the area with Kiwi the Mongoliensis and the other dinosaurs. We still had to figure out that quest if we had time.

I also had three separate events I was going to appear at over the next few days, all thanks to my fan box. I wasn't looking forward to that. Not even a little bit.

It was almost overwhelming. *One problem at a time*, I thought.

As soon as we were done here, the task at hand would be the *Vengeance of the Daughter* storyline. They said they were open to a deal for another season, but they hadn't committed to it. I was starting to suspect that they didn't actually want one, despite what they'd told my lawyer. If that was true, there was only one real explanation for it. They had some grand finale planned out. One that likely ended with the death of Signet and probably everybody around her.

It'd been bugging me since we'd gotten that warning from Odette's assistant. After we dealt with the naiads, Signet's ultimate goal was to get to and kill her stepsister. Imogen. The high elf queen. But this same lady was also the big, bad country boss that all the top crawlers were going to have to deal with at the party. On the third floor, my exploits with Signet weren't shown on the recap episodes because anything that happened with an elite was licensed to the owners of the elite's program. There was no way—no way at all—that Borant or the Valtay or whoever was in charge would allow this floor's massive climax to be exclusive to some other program.

So what did that mean?

Maybe that meant the *Vengeance of the Daughter's* climax was set to pop off *before* this party at the end of the floor. If so, it'd be Signet versus a boss that wouldn't be allowed to be killed. If that

was the case, it meant they were going for a tragic climax. Both Mordecai and Zev had told us that these programs loved their unhappy endings. There'd be no appearance on the ninth floor. And if Signet died, everyone around her would probably get the axe, too. Including me and Donut.

Make sure you surround yourself with trustworthy, competent companions. Not too many, but enough to get the job done. That was Herot's advice. He'd written the 16th edition. I'd been re-reading his convoluted, rambling essay on the nature of NPCs recently. I had a nagging feeling that there was genius in there, hidden in his wandering sentences. *Efficient helpers are an absolute must. Remember their true capacity. Fools will get you killed.*

"Put me down! I'll kill you! I'll kill your mother!" Samantha screamed, breaking me out of my thoughts. Mongo had picked her up and was shaking her back and forth like a chew toy.

"Hey!" Donut protested.

Clint and Holger howled with laughter.

I sighed.

"So, a 'castor' is actually a beaver?" Donut asked Holger as we walked. We'd been walking for almost three hours now, grinding on small, vicious mobs called slickbacks, which were like half-sized wolverines that popped up out of holes in the ground. They were easy to kill since Donut could see them before they emerged. We had to put Mongo away because once he discovered them, he was gleefully committing mass murder, denying us the chance to grind.

The sun set, and nighttime descended on the forest. Donut cast her *Torch* spell, which was now level 13. The slickbacks moved deeper into their holes. Holger said they'd soon be replaced by predatory bat-like creatures. They generally didn't attack groups, especially a well-lit one, but we still had to be on the lookout. We would be at our destination soon.

We were on our way north to meet Signet and the rest of the team for the assault on Fort Freedom, the former naiad palace. Clint had run ahead to let them know we were on the way. Supposedly the entire "assault team" was going to gather at another one of those old trees. From there, we'd approach the river and execute the plan. Thankfully, Donut and I had but a minor role in tonight's assault. It was clear Signet wanted to keep us safe for the second part.

Plus, the castle was mostly submerged, and we all knew Donut's opinion on going underwater. She'd already reiterated the point multiple times.

Samantha also traveled with us. I carried her at first, but she wouldn't shut up, so I was now making her roll. She followed behind or ahead, happily growling and splashing through the mud and foliage. She could move quickly, but she couldn't jump or hop, which sometimes bogged her down. She kept getting hung up in bushes and branches, and we were constantly rescuing her. At first, I was worried about her running off or disappearing into the darkness. She didn't. She hummed to herself merrily as we went, and she cursed loudly whenever she bumped into something. She was frequently threatening trees.

"I ain't never heard the term beaver before," Holger said. "But you foreigners always have funny words for things."

"Well, you are most definitely a were-beaver. It's adorable. This chee form you're in now is perfectly fine, but the beaver body is just a delight." Donut suddenly gasped. "Carl, is that where castor oil comes from? Do they get it from beavers? Miss Beatrice used to use castor oil on her head for her hair. She insisted it made it grow faster. She did have nice hair. Almost as nice as Holger's. She'd sometimes make me drink a drop of it so I'd poop before I went into the judging cage. It always made my stomach hurt." She smacked her mouth. "My word, what an unpleasant memory. Come to think of it, it did taste a bit how you smell, Holger."

"She shouldn't have done that," I said. "I'm pretty sure castor oil is really dangerous for cats. It doesn't come from beavers. It comes

from a castor bean. But I once read they used beaver gland excretions or something for perfume and as a vanilla flavoring."

"That's disgusting," Donut said. "Vanilla? Beavers do not give me a vanilla vibe. Maybe rocky road. Or Neapolitan. But vanilla? Hardly."

"There's a beaver god in the Nothing," Samantha said. She'd rolled up between us. "Capa or something. He's a fuck. Another god, Hehaka, uses him as a hat. He doesn't like that much, but he can't do anything about it. He's always crying."

"Gland excretions?" Holger asked, ignoring Samantha. "For *perfume*? Oi, you guys are crazy. No wonder you humans smell so bad."

"Oh, you have no idea," Donut said. "You should have met some of Carl's old friends. He had this one friend named Maloney who smelled like rotten Spaghetti-O's mixed with…"

Donut was interrupted by a distant, bright light shining into the air, turning night to day, coming through the trees, so bright it overwhelmed the torch. The brilliant, blue flash stopped us in our tracks. It was followed shortly by a crackling lightning sound and then the rumble of thunder. The ground shook, and all the hair on my arms stood on their end as I felt the tingle of electricity. Donut and Samantha both let out little screeches.

"Carl, what was that? That sounded like an explosion!"

We all stopped and crouched down. Donut snapped off her *Torch* spell.

"Not an explosion," I said. "It was lightning."

"That's where the all-tree is!" Holger said. "Just over the next bend. I think they got attacked!"

The scent of burning wood filled the air.

"Donut, what's on your map?" I asked.

"We're too far away!"

"I'm on it. I'll kill 'em!" Samantha said, rolling off.

"Wait," I hissed, but she was already gone.

"Goddamnit," I said. I was about to go grab her, but I hesitated. The whole plan was to use her as a distraction anyway. She rumbled off into the night. "We'll follow, but stop as soon as you see something on your map."

"Yoohoo! Who's shooting lightning!" Samantha yelled in the distance.

"For something so small, she sure makes a lot of noise," Donut muttered.

"Come on," I said. "Stay low." We moved quickly through the dark woods. There were suddenly dots everywhere, but they were all low-level forest creatures fleeing the explosion. A group of the ever-present monkeys screeched as they rustled through the trees above us.

"There's a few Xs on the map," Donut said as we approached. "Uh-oh, I see a hunter. No, wait. It's surrounded by a bunch of NPCs. And two elites. It's Signet and that scary ogre guy. What was his name? Areson. That's it. I see the other beavers and their caterpillar lady. I don't know who shot the lightning, but I think the hunter guys got the worst of it. There's two dead bodies, and I think they're the bad guys. Carl, these hunters are terrible at their jobs. They keep getting caught and killed."

Ahead, Samantha started caterwauling, screaming for help. She'd gotten herself stuck.

I sighed. "Okay, come on," I said, standing up.

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Clint found us as I fished Samantha out of the mud.

"Gah, how did you get stuck down there?" I asked. She'd gotten herself wedged in good. She'd somehow gotten the back of her head half buried. I had to yank to free her. Her head made a slurping noise as she pulled from the muck.

"I was trying to take a shortcut, but I hit a rock." Globs of mud cascaded off of her.

Clint emerged. The bald man had a harried look to him.

"There you are. Taking the scenic route, are you? We're all waiting for ye."

"Everybody okay?" Holger asked.

"We got jumped by a trio of off-worlders. They're a weird kind of hairy orc ain't never seen before. Hurt a few elves, unfortunately, but it didn't kill 'em. The fools used a lightning attack near the all-tree."

"Oi," Holger said, shaking his mullet. "What a bunch of twats. So they get splattered?"

"Two of them," Clint said. "The third got his shoes blown right off him. Areson grabbed him. Now Signet is gonna use it as her sacrifice. She's gonna assemble her battle squad. The full group. I'm pretty excited about it."

"Signet? Tsarina Signet is there?" Samantha asked. She wiggled out of my hands and plopped to the ground. She started rolling off

toward the encampment, shouting, but she got herself stuck again about twenty feet away. She started growling.

"What's the all-tree?" I asked, moving to grab her.

"You saw it before," Holger said. "It's an old, magic-infused tree. It protects us. The dwellers of the forest."

I remembered the old tree we'd sat around the first time Signet had gathered us together. The description hadn't been very helpful, I remembered. "That other tree was pretty far from here."

"Yep," Holger agreed. "It's all the same tree. The roots cover the entire area. What you saw was just a small outgrowth. The main body is far below us, between the disputed lands and the celestial realm."

"Huh," I said. I couldn't remember reading anything about a giant, floor-spanning tree in the cookbook. "And this tree protected you from a lightning attack?"

Clint answered as I bent down to once again retrieve Samantha, who was now shouting for me to let her do it herself. Donut clucked her tongue at how dirty the sex doll head had gotten.

"Any forest-kin within a few hundred meters of an all-tree outcropping is protected from magic attacks. The tree sucks the spell in and turns it on the caster. Everybody knows that. It kills the outcropping. But it grows back in a few months. Only an idiot attacks near one of them things."

This had to be something new. There was no way a hunter would be stupid enough to attack otherwise.

"The tree protects forest dwellers? Even the high elves?" Donut asked. "Even though they're the bad guys?"

"Yeah," Clint said. "Those assholes have their castle right in the middle of a grove of the things. The all-tree don't give a shit about who is good or bad. It just shields those of us who have the forest in our blood. It's not smart or nothing."

"That's too bad," Donut said. "I thought maybe it was like that tree from that weird, blue alien movie with the *Ghostbusters* lady and that Scientologist guy who married Eric Forman's mom on *Friends*."

"What?" I asked. "What are you talking about?"

"Really, Carl. If you're not going to understand my references, I don't know why I even bother discussing classic entertainment with you.'

"Put me down! Put me down," Samantha demanded, interrupting. She wiggled in my hands.

"Okay, but if you get stuck again, you're gonna have to get yourself out," I said.

"Put me down!"

I rolled her like a bowling ball, and she disappeared into the woods.

A few minutes later, we entered the clearing to find Signet conversing quietly with Areson. The ogre nodded and picked the unconscious hunter up over his shoulder and walked off into the dark. He was followed by a group of bush elves and ursine.

Samantha had not yet arrived, having gotten herself tangled up once again. I was going to give her the chance to free herself before I rescued her.

I looked down at the fried corpses of the two orcs. While there were X's on the map, these guys had been so thoroughly fried, there was hardly anything left of them. Still, I had the ability to loot one of them.

Corpse of Hunter The Talent. Killed by zapping himself with his own *Lightning* scroll. What a punk.

The Skull Empire.

"I was wondering when these assholes would show up," I said.

"They seem about as inept as their Prince Maestro," Donut said. "Do these guys really run a giant galactic empire?

This guy, who had the ridiculous name "The Talent" had three scrolls of *Lightning* and an astounding amount of gold. Almost 75,000 gold pieces, which was—by far—the most amount of gold we'd ever found on someone.

Carl: Hey, Donut. You better loot this one. Not me. Don't want to pay that much in tithe taxes.

Donut audibly gasped when she saw what he had on him.

Donut: WHY DOES HE HAVE SO MUCH. THE OTHER ONE DOESN'T HAVE ANYTHING.

Carl: Dunno. But be careful with those scrolls.

Donut: CARL, CARL. HE HAD SOMETHING ELSE. IT WASN'T LISTED, BUT WHEN I HIT LOOT ALL, I GOT SOMETHING EXTRA! IT'S A CREDIT CHIT. I THINK THAT'S LIKE A CREDIT CARD. IT DOESN'T HAVE A DESCRIPTION. IT LOOKS LIKE A CREDIT CARD. WE NEED TO GO BUY SOMETHING WITH IT BEFORE THEY CANCEL IT!

Carl: Hold onto it for now. We'll ask Mordecai about it later. From now on, when you loot hunters. Only take one item at a time. Don't do the loot all option.

Donut: THAT'S GOING TO TAKE FOREVER, CARL.

"They somehow knew we'd be meeting here," Signet said. "They were hiding, preparing an ambush when Edgar sensed them. It forced them to attack."

Edgar was the tortoise creature. He looked like a regular, giant tortoise one would find in any zoo. One of those creatures who was always like 150 years old. The only difference was this guy could talk. He and Donut had taken a liking to each other.

"Where are you taking the other one?" I asked.

"Areson is preparing the sacrifice," Signet said. "I was hoping you'd do the honors."

I nodded. "Absolutely. But I'd like to talk to him first."

"If we have time."

"Signet! Darling!" Samantha cried, her voice uncharacteristically high-pitched and friendly. She rolled up to Signet's feet and started pushing against her, leaving muddy splotches on her leg. She had a branch in her hair. "Niece! Or is it cousin? I gotta say, I love the bare breasts. It's good. A bold statement. They're not as good as mine, but I am impressed that our genes have held up so well. Seriously. Those are some grade-A party pillows. Small but perky. When I first got locked up, there was a time when I did a little experimenting with these demon ladies we got locked up with, and I learned to really appreciate… You know what, never mind. You don't want to hear about that. All I'm trying to say is nice tits. You got them from my side of the family, I'll have you know. I don't know why you'd besmirch such a beautiful body with so much ink, but that's

something that can be dealt with. Oh, I suppose I should call you tsarina, shouldn't I?"

"What in the name of the gods?" Signet said, stepping back. "Is that supposed to be a Lika head?"

Lika was the fictional character the original sex doll was based on.

"Uh, yeah, that's Samantha," I said. "It's who we were going to use as the distraction."

"I see," Signet said, looking down at her, mouth tight.

"She says she's related to you," Donut added. "She's a withering spirit!"

Signet crouched down and picked up the sex doll head to examine it. All the tattoos swirling about her skin crowded to the front to get a better look.

"Look, cousin. Your imperial majesty. I need you," Samantha said as Signet turned the latex head over in her hands. The naiad ran a finger along the scar on Samantha's chin. "As I'm sure you heard, my pop sent me on a little time out, and you would not believe what I had to go through to get back out. But the human who was helping me screwed everything up, and long story short, I'm stuck in this thing. You being the last trueblood heir to the empire *and* a blood relation, you have the ability to help me out. It won't even be that difficult for you. It'll take like two-three minutes. Tops. And I'll have my body back."

Signet looked at me pointedly. "Carl, when you said you had someone to assist in the assault, you forgot to mention a few details."

I grunted. "I seem to recall when you used Donut's life as a bargaining chip to get me to help you. This isn't even close to that."

Signet sighed and returned her attention to Samantha, who was unsuccessfully attempting to distort her wide mouth into a big smile. The effect was like a fish gasping for breath

"What, exactly, do you wish for me to do for you?" Signet asked.

"You have to give me your body," Samantha said. "You'll die, of course. But it'll only take a few minutes. I'll walk you through the spell. I see you're a summoner, so you most definitely have the

chops to cast it. Do you wish to get started now, or do you want to do the assault on the castle first? I mean, no offense, but that'll be much easier once I take over. What's your bra size? King Blaine loves them perky like that. Not too big. Just perfect. He's sure to stop banging my mother once he sees my new body. We'll have to expel those tattoos first, but no problem. Really, no need to apologize. Oh, I am so excited."

Signet returned her gaze to me.

I laughed.

"Ungrateful bitch," Samantha grumbled as we approached the river. We'd had to hike for another half an hour through the dark woods to get to the edge of the river, and Samantha had been grousing the entire time.

"Shush," I said. "You need to stay quiet."

"She's a liar. Just like her slut aunt Corrine."

Samantha sat upon the back of Mongo, lashed just behind Donut on the saddle. We didn't trust her not to roll off. Donut turned and patted the head with a paw. "Don't you worry," Donut said. "We'll get something soon enough."

"I wanted her body," Samantha said. "She has a nice body. I don't see why she won't just give it to me."

"She said she'll help you," Donut said. "She just doesn't want to, you know, die in the process. It would be most inconvenient for her."

"She's full of shit," Samantha grumbled.

Signet *was* full of shit. It was painfully obvious she had no intention of helping Samantha regain her body. She'd told Samantha that after both the naiads and elves were dealt with, she possibly had a spell that could summon a permanent body for her. The elite was really just saying that to get her to shut up.

The problem was that Samantha was no dumbass. She was batshit crazy, but she wasn't dumb. Still, she wanted it so bad, she

was willing to help just in case Signet was being truthful. That didn't stop her from bitching about it the whole time.

"When we approach the water, we have to be quiet. We don't want them knowing we're here yet," I said.

"I'm going to kill all of them," Samantha said. "Just you watch. I'm going to kill them all. And then their mothers."

Ahead, the shimmering blue of a spell danced in the air. This was a protection spell, designed to keep large parties invisible. It'd been cast by Edgar the tortoise, who was something called a Shell Mage. We headed toward the edge of the spell and pushed ourselves inside. My ears popped, similar to when I went in and out of a *Protective Shell*.

You are secreted!

The area of the spell was huge, bigger than I was expecting. I was suddenly reminded of Grimaldi's circus tent. *You could hide a whole army in here.* Ahead, the others crowded at the top of a hill. I spied Areson the ogre, still with the orc slung over his shoulder. The bound creature was awake and struggling.

We crested the hill, and there it was, glittering in the dark. Fort Freedom.

We stood at the edge of the forest, just inside the line of trees. The protection spell extended about a quarter of the way down the hill. A long, muddy slope led down to the river, which was much wider here. At least a mile and a half, which was significantly wider than it was just outside of Point Mongo to the south. The naiads had cleared the slope of foliage so they could see if anything approached. A single, rock-paved trail led down out of the forest to a stone archway, which ended at the riverbank.

As I gazed upon the slope, multiple lights started popping up around the area. Traps. Lots of traps. These were alarms and summoning traps. I turned my focus to the stone walkway, and it was also covered with "silent alarm" traps.

A group of bush elves crawled over the muddy slope, quietly disarming the traps within the area of the spell. As I watched, a group expertly crept out of the spell's containment and moved to the

first trap. Actually, a trap I hadn't yet noticed. They set to work disarming it. They were carving a path to the water.

The castle itself sat about a quarter mile off shore, coming up out of the water like the top of a skyscraper that had been submerged in a flood. Even in the dark, I could see the castle was in poor repair. One of the ramparts was missing a wall. A dark, tattered flag hung from a pole, which leaned at an odd angle, like it was about to tumble forward. What had once been a massive, arched, stained-glass window was built into the stone just above the waterline, spanning two stories high. It was now dotted with holes, so many that I couldn't tell what it once depicted.

If there was a bridge from the shore to the castle, it was long gone.

Only about half of Signet's fighters were here. The other half were on the opposite shore, hidden in the trees.

I came to stand next to Signet, who gazed mournfully at the castle. She turned to look at me. A single tear ran down her cheek.

"You know what the funny thing is?" Signet asked.

"What's that?"

"If they had just waited, they would've gained control anyway. It would've been a peaceful and organized change of power. They didn't have to kill my mother. I was her only child. Under the imperial charter, I would've never been eligible. The rule would've gone back to the people. But the confederacy couldn't wait, and they killed my mother right before she was to become tsarina. Sometimes, looking back, I think she was planning on stepping down anyway. She talked about it sometimes. Just me and her running off. Finding an island somewhere."

The tears running down Signet's face weren't actually touching her skin. They hovered just a millimeter off of her, and when she turned her head, they flew off and away, some striking me. *Water doesn't touch her*. What had she said to Donut before? *It's not a spell. It's a curse.*

I still didn't know Signet's full story. At least not the details. I knew her mom was a princess, but she'd gotten knocked up by the high elf king guy. King Finian, who was now dead. A coup had killed

her mother and gotten Signet banished from the naiad. At the same time, just as King Finian's health started to fail, his heir—Princess Imogen—set out to eradicate all the half-elf bastards he'd sown. Probably to secure her own claim to the high elf crown. Signet had been forced to flee to the Over City where she'd joined the circus.

The naiad kingdom wasn't very big. The naiad people had fallen to anarchy. The usurpers occupied the castle, no longer maintaining it or the kingdom. They were so obsessed with the idea of being "free" that they lost sight of what it meant to actually run a government. Like with most of these stories and quests, this was probably some bullshit political cartoon, and they were making a statement about something. I didn't care. However, I knew I needed to know about all of this as much as I could.

We should be doing this part last, I thought. *That makes more sense*.

"So, you ready to summon your squad?" I asked.

"Yes," she said, straightening. "You send that possessed thing into the water and get the main guards moving toward her, and my crew will take the castle from the top down. You, Princess Donut, and the rest of the ground team will protect the shore from those who might attempt escape. I suspect you won't see much fighting. They rarely leave the water." She paused. "If something happens to me tonight, I want you to know that I appreciate all you've done for me, Carl. I consider you part of my family, now. And family is very important to me."

I turned toward the captive. "Let's get this done."

I had to do the sacrifice first. It took Signet several minutes to cast her spell once the sacrifice was made. While she did, I would toss Samantha into the water, but I had to use my xistera extension if I wanted to get her back. I would have to keep the extension on my arm.

Signet nodded at Areson, who stepped forward and unceremoniously dumped the orc at my feet. I examined him.

Her, actually. She was a young, female orc, spitting and grunting. I grinned when I saw her class. Like Gwen, she'd traded fighting skills for no magic whatsoever. Plus she was also still level 50, which

meant she hadn't even leveled once since she got here. This had very likely been her very first foray into battle.

Future Huntress – Wire-Haired Orc. Level 50. Boring Ol' Fighter.

The Skull Empire.

I kneeled down in front of her. Areson had gagged her and tied her up. He'd also stripped her of all her gear. She didn't have anything magical on her and wore a simple bodysuit. She possibly had a scroll in her inventory, but the fact she hadn't used it yet suggested she didn't. The dead one with the money and the scrolls and that weird credit chit had obviously been the leader of the group and held onto all the expensive gear. Still, I had to be cautious. Like usual, I pulled the ring from my inventory and stuck it on my finger. I cast *Wisp Armor* on myself, which would last for ten minutes. I pulled the gag off. Samantha rolled up and started chewing on the orc's ankle, growling. I left her there as a distraction since she couldn't do any damage.

"You can't do this," Future Huntress said, her voice full of fear. "You can't do this. The Skull Empire will hunt you down and kill you."

Donut and I both laughed.

"Oh, honey," Donut said. "Are you suggesting that if we don't kill you, the Skull Empire won't hunt Carl down? I mean, really. What an absurd threat."

"How many other skull empire orcs are there on the floor?"

"Thousands," she hissed.

I sighed. "Including you, that was three. We already wiped out all the Dream elves." We still didn't know if that was true or not, but I was hoping it was. "We know about the hunting areas. This isn't even your territory. The Gorgites have this area."

"Top tens are fair game for those who bought the hunting license. It doesn't matter where they are."

"Hunting license?" I asked. "Is that official?"

She didn't answer. She continued to glare at me sullenly. "You should let me go. If I die, then you'll be free game for the Dark Hive. We paid to have first crack at you."

"So you *are* the last of the orcs?" I asked.

She didn't answer.

"I can yank an arm off to get her to talk," Areson said.

"No," Signet said. "It'll weaken the sacrifice. Even if we heal her."

"I'm not going to torture her," I said, standing up. "Untie her and heal her. If she pulls something, make sure she doesn't get away."

"No, no. Please. You can't do this. I'm a real person. Not a crawler or an NPC. I'm a real person."

I took a deep breath, holding back the sudden wave of anger. I'd actually been starting to feel bad about this. She was so goddamned scared. I pulled up my menu to mark her, but I was interrupted by a notification.

System Message: A champion has fallen. A hunter has claimed a bounty.

"Fuck, fuck," I said, quickly pulling up my chat to make sure everybody was still on there.

Katia: Something's happened. Langley's team is gone. All of them. They're all dead.

Next to me, Donut gasped. I held my head low. Langley. The archer and all his friends who'd been crucial on the previous floor. But they weren't on the top 10. That message only appeared when someone on the list fell.

Carl: Goddamnit. I'm really busy right now. The dead top-10 must have been that two-headed guy. The Popovs.

Katia: No, Langley hadn't gotten to them yet. They were hunting down Bogdon Ro on their own with a large group. They had him cornered.

Bogdon Ro was a guy who'd been off and on the top 10, but I didn't know anything about him other than that he had a bunch of player killer skulls. Whatever happened resulted in the death of all of them, and a hunter had gotten credit.

"See?" Future Hunter said. "See how dangerous Vrah is? You need me to protect you. She can't hunt you for three more days, but not if I die. Then you're fair game."

I took a deep breath. Poor Langley. He and his friends had worked so goddamn hard to get off that last floor. They'd all been immigrants to Finland, working their fingers to the bones their entire

lives. They'd had to scramble for everything they'd ever had, and the moment they'd gotten a leg up, they'd turned around and tried to help others. And just like that. Gone. He'd been trying to do something good.

"You know," I said. "The only possible reason why Vrah would let you guys go first was because she knew you'd fail."

The orc seemed to deflate. She nodded. "I know," she said after a moment. "I should never have come here."

"No," I agreed. "No, you shouldn't have."

"Carl," Signet said.

I marked Future Hunter. A moment later, I groaned.

"Charisma?" I said. "Your highest stat is charisma?"

The doomed orc sat up straight. She knew now that she'd been marked, it was over. She sighed heavily. "I thought I could charm my way out of bad situations."

"But you're an orc," Donut said, incredulous. She'd stepped back. We had a circle around us now, everybody watching.

I formed a fist.

I pulled my xistera extension and loaded Samantha up. I grabbed an alarm trap ball, one I'd marked "Annoying" and duct-taped it to her head. I set the timer for one minute. Nearby, Signet was frozen, her arms out in a Jesus pose. The tattoos around her body swirled, faster and faster. The were-castors all oohed and aahed as they watched.

"What song does that one play?" Donut asked, peering at the alarm trap.

"It's not important," I said. I couldn't get Langley out of my head. *I should have talked to him more. I hadn't said a word to him since the floor started*. "It'll be submerged, and you probably won't hear it." To Samantha, I said. "I'm going to throw you a little upstream. Just start shouting when the alarm goes off. The current isn't too strong, but if you can, try to aim yourself to get inside the castle. Let

me know if you overshoot it. If they capture you, remember your lines."

"I don't want this strapped to my head!" Samantha said. "I can be plenty loud without the trap!"

"Don't worry. They'll get rid of it as soon as they can."

"I'm going to kill all of them."

"Remember your lines. You'll have plenty of time to kill them after."

I turned, aimed, and chucked Samantha into the river. She arched up and away, plopping into the water like a stone.

I turned in time to watch the three-headed, paper ogre emerge out into the sky, stooping down to remain within the protection spell. The were-castors all started to transform. The elves glowed as they cast a water spell on themselves.

Nearby, the body of Future Hunter remained crumpled on the ground. She hadn't even fought back. Her hand had already been magically removed by the system. I thought of poor Langley. *I will break you all.*

Samantha: WHAT IS THIS WONDERFUL SONG.

Carl: It's called "Wonderwall."

Donut: CARL, YOU THREW THE WRONG TRAP.

An alarm went off somewhere deep in the castle. The sound echoed up into the night air.

More paper monsters formed. The protection spell around us snapped off.

"For my mother," Signet said, and she moved toward the water, followed by the assault team. We watched them move forward. To my surprise, Edgar the tortoise moved with them. Areson the ogre remained with us. The caterpillar remained with us, too, along with a handful of the elves.

"Do you think we're going to have to fight anything?" Donut asked, watching the assault team.

"What do you think?" I asked.

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"Do you think that was her real name? Future Hunter?" Donut asked as we watched the team slowly approach the castle. The castle's alarm was a constant, pounding *ah-luga, ah-luga*. Apparently that particular pattern meant *attackers at the main gate. All defenders converge at the front.*

"Maybe," I said. "I think all the orcs of the Skull Empire have weird names."

"It's just weirdly specific," Donut said. "I mean, she was a hunter. Not a future one. A terrible one, sure. She ended up dying almost immediately, but she could've dropped the 'future' part from her name. It's confusing. When her parents talk about her at her funeral, what are they going to say? 'Future Hunter the hunter was formerly a hunter before she got punched to death by a human with no pants?' Also, what if she wanted to be an Instagram influencer or something? You're not exactly giving your child a whole lot of choices when you name them something like that. It's like naming your daughter Candy. Of course she's going to become a stripper. She has no other choice. When I'm ruler of the galaxy, I'm going to institute name rules. Like they have in Iceland. Katia was telling me…"

We were, thankfully, interrupted by Samantha.

Samantha: THEY CAME OUT TO GET ME BUT I SHOWED THEM. I WENT RIGHT PAST AND INTO THEIR CASTLE. THEY HAVE REALLY LET THIS PLACE GO. THE TAPESTRY OF MY

GRANDFATHER IS GONE. THEY'RE ALL CHASING ME, BUT I GOT SUCKED INTO THE FILTER VENT. THE SONG TRAP FELL OFF AND WENT DEEP DOWN THERE. NOW THEY'LL NEVER TURN IT OFF.

Carl: Did you get a chance to talk to them?

Samantha: DO YOU KNOW HOW LOUD THIS THING IS? BESIDES, THERE'S NO TALKING IN WAR. ONLY TEETH AND BLOOD AND THE WAILING OF WOMEN WHO BLEED OUT AS I SEDUCE THEIR MEN AND MAKE LOVE IN THE GORE. OH GOODIE. THE SONG JUST STARTS OVER WHEN IT FINISHES. IT'S LOUDER NOW BECAUSE IT'S IN THE VENT SYSTEM.

I sighed.

"Hah!" Donut said. "She forgot her line. You owe me a gold coin!" A moment later, Donut gasped. "Carl, Carl. I can hear it! The song! It's coming from the castle! I can hear it over the alarm! Tell them to shut off the castle alarm. It's ruining it!"

"You know," I said, "it occurs to me that we've never learned what Samantha is supposed to be a god of. I guess since she's a minor goddess, maybe she didn't get a thing. Whatever they call it."

"She's the goddess of unrequited love," Donut said, bopping her head. She stood atop Mongo who was sniffing suspiciously at the air.

"Really? How do you know?"

"I asked her, Carl."

"Huh," I said. "Interesting."

"Well, she *said* it was unrequited love. But I must say. I kind of get the impression it's more like the goddess of crazy ex-girlfriends. Everything she does is because she wants to get back with some weird king guy. She also seems to think her sand ooze child, you know the one that was married to the mage guy on the last floor, is still alive and is on the ninth floor. I don't know how she knows that. But she wants to pick up the kid and then get herself down to some other floor where the king is. The first part of her plan is to get a body, though."

I shook my head. I figured the odds of them letting her move from her current form to a regular body were pretty slim. Either way,

she was much more powerful than she was letting on. We had to be careful.

Samantha's part in the castle assault was to be nothing more than a distraction, and she'd already done her job. She was to enter the water, splat in front of the castle, and wait for the Oasis-blasting trap to draw everyone's attention. When the guards reacted, they'd set their own alarm off to tell the defenders where the threat was. When this happened, Samantha was to roll/float toward the guards. The castle's alarm system was old and inefficient according to Signet. Once triggered, it took a long time to reset.

They had guards, but not enough to cover all the entrances and exits. Once the alarm went off, signifying an invasion at the front door, all the poorly-trained guards would move in that direction, leaving the rear, air area of the castle undefended while Signet's amphibious assault team moved in. Even if noticed, there wouldn't be enough time for the alarm to be reset to tell the defenders where the real threat was coming from. The team would move to the throne room where the leaders of the confederacy would conveniently be hiding.

It was simple. Child's play. The whole defensive system of Fort Freedom was a joke. This was just an extra plot point in the Signet story and not meant to be a true obstacle.

We'd given Samantha a line to say because she'd been bitching that we were underutilizing her "talents." The instructions weren't important, but she'd insisted on having something to do if she got captured and the alarm trap deactivated, so I'd made her memorize a line. One designed to toss the guards into further confusion:

I am Psamathe, long-lost daughter of the confederacy! I am here to parlay with the leaders of Fort Freedom. Take me to them immediately so I may discuss the conditions of my army's surrender to your glorious cause! The cause of freedom from tyranny!

Donut insisted the line was too long and she'd never remember or say it. I figured Donut was probably right. If by some miracle they did transport Samantha to the leader chamber, she could relay important information back to us. They couldn't hurt her, and I could

teleport the sex doll head back to me at a moment's notice, so it was a pretty harmless plan.

I was glad to be otherwise sitting this one out. I figured we'd have to fight something, as they weren't going to just let me and Donut sit here with our thumbs up our asses, but if there was a big what-to-do, it'd be between Signet and whomever she found down there. The showrunners were trying to walk a very fine line with this. They wanted me present, but they certainly wanted to protect to the integrity of their main character.

Ahead, the paper soldiers along with the others moved into the water. The flying ones circled above while the others floated atop the slow current of the river. One of the battle squad, a long eel, laid itself across the river like a boat, allowing the elves to scramble aboard. It bobbed up and down a few times and was now moving quickly across the river toward the castle. Signet traveled with this group. Some of the others, like Edgar the tortoise and the beavers disappeared into the water, sinking below the surface. Mongo let out a forlorn peeping noise when they disappeared.

Next to me, Miss Nadine the giant caterpillar hissed worriedly. Areson the ogre patted the hairy thing. "It'll be okay," he said. The caterpillar hissed again. She smelled like wet moss. Behind us, a few bush elves remained, guarding the trees in case something attacked from behind.

Signet and the elves reached the castle and stepped inside, moving directly onto a walkway aligned with the height of the river. Wherever the half-naiad walked, water shied away from her, like a magnet pushing iron shavings away.

"How is she going to go down there?" I asked Areson. "It seems like the curse might make it difficult."

"She floats like an apple," the ogre said. "It's a bad curse. But she can go down. You watch."

One of the summoned paper monsters—a hammerhead shark, but with a buff, human-like body—wrapped Signet into a hug. Together they disappeared inside. I didn't actually see what was happening there.

"Once she deep enough, she doesn't pop up no more. She needs air though. Has spell. But if she go too deep she get the squish. Good thing river not deep enough."

"How did she get the curse?" Donut asked.

Areson grunted. "High elf cast it the night mom was deaded."

"Wait," I said. "There was a high elf working with these naiad guys?"

"Yah," Areson said. "The dissenters killed the tsar and his family. They only did it because they had help from the sneaky high elves. It stopped fighting between elves and naiad, but the naiad are almost slaves now. Especially after nine-tier attack. Most of the fishy people died, but there's a good number left. They still at the teat of pointy-ears. They gotta ask them for permission to do anything. Now the naiad regular folks are going wild like old days because the castle people don't do no ruling or nothing."

I remembered what Signet had said, that her mother was planning on a peaceful transition of power. All of this happened before the Scolopendra attack, so years and years ago. I wondered how different it would've been had there been an efficient government in place when the disaster happened.

A few of the paper monsters draped themselves over the top of the castle, but several others lowered themselves slowly into the dark water. It looked almost as if they were being erased. Or fed into a paper shredder.

A few minutes passed with nothing happening, and then the castle alarm abruptly stopped. This had the unfortunate side effect of allowing the looping alarm trap to be heard much more clearly. It sounded distant and hollow. Thankfully.

Samantha: I CAN HEAR FIGHTING. I'M TRYING TO WIGGLE MY WAY OUT TO GET IN ON THE ACTION.

Carl: Don't get in the way. I'm going to recall you.

Samantha: PLEASE NOT YET.

Carl: Okay, but stay out of the way. And keep me updated on what's going on.

I had no idea how the massive, paper monsters were going to fight in such close quarters. But I figured it was equally glorious and

terrifying to behold.

Samantha: THERE'S A LOT OF BLOOD IN THE WATER. AND THE GREEN ALGAE STUFF THAT WAS COVERING ALL THE NAIADS IS FLOATING ALL OVER THE PLACE.

Donut: THAT SOUNDS DISGUSTING.

Samantha: IT REALLY IS. I CAN TASTE IT IN THE WATER. IT MAKES THE BLOOD TASTE EARTHY. LIKE I'M EATING A SALTY, FISH-FLAVORED SALAD.

Donut: EW.

The river surrounding the castle started to bubble. A lightning bolt shot upward, coming directly out of the water. It shot into the sky, briefly turning night into day. At that moment, I caught glimpse of the defense team on the south shore, multiple ursine standing there looking back at us.

The ground shook. I exchanged an uneasy glance with Areson. Mongo abruptly howled and started pawing at the ground. He jumped up and down excitedly, causing Donut to yelp and yell at him to calm down.

"Look," Donut said, pointing after Mongo calmed. A body floated in the water, face down. A naiad. It disappeared as it floated away into the darkness. Another naiad appeared, popping up like a cork. Then another, this one missing a head. But then two more bodies appeared, both of them the paper cutouts of Signet's battle squad. They appeared and then dissolved. Yet another body popped up, this one too mangled to properly examine in the dark. I was pretty sure it was a bush elf. It'd been ripped in half.

"This not good," Areson said as Miss Nadine started chittering worriedly.

Samantha: UH-OH.

Carl: What's happening?

Samantha: I THINK IT WAS A TRAP. DON'T WORRY. I GOT THIS. I JUST WRIGGLED FREE.

"Goddamnit," I growled. "Donut, you stay here. I'm gonna have to go in there." I pulled the water-breathing ring from my inventory and slipped it on my finger. I felt the gills form on my neck.

You've been hit with the ugly stick!

"Oh my god, Carl. Take that ring off this instant. I can't believe it only lowered your charisma by one point! You're all slimy. And Signet told us to wait here. I don't think going in there is a good idea."

A new explosion rocked the river. Bloody, red water showered up, this time from within the castle, coming out the broken, stained glass window. More bodies appeared, but I couldn't tell what they were, but one of them was distinctly short and hairy.

Miss Nadine started to lose her shit, bouncing and hissing. She broke for the hill leading down to the water.

"You no swim!" Areson called. She did not respond.

"No time to argue," I said. The xistera extension remained on my arm. I had to remove it before I dove in there.

Carl: Samantha, I gotta teleport you back.

Samantha: NO! NO! I ALMOST HAVE HIM.

I pulled the extension into my inventory.

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[27]

I HAVE NEVER CLAIMED TO BE A SMART PERSON.

We all do stupid things. A lot of times, people do stupid shit not because they *are* stupid, but because in the heat of the moment, they make rash decisions. It's a different sort of thing. That's my excuse here.

Heat of the moment. At least that's what I tell myself.

When Samantha said, "I almost have him," I *should* have waited a moment and asked who she was talking about. She would have answered with, "The lightning-shooting river monster that has taken over the throne room of Fort Freedom." And then I would have followed up that question with, "Are you biting down on this creature right now?"

I was expecting Samantha to teleport to my feet like she usually did. Instead, the enormous, truck-sized frog thing appeared right next to me. It appeared so close, we all went flying, the sensation oddly akin to bouncing off a wet trampoline. Donut and Mongo rocketed away, disappearing into the trees. Areson fell over and disappeared with a howl. I flew backward and started to slide down the slope to the river. I stopped, smashing against the surprisingly-soft body of Miss Nadine the giant caterpillar who'd paused her descent to gawk at the sudden appearance of the monster.

The large creature was about eight feet tall and maybe fifteen feet long, green and lizard-like. The thing had no neck, and short, stubby legs that looked ridiculously too short. It had a stub where its

tail should be, like it had recently been ripped off. It was like a half-frog, half-squished alligator. It had a distinctly prehistoric appearance. It opened its mouth and croak/growled in surprise at its sudden teleportation.

When it croaked, both Samantha and beaver-form Holger vomited out of its mouth, both of them unceremoniously splatting onto the dirt like a pair of quivering hairballs.

Slime-covered Holger lifted his head and tried to yell something, but he plopped over, unconscious. Samantha was screaming something incomprehensible about the frog thing's mother.

The world did not freeze nor did new music start, but I knew this creature was a boss even before I read the description. I started to scramble back up the slope as the description popped up. I ducked as a multi-branch lightning bolt ripped through the night, coming from the monster's eyes. The bolt sizzled above my head and slammed into the castle walls far behind me. *Shit, shit, shit*.

Claude Sludgington the Fourth. Eryops Gigantis.

Level 65 Borough Boss!

Oh boy are you in for a treat. These bottom-dwelling, lightning-tossing water pigs will ruin just about anyone's day. It's pretty much what they live for.

Also known as the River Squatter or the Mud Kato, one of the cardinal rules of living under the water in a river is that you never, ever invite an Eryops into your home. Why? Because they never goddamn leave. That's why. Sure they're cute when they're young. They tell jokes. Great dancers. They mix a mean pisco sour. But when the party's over, they'll plop themselves down into the middle of the room and announce that this is where they now live.

That's what happened with Claude here.

A few years back, the few remaining members of the confederate government thought to host a fundraiser to gather gold to fix up their aging castle. Their aversion to all taxes whatsoever led to a rather unfortunate and unforeseen shortage in the kingdom's treasury, especially since they are still required to pay tithes to the high elves.

So, taking a page from those same elves, the confederates thought to host a grand ball, and any underwater dweller from near and far was welcome. Welcome, that is, if they were willing to pay the 50 gold entrance fee.

The party was a disaster from the start. Nobody showed up, first off. This was mostly because the regular citizens of the naiad kingdom had been starving for a while now and would eat pretty much anyone and anything that came close to the water. Secondly, because everyone knew the confederates were shit at throwing parties.

Claude Sludgington the Fourth, however, decided to make an appearance at the last possible minute. The guards allowed him into the castle despite his reputation. The rest is history.

Eryops receive a 10X constitution bonus if they are rooted in place. Oh, and they shoot lightning out of their eyes if you irritate them. They are notoriously difficult to kill. Or even move. I heard a rumor that they really dislike belly rubs.

Claude is an amphibian. You know what that means.

Warning: This is a lizard-class mob. It will inflict 20% more damage against you thanks to your Extinction Sigil. And, yes, like with the dinosaurs, I know amphibians aren't really lizards. You can complain about it to management.

Claude roared indignantly and shot yet another bolt of lightning. He already had a health bar over his head, but it had hardly gone down at all. Next to me, Miss Nadine hissed in rage and started moving back up the slope, pushing past me. The bristles rushed past my face, like I was being pulled through a car wash. Areson was suddenly on top of the boss, screaming. Claude just looked around, bewildered at his new surroundings, still disoriented. He shot a tongue out and captured a bush elf, who screamed as he was pulled to the mouth. He swallowed the elf whole.

I started to scramble up the riverbank.

Carl: Donut, we gotta flip it over. Then we can get at its stomach.

Donut: THAT THING IS DISGUSTING. HE SMELLS LIKE ALGAE AND CHEETOS.

Carl: He's going to flip in your direction. Be ready. Don't attack yet. Take Mongo back deeper into the woods. Watch out for his lightning attack, but when he's on his back, we gotta go for the stomach.

Donut: WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO?

Far behind me, a new sound filled the night. Fighting. This was coming from the far shore. A roar filled the night. A distinct dinosaur roar. Not velociraptors, but something bigger. *Goddamnit*. There was nothing we could do about that right now.

"Areson!" I yelled. "Get off of it!"

Claude let out a new and mighty noise. Not quite a croak. More like a reverse belch. He slurped up the unconscious form of Holger and Samantha once again. Miss Nadine launched herself at the side of the monster, her mandible things thrashing. The neckless head of the creature struggled to turn toward the giant caterpillar, still oblivious of the ogre on its head. The twin, beady eyes focused on Miss Nadine.

Miss Nadine, who also happened to be directly in front of me.

The eyes glowed.

Oh shit.

I dove to the right just as the twin lightning bolts blasted forward. They hit the long, fuzzy form of Miss Nadine. Her body inflated. She momentarily glowed, like she'd been transformed into a neon tube. And then the former-kindergarten-teacher-turned-guardian just exploded, green gore and black, fuzzy quills going everywhere at once. I was hit in the side of the head with one of the saddles, sizzling hot, pushing me even further off course. Areson screamed in outrage as I continued to roll.

My foot hit a non-disarmed summoning trap as I scrambled up the hill. A pair of dead naiad guards suddenly appeared, splatting onto the hill in front of me. They rolled down the hill toward me, and I had to hurdle one as I continue to scramble back toward Claude

the rampaging frog lizard thing, who continued to look about with bewilderment.

"Areson," I yelled a second time. "Get the hell off of it. We can only attack its stomach."

The ogre was attempting to… I don't know. Dig into the thing's head with his bare hands or something. Whatever he was doing, the monster didn't even know he was there. If the ogre wasn't going to listen to me, that was his own problem. I had mere seconds before the lizard would finally notice me.

Samantha: IT SWALLOWED ME AGAIN. DO NOT WORRY. I'LL JUST KILL HIM FROM WITHIN.

I slid to a stop just to the side of the thing, trying to keep out of its direct line of view. Claude croak-belched again. He vomited something out. I was pretty sure it was Holger again, who remained unconscious. Samantha and the other elf were still in there. *God, I hope this works.*

"Hang on, Areson," I yelled. "He's gonna flip. Jump off."

I cast *Protective Shell.*

I was expecting the larger monster to bowl over to the side, like a semi-truck rolling over, which would hopefully expose his stomach. The hint in the description was pretty obvious that was how to kill this thing.

That's not what happened.

I was too close. The diameter of my protective shell grew with my intelligence, and I probably should have cast it while I was lower on the hill so the angle of the sphere would've pushed him to the side and not launched him straight into the air.

Whoops, I thought as I watched the massive lizard thing blast off straight up into the sky. I didn't see Areson, but I assumed the ogre was still attached, riding the thing like a bucking bronco. The boss's stubby legs scrambled as the fat thing flew straight up into the night, faster and higher than should be physically possible for something that big.

I should get out of the way, I thought.

Donut galloped into the shell astride Mongo, looking up. "That wasn't to the side, Carl!"

"Shoot it! Quick!" The monster reached its apex and started falling back down toward us.

"Fireball!" she cried as the beachball-sized ball of fire burst forth. The level-10 fireball rose slowly into the air, almost reluctant as it blasted directly into the pink stomach of the flailing beast. The creature exploded in flames, his entire body catching alight as he landed atop the barely-visible shield with a vicious *splat*. The howling monster sizzled and scrabbled as it started to slide off the dome, falling in the direction of the forest, leaving a smear of flaming gore atop the shield that started to rain down on us a few moments after it detached from the boss's body.

The line of trees stopped the monster's descent. It roared indignantly as it came to a rest, face down like it was doing a hand stand. Its legs scrambled against the sparking shield. It was stuck. It would either tumble backward into the woods, or it would fall back toward us if the shield ran out first. Behind it, the massive trees started to bow and bend under its weight.

From this angle we could not see its health bar.

"Wow, look at that, Carl!" Donut cried. "Fireball is awesome!"

Donut had punched a hole directly into its belly and somehow caught the contents on fire, but the job wasn't done. The boss, his large face pressed against the ground, fired multiple lightning bolts in every which direction as it screamed in pain, showering gore. The lightning did nothing but slam into the ground, and random trees all around us started to explode.

"Where the hell am I?" Holger groaned from the ground. I hadn't realized he was here at my feet. "That thing ate me right up."

It still hadn't fallen over. The four legs waved. Claude squealed in pain and fear. We had seconds before the shell would fizzle out.

"Missiles," I cried as I loaded my least powerful hob-lobber. We were too close for any real explosives. I tossed it directly into the thing's stomach just as Donut started lobbing magic missiles into the open wound.

"Why isn't it dead? Every time it breathes, gore comes out. I mean, really," Donut shouted. "No, no! Mongo! No!"

Mongo—with Donut still on his back—roared and dove for the open wound just as the spell fizzled out. Donut backflipped off the dinosaur, landing perfectly on my shoulder, shooting one last magic missile just before the dinosaur dove head-first into the open wound.

"It's going to fall onto its back," I cried as the trees behind it continued to bend.

The spell snapped off, and the trees acted like spring hinges, launching the amphibian directly at my position like I was standing right in front of a massive mousetrap.

"Oh fuck," I cried. I scrabbled to jump out of the way. *Too late. Too late.* Donut was already gone, launching off my shoulder with supernatural speed. I watched in slow motion as the corpulent lizard fell toward me, Mongo's long tail sticking from the hole in its stomach.

"Gah," I felt myself cry as I fell directly into the wound. It was no longer on fire, but I suddenly couldn't see or breathe. A searing pain ripped through me. I felt my neck getting rent open by a claw as I was compressed further. I couldn't scream or see. It felt as if a building had landed atop me. My health flashed a warning. I slammed my healing spell, but the pain kept coming.

It was Mongo's back claw pushing off me as the goddamned dinosaur gleefully ate his way up and out the back of the monster. My shoulder shattered as he pushed away from me. I caught glimpse of light, and I took a deep breath as Mongo broke free, coming out the back of the monster. I drank a healing potion, crying out in pain, taking a lungful of Claude gore.

I pulled myself up, coming out the back of the large creature, who continued to shudder and quiver in death. The body felt like a slime-covered spring mattress. I slurped off of the side and fell to the ground, hitting the dirt hard. Next to me, a gore-covered Mongo gurgled happily and jumped back onto the dead creature.

I sputtered, and I realized I had lizard gore in my goddamned gills. I was still wearing the ring. I used a finger to clear them out. The sensation was like I was trying to scoop yogurt from the back of my throat. I started to hack as my lungs cleared.

Holy shit, that just happened.

The whole fight had lasted maybe thirty seconds.

As always, once the boss died, the supernatural glue that held its body together disappeared. The body exploded. It literally exploded in gore, and I felt myself fall back as Claude guts rained all around me. I had Holger to my left, sputtering, Mongo to my right, grunting as he devoured up the guts. The bush elf was dead, his body in pieces. Areson sat nearby, rubbing his head. I had no idea what had happened with him, but he looked pissed.

Donut leaped into a branch overlooking the scene, looking down at the mess and clicking her tongue with disgust. Quills of Miss Nadine littered the area.

Sitting right on my lap was Samantha, completely soaked in gore.

"Hi Carl," the sex doll head said. "I told you I'd kill it."

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[28]

New Achievement! Premature Questjaculation!

You beat a quest before I could even give it to you! Anticipating what's going to happen is one thing, but this is just ridiculous. It's like arriving in your pants before your date can even untie their shoelaces.

Pathetic.

***Reward*: You get nothing! And you would've received a good quest box, too!**

"This is an outrage!" Donut cried from the tree. There was gore just everywhere, and she was refusing to come down. I picked up the neighborhood field guide map from the dead boss, which showed which parts of the river were currently occupied by naiads and which parts would be safe to cross. It was actually super useful information.

I wasn't exactly certain what the quest would've been, but I had an inkling. Signet and the assault team would've cleared out the castle, all except the frog thing in the throne room. I would've somehow been tasked with removing the creature. But we'd jumped the gun thanks to Samantha getting swallowed by the thing before I could recall her. I'd also inadvertently saved Holger's life, but he wasn't seeing it that way.

"Oh, oh gods. Miss Nadine! Miss Nadine!" Holger started to cry once everything settled. "First Clint and now Miss Nadine!" The beaver held his head into the air and started to howl.

"Clint? Clint is dead?" Donut asked from her tree.

"He got ripped up right in front of me," Holger said, rubbing his eyes. "And Miss Nadine, too. She'd been taking care of us for so long." He sniffed. "She was like my mama. It's like my mama died."

"It was my fault," I said, standing up. Samantha bowled off my lap and started rolling in circles in the gore. "I accidentally summoned it up here."

"No. No fault," Areson said. "Miss Nadine was going to water. Would've drowned anyway. She died fighting. Warrior's death."

"It's the thing that killed her's fault," Holger said. "Oh, Miss Nadine." The beaver looked up at the ogre. "Do you think there's enough of her left? Do you think she was worthy?"

"She worthy," Areson said.

I didn't know what they were talking about. I turned my attention back to the water. There was still fighting, but it was much less tumultuous than before. I could still hear the song playing quietly through the water. I knew it had to be unbearably loud down there.

I turned my attention to the opposite shore. I couldn't see what was going on, but they'd gotten attacked. It was too dark to use the gnomish farseer telescope. I pulled my xistera extension and affixed it.

"Samantha. I have a recon mission for you."

"Oh goodie," she said, suddenly at my feet, bumping up against my legs.

<u>Samantha</u>: I AM ALMOST THERE. I CAN SMELL THE BLOOD.

I'd tossed Samantha over there almost ten minutes earlier, but I'd accidentally thrown her a little too far in the dark. She insisted she could get to the shore on her own and was making her way there.

While we waited, I spent time on the slope down to the water searching for untriggered traps and disarming them. I could use my

Tripper skill to set them all off, but I needed to train my Find Traps skill, which was stalled out at nine. The summoning traps were hard to spot, and there were several of them scattered about. I accidentally tripped them twice, and both times they brought a pair of naiad guards with them. The traps apparently summoned specific guards, and every time, the guards in question were already dead. All of them had been killed by were-castors. After looting them of their crap gear and occasional health potion, I moved on.

After I discovered the third or fourth such trap, my Find Traps skill finally leveled to 10. The moment it did, the slope lit up like a Christmas display. I went about disarming and collecting everything. They were mostly silent alarm and summoning along with a few of those glue traps, which made it so you couldn't move away for a full minute.

After returning to the top of the slope, I examined one of the ten summoning traps I now had.

Summoning Trap

This is a Recycled Trap

Effect: Once triggered, will summon two town guards or minions to the location of the trap. Will summon two random guards or minions from this floor only. If you do not have minions or if you do not control a town, this trap will misfire. Specific guards or minions may be programmed at a Sapper's Table.

Delay: two seconds.

Target: Programmable.

Duration: one time use.

That could potentially be useful, but I didn't have any towns on this floor. Nor did I have any sort of minions. That was a Donut thing. If we ever used this trap, she would have to be the one to set it. I put it away for now.

Samantha: THEY'RE ALL DEAD. IT LOOKS LIKE THEY GOT CAUGHT IN A WHEAT THRESHER. ONE OF THE BEARS IS JUST A HEAD. ANOTHER LOOKS LIKE A COOKIE THAT GOT A BITE TAKEN OUT OF IT.

Carl: Do you see any sign of the dinosaurs who did it?

Samantha: JUST FOOTPRINTS. I THINK IT WAS JUST ONE. IT'S THREE TOES. THE TRACK IS BIG ENOUGH FOR ME TO SIT INSIDE OF. OH AND THERE'S PINK FEATHERS EVERYWHERE.

Carl: Pink feathers mean Kiwi the mongoliensis was there, too.

Samantha: IF SHE WAS, I DON'T SEE ANY OTHER SIGN. THE DEAD BODIES ARE ALL BIG DEAD. NOT TORN UP BY MONGO DEAD.

Carl: Okay. Grab a feather. I'm bringing you back now.

I relayed everything to Areson while we waited for Samantha to find a feather and stick it in her mouth. The water had stopped thrashing. Several more bodies bobbed to the surface, all naiads. Holger returned to the water to tell the others what had happened.

I pulled the extension, and Samantha returned with a *pop*. She growled and dropped a feather on the ground. Then she rolled off into the underbrush. Donut remained in the tree. She'd cascaded herself across one of the branches and was snoring while Mongo continued to splash about in the remains of the dead boss. I reached down to pick up the feather. It was dirty and flattened and small. If it had come off of Kiwi, it was from a long time ago. It reminded me of the down they put inside of pillows, but a little bigger.

This is a feather. It's pink. It's garbage. Fuck off with making me describe this shit. Do you want me to describe the dirt below your feet, too?

"Sounds like Big Tina," Areson said after I finished describing what Samantha found. "She's usually not this far east, but it sound like her. She wear a pink boa."

"Big Tina?" I asked, raising an eyebrow. "And she wears a boa? A necklace made out of feathers? Are you serious?"

"A pink boa. She just a kid," Areson said. "But she a big dinosaur. Carries a wand too, but it run out of zaps a long time ago. Got anger problem. Doesn't like ursine. Eats them all up. She usually with the mongoliensis, but she runs away a lot and then gets herself into trouble before they find her. She usually the one that attack that town downriver that you staying at. The other dinos gotta go get her

and bring her back out. That's why I stay on this side of river. She dangerous. She good at killing."

Quest Update. The Recital.

There's a dinosaur out there named Big Tina, and she's being a bad, bad girl. She's somehow involved in the attacks on Point Mongo on the other towns. Find out what this crazy dino chick is up to. Kill her to save the towns. Or find out why she's the way she is, and do something about it.

"What? What's going on? Ahhh!" Donut announced suddenly. She fell from the tree, but landed on her feet in the midst of the gore. She hissed with dismay and then scrambled away, her hair poofed out. She ended up back on my shoulder, licking her paw furiously.

"Carl, that notification woke me up," she said between licks. "That's never happened before. If you're going to be investigating quests, I must insist you only do it when I'm prepared."

"You were sleeping outside of a safe room," I said.

"Well that's because I'm bored, Carl. And if I'm bored, that means the Princess Posse is bored. We've fought one boss all evening, and that's it. I only got to fire one fireball!"

We were interrupted by the return of Signet. She bobbed to the surface with a loud splash, water cascading off the forcefield around her like oil off a hot pan. All of her tattoos had returned, and she was brought back up with the help of the remaining were-castors, who all moved to the remains of Miss Nadine and started to wail.

"Damn. Damn, damn, damn," Signet said, looking down at the splattered, exploded mess of the giant caterpillar.

"The ursine on the other shore got Big Tina'd," Areson said.

Signet shook her head. "What a waste. If I had known the castle was so poorly defended, I would've just gone in there myself."

"What happened down there?" I asked.

"We took the castle. There were still plenty of guards, but the whole place would've fallen in a matter of months on its own. There's an algae infestation, and the godsdamned confederates had stopped attempting to rule ages ago. It was barely a fight. They'd lost control of the throne room to a damn eryops. The entire kingdom is in shambles. After we free ourselves from the chains of

the high elves, I will have to find a suitable ruler to clean up the place and begin the long, slow process of bringing the remaining citizens back to civilization. It's a nightmare. My mother weeps from beyond the veil."

"But the castle is liberated? The confederacy defeated?" I asked.

"Yes. It is done."

Quest Complete. The Vengeance of the Daughter. Part One.

All surviving members of the assault like you 20% more. That doesn't really mean anything. Especially since half the squad is dead because you left the southern shore unprotected. The real prize comes at the end of part two.

I exchanged a look with Donut and waited for the notification. It came immediately.

New Quest. The Vengeance of the Daughter.

Part Two of Two.

Tsarina Signet has taken back her family's castle only to find the place in ruins and the Confederacy in tatters. Her people have regressed to a time before society taught them that eating everybody they meet is just rude. They are nothing better than selfish, wild animals, reminiscent of those creatures who crawl over each other to purchase televisions on Black Friday each year. Signet has a long road ahead of her to reunite her people.

But that shit's boring, and we ain't gonna make you have anything to do with it. We're still on the revenge track, and we're going to fast forward to the good stuff.

The true culprit in all of this are the murderous and xenophobic high elves. And since King Finian is now dead, your target is Tsarina Signet's half-sister, Queen Imogen. The reclusive, pure-blooded mage rarely ventures from her chambers deep in the impenetrable high elf castle. She does, however, make an appearance at the yearly party the high elves throw for the most elite citizens of their empire.

The same party you will be invited to should you remain one of the game's top players.

Help Signet kill Queen Imogen. Destroy the stranglehold the high elves have on the Hunting Grounds. Only then will the daughter find her revenge.

Fair warning. This one won't be nearly as easy as the last.

***Reward*: Upon killing Queen Imogen, the contents of the High Elf Castle will become available to loot. There's a rumor they have something hidden within that will protect one from Scolopendra's attacks. That, plus a metric fuck ton of other good shit.**

"I suppose we now must deal with this elf queen," Donut said, still licking her paw.

"Yes," Signet said, her voice tired. "But not tonight. Tonight, we mourn and celebrate those we've lost."

Despite the victory, a dark cloud fell over the camp.

I watched as all the tattoos on Signet moved to the front and looked down on the exploded remnants of Miss Nadine. The were-castors had all returned to their short, chee forms and were huddled in a circle around the body. A pair moved downstream to see if they could locate Clint's corpse, but I knew they'd never find it.

"Signet, you're not planning on being their ruler?" Donut finally asked.

"Not with my curse," she said. "It's not something that I will ever be able to remove from myself."

"I'll do it," Samantha said as she rolled past. She had something gross stuck in her hair, and Mongo was sniffing after her. "Remember our deal. Once we get rid of the high elves, you're going to get me a body." She rolled off. Signet just watched her.

Edgar emerged from the water, climbing slowly onto the shore. The ancient tortoise had bright, gooey blood on his jaws, making it look like he'd just eaten a strawberry. He paused at the sight of Miss Nadine. He sighed and lowered his green head.

"Edgar," Signet asked. "Do we have enough moonlight left?"

"We do," the tortoise said. He lumbered off toward the back of the camp. "I'll get my stick."

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Donut and I sat, fascinated, as we watched Edgar the tortoise use a silver, needle-like stick in his mouth to poke a new tattoo onto the skin of Signet. Both Mongo and Samantha also stopped to watch the process. Edgar dipped the thin stick into the remains of Miss Nadine, which sucked up pieces of the exploded caterpillar like a straw. It made a slurping noise as the fur and quills and white guts got pulled in, like the sound of a malfunctioning bilge pump. He then turned and poked at Signet's thigh. With each poke, a dot appeared and then moved out of the way. The tortoise wasn't actually drawing the tattoo, but just poking in the same spot over and over, and the dots moved on their own, slowly forming the image.

Each poke made an odd, pen-clicking sound as it entered her body, like he was tapping the stick directly against bone.

The other tattoos on her body swirled in circles around the new, half-completed one, giving it a wide amount of bare skin. The new, unfinished tattoo curled in on itself, as if cold and afraid.

Donut: THIS IS DISGUSTING. BUT I CAN'T LOOK AWAY. IT'S LIKE THAT PIMPLE SHOW MISS BEATRICE ALWAYS WATCHED.

Carl: Yeah, it's pretty gross. Don't say it out loud though.

"So all of these tattoos are from fallen companions?" I asked. I whispered the question. The whole process had taken on an almost spiritual vibe. The other were-castors along with the remaining bush elves and other odds and ends all watched silently, reverently. The

only sound was the clicking and the occasional rush of water down below.

"Yes," Signet said, also whispering. "Or fallen enemies whom we've deemed worthy. I received my first one the night my mother was killed. That was the same night I met Edgar."

"So, you were a little girl, crying and alone, and some tortoise guy walked up to you and said, 'hey kid, would you like a tattoo?'" Donut asked.

Edgar, with his mouth still wrapped around the tattoo stick, grunted with soft laughter.

"Wait a moment," Donut added, looking between Areson the ogre and the three-headed ogre tattoo on Signet who glared back at the cat. "That tattoo there is clearly the same as Mr. Areson here, and Carl says there was another ogre that looked like another one of the heads, too. If that's a tattoo of him, they're not of all dead guys."

Areson grunted.

Signet glanced sadly up at the ogre. "Areson, Apollon, and Herman are ogres, yes, but they were born the day their progenitor fell. Di-we. He is the second tattoo I received. A three-headed nodling who died protecting me from agents of my sister. When a nodling dies, he splits into a new creature depending on how many heads the original had. These new creatures emerge as toddlers but quickly grow. The original body remains, and we used that for the tattoo. Areson here has a third of the knowledge of his progenitor. He remained here in the Hunting Grounds. Apollon traveled with us to the Over City where he worked in the circus. Herman is down below in Larracos."

She paused, her eyes going glossy for just a moment. And then she added, "I hope one day to see him again."

"A nodling?" Donut asked. "Carl, isn't that what the Popov brothers are?"

"Yes," I said. I was thinking the same thing. That actually created more questions than answers regarding the two men who'd picked that odd race. "They only have two heads, not three."

"A nodling can be anything from two to six heads," Signet said. "They're usually two or three."

It took another hour for the tattoo to be finished. By the time it was done, the sun was starting to peek over the distant horizon. The finished tattoo was small, maybe four inches long. We watched as the likeness of Miss Nadine took a tentative step on Signet's skin. The three-headed ogre—Di-we—went to a knee before the newcomer and put his hand on her. She curled up, afraid.

"Does she know who she is?" I asked. It suddenly occurred to me that Miss Nadine might not have asked to be turned into a tattoo upon her death, and that this wasn't necessarily an honor depending on how you looked at it.

"She is not Miss Nadine," Signet said, looking down lovingly at the new tattoo. "She is a blood and ink elemental, and she is a combination of the remains of who she was and of my personal memories of her. She is like a living portrait painted with her blood. But she is not real. Not in the sense you're asking. She is a facsimile. A loving memory."

As I watched, the caterpillar straightened and then formed into a young, female chee wearing a long, flowing skirt. She looked up at the ogre, wide-eyed. A smaller, child chee appeared, peeking out from behind her skirt.

Next to me, Holger gasped. "It's Clint! She brought Clint with her! Oi, but he's how he was before we changed. Look at all that hair."

"It happens sometimes," Signet said softly, watching the new tattoo. The child Clint looked about, wide-eyed. "She loved him so much that his memory lived within her. So when we drew the tattoo, she brought his memory with her even though we didn't have his body."

Holger reached forward reverently, his finger stopping an inch from the half-naiad's skin. "I'll miss you, buddy. But you got Miss Nadine with you. Here and wherever else you are. You're safer than we are." He reached up and rubbed his eyes. One by one, the surviving were-castors bowed to Signet's skin before turning away.

Christ, I thought, watching the exchange. *This goddamned place.*

Just as the sun fully rose, the were-castors returned to the water, set on building a wooden dam around the entrance of the castle.

Holger popped up a few minutes later to complain that they couldn't reach the alarm trap that had fallen deep into a vent. "Wonderwall" was playing on an endless loop.

"We won't need to build a defense around the castle. Not with that racket playing," the man said.

"Why would you want to turn it off?" Donut asked.

We needed to get to a saferoom. I had my first appointment coming up. I couldn't remember exactly what I was supposed to do, but it was some bullshit, and we didn't have time to get back to Point Mongo. There was a small village a few miles north of us, but instead we opted to cross the river, pass through the carnage on the south shore, and head toward a small dryad settlement south of there. It was an extra few miles, but it was in the direction we wanted to go. Once we got ourselves settled, we'd take the town, train the guards, and then maybe poke at the dinosaur quest.

From there, we were going to spend the rest of the time hunting the hunters and preparing for the inevitable battle against Queen Imogen.

"I'll be in contact," Signet said as we prepared to leave.

"We'll be moving around," I said. "How will you find us?"

She smiled devilishly. "Don't worry about that. Once we have a plan in place for the assault on the elves, I'll send someone to collect you. In the meantime, we'll be moving southeast toward their territory. Imogen will know I'm back by now, so we will be running, fighting, and hiding from now on. We will continue to hunt the outworlders as well."

"Be careful of them," I said. "Just kill them as soon as you find them. Don't try to capture them. They'll be getting stronger by the day, and soon they may be too strong to easily kill."

She kissed me on the cheek before she turned away.

I approached the water and pulled my kayak as Donut stored Mongo. We needed to keep him locked up because we knew other

dinosaurs were in the area. They had a way of sensing each other, and that wasn't something I was ready to deal with just yet.

A low fog descended onto the river, covering it like a blanket. I still caught occasional glances of the dead ursine on the opposite shore. I wanted to get there before the forest critters ate them all. Some of them had magical gear.

I eased into the kayak, and Donut jumped to my shoulder, looking down suspiciously at the water. I tossed Samantha in as well. The sex doll head had fallen asleep, and she was snoring loudly. We proceeded to make the trek across the river.

"You know this Signet lady wants to jump your bones, right?" Donut asked as we were halfway across. I kept a wary eye on the far shore. It wasn't as sloped as the north shore. I wondered how many traps were over there.

"If she does, it's because the producers are making her feel that way."

"Oh, I don't doubt that for a second. But if I know anything, Carl, it's how story arcs work. She's going to want to boink your brains out before the final battle. There'll probably be a meadow involved, and she'll be wearing a ring of flowers in her hair, and there'll be candles and butterflies. She might cry out for her mother during the sex, and there'll be all sorts of back arching and nails raking across skin. You'll be grunting like an overheated water buffalo like always. And afterward, they're going to try to kill you. That's the rule. That's how this sort of thing works. Sex with a guest star always spells doom. Well, I'm not going to let it happen. You are not to ever be alone with her again."

"I am not going to 'boink' Signet."

"No, you're not. Not if I have anything to say about it. It's too bad Areson and Holger are both so hideous. That's the real problem. There's no other decent looking people in the party for the sex sacrifice. Other than myself, of course. I'm pretty sure she's not a lesbian, though. Even those bush elf guys all look like they've just been released from a hard labor work camp. I thought elves were supposed to be sexy."

We hit the shore, and I went to work. I tied the still-sleeping Samantha to my back by her hair as we looted the mangled ursine. Samantha was right. These guys were big dead. All chomped in half by something huge. The pink feathers of the boa littered the shore. The stench of death filled the air. I picked up multiple bits of armor and several enchanted daggers and swords. There wasn't anything overly valuable, but it was all worth over a thousand in gold.

Most of the traps had already been disarmed or triggered, but I managed to find and disarm a few additional ones on the edges of the area, including a new one called Slippery Slope, which would've caused me to slip and fall into the water. The traps all went into the inventory.

"Keep an eye out for the dinosaurs," I said as we moved into the woods, heading south. The town was supposedly a few hours south.

Zev checked in and told me to hurry up. She warned I'd be transferred whether I was in a saferoom or not, which meant abandoning Donut in the wild. She was being unusually insistent that we hurry. I took the hint and picked up the pace.

We came across several mobs, most of them things called thorny dervishes, which were creeping plant things that reminded me of blackberry bushes, only they moved like spiders. The flowers on them were on Mordecai's list, so we quickly killed several and took their bodies. In addition, we picked up several more items Mordecai wanted, much to his delight. We didn't see any major mobs or dinosaurs, but we did manage a good, solid hour and a half of grinding as we moved quickly. Samantha woke up, and she bitched loudly from my shoulder, wanting to be let down. I kept her tied up. Her shouts attracted more mobs, all of which we easily killed. I was more than ready to get to a saferoom and dump her back inside.

The town finally came into focus. It reminded me of the very first town we'd found, but even smaller. A single funeral bell guard stood out front. Treehouses crawled up trees at odd angles. Most of the buildings were made of bamboo-like planks. A single temple stood in the middle of town. Even from the outskirts, the village smelled sweet, like fresh flowers and rain.

Zev: Carl, Donut. Get to the saferoom. I won't be able to stop or delay the transfer. You have two minutes. Or maybe you should… Never mind. I can't say that. Just get there.

The view counter, which had been relatively middle-of-the-road since before the whole tattoo thing started was suddenly spiked, buried all the way to the right. The movement was sudden and jarring, like the folks on the intergalactic internet were realizing something just after Zev had realized it, whatever this might be.

Uh-oh, I thought.

Entering Alucarda.

"Carl, this village already has a name!" Donut said. "Not fair! I wanted to name it!"

I paused, looking around quickly. "Be careful," I hissed. "There might be another crawler here."

"Well, that's just not acceptable. This is why we need Katia. She has that Find Crawler skill. Carl, I don't see any dots at all on the map. It's broken!"

"There's a protection spell. Go!"

We moved quickly, coming to a line of businesses. I paused at the entrance to the pub, a small building called The Aloe Mana. This was a true saferoom. The logo was a cactus glowing blue. A tree-like dryad stood out front. He had a monkey climbing in his branches.

"Hey," I said, my hand on the door. I could see the inside of the saferoom. It was a fast-food restaurant of some sort with nobody inside except a single bopca. Donut sat on my shoulder and Samantha remained on my back. "Do you know who the mayor of this town is?"

"It was R'aggah," the tree guy said. "But he has returned to the earth. An evil woman has taken control. A woman with two beasts that kill indiscriminately. Mayor Lucia Mar."

Fuck me. "Where is she now?" I asked.

"Ooh, who's that? She looks like my type of crazy," Samantha said from my back.

And that's when I transferred away.

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[PART 3]

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THE UNHINGED CHILD

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[30]

Entering Security Checkpoint.

I, once again, transferred to a space station. *No. No, no, no*. Donut and Samantha remained down there. Alone with that psychopath. The door to the saferoom was open. Had Donut gone in? Of course she had. Donut wasn't stupid.

But I couldn't be certain. Why did I have to ask that dryad who the mayor was? Zev had tried to warn us the best she could. *Goddamnit*. I had to get down there.

I twisted in the near-zero gravity, surprised at my environment despite this being the second time. I tried to pull up my chat, but my interface was blacked out. "No," I said again.

Several torturous minutes passed. Below, something burned on the surface of India near the southern point of the country. I didn't know the geography well enough to know what city that was. Or what city it had been. The fire was big enough to see from up here. "Hey," I called up at the invisible trap door. "Hey!"

With every minute that passed, my panic rose. The thought of something happening to Donut and me not being able to do anything about it filled me with an overwhelming sense of helplessness.

"*Goddamnit*." I kicked at the window floor showing the planet below, which was a mistake. I went flying off at an angle and

crunched heavily against the corner bulkhead.

To my left, the trapdoor in the ceiling finally opened, just as I started to sink back down toward the floor. A single gnoll came through the chute, all business. This was not one of the same ones as before. This one was less kitted out with not as much crap attached to his uniform. He was also older, with gray around his snout. He had a quarter moon insignia on his shoulders, which was different than what the last guys had.

"I need to go back. Now. Right now."

"You need to shut up is what you need to do," the shade gnoll said. He hit the ground with a clank and took a few steps toward me where I helplessly floated downward. He grabbed me by the ankle and effortlessly pulled me down the rest of the way. I had to struggle to keep from fully collapsing to the translucent floor. He waved a scanner over me. "Do you have any explosives on your person?"

I had an overwhelming urge to grab this guy by the neck and start choking him, but I knew that'd just end up delaying everything. Zev said she'd meet me in the production trailer. She'd tell me what was happening. I hoped.

"I don't have anything," I said. "Now get it over with."

The gnoll leaned in. His breath was hot and smelled strangely sweet, like mandarin oranges. "My grandpup's name is Lix. I would consider it a personal favor if you looked approvingly on her and her entry. I can't back-scratch you directly, but I am in charge of security in the production vessel you're about to be transferred down to. You're known to steal from production trailers. I can overlook any such future transgressions if you do this for me."

I pulled my head back to regard the older gnoll. "What in the flying fuck are you talking about?"

He didn't answer. He grabbed my jacket and bodily turned me sideways, like he was turning the arms on a clock. My feet left the ground as I twisted in midair. I was so surprised at the motion, I didn't resist. I started to slowly float down. He said, "Clear" into his shoulder and then jumped toward the ceiling. Before I could react, I flashed.

Entering Production Facility.

Last time, I landed hard on my side. This time I landed on my feet. My bare feet echoed as they hit a thin, cool metal. My interface snapped back on for a moment before snapping off again. In that brief second, a page of messages appeared, mostly from Donut and Mordecai. And Samantha. One popped up from Donut right at that moment, saying something to Katia, so I knew she was okay for now. I didn't get to read the messages, but I relaxed. Slightly.

"Whoa," I said, looking about. I could tell right away that this production trailer was much bigger than usual. We were underwater, but I could sense this vessel was huge. I could feel movement and sound all around me. I thought of the *Akula*, the massive submarine from the last floor. This was the same sort of thing. The room was ridiculously humid, and I felt my ears pop.

My room looked similar to the last underwater trailer, minus the large window. There were no portholes here. A single, slightly-too-small exit sat against the far wall, and a red-blinking light was affixed to the metal above it. An alien symbol was etched above the light. It looked like a capital Q with two extra little lines in it. I committed it to memory. Everything else was the same as usual. There was a bare counter. A small bathroom. A couch, though it was made of metal, like the bench at a bus stop. *Donut would hate this*. Below my feet, I heard what sounded like the crackle of a spell being cast, followed by cheers and laughter. There was a slight vibration in the floor with the sound of the cheering crowd. "What the hell?" I muttered.

"Hello, Carl," Zev said from the bench. I jumped in surprise. She was directly behind me, and I hadn't noticed her there at all. She sat quietly, leaned up against the arm. She wasn't wearing her suit. Only the rebreather, and she looked small and tired. The diminutive fish woman smiled up at me.

"Zev," I said. "I need to get back down there."

"Yeah," she said. "That was quite the fight, but Donut is okay. She is safely ensconced in the guildhall. There's no need to hurry. This is the first of three events, and this one will not take too long. However, I was discussing your schedule with my team, and…"

"Fight?" I exclaimed, interrupting. Any relief I felt fled. "She fought Lucia Mar? By *herself*?"

Zev looked nervously up at the ceiling. "Look, Carl. Things have changed with the, uh, new management. We are not in a regular production trailer. Most of the rental trailers were owned by a company called Senegal Production Systems, Unlimited, but they've been kicked off system by the Valtay because it's difficult for them to keep… track of crawlers when they're outside the dungeon. There was an incident. An escape attempt. That along with what happened with Loita last floor, yeah, they've decided to be a little more strict." She leaned in. "We are under constant surveillance. Not just by the AI, but by the actual security detail of the vessel. I can't tell you exactly what happened. But Donut is okay."

I remembered what that guy up in orbit had said. "Strict?" I asked, looking about. *With us*? I didn't add. *After what we helped you do*?

Zev continued. "This is an actual Valtay landing vessel, and it is parked in the planet's primary zone. So we're sitting at the bottom of the ocean. Not far from the headquarters, actually. The ship is normally sectioned off into different environments, but it's been cleared and pressurized to Earth standard, and most of the interviews will occur here from now on."

Below my feet, I heard more muffled laughter. *There's a show being recorded down there right now*.

I took a deep breath. "All right. Let's get this bullshit over with so I can get back down there."

"Actually, what I was saying earlier, Carl, was that I was discussing your schedule with my team. You have your first event coming up in a few minutes followed by the second, a panel discussion, in a few hours. We've decided to keep you here the whole time. Your autograph session is already booked for tomorrow,

so you'll have to leave and come back for that one, but your "Crawling Through the Ages" panel is scheduled for about six hours from now. So after your first event, you'll return here, and we'll provide you with a bed and food. We can also provide you with access to a training room as compensation for the loss of dungeon time."

"Is this a joke?" I said. "Screw that. I want to go back down there immediately. If Donut managed to get herself into the guildhall, that means she can only exit through that same door, and if she didn't kill that psycho kid, that means she and her dogs might still be there. Donut is trapped, and I need to get down there as soon as possible."

Zev lowered her voice and spoke slowly and deliberately. "Your involvement in CrawlCon is highly anticipated. Not only is the universe looking forward to meeting you today, but it might be in your best interest to… linger as much as you can. Do you understand?"

"No," I said.

"Then you will have to trust me. When we are done, you will be transferred back to the exact place you were transferred from. Any other crawlers and their pet or *anyone else* who may be aware of your participation may very well be waiting for you. So you need your rest. It will do you good. That is all I can say."

There was so much loaded into that statement, it made my head spin.

"I thought you guys plugged up the communication…"

"Stop talking," Zev said, raising her webbed hand. Water splashed from her neck and dripped off the bench. "I'm going to open up your inventory for a moment. Pull out that CrawlCon badge you got from the fan box and put it around your neck. Do not remove anything else. Lose the bandana, too. You'll be able to put it back on before you return. You need to get out there."

I sighed and pulled the badge with the red lanyard. The red demon on the front of the badge roared silently, shooting fire from his mouth. On the back was a scrolling ad for some real estate

venture on what looked like a swamp planet. I put the badge around my neck.

A new tab is available in your interface. CrawlCon schedule.

I tried to open the tab, but I couldn't get to it.

"I can't get to the schedule," I said.

"Sorry, Carl," Zev replied. "Unlike the regular trailers, this vessel has its own containment zone. You have crawler wetware, so you're blocked out."

I instinctively formed a fist to see if my gauntlet worked. It did, just like when I was above sea level. I quickly dismissed it before I summoned security. Weird. What did that mean? I really wanted to ask Zev why, but my instincts told me to leave it be. For now.

"What was this first event again? I forgot what the prize box said it was."

"You're judging a kids' art contest."

"Are you fucking kidding me?"

"Try not to swear for this one, Carl. They're children."

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"My daddy says you're the cat's bitch," the little boy said. He was human, and his badge said his name was "Keith H." The boy was about six or seven years old, and he had a weird-ass haircut. It looked like a skunk had curled up on top of his head and died. Most non-earth humans were generally thinner and more big-eyed. This kid was stout and squat, practically a dwarf, with eyes like pinpricks. He looked at me expectantly with his piggy stare.

I examined the kid's submission to the art contest. It was a shitty drawing, even by seven-year-old standards. It was a flat piece of paper with a stick figure with a bunch of red scribbles over it. There was maybe a yellow bird or something floating over the mess. It looked like he'd spilled chocolate milk on it, too.

"What is this supposed to be?" I asked.

"It's you getting eaten by a brindle grub," the boy, Keith, said. "My dad says if you weren't the AI's toy, that's probably how you would've really died. He says you're a cheater and you whore yourself to the macro AI and to the mudskippers. He says now that the brain worms have taken over, you're going to die any day now."

"Ask your dad why that other guy is always coming over when he's not home," I said. I reached over and clicked the number one on the virtual tablet that hovered in front of me. "Next."

To my left, Hurk suppressed laughter. The Gleener gave one glance to the kid's artwork and made his vote, shooing the kid away.

This had been going on for over an hour now. Apparently this CrawlCon was happening at an actual, physical location somewhere in the inner system, whatever that meant. While the adults were walking around buying random shit and visiting booths and panels, they had a daycare where they could drop off their kids. For an extra fee, the kids could participate in an art contest. Each day of the three-day con had a different panel of so-called celebrity judges. The kids were given all sorts of art supplies, from digital tablets to "nano, self-learning sculpting clay" to the alien equivalent of paper and crayons. Then the kids marched, one by one in front of three judges where we looked at the art, and we judged it on a scale of one to 30.

I was given no direction on what to do or how harshly I should be judging this stuff. Most of this crap looked like how one would expect. But there was also a smattering of art pieces that looked like they were drawn by master artisans, including 3D, moving paintings that were so realistic that they looked like photographs. The kid before Keith was a green bubble alien named Guru-san, and his art piece was a sculpture that looked and moved like a real-life, lava-spitting llama. The alien kid had no arms or features at all, and I had no idea how he'd even made the thing. I'd given him a 25.

Usually I had some sort of robot or producer telling me what to do, but this time there was nothing. I'd gone through the small door on the side of my green room, and I sat down at a desk, and suddenly I had a panel floating in front of me. I was sandwiched between two aliens. To my left was a fish-like gleener, who appeared to be floating in a virtual tank of water or some other alien liquid. Everyone who wore that badge had their name floating over their heads, and the name floating over him said simply, **Hurk.** He waved at me jovially. These gleener guys looked a lot like the kua-tin, but they were human sized and had more of a blue tinge to their skin.

To my surprise, the alien to my right was a dour, long-faced Bactrian camel alien. I hadn't realized these camel guys were a real thing and not something made up for the dungeon. I wondered what they thought when they saw earth camels. I wondered if that was like a human seeing a monkey or a neanderthal.

This guy was dressed in a long, silk-like robe. His label said **G'valt. Session of Love**. I had no idea what that meant. He looked at me and snorted, snot flying from his nose and disappearing once it hit the virtual edge of the screen.

All three of us were attending the con virtually, but all the kids were really there.

In front of us was a wide room filled with screeching children. It didn't appear as if they could see us yet. Multiple, frisbee-shaped, Mexx-style robots floated about the room, humming and hawing over the chaos. The kids were an eclectic mix, ranging in age from what appeared to be two years old to about ten. There were soothers, sacs, humans, elves, orcs, and dozens of other what-the-fuck-is-thats mixed about the room. They were all air-breathers, I noted. There were no gleener or kua-tin children.

About a third of the kids were hard at work creating their masterpieces. The rest were pinging off the walls and running around, doing typical kid stuff. I was struck with how normal the scene was. If it weren't for the actual aliens and robot attendants, it could easily be a scene from a regular, earth daycare.

"I have no idea what I'm supposed to be doing," I announced.

"Don't worry, my child," Hurk the gleener said. Despite being in a tank of liquid, I could hear the creature like he really was sitting next to me. He had an oddly formal, British accent. Like a Shakespearean character. "This isn't quantum mapping. You look at the art, and then you press a button between one and 30. The better the art, the higher the score. Simple. At the end, the little poop dumpling with the highest average wins."

To my right, the camel guy snorted with derision. He pulled what looked like a tumbler filled with smoke and pulled it to his large nose. The camel sniffed long and hard.

"Really, old friend? Children too much for you?" Hurk called over at the camel. "You'll be out of your mind before we're finished."

"Eat my ass, Hurk," the camel said. Then, raising his voice, the camel called, "Let's get this over with."

This would be the first and last time I would hear the camel speak.

"Don't mind G'valt," Hurk said to me, whispering conspiratorially. "He's mad they added his drama to his name."

"I don't know what that means," I said.

Hurk pointed upward. "My name tag says 'Hurk.' That's because, ostensibly, everybody knows who I am. I'm Hurk. Designer of the Desperado Club along with several different sets. Perennial flower of the CrawlCon panel. Likewise, your tag simply says 'Carl.' Everybody knows who you are, even if you weren't prancing around in your underwear. This year, G'valt's name tag has a qualifier. Once upon a time, he wrote multiple stage dramas, including a minor masterwork called *Session of Love*. It is only performed by NPCs on the ninth floor of the crawl. At least only legally. Back in the olden days, everybody knew who he was. Now he needs a little bit of a boost to jog everyone's memories." The fish man sighed dramatically. "It matters not when it comes to these diaper-encrusted balls of talentless youth. The only one of us who they'll possibly recognize is you, dear Carl. Judging the art contest is both the first and last stop of the panel circuit. A mix of rising stars and those they're about to toss into the rubbish portal."

I was starting to realize that despite his jab at the camel, this gleener guy was also blitzed out of his mind.

"Hey," I said. "Do you know what just happened? In the dungeon, I mean. With Donut and Lucia Mar? They won't tell me."

Hurk shook his head. "I apologize, my boy. I only watch the highlights nowadays. But if your companion tangled with that psychotic crawler, you have my condolences for your friend."

Damnit, I thought. I looked over at the camel, but he just shook his head at me.

One of the mexx robots suddenly beeped and buzzed in our direction. "Children. It is time to be judged. Now line up one by one."

“It’s my mom,” the little elf girl said. Her name was Buttercup Divinity, and she’d drawn a strikingly-good, anime-style rendition of a female elf, smiling up at the viewer. The picture blinked at me and blew a kiss.

“That’s really good,” I said. I gave her a 24.

“Thanks. She’s dead,” the girl said before turning away.

“Jesus,” I muttered.

“Oh, gods. These guys,” Hurk whispered as a trio of goat things walked up, side-by-side. They were small, jet-black, long-haired goats with red eyes. They looked like miniature, satanic, Prepotentes all lined up. The names over their heads were what looked like scientific equations. Completely unpronounceable.

“Uh, so where’s your entry,” I said, looking at the three, small goats.

“Judge us,” the center goat kid said. He bleated. “Judge us.”

To my right, G’valt had passed out, and a hand reached over his shoulder and picked a score. That’d been going on for a while now. He’d been silently voting, but since he’d fallen asleep, someone else in the room with him was doing the voting.

“I’m not sure what I should be…”

“Just pick a number,” Hurk whispered as he voted. “Get them the hells out of here.”

“Judge. We wish for judgment,” the center goat said. The other two let out a long, prolonged bleat that sounded like it was being played back in slow motion.

I reached down and picked five, which was the lowest I was giving everyone except that little asshole Keith.

The three goats sighed as one, and all three did a little spin and just walked off.

“Judgment received,” the middle one said. “Judddddgggment.”

“What the hell was that?” I asked Hurk as the next kid walked up. A soother holding what looked like a play-doh flower.

“The Plenty,” Hurk said, watching them walk off. I could hear the shiver in the fish man’s voice. “They’re all like that. You should see the adults. Your fellow contestant, that caprid guy, goes on a program with them every few days where they just sit in a circle

around him while he screams, and they scream back. It's the strangest thing. Nobody knows what's going on in their heads. It is bizarre, even to me, and my boy, I have seen things you wouldn't believe."

"Weird," I agreed. An uneasy feeling washed over me, like we were all suddenly in danger. Those guys, the Plenty, were the ones who invented the tunneling system, the ones who were supposedly working with our new sponsor, the Apothecary.

I turned my attention back to the new kid, and then I noticed the next kid after him waiting patiently for his turn. I saw the name glowing over this other child's head. I leaned over to Hurk.

"Hey, do me a favor. Give this next kid a high score."

Hurk turned all the way in his tank to regard me. "The gnoll child? Why would I do that? I've been giving all of these little snot factories ones and twos all morning."

"If you give her a good score, I'll say I really like the design of the Desperado Club during my next panel."

"Sold!" Hurk said. He looked up at the soother kid holding the flower sculpture. "You're still here? It's middling at best. Make way for a real artist."

The tall alien kid nodded solemnly and walked off.

The next kid looked like a walking puppy, barely resembling the hyena creature she would grow into. Her name was Lix, and she had ridiculously large, innocent eyes. The head of security guy wanted me to vote for her, apparently his grandkid, and in exchange, he'd let me loot my green room. As far as I was aware, there wasn't anything that great in the room, but the last thing I wanted was some security officer guy pissed at me on top of everything else.

"What have you got there?" I asked.

If I had to guess, the girl was the equivalent of about four years old. She'd made a 3D stick drawing of an older gnoll with a truncheon. The gnoll on paper appeared to be beating something. Maybe an orc. She'd only used one color. Black.

"It's my pup-pop," the kid said. "He's helping rid the universe of tax-avoiding scum."

Hurk laughed. “This is a thirty out of thirty if I’ve ever seen one.” He voted with an over-enthusiastic flourish.

I sighed and also voted 30 for the kid’s drawing.

“We don’t get to see the winner’s ceremony,” Hurk said after the last kid was done. “But we do get to see who the winner is. That way you’ll know I didn’t cheat you. Don’t forget your part of the bargain.”

The whole process had taken almost two hours. After we finished voting, the scores populated on our screen. Lix the shade gnoll had won with a perfect 90. To my right, the Bactrian continued to snore. Whomever was voting for him was picking 30 for every entry. The kids who’d entered while the camel was still awake had all received ones. That little punk Keith placed dead last with a final score of four.

“Most of the time, I am okay with that,” Hurk continued, “With missing the ceremony. But I am rather interested in watching today’s service. The Eyber faction will be quite ruffled. They’ll be squirting anger slime all over the place. Gonna stink up the whole convention center.”

“Who’s that?” I asked.

“The kid who drew the portrait of your cat companion. They usually win this thing. The kid won yesterday. They love blowing bubbles up the posterior of the judges, but when they don’t get their way, watch out.”

I remembered the portrait. It was a perfect likeness of Donut, and she would’ve absolutely loved it. I’d given the kid—some sort of slug thing—a 26. *Oh well*, I thought. I was glad we were skipping the awards ceremony. Apparently they went through all the winning portraits, which would take goddamn forever. It’d be painfully obvious there was some sort of fix. I didn’t care.

It was time to go. The door above the entrance to my green room started blinking, which apparently meant I had to leave. “Well,

Hurk, until next time," I said, standing. I raised my voice. "You, too, camel guy."

"Good luck to you, Carl," Hurk said. He paused a beat. "You know, it's been a while since there's been a crawler like you. One that people pay attention to. One that they actually *see*. Be careful."

"Careful?" I asked.

He laughed derisively. "Yeah, I suppose that's silly advice. Nevertheless, I will be watching your panel that's to occur later. I must admit, I may be an old hand at this, but I am quite excited about the upcoming nova display. I hear the line to attend the panel was filled this morning the moment the con opened."

"Nova display?" I asked. "What do you mean?"

"My boy," Hurk said. "Didn't they tell you?"

I sighed. "Lay it on me."

"You're going on a panel that is being moderated by the mother of one of the hunters you killed. And she is quite vocal about how much she dislikes you. The entire fandom is just dripping wet over about what's going to happen. Everyone will be watching."

Next to me, the camel guy snored, blowing snot everywhere.

"Oh, I can't wait," I said.

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"Zev," I said as I returned to the green room. The kua-tin remained sitting on the metal bench. She was intently watching a screen, but she snapped it off the moment I entered. "Who is on the panel I'm attending later today?"

"Why did you guys vote for that shade gnoll kid to win?" Zev asked. "All three of you gave it a perfect score. I've been staring at this thing for several minutes now, and I don't see it. Is it supposed to be a joke?"

"The panel?" I asked.

"Oh, yes," Zev said. "About that. It starts in approximately four hours. You'll be brought to a different room to participate. They need to use the studio attached to this one for something else. The scheduling is a nightmare. I'm glad I'm not in charge of that stuff."

"Who is this moderator?"

"Her name is Circe Took. She's a minor hive queen. A mantis. Not part of their military or the Burrower clan. She's more of a businesswoman, but she started off as a hunter and became quite famous for a while. She owns an amusement park."

"Apparently, I killed her child."

"Yes. Xindy. Vrah's little sister. It was her first hunt. The mantis people are overly dramatic about everything. The woman is a hive queen, which means she probably has ten thousand children. Try to avoid talking about her government, and there won't be any problems."

I sighed. I guess there wasn't anything I could do to make it worse. It's not like I could make Vrah want to kill me more. Or less. But it also explained Zev's warning. At least somewhat. If this mantis had somehow figured out how to speak with her daughter, that meant Vrah would know exactly where and when I would be returned to the dungeon.

"Why can't you return me now?" I asked. "I'll just jump right into the saferoom."

"I'll be returning to base in a few minutes," Zev said, ignoring the question. "They will come and fetch you in a little over four hours. After I leave, security will have a bed and a training module attached to the room. I'd get some rest and some training in. Do your panel, and then come back here, and I'll give you a quick debriefing. And then you'll go back to the dungeon. Understand?"

"Okay," I said, settling into the metal chair next to Zev. "What is this panel about, anyway? I've never done anything like it."

She waved a small hand. "It's called 'Crawling through the Ages.' I looked at the panelist list, and it won't be anyone you know. You're the only current crawler. Usually the crawl and the con aren't run concurrently, but it happens sometimes. They've only let four active crawlers attend this one, and they're spread thin. Five crawlers actually, since the Popov brothers are really two. You're lucky you're only doing three events. That's because you got here because of a fan box. The Popovs are doing something like 10 events."

"Who are the other two?"

"A guy named Chirag Ali and your old friend, Tserendolgor. You won't see either of them, but you're scheduled to be sharing an autograph table with the brothers tomorrow."

I'd seen the name Chirag Ali, but I didn't know who that was. He or she had sometimes popped up on the top-10 list. Tserendolgor was a dog soldier woman who looked like a German Shepherd. We'd fought with her at the end of the third floor, and we'd saved her entire bubble at the end of the fifth. Donut did not like her, and she was going to be pissed if she found out the woman got to go to this con.

"I wish Lucia was involved. Then she'd be up here and not down there."

Zev grunted. "Lucia hasn't done an interview or event for a while now. She's too… unpredictable." Zev paused, seeing the concern on my face. "Donut is okay for now, Carl. Really. She's not the one in danger."

I knew what that meant. I was going to be sent back to the surface and into the jaws of some trap. The details of which were unclear.

"Are you… are you doing okay, Zev? Donut seems to be pretty worried about you."

The fish woman smiled sadly. "I'm doing about the best anyone can expect. We don't know what's going on back home since the entire system has gone dark. When this is all over, those of us who stayed on after the change don't know if we'll be welcomed home or executed as traitors. Plus, you know, my entire family was slaughtered because I refused to wear a pin. But I got a job to do. I gotta go, Carl. See you in a few hours."

She blinked and disappeared before I could say goodbye.

A pair of gnoll guards entered the room a minute later. Their names were Frito and Moxo. I stood back while Frito installed a "bed" in the corner. This was nothing more than a blue, glowing panel that I could walk over, and it would fully refresh and buff me for 30 hours. This was a tier-three bed, something I wouldn't be able to purchase until the ninth floor. They brought a crawler's biscuit and dropped it on the table. They also added a door against a wall that led to something labeled **Ultimate Training Room**.

"Is this thing gonna work?" I asked, eying the training room. "I can't pull up any of my systems."

"It'll work," Frito said. He paused and leaned in, whispering. "The captain sends his regards. That's a tier-four training room, so you best use it while you can. You won't be able to nick the room or bed

when you leave. But a smart guy like yourself can be creative. We'll likely turn your inventory back on right before you return to the dungeon, just so you know."

The two mercenaries nodded and walked out.

I strolled over to the bed thing, and I instantly felt refreshed. My skin prickled for a moment, like I was walking through a sprinkler. If there were notifications or achievements associated with it, they were suppressed. I examined the crawler's biscuit, and it looked and smelled normal. I dropped it back on the table. Without the ability to properly examine it with my UI, there was no way I'd eat it.

I turned to the training room.

Interestingly, my Valtay portal skill worked on this door. I still couldn't enter or use any of my menus, nor could I pull up the subspace portal description, but the tell-tale glow of a portal surrounded the training room door.

I shrugged and stepped inside.

The room looked identical to the training room back at the base. The training menu popped up, just like normal. It allowed me to scroll through and pick something to train, but if that training required something that was in my inventory to use, like a weapon, I wouldn't be able to use it. Still, I could select multiple items, like Powerful Strike or Bare Knuckles.

It took me a bit of scrolling to figure out why this room was superior to the other one.

Firstly, it appeared I could train for up to six hours a day in up to six different skills, as opposed to one hour a day in a single skill. Also, I was now given a visualization regarding how far along in the training I was to level up. Plus it seemed I received an additional bonus to training.

Secondly, there were additional types of training listed. This room combined several kinds of training rooms into one. It wasn't just skills and weapons. The room was actually a combination of the regular training room, the magic workshop, the explosives studio, and multiple other similar rooms, all combined into one. My regular spells were listed as trainable along with spells associated with equipment, like my *Protective Shell*. Apparently, if I upgraded the

spell in the training room, the associated armor—my boxer shorts in the case of *Protective Shell*—the equipment itself would actually be what got upgraded. Interesting.

But I could also train on how to use workshop tables, like my sapper's table and the explosives workshop. This was easily the most valuable feature of the room. I didn't need to have my tables with me. I just had to have them installed in my crafting studio.

I found **Sapper's Table** on the list and clicked it to see what would happen.

A familiar, level-five table popped up out of the ground. The table was identical to my own, though less scorched. I ran my hand across it, and it didn't come away sticky, either. I remembered the time I'd "accidentally" set off the hobgoblin disco ball. It'd left residue everywhere. The tables were the one place in the entire base that the poor, overworked cleaning bot didn't dare touch.

Instead of the multi-armed trainer guy who usually appeared, a badger creature with an eyepatch and a hook for a hand faded into reality in front of me.

"Oi," the badger said. The name over his head simply said, **Trainer**. "I hear you wanna learn how to blow things up and disarm traps and maybe brew a poison or two using this table. Well, you come to the right place, mate," the virtual badger said. "Let's see here." He paused, his eyes flashing. "Oi, mate. It looks like you already know your stuff. You're practically ready to teach me a thing or two. What can I do for you?"

"There's a specific type of bomb I want to learn how to make," I said. "I guess it's more of a trap. I think I have most of the components, but I'm still missing the last part." I told him.

He smiled and thought for a moment. "No, that's not a trap. Or a bomb. It's a weapon. The explosive itself is no problem, but what you're asking requires a different type of table. I see you have a bomber's studio and an engineering table, both of which can inch you there. But not quite, mate. You need either a hypnotist's bench or necromancer's altar. Or maybe a spider nursery room. I see you recently added a pet stables to your personal space. You need something that'll allow for multiple minions. And not temporary

ones, either. That or a bunch o' suicidal friends. Hmm. It doesn't look like something you can pull off. At least not any time soon. I got a recipe for a trap that'll infect an entire party with stink-finger leprosy. Takes three hours to learn. Four hours if you want to add the extra-credit fungus module. Want me to teach you?"

Holy cow, I thought. *We need this room*. This trainer guy was an actual AI, not the mindless NPC in our other room. And I had access to multiple versions of this guy. If I pulled up the alchemy table, it'd probably be someone else. Someone Mordecai could talk to. Unfortunately, this was also a tier-four room, which meant normally one wouldn't have access to it until the 12th floor. I wondered if anyone ever had one of these rooms before, considering so few ever made it down that low.

I had less than four hours to exploit this the best I could.

"Let's talk about the first part of my idea. I've been working on sticky bombs for a while, but the ones I've been making aren't very adhesive. I can't go into my inventory right now to show you, but I was hoping you could help."

"Hmm," he said, eyes flashing again. "I think I know what the problem is. Let's put this table away and pull up the advanced bomber's studio workshop. Then we'll have to move over to the alchemy table for a minute, which means you'll be talking to my associate for a bit. But the whole module will only take two hours. Is that acceptable?"

"Let's do it."

Training Module Started.

Frito and Moxo the guards came to me while I was working on my Powerful Strike. After the sticky bomb and then a few other odds and ends, the only thing I could do in a 15-minute increment was this skill. They actually waited for me to finish the module, and by the time I was done, it'd moved from nine to ten. It'd been stuck on

nine for over a week, and getting it up just a single notch had been a long road.

The training guy for the skill was the same as in my regular training room, but he talked now, throwing insults at me while I pounded at the wooden dummies. I had a visualization of how efficient each strike was, which allowed me to hit items better and more effectively.

With all my equipment buffs along with the extra benefits of my primal race, the skill should have gone up to sixteen, but according to the display in the training room, it remained at fifteen. Mordecai had warned me that would probably happen. My primal race allowed me to train past 15 in skills and spells, but armor and weapons-based enhancements lost effectiveness past 15, which meant certain benefits, such as the +1 to Powerful Strike from my gauntlet were greatly diminished.

That didn't meant the enhancements actually stopped at 15. There was complicated math involved I didn't understand. It was similar to how our personal space worked with multiple rooms attached. The bottom line was that the +1 to Powerful Strike from my gauntlet and the additional +5 from my toe ring would still enhance me past 15, but I'd probably need to get to 12 or so on my own before it did. And each level beyond that came with diminishing returns. If I wanted to hit 20, I'd probably have to train to 17 or 18 on my own, which likely wouldn't happen.

"Come on. Panel starts in a bit," Frito eventually said. "We'll all get our hides stripped if we're late."

We walked through the studio I'd used for the art contest, and it had completely transformed to a much-larger room. There was a virtual audience filling the arena. They didn't see me. On the stage was a soother and a pair of dwarves, along with what looked like a quarter-sized version of one of the dwarven automatons from the fourth floor.

One of the dwarfs stood at a workbench, preparing some items on it. He looked up, startled as we walked through.

"Oh, hello there," he said as we passed. He was an older man. He had CrawlCon badge around his neck, and the name over him

said **Dr. Ratchet.**

"You can see me?" I asked.

"I think we're actually in the same room," Dr. Ratchet said. "It's hard to tell sometimes. But I'm visiting the planet and had to borrow this room for my upcoming panel. This floor of the ship has access to the dungeon AI protocols, and it was the only available room." He patted his table. "I need the juice for my demonstration, so unfortunately you'll have to go upstairs. Sorry about that."

"Come on, no dawdling," Moxo the guard said, nudging at my back.

"Hey," Dr. Ratchet called over at me as I exited the far door. "Uh, good luck. At both the panel and when you return. Keep your head down."

I left the room, an ominous feeling coming over me. I suddenly felt like I'd wasted my time in the training room. Like I was supposed to have learned something that I hadn't.

We moved into a tight hallway that looked more like an electrical conduit access panel. All three of us had to duck as we pushed our way through, passing doors and moving straight for what seemed like five minutes. The temperature in the halls was sweltering, and I felt sweat start to bead on my head. The two gnolls looked absolutely miserable.

We came to a ladder. It was like a ladder for a child, with the rungs too close to one another. "Up," the guard said. I complied, squeezing my way through a ceiling porthole, coming into a hallway identical to the one I'd just left.

There was no subspace portal warning, but something changed when I went up the ladder. My interface remained off, but I suddenly felt weaker, almost like the gravity had shifted.

"Breathe for a second," Frito said. "You're in a zero zone. No enhancements at all. You'll adjust in a second."

"Gods, I hate that transition," Moxo said, shifting.

I still didn't understand what all these different zones meant. There seemed to be multiple types. I made a fist, and for the very first time, my gauntlet didn't automatically form. What did that mean?

"Don't worry," Frito said. "We're going to studio three, which has a class two."

The other guard grunted. "Okay, enough rest. Move along."

We walked for another few minutes and stopped at a round portal with words over the door.

The words, I realized, said Studio Three. Something, something, only. I recognized the text as syndicate standard. I could read it. Sort of. Like I knew it, but I didn't know it very well. Like an old language I hadn't spoken in a long time.

What the hell?

We entered the room, and I felt my energy return. The words on the door were back to the regular syndicate standard that I could read just fine along with a few sentences in another alien script I didn't know.

"We're gonna wait in here," Frito said, pointing to a corner.

Moxo pulled out a vape pen similar to the one Quasar my lawyer used and started sucking on it. "Yeah," he agreed. "We got the best seats in the house for this."

"Hello, Carl," a robot voice said. This was a mexx-style frisbee robot, but thinner and much more sleek looking. "I am a Valtay Corporation Porter Bot, identification number 6.ff. I will be your assistant during the upcoming panel. You may call me Biff." It spun, and the room formed around me. A massive, completely full chamber with stadium seating appeared. It was packed with literally dozens of alien types, including several I'd never seen before, from bugs to slimes to three-headed bird things. They did not see me.

Ahead of me was a long, straight table with four chairs, facing the audience. It was raised up on a podium. The three chairs at the end of the row were already occupied. These guys did not see me, either. Or if they did, they didn't acknowledge my presence. The sound of crowd chatter filled the room.

Biff floated over to the final chair and hovered over it.

"This is where you'll be sitting, Carl."

I noted the long, empty space to the left of the chair.

That's where she'll be parked. They put me right next to her.

“Am I alone in the room?” I asked, moving to the chair. I was suddenly worried they were going to pull something ridiculous, like really put me alone in a room with this woman.

“That is correct,” Biff said. “Except for myself and the two flea-infested mercenaries who are smoking illicit, mind-altering materials while on duty.”

“Watch it,” Moxo called from the corner.

“Oh, I am terrified,” the frisbee robot replied. “My servos are quaking.” To me, it added, “The panel will commence in approximately three minutes. You will be the only panelist attending virtually. Upon the conclusion of the event, remain in your seat, and your security, assuming they’re both still conscious, will collect you to escort you back to your chamber.”

“All righty,” I said, apprehension rising as the robot vanished into the ceiling. I could smell whatever the two gnolls were smoking. It wasn’t the distinct, tangy smell of a blitz stick. It was actually closer to the skunky scent of weed, but not quite. It filled the room.

“We got the best seat in the house,” Frito said. “People were paying big bucks for a chance to be at the panel. They’re not going to tunnel it until later.”

Moxo took a drag of his hit. “Being a mercenary has its perks.”

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<Note added by Crawler Rosetta. Ninth Edition>
Never trust mercenaries.

I EXAMINED THE THREE CREATURES ALL SITTING TO MY RIGHT. I DIDN'T recognize any of them or their names.

Next to me was a ridiculously-thin, flat-faced, orange-hued alien with wide-set eyes. The dude looked like a human-sized stick of gum with eyes and arms. He didn't wear any clothes at all, and his badge was magically affixed to his pale, orange body. His eyes were the size of softballs and made a squishing noise when they moved. He had a floating window in front of him, and he was reading notes, not talking to the other two who were chatting. The name over this guy read **Uptown Hal.**

The next was a female, tentacle-faced saccathian. She reminded me of Princess D'Nadia, but about half the size. She wore a simple, blue sheet of fabric that made her look like she was wearing a bed sheet toga. It looked dirty, too. Her name was indicated as **Sydnee Iglacia – Crawl Historian**.

The third was an older, heavily-scarred, albino, bald elf that I immediately recognized as one of those Dream assholes. A moon elf.

His name was **Drick**. Despite his advanced age, I could see the muscles bulging under his silk shirt. *This guy is a former crawler.*

He was listening to the saccathian woman talk animatedly about something I couldn't quite understand. Something about audience numbers from a previous season. The guy stared back at her blankly.

It was clear they didn't know I was here.

"Hey," I called over to the gnoll guards sitting in the corner. "Who are these three guys?"

Frito grunted. Neither of them stood. They both sat in a cloud of smoke.

"The first guy. The slate. He's an ex-game guide. From back before they used former crawlers. Now he has a popular show called *Uptown Hal Talks Tactics*. I don't know who the slime-face bitch is. It says she's a historian. That last guy is Drick. Was a crawler a long time ago. Tapped out at the end of the 11th. This was on a Valtay season, and he used a plasma saw as his main weapon."

"Yeah, he's a psycho," Moxo added. "But he's a funny psycho, so they use him a lot for panels. I think he's a worm head now. Can't remember."

"Don't say that in here," Frito growled to his companion. "And he is. He died a few years back in a fight at a waystation, but he had a Valtay contract, and they got to him in time."

"They always do," Moxo said. "*Keeping the best of you alive*," he added in a sing-song voice, like it was a jingle.

"Godsdamnit, Moxo," Frito hissed. "Don't fuck around."

"Panel starts in two minutes and six seconds," a disembodied, female voice announced.

"So, you think Carl is gonna survive?" Sydnee was saying to the elf. "If he does die, this panel will be his last appearance. It'll be great for my book sales."

"You know," Drick said, his voice full of disdain, "He's probably sitting in that chair right now, listening to everything you say."

"They don't let the crawlers listen in on this stuff," Sydnee said. "The Valtay are much more intelligent about security than the

mudskippers ever were."

Drick grunted. "The Valtay aren't running the crawl. The Borant Corporation still is. It's a big difference. It's all mudskipper infrastructure with mercenary support." He turned and looked directly at me.

"Anyway, he'll probably survive," he said. "It's gonna be chaos, and that's Carl's preferred environment. He's gonna need to go straight to the offensive. Both the nebs and the mantids will be there, and they won't know the exact time or spot he's going to appear."

"I don't understand why they told them he'd be there," Sydnee said. "It seems like a betrayal."

"No," Uptown Hal said, speaking for the first time. He still had his face buried in his screen. His accent was strange. Like he was West African. "Drick is right. Summoning the hunters was the best choice after Lucia cast those spells and set up camp. He wouldn't have a chance against her one on one. This is still a desperate ploy. But unless they know the exact moment and spot he will appear, he's better off against the hunters than the Lajabless. Especially with her so angry."

"I don't understand any of this," Sydnee said.

"Hopefully Carl will," Uptown Hal said. He shared a grin with Drick. "I just wish we were allowed to tell this directly to him. We'll see. Ah, here comes our moderator."

"I can't believe she's late," Sydnee said. "I'd read she's never late."

"Someone leaked her path to the panel room, and it is packed with fans," Drick said. "Carl and Donut fans. She's going to be grumpier than usual."

In the back of the large room, a circular door twisted open, like the mouth of some beast. For a moment, I had a glance of a large crowd beyond, with blinking lights and things zipping through the air. Voices rose, a combination of both cheers and jeers. The view was quickly obscured by the large insect entering the room. The door irised shut, cutting off the sounds from the hall beyond.

The crowd within the arena went silent as the bug woman stormed down the center aisle. The way the large bug skittered reminded me of a bad-guy wrestler on their way to the mat, minus the music and crowd noises.

I examined the bug woman. I'd seen Vrah in action and again on the recap, but I wasn't quite prepared for how terrifying this thing was in such a mundane setting. My heart quickened as this woman bug, presumably Vrah's mother, came directly for me. My head spun, and I felt a little light-headed.

Circe Took was the size of a mantaur. Her head resembled Odette's bug helmet, but it wasn't quite exact. Antennae things hung from her skull like dreadlocks, reminding me of the creatures from the Predator movies. Her top, folded arms were like segmented, meter-long blades designed to pierce and disembowel enemies. A pair of secondary arms with three fingers on each side hung under the natural weapons. Her long, insectoid body was held up by three additional pairs of segmented and spiked legs. These, too, looked deadly.

There was no question that this creature was built for one thing. Hunting and killing prey.

A pair of translucent wings were folded on her back, covering a thick, armored abdomen. Her six legs made clicking noises as she descended the stairs, crossed the space, and then came to stand next to me behind the table. She turned her large head to regard me. Her mirrored, compound eyes examined me, and only then did I realize that she could actually see me.

I shivered. I had the urge to cough, and I suppressed it.

"Your luck is a dishonor on the hive," she said finally.

"The hive can lick my sack," I said.

Thwap.

The attack came so fast, I didn't have time to react.

Circe's top, right arm blade came down and cut straight through the table, cleaving a huge chunk out of it. Little pieces flew everywhere. A few people in the crowd shrieked in surprise.

If I'd really been sitting there next to her, she would've just cut me in half.

"By the gods," Uptown Hal shrieked, his voice going up an octave. The flat, strange alien jumped from his chair. He fell onto his back. He had two, short legs, and they wriggled helplessly in the air for a minute like he was an upset turtle.

I'd like to say my lack of reaction was because I was cool and collected. But it was really because it'd happened too fast. Still, I seized the moment and looked up at the bug, smiling.

"I wonder how many times your daughter practiced that move. Too bad she never got the chance to use it."

A deep, chittering noise rose from the throat area of the mantis. She bobbed up and down a few times like she was composing herself.

"Get up," Circe said to Hal, who remained on the ground, staring up at the bug woman with terror. I realized that since he couldn't see me, it had looked as if she'd almost attacked him. He'd probably just shat himself.

And without any further fanfare, Circe Took turned her attention to the crowd.

"We are here today to discuss the history of the crawl. That and nothing else. I am the moderator, therefore I am in charge of this discussion. I will be asking questions of the four panelists in the unlikely event I deem the discussion requires their input. I will be doing the introductions."

She started at the end of the line, pointing at Drick. She pointed with the same arms she'd just used to slice the table, and she pierced the arm directly through my head. I was still invisible to the crowd.

"Drick is the famed iguanoid-turned-moon elf crawler from approximately 400 seasons ago. He has an impressive body count for a crawler. Was stabbed in the back after a bar fight at a waystation after he bragged too much about his fighting prowess and is now under the control of a Valtay worm." A smattering of applause filled the room.

"Next we have a saccathian. I don't know who she is."

"My name is Sydnee, and I'm the author of…" the woman began.

Circe talked over her. “The idiot still on the floor is Uptown Hal. He is a former game guide and occasional manager who spent over 200 seasons in the dungeon before retiring and starting his own program. He was never a warrior.”

“And finally,” Circe began. The crowd erupted into cheers, and I knew I was now visible. I sat stiffly, the cleaved-in-two section of table right in front of me. I had my hand on it, and I could feel the real table of the studio was perfectly intact. “We have the top crawler in the current season. He will not survive much longer.”

I waved, planting a smile on my face.

Circe leaned forward. She delivered the words in an almost deadpan voice, like a bored college professor. “We are here to discuss the history of the crawl and how it has changed over the cycles. We all know how it started. When the original council nations first accidentally tripped the primal engines and started the chain reaction that overpopulated the galaxy, it was eventually decided that we needed to both collect the primal elements left behind on all the pre-seeded worlds and to beat back the new biological overgrowth. In addition, superior species such as the Hive—who have been at the forefront of decoding and reverse-engineering primal technology—approached the council and demanded the ability to field test macro-AI-controlled enhancement zones. This, unfortunately, led to the formation of a Syndicate subcommittee that put the request under advisement….”

She went on like this for almost ten minutes straight, not allowing anyone else on the panel to speak. The story was actually kind of interesting, though Sydnee the historian woman scoffed loudly multiple times during the mantis’s lecture, suggesting she disagreed with what the bug lady was saying.

I kept thinking, *if Donut was here, she’d have stopped this by now*. I could tell the crowd was already bored out of their minds. They’d mostly come to this panel not because they wanted to get a mind-numbing history lesson, but because they knew Circe and I would be in the same room together, and they wanted to see what was going to happen.

After a few more minutes of the bug woman discussing how the formation of the Indigenous Species Protection Act was endangering the very existence of all life in the universe, I leaned forward and banged my head loudly on the table. I placed my head firmly on the illusionary broken spot. It banged louder than I expected, echoing through the room like a gunshot.

Circe paused her droning and didn't speak for several moments. The other members of the panel didn't speak, either.

"Carl," Circe eventually said. "What are you doing?"

"You did it," I said, not moving my head from the table. "You killed me. I am literally dead right now. Your kid couldn't do it, but you pulled it off. You've succeeded in boring me to death."

The crowd erupted in laughter. To my right, Uptown Hal said nothing, and neither did Sydnee. Drick guffawed.

"Carl, I will be forced to mute you from the panel if you're going to insist on being an imbecile."

"Mute?" I said. "You're not letting anyone talk." I finally looked up, addressing the crowd. "Does anybody give a shit about this subject?"

"No," half the crowd said.

"I do," Sydnee said, sounding crestfallen.

"Great," I said. "Sydnee or whatever your name is. What's the name of your book?"

She straightened. "It's called *A Petite Chronicle of the Crawl. One Lady's Journey into Enlightenment Through Knowledge and Scholarship and Three-Beat Poetry*."

"Sounds like a great time. If you guys really want to learn about this stuff, read that book. I guarantee it can't possibly be less interesting than this bullshit."

"Thank you, Carl," Sydnee said. "Can I put your endorsement on the cover?"

"Absolutely," I said.

The dreadlock hair things on Circe's head all went rigid. She started to say something, but I cut her off.

"I heard a rumor that a lot of you guys waited in line a long time to see this panel, is that correct?"

"That's right," a person called. I looked up at him. It was a half-human, half-robot guy, sitting near the back. He was wearing a t-shirt that appeared to feature a pinup version of Elle on it and was eating what looked suspiciously like sparkling cotton candy on a stick.

"I'm guessing what you guys *really* want is to hear is what this roach lady has to say about me killing her coward bitch of a child. And then you probably want to hear me respond by saying I'm going to kill her other kid, too. Then she's going to get all hissy, and I'll say something else that'll piss her off further. Isn't that right?"

Now, the crowd was starting to really get worked up. To my left, Circe Took was bouncing up and down, angrily chittering. Her weird hair things were all rigid, making her look like a praying mantis with an afro. Uptown Hal was starting to back away, as if afraid the mantis would literally explode. Sydnee just seemed happy she got a chance to mention her book. She'd pulled the book out and was holding it against her chest. Drick was watching me intently. He, too, was tense, as if afraid I'd somehow sneaked a bomb halfway across the galaxy.

"Here's the thing," I said. I leaned back and put my bare feet up on the table. "I was originally going to say, 'y'all can go fuck yourselves' and storm out of the room. But I have a problem, and I'd like to enlist your help. You guys want to help me crowdsource a solution?"

"This is why we should never use active crawlers for this," Circe hissed as the room went berserk. She looked up at some wide-eyed soother guy standing in the back of the room. "Cut him off."

"Don't," a voice called. It was a woman. A human or maybe elf woman, sitting in the back corner, wearing a simple, brown cloak with a distinctive pattern on it. The pattern was somewhat familiar, but I couldn't place it. It was circles and lines. Her voice was unnaturally amplified, like she, too, had an invisible microphone. She sounded much older than she looked. She pointed at the same soother and called, "Don't." The creature froze, eyes wide. Several audience members, noticing this woman, all started to point and whisper. Several people gasped.

The audience members closest to her all got up and scattered back, as if afraid of her.

Who the hell is that?

"I am the moderator of this panel," Circe hissed, speaking to the newcomer. She slammed her two lower arms on the table, and it broke off at the point where she'd chopped earlier, causing her to stumble forward and almost tumble off the platform. All three of the other panelists jumped back while the audience tittered. Everyone was looking back and forth wildly, between me, Circe, and this new woman.

"Was this the plan? Was it a setup? To mock the death of my child?" Circe hissed. "To humiliate me? Well it won't work. I am not the Maestro, and I won't be trapped so easily."

I looked over at Uptown Hal. He still stood, turned sideways, facing me and Circe. His eyes were intent on the mantis woman. Sydnee had scattered back, and she was now standing behind Drick, who was whispering something in her ear. Drick's attention moved quickly between me, Circe, and the robed woman in the back of the room. I could tell that he was also talking to someone using his interface.

They all were, I realized. Everyone's eyes were glossy and flashing. It was the intergalactic equivalent of everyone having their phones out, recording whatever this was.

I remained on my chair, my feet up on the table. I knew to this crowd, it now looked as if my feet were floating in the air.

"Can someone tell me who the lady in the robe is?" I finally asked. Then, I felt myself add, "She's kinda hot."

It was then, at that moment, that I finally realized how stupid and reckless I was being. I looked sharply over at the two guards, Frito and Moxo. They were gone. Moxo's vape pen thing remained on the floor, smoke lazily drifting out. The heavy scent of the drug remained in the room. *You idiot*. This was the same thing as the drugs hidden in the pet treats on Odette's show. This *was* a setup. I'd been drugged with something.

I still felt as if I had all my faculties. But something had definitely changed. My inhibitions were gone.

I didn't care. I guessed that was the point. The Valtay had set this up. But was it to get me in trouble or was it something else? I was in over my head. Again. I was being used by forces much bigger than myself. Again.

I didn't goddamn care. I looked over the audience and thought, *this is my chance*.

The woman in the robe spoke.

"Carl, I am not allowed to address you directly because I am one of your sponsors, and it will be a violation of the sponsorship contract. So I will be taking my leave. But I am also one of the sponsors of CrawlCon, and I have directed them to allow you to speak. That's all I can say."

The woman strode from the room. People scattered out of her way as she marched toward the round door and disappeared.

Sponsor? I thought. The Apothecary? Or was she from the Open Intellect Pacifist Network?

"Bitch. Godsdamned bitch. I will kill her," Circe growled, watching the woman leave. "I am not staying for this." Without another look at me, the large mantis started to move toward the exit. She had to move the broken table piece out of the way. She picked it up and threw it against the wall. It crashed loudly, shattering into pieces before she started to flee.

"So," I said, loudly. "Can someone tell me the best way to kill Vrah?"

Circe froze, stopping dead in the space between the raised platform and the audience. She stood rigid, not turning. To my right, Sydnee let out a gasp. The audience was suddenly dead silent.

"I mean, that's what you talk about at these things, isn't it? That's why we're here, no? That's what this whole convention is, is it not? To celebrate killing. We talk about monsters. NPCs. We glory in the casting of spells that melt the faces off people like myself. Vrah decapitates her kills and wears their heads on her back."

I allowed the uncomfortable silence to hang for a few seconds before continuing.

"I just judged a little kid's art contest where a bunch of them drew pictures of me dying. Of my friends dying. You treat us like

we're nothing. Like we're not real. Like we're below you. It's like you're all members of this giant death cult, and all the pain and suffering is just great as long as it's entertaining and as long as it's not you. You're all smart. You're intelligent, thinking species. You allow yourselves to separate people like myself into a different class. It's okay. It's just crawlers. But deep down, you know. You have to know what you're doing. I don't get it, and I don't think I ever will. I have to get over that and accept it for what it is. So y'all like it when other people die. Great. Let's go all in."

I pointed down at Circe, who remained frozen in place.

"I'm not asking to cheat. I'm just asking to have the same information as those who I'll be fighting. The moment I'm done with this panel, I'm going back out there, and I'm pretty sure I'll be facing down not Lucia Mar, but Circe's daughter in battle. And not just her. Aren't there several mantises?"

I already knew the answer to this because I'd seen it on the recap episode. Still, I looked over at Drick, who I knew would be the first. The man nodded.

Just little seeds here and there, and soon enough you have a forest.

"Are they *all* children of Circe? How many are there?"

Someone else, an orc from the audience, called out the answer. "There's eight left, though one stays in Zockau to exchange with the other trade representatives. That one is a male. It's seven warriors including Vrah."

"The warriors are all her daughters," someone else added. "They're all Dark Hive."

"But the Nebulars are camping out, also. They're claiming they have the right to hunt you now, too," yet another person called. "You're in their territory."

I motioned to the three panelists who remained standing there uncertainly. "Good, good. Let's talk about this. Sit back down, guys. We have a discussion on our hands."

This whole time, Circe remained rigid, not moving.

"Circe, you're free to come back up. I don't know how much time we have left, but I want to brainstorm with all of you. If you were in

my position, tell me what you'd do. Feel free to raise your hands. Or, uh, tentacles. Whatever you got. Uptown, Drick, feel free to let me know if you think someone's suggestion has merit. You too, Circe. It'll be great to have an insider's perspective."

"If anything happens to my other daughters, I will personally hunt down and kill the person responsible," Circe suddenly hissed before becoming unglued. She stomped toward the door, causing more audience members to scatter.

"That'll be me," I called. "I'll be the one responsible. And you should have thought of that before you sent them all off to die in my dungeon. It's too bad you're not in there, too. I guess you're too old or too cowardly to face me."

The mantis paused again, but then she stormed from the conference room.

"You know you're fucked, right?" Uptown Hal said. The rectangular alien looked down at me sadly. "She is correct when she says she is not the Maestro. The mantids are not just excellent hunters. They are tacticians. I am constantly in awe of them. If you survive this, you best make sure you kill them all."

I sighed and returned my attention to the crowd. "Uptown says I'm fucked. So how do I unfuck myself? What's the best way to kill a mantis?"

Multiple hands and tentacles and wings raised into the air.

"I'll be back tomorrow," I said when the soother guy indicated our time was almost up. The two mercenaries had returned, and the vape pen thing had disappeared. "I'll be signing autographs at my own table and taking photographs and answering questions. If your plan works, I'll be sure to bring the heads of Circe's daughters to decorate my table."

The crowd laughed and cheered.

Oh shit, I thought, remembering something. "By the way," I called out. "Have you guys ever noticed how awesomely-designed

the Desperado Club is? It's just amazing."

Several audience members looked at each other, bewildered. I laughed, still feeling the effects of the drug.

"So who was that lady," I asked Uptown as we all stood.

"A representative of the collective. Their spokeswoman," he said.

I nodded. I was correct. The Apothecary.

"They are not someone you want to attach yourself…"

The room blinked and suddenly the crowd and my fellow panelists all disappeared, cutting Uptown Hal off in mid-sentence.

"Come on," Moxo said, grabbing me by the arm. "Time to go home."

"Yeah, you forgot your vape when you stepped out," I said.

The two guards were much less talkative and more serious as we made the trek back to my green room. I didn't bother trying to talk to them further.

We stopped in front of the door to the studio that in turn led to my green room.

"You can figure out the rest of the way," Frito said. He leaned in. "There are two types of transactions. Personal and business. We have transacted both types today. The matter with the drug was business. The matter with the commander is personal. Two separate things. Do you understand?"

"No," I said.

He patted me on the shoulder, and pushed my back as I entered the now-empty studio. All that remained was a single table sitting there. As I looked at the table, my UI suddenly returned. A page of messages appeared. I only read the most-recent one.

Donut: IF YOU SEE THIS DON'T GO TOWARD THE SAFE ROOM. IT'S A TRAP. LUCIA IS IN THERE AND CAN HURT YOU EVEN IF YOU GO IN. I KILLED HER STUPID DOG AND SHE'S REALLY MAD ABOUT IT. SHE'S WAITING FOR YOU. BUT THE BUG LADIES ARE OUTSIDE IN THE TOWN. THEM AND THESE OTHER GUYS WHO LOOK LIKE BAD STAR TREK ALIENS WITH BIG HATS.

I already knew all this thanks to the panel. I took a deep breath. I'd written out instructions for Donut in my scratchpad and prepared

to send it to her. I paused, finally noticing the table that was sitting there in the middle of the empty studio.

Automaton Table. Level 5.

Sitting on the table was a book. It was a regular paperback featuring a familiar, smiling dwarf riding on the back of a mechanical horse thing.

Dr. Ratchet's Guide to Building Automatons for Fun and Profit. I picked it up and opened to the first page. It was autographed.

I took both the book and table into my inventory and cracked my neck. Once I entered the green room, I'd have about five minutes before I was to be transferred back to the dungeon. I took a deep breath. I pulled my bandana and returned it to my face. I pulled the ring of Divine Suffering and slid it onto my finger.

"Here we go," I said, and I entered the green room.

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[34]

Trophy Count: 39
Remaining Hunters: 914

"Poison is good against the mantids," one audience member said. "It affects them almost three times as fast as it does to everyone else."

"That's no good," replied someone else. "Those guys load up on antidote stuff. I'm pretty sure Vrah has an antidote ring. So you can poison her, but it'll get cured almost right away."

"And it can't be cloud poison. She's immune against that now, too, remember?" a third guy said. "You'd have to stab her with poisoned blade. It'd have to be a poison that kills in five seconds or less. Or one that can't be cured."

"That's not going to work," I said with a sigh. "Any other ideas?"

"Their necks are the least armored parts of their body," a blob thing called out.

"The other hunters like to use alarm traps because they're loud, and loud sounds hurt mantids," yet another audience member added. This was a little, chunky, dwarf-like girl with what looked like chocolate all over her face. "It keeps the bugs away long enough for them to claim the crawler bounties. Mantids like to swoop in from above and poach other hunters' kills."

I glanced over at Drick, who gave a half nod.

"They poach the other hunters?" I asked. "Doesn't that piss everyone off?"

The crowd laughed. They'd finally warmed to the uncomfortable subject and were all participating. A few had gotten up and left, but the moment they did, the soother dudes at the door allowed others to enter the small arena, and the seats remained full. When the round door opened, I could see a throng of people had gathered outside.

"A few seasons back, Vrah got into a fight and killed a fellow hunter," someone else called. This guy was a fuzzy quokka, the same type of creature as the talk show host, Ripper Wonton. "They said it was legal since it was in the Hunting Grounds. Since then, people just do what the Dark Hive says. Almost everyone is scared of them."

"But those nebular guys are also waiting to hunt me. Why are they pushing back against the hive?"

"The nebs have never gotten along with the mantids," the same quokka said. "They fought a war a long time ago. Plus, you know, they're the nebs. They kinda just do what they do."

"I don't normally agree with mantid policy," Uptown Hal said, "but in that case, the nebulars got what they deserved. They were squatting in a hive system. Not that the Dark Hive had anything to do with that. Those were the Burrowers, but most people don't know the difference."

I'd never seen a nebular before. I hadn't seen any during my raid on Zockau, and from what I gathered, they weren't ones to attend shows like this.

They weren't actually a distinct alien race, but a religious cult that mechanically and bio augmented themselves as a sacrament. Their deity was apparently some space oddity at the center of the inner system. They were nomadic, oftentimes settling onto barely-hospitable planets and then bioengineering their own children to adapt. They'd only live on the planet long enough for their children to grow to adults, and then half of them would move on to a new world. They consisted of soothers and humans and elves and dozens of other aliens, though apparently it was sometimes difficult to tell what their lineage was because they were always wearing the same

outfit, which apparently covered their whole bodies. I'd have to see it for myself, but I had the impression they looked kinda like the sand people from *Star Wars* wearing bishop hats.

People viewed them more as a nuisance than a genuine threat. From what I gathered, they had a healthy income stream, but I had no idea what it was. They didn't actively recruit, and they only settled on empty worlds and abandoned space stations. They fought if they were attacked but were generally considered pacifistic and kept to themselves.

Except when it came to the crawl.

As I understood it, the Nebular Sin Patrol was one of the few hunting groups who always attended a crawl, but the actual hunters were different every time. They trained for the event, and the team consisted of young males, all studying to be priests. They believed people like me—someone born on a "seeded" planet—were an abomination, and they considered the act of hunting us as a sort of crusade. They spent a lot of money on sending hunters, and they sometimes even paid for a deity sponsorship. They were actively campaigning for the right to run a future crawl.

There weren't many mentions of them in the cookbook, but it appeared they liked to focus their crawler extermination efforts on cleric and paladin-based players for some reason. I remembered from that list that they'd claimed Prepotente and Miriam Dom as their targets. Someone else mentioned that they'd biffed an attack on Lucia Mar a few days back, despite her being claimed by the Dark Hive.

As I suspected, the truce on who was allowed to hunt whom was already falling apart.

"That's what always happens, in the end," Uptown Hal said, when I pointed that out. "Scarcity breeds increased competition. And competition always leads to violence. It's actually a little ironic, considering that's a core tenet of the neb's bizarre religion. To avoid violence. And poverty. Dunno how that translates to them camping out on inhospitable worlds, always getting themselves wiped out by the environment."

"Their pacifism is the one portion of their religion I respect," Drick added, looking at me. "Not that they all follow it, especially the priests. But it sounds good when sung out to the heavens. Their 'Ballad of Survival,' they call it. Avoid conflict. They preach that scarcity-based competition breeds violence, and I agree with this. But it is their next principle which I feel is much more important to the question before us now, quoted directly from one of their songs. *Violence breeds chaos. From chaos we were born and into chaos we will succumb*."

A sudden, uncomfortable silence filled the room.

"Do these panels always stray this far off the main subject?" Sydnee asked.

"Just the good ones," Uptown Hal said as the audience laughed.

Zev had returned to the green room as I sprinted in.

"Carl, you took too long on your panel," she said. "I was going to give you fifteen minutes in the training room, but they came and took it away."

"It's okay. I need five minutes to get ready."

"What happened on that panel? The tunnel is going crazy. The Valtay blocked all the attempted live-tunnels, but everyone is talking about it. They said you attacked Circe Took, that you somehow pushed her off the podium. And the Apothecary was there egging you on."

I laughed as I grabbed the bowl of fruit on the counter. It had appeared earlier while I was training after they noticed I didn't touch the crawler biscuit. I pulled it all into my inventory, including the bowl.

I tried to pull out an alarm trap, but I received an error.

You may not remove inventory items in this location.

Shit, shit. Okay. I'd have to do it all when I hit the ground. I started moving things around in my hotlist.

"You know, Zev," I said as I frantically worked. "It's weirdly comforting that the telephone game still exists out in the wide universe. It reminds me that you guys aren't that different."

"I don't know what that means, Carl."

I ignored her as I jumped back to the chat.

Carl: Okay, guys. Listen carefully. I'll be there in four minutes. I'm going to copy and paste the plan. Read it quickly and then tell me when you're in place. Katia, are you near a guildhall?

Katia: Entering now. We were trying to make it back to where you are, but it was just too far.

Donut: DON'T GO INTO THE SAFEROOM.

Carl: Are all the dots still turned off on the map?

Donut: I THINK SO. I HAVEN'T BEEN OUTSIDE IN A WHILE. SAMANTHA IS STILL OUT THERE, BUT SHE'S MAD AT ME AND ISN'T TALKING.

Samantha: YOU ABANDONED ME. THIS WAS WORSE THAN THE NOTHING. IT WAS WORSE THAN WHEN MY MOTHER HUMILIATED ME IN FRONT OF MY KING. I DON'T KNOW IF I CAN HANDLE ANY MORE INDIGNITY. FIRST THE DISGUSTING, SLOBBERING DOG TREATED ME AS A CHEW TOY, AND THEN YOU DID NOTHING TO HELP ME. AND NOW I AM ATTACHED TO THE BACK OF THIS BUG. I AM SURROUNDED BY DECAPITATED HEADS AND LET ME TELL YOU, THEY ARE POOR COMPANY.

Donut: OH, HONEY. YOU USED TO BE A SEX DOLL. I'M QUITE CERTAIN YOU CAN HANDLE ALL MANNER OF INDIGNITY.

Samantha: DON'T SLUT SHAME ME. I'M GOING TO KILL YOUR MOTHER.

As they bickered back and forth, I activated an alarm trap within my inventory. I actually had an initiated one already on my list, forever playing "Kickstart my Heart" by Motley Crue, but I decided it would be best to have something with a short delay.

Carl: You two fight later. Donut, did you read the plan?

Donut: LUCIA AND HER DOG ARE IN THE SAFE ROOM. SHE'S SCREAMING AND SCREECHING, AND THE LAST TIME WE LOOKED, SHE WAS PUNCHING HERSELF IN THE FACE. SHE'S TRASHED THE PLACE WORSE THAN THE TIME MISS BEATRICE WRECKED THE KITCHEN WHEN YOU TOLD HER SHE SHOULD STOP TRYING TO SELL THOSE AWFUL LEGGINGS. CARL, LUCIA IS CRAZY. I KNOW WE SAID THAT BEFORE, BUT SHE'S CRAZIER THAN YOU THINK. SHE'S WAITING FOR ME TO COME OUT. SHE'S FIGURED OUT A WAY TO CHEAT THE SAFETY MEASURES. SHE HAS TRAPS THAT KICK PEOPLE OUT OF THE ROOM. I WENT OUT THERE WHEN I THOUGHT SHE WAS GONE, AND I HIT A TRAP. IT TELEPORTED ME INTO THE MIDDLE OF TOWN. AND THEN WHEN I TRIED TO GET BACK TO THE SAFEROOM, I HIT ANOTHER. THEN SHE CAME OUT OF THE WOODS AND CHASED ME INSIDE JUST AS THE HUNTERS ARRIVED. MORDECAI AND I WANTED THEM TO KILL HER, BUT THEY GOT HERE REALLY FAST, AND WE THINK THEY ALREADY KNEW YOU WERE GOING TO BE HERE. NOW LUCIA IS IN THE SAFEROOM, I'M IN THE GUILDHALL, AND THERE ARE A BUNCH OF HUNTERS OUTSIDE. THERE ARE SIX OR SEVEN BUG GUYS AND LIKE 10 OF THESE GUYS IN WEIRD ROBES WITH TUBES ALL OVER THEM. THEY HAVE MAGNIFICENT HATS THOUGH.

Samantha: THEIR HATS REALLY ARE FASHIONABLE.

Carl: Goddamnit, did you read my instructions or not?

Donut: I AM TRYING TO GIVE YOU IMPORTANT BACKSTORY, CARL. AND YES.

Katia: I won't be able to make a good facsimile in time, but I have an idea. Daniel has a stuffed animal called a back alley mouser that'll work. I'm already at a table, shaping a fake crown and sunglasses. Too bad we don't have Robot Donut anymore.

Carl: Is Lucia in her pretty woman form, or is she the skeleton lady?

Donut: SHE WAS IN THE PRETTY LADY FORM LAST I SAW, BUT THAT WAS A WHILE AGO. SHE ALREADY CHANGED ONCE. ALSO, WHAT IS A MOUSER? I DON'T LIKE THE SOUND OF THAT ONE BIT.

Carl: The hunters haven't tried coming into the saferoom? Even to just talk?

Donut: NOT THAT I KNOW OF. I THINK THEY KNOW YOU'RE COMING BACK. THEY'RE WAITING FOR YOU JUST LIKE LUCIA IS WAITING FOR ME.

Samantha: THEY KNOW CARL IS COMING. THEY DON'T KNOW EXACTLY WHEN. THEY DIDN'T KNOW WHERE, EITHER.

My heart skipped a beat.

Carl: Samantha.

Samantha: SO… THEY DO KNOW SOME OF IT. THEY TRIED TORTURING ME TO TELL THEM WHERE YOU WOULD APPEAR. I PLAYED ALONG. LIKE THEY COULD ACTUALLY TORTURE ME. HA! I TOLD THEM, BUT I TOLD THEM THE WRONG SPOT. I HAD YOU APPEARING A WHOLE FIVE METERS AWAY FROM THE REAL SPOT. YOU'RE WELCOME. BUT THE DRYAD GUY SNITCHED ME OUT. SO THEY KNOW. BUT THE ROBE GUYS AND THE BUG GUYS ARE FIGHTING OVER WHO GETS TO KILL YOU, AND I THINK THEY ARE GOING TO KILL EACH OTHER FIRST.

I took a deep breath.

Carl: Okay. I'm transferring in a minute. Get ready at the door. Wait for my signal.

"Zev, is it going to let me down an invisibility potion before I teleport back?"

"I… I don't think so, Carl. Thirty seconds to transfer."

I clicked on a health potion to test it. I received an error. *Great.* I would be coming in without any protections.

"Okay, this is it." I said. A strange calm descended onto me. There was nothing peaceful about the sudden warmth that spread through me. Still, that was the sense I had. Calm. In the back of my mind, that feeling of movement, the hidden river, raged.

This is where you belong, Carl, the river said. *Jump into the rapids. Embrace the chaos.*

"Zev, if I die and Donut gets out of this, please watch over her."

"I'll do my best, Carl," Zev said as I felt the first tingles of teleportation, like hundreds of hands coming to drag me into the abyss.

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[35]

Entering Alucarda.

I teleported back into the village, my face pressed up against the door to the saferoom tavern. I'd actually been standing *in* the doorway when I'd originally been whisked away, and I was lucky I hadn't just had my nose sliced off. Instead, the effect was like I'd been smacked in the face with a baseball bat. I slammed down on the invisibility potion as I staggered. I dropped a smoke curtain as I jumped to the left, tripping again, this time over the corpse of an NPC. The same druid I'd been talking to when I'd been teleported away. The snitch.

At that same moment, multiple things happened at once.

The heavy form of a mantis landed on the ground right where I'd been standing. The creature—it wasn't Vrah—slammed her forward, segmented arms against the ground, swinging wildly in an attempt to catch me. She missed by inches.

The entire front of the tavern rocked as magic missiles and lightning bolts and small, fist-sized fireballs slammed in and around the doorway. These all came from a group of nebs huddled about forty feet away. A full-powered magic missile slammed my shoulder just as I activated *Wisp Armor*.

"Gah," I cried out as the mantis behind me was also slammed by the attack. She crumpled to the ground. Not dead, but she screamed profanities at the nebular priests.

Despite the magic protection, my health plummeted by almost half. I continued to run, praying my invisibility would protect me.

Carl: Do it now!

Donut: They're out!

I heard the pop of teleportation behind me, but I didn't have time to look. I cast *Tripper,* causing the rest of the traps in the area to all go off at once. Hundreds of little explosions and snares and teleport traps all detonated simultaneously.

I hurled an alarm trap ball as chaos erupted. I lurched toward the next building, turning the corner onto another street. I paused at a strange scene. There was a goddamn inverted crucifix in the middle of the street with an ursine nailed to it upside down. He had the word "Leche" carved into his chest. The words were facing up, so they were carved upside down on the bear's naked stomach.

The creature was still alive.

What the fuck. I didn't have time. I moved around him and across the street. I came to a small temple that overlooked the town. It was the tallest building in the area that wasn't an actual treehouse. I activated Sticky Feet as I executed a drop kick against the bamboo wall. I ran along the side of the building, angling upward to get a better view as I pulled the next potion ball. This one was filled with my last potion of Bloodlust, the same berserking potion I'd used to save us against the baby sharktopuses. It made creatures speed up and blindly attack anyone near them. I searched for a target.

Donut: IT WORKED! CLOCKWORK SLEDGIE NUMBER ONE WENT OUTSIDE, AND STUPID LUCIA DID HER TELEPORT THING ON CLOCKWORK SLEDGIE TWO! I CAN'T BELIEVE IT. THAT THING DIDN'T LOOK ANYTHING LIKE ME. SHE'S GONE! SO IS THE DOG!

Relief flooded me. I'd been relying solely on the information from my panel that this would've worked. Information I'd publicly dismissed as untrustworthy and too risky to rely upon.

Where the hell was Vrah?

Carl: Have the real Sledge wheel it all the way to the door to the outside. Don't let Bomo out of the guildhall. Take the

invisibility potion in case someone comes in. If they do, pull the whole thing into your inventory before they can steal it and book it back to safety.

The trap ball I'd tossed finally activated.

Peaking at Number Five on October 17th, 1975, it's "Ballroom Blitz."

I cast *Ping*. I received an error message.

Oh shit! It didn't work! It's almost like the mapping system is blocked out in this town!

"Damnit," I growled as the snare and bass drum intro to the song echoed through town. My abs burned from standing at a right angle. I'd heard this tune a million times, but I had no idea who the artist was. I scrambled up the side of the building, curving around the back of the steeple to get a view of the bedlam spreading down below. One of the two clockwork Sledges, who'd teleported right into the midst of the hunters, exploded just as a pair of pissed-off mantis warriors descended on the group of nebular priests.

The bugs screamed and pointed at their injured companion as the nebs shouted back. One of the bugs pushed a robed priest, whose hands started glowing.

A third mantis was attempting to destroy the trap ball. The music had an obvious effect on the bugs. All four of the ones on the ground—the two fighting the nebs, the injured one at the door, and the one slamming the trap ball against a rock—all had a debuff over their head. **Unsettled.**

They're all bunched together.

I quickly stowed the potion ball and pulled a full strength hob-lobber. I chucked it into the chaos.

Bam!

Body parts tore through the air. Notifications flew, including a level notification. I waved them away as I desperately searched the air for Vrah. Was she invisible, too?

Despite the hob-lobber going off right in their midst, the damage-enhanced explosive had only killed a handful of them. All of them were blown off their feet, some now missing body parts. It

appeared I'd killed three of the nebs, but none of the mantis warriors. They had explosive protection. Still, the protection wasn't absolute. They were all injured and disoriented.

The song continued to play, louder than ever. I took a second invisibility potion. I only had two more after this. My sticky feet would run out soon. I scrambled up the side of the building, going even higher. I grasped onto the tip of the spire, anchoring myself so I wouldn't fall when my foot buff ended.

Carl: Samantha, where are you and Vrah?

A pair of bugs swooped down onto the scene, coming from the top of a massive tree that appeared to have recently been on fire. They rocketed toward their injured companions. Neither of these were Vrah.

I pulled the berserking potion, aimed, and beamed it directly at the closest of the two flying bugs. It slammed the back of the creature, who howled indignantly.

The mantis turned in the air, searching for me. Her companion also stopped, looking at the bug questioningly. The **Enraged** buff appeared over the first bug's head. She reached over, almost casually, and yanked the head off of her own sister. *Holy shit*. She hissed loudly and then dived like a hawk toward the still-recovering group of nebs and bugs.

The robe on one of the priests had ripped off in the explosion, revealing a young, human male. The priest had almost been zeroed out by the explosion, but he'd healed himself. He fired a magic missile at the screaming and diving mantis, which staggered the bug. She shrieked in rage. At this distance, I couldn't read the name over the priest's head, but I saw it started with a Q. I jumped into the menu for the ring of divine suffering, searching for a nebular with a Q name. There was only one. I marked him as the berserking mantis descended, slamming onto the ground, cleaving the human in half.

I then marked the next nebular. And the next. By this point, they were all fighting, and all of them were injured, and I didn't dare mark any more.

All three of the killed nebs had intelligence as their highest stat. The ring's Marked For Death skill leveled up between the second and third kill, giving me a total of seven stat points in intelligence. The next two kills with the ring would give me three stat points each.

I quickly noted that Vrah was on the list, able to be marked. Lucia was not.

All of the dots on my map suddenly populated. Whatever protection spell there was before, it was now gone. The screen was sparsely populated. The X's of dead NPCs filled the village.

Samantha: WE WERE WAITING ON THE OTHER SIDE OF TOWN. SHE GOT INTO A FIGHT WITH MISS-BOO-HOO-YOU-KILLED-MY-DOGGIE WHEN SHE TELEPORTED HERE ALONG WITH THAT CLOCKWORK ROCK MONSTER AND CAT. THE BUG LADY ATTACKED THE CAT FIRST, AND NOW THERE IS STUFFING EVERYWHERE. THE DOG LADY CAST A SPELL AND DISAPPEARED. THE BUG LADY IS REALLY MAD. I COULDN'T SEE ALL OF IT. I'M FACING THE WRONG DIRECTION. THE BUG LADY KEEPS HISSING. SHE SOUNDS LIKE A SNAKE WITH A LISP. THEN SHE THREW ME ON THE GROUND AND FLEW AWAY.

Shit, shit. She was coming for me now. She'd found me last time when I was invisible. I still didn't see her. I had to hurry.

Vrah wasn't stupid. She knew Samantha was feeding me information, and she'd kept the indestructible head with her just so I'd get a false sense of what was going on. It was clear the hunter was still receiving intelligence from outside the dungeon. She knew that Lucia always set a teleportation escape spot when she entered an area. She also knew, as I now did, that Lucia regularly cast that spell while she was in a saferoom. This teleported everyone in the room away, allowing her to attack them outside the safety of the room. It was insidious, a way to cheat the saferoom protections.

Lucia had been in the saferoom, waiting for Donut to come out so she could teleport all of them to a distant spot where she could strike at the cat and get her revenge. This was an actual spell, and I knew it only worked when Lucia was in her beautiful woman form.

Vrah somehow knew where this pre-set teleportation destination was and was lying in wait, away from the inevitable, messy chaos with her sisters and the nebs. No matter what happened when I bounced back, there was a distinct possibility that at least one of the three high-priority targets were going to show up at that spot. She'd probably been hoping that all three of us would appear: me, Donut, and Lucia.

If I'd precisely followed the panel plan, that's exactly what would've happened.

Instead, Vrah got just Lucia.

We knew Lucia had set at least two teleport traps. One right inside the door to the saferoom and one right outside the door to the guildhall. According to some nerd kid at the panel, the system allowed them to be set within saferooms because the real trap module was actually set outside, at the destination. A loophole. One that had been around for years and years.

Despite appearances to the contrary, Lucia was always vigilant when she entered a new area. In addition to using the teleports as an attack, she had more than a dozen different ways to teleport herself and her pets out of a dangerous situation.

We had to use that knowledge to our advantage.

Mordecai and Donut, not knowing if they'd be able to talk to me, had originally come up with a desperate plan. They hoped to summon hunters to us to take care of Lucia before I had the chance to return. Hunters rarely lingered in an area after a kill, and if they didn't have outside information, they would've, in theory, had no idea Donut and I were still in the area, or worse, that I was going to teleport to the area vulnerable.

Bomo was still tuned to Zockau, and they sent the cretin through with a note, telling the hunters of Lucia's location. But they already knew, and Lucia was refusing to come out of the saferoom, thus setting the stage for the three-way showdown.

The public plan was for me to immediately cast *Tripper* and jump into the saferoom just as Donut jumped in from the other side. Then, Lucia, still in a rage due to the earlier events—events I didn't yet know the full details of—would teleport the entire room to the

edge of town, where we'd have it out. We'd have to quickly dispatch the other crawler. Then, no longer cornered, we'd be able to face the hunters or flee.

The panel audience all thought this was a grand plan and were quite proud of themselves.

It was suicide, but I didn't tell them that. Instead, I took bits and pieces of their ideas and cobbled together a better one.

Well, maybe not better. But one that wasn't floating free all around the tunnels.

I took Drick's advice and created chaos that I could hide within.

Donut had cast *Clockwork Triplicate* on the Sledge. She had the two automatons rush into the saferoom from the guildhall, one after another. The first triggered the teleport trap, and Sledge automaton number one appeared right outside in the midst of the hunters.

The second rushed into the room at Lucia. This was clockwork Sledge number two with Donut on his shoulder. Only it wasn't Donut, but one of Bautista's beanie babies. Supposedly a black cat thing wearing a crown and sunglasses.

Lucia would've had to cast the spell immediately, lest Donut cast a dispel magic enchantment, yet another non-attack spell that would be allowed within a saferoom.

It all worked as I hoped and feared. I had a sinking suspicion that they'd be ready at the teleport spot, and I was right. I'd assumed Lucia would be dead, but the kid survived. That little shit was crazy, but she was also a brilliant fighter. I still couldn't believe Donut had survived her encounter with her.

But all that was only the first part of the plan. The rest of this I was making up on the fly.

Down below, anarchy reigned. The nebs ran from the remaining bugs. A total of three mantises were dead and only three of the nebs were still alive.

I'd killed three of the robed hunters and successfully marked three more before they were killed by the bugs. The berserking bug had managed to kill two of her own people before getting cut down by one of her own. I'd blown the back legs off another bug, the one who'd been trying to disarm the alarm trap. She remained on the

ground, crawling away toward the edge of town, leaving a streak of white gore from her ruined back legs. She was so disoriented, she hadn't even attempted to heal herself.

I was a sitting target up here, invisible or not. There was no easy way to get down. I jumped from the spire, landing on the roof of the temple.

Crack.

"Uh oh," I said as the ceiling collapsed under my feet.

Entering Temple of Diwata.

Warning: This Temple has been Desecrated.

I crashed heavily into the building, landing atop a small shrine, shattering it. Water splashed everywhere. A notification popped up, but I waved it away. I healed myself and jumped to my feet. This was a wide, empty room filled with tree branches and vines and potted plants.

And bodies. Lots and lots of dead bodies, all NPCs.

Most were dryads, but there was also a pile of dead funeral bell guards. They'd all been killed by Lucia. I didn't have time to figure all that out. I rushed for the front door of the temple, thought better of it, and jumped out one of the side windows, which had already been shattered in the earlier explosion.

Carl: Coming in. Samantha, roll into the woods. Head south.

Samantha: IS THAT SUPPOSED TO BE A PUN?

I cursed myself for having wasted my *Ping* spell when the map was down. It had a five-minute cooldown.

I was still invisible, and I bolted for the unguarded saferoom door. All the nebs were now dead. A single mantis stood over their corpses, all the way at the edge of town. The legless mantis still crawled away while a third leaned over her, attempting to render aid.

The song continued to blast. The ball had rolled up against the side of the saferoom, and it bounced up and down to the beat, dancing between me and the door.

Slam!

Vrah hit the ground with the force of a meteor, landing atop the trap ball. It shattered, causing the battlefield to plunge into silence.

My ears rang. Smoke from the dying curtain swirled away, catching in the wind, forming twin vortices before fading.

Oh fuck.

The mantis had been level 70 last time I'd faced her in Zockau. She was now level 74. She was also a lot bigger. The back of the praying mantis alien was covered with heads, dotting her exoskeleton like round pustules, all in various states of decay. I stopped dead, not daring to move. She didn't move, either, for several moments. She was right there, fifteen feet in front of me.

I recognized the two heads at the top of the pile against her insectoid shoulders, flanking her exposed neck like a pair of headphones. I had no idea how she attached them to her body. The one on the left was Langley, mouth wide in surprise. The one on the right was a human I'd seen on the recap a few times. Bogdon Ro, one of the top player killers. He'd been in the top 10. The only one so far to be killed by a hunter. Langley and his men had been hunting him when they'd all been set upon by Vrah's team.

"Mother," the legless mantis cried as she dragged herself away. "Mother, where am I? I want to go home."

You have been deshrouded! Invisibility negated!

"Carl," Vrah said, turning to face me. The movement was smooth, indicating she'd known I was there the whole time. When she turned her insectoid head, the heads planted on her shoulders moved with her, following her movement. It was some trick to make her look extra terrifying. She peered over at the pile of dead insects and nebs and made a chittering noise. "You are a worthy opponent, I will give you that. You and the Lajabless child both. I've almost forgotten what it's like to hurt for a kill. But it ends here."

She held her crossbow in one claw. It was loaded with a glowing bolt.

"I met your mom," I said. "I pushed her off the podium."

"That's not..." Vrah paused, and then what might've been a smile cracked across her insect face. She made a clicking noise. "Nice try, crawler."

I, too, smiled. "You can hide it, but it's clear you're still speaking with your mother. Is that why you've collected so many heads?

Because you're always cheating?"

"It's not true, but do you really think it would matter if I *was* cheating? Would anyone truly care? You are nothing but livestock, and livestock exists to be culled. Everyone watching right now doesn't care how this moment came to be, just that it's here. There's not a regulation in the galaxy that will change that fact. When I'm done with this hunt, I will take my place in the birthing hall of Hive Home two, and I will birth a thousand nymphs, all of whom will be born with the memory of this moment, of your slaughter, yet not a single one will care because you will be nothing but a faceless blip, one of thousands."

"So, it's true?" I asked. "I heard that earlier today. That this is your last crawl, and you are being sent off to be breeding stock. Your sister Xindy was supposed to take your place as top hunter. Too bad she never got a chance."

"This won't be pleasant, crawler," Vrah said as she raised the crossbow.

"Wait," I said, holding my hand up. "Langley, I'm sorry I couldn't help you before. I appreciate your help now."

Vrah cocked her bug head to the side.

"What?" she asked just as the reanimated corpse head bit down on her exposed neck. On the other side, Bogdon Ro groaned. Surprised, Vrah turned her head toward Langley, but his teeth held firm. The movement allowed the Bogdon Ro head to also bite down on her neck from the side. Then a third head started biting at her, the one right below Bogdon. Vrah screamed and fired her crossbow as I hit the deck. The bolt whizzed over my head.

I jumped up, pulled the arrow of Enthusiastic Double Gonorrhea and rammed it into Vrah's neck just before the shield popped up, which ejected the zombie heads on the bug woman's neck and shoulders and tossed me back. I slid, bumping into Donut, who'd sneaked out while still invisible and cast as many *Second Chance* spells as she could before her mana ran out.

Vrah writhed as the bottom of her carapace burst into flames. She jumped into the air in an attempt to fly away.

"Go!" I shouted.

The two other mantids had finally noticed and rushed toward us. Donut and I vaulted into the saferoom.

It was right there at the door. The wheeled bomb that the system had named **Just Wait Until Your Daddy Gets Home**. The same wheeled bomb I'd wanted to use to level Zockau. The Sledge stood there, peering outside at the two mantises rushing toward us.

"Cover your ears," I shouted as I kicked the wheeled bomb out the door. It rolled and started to tip as I slammed the saferoom door shut.

"We've gone over this before, Carl," Donut shouted. "I can't cover my..."

Bam.

The world rocked. Despite this being a saferoom, we all flew into the air and slammed to the ground, rolling and spinning like billiard balls. My ears rang, and my body cried out in pain. The world rumbled for a very long time. Notifications rolled down my screen.

Samantha: YO, WHAT THE ACTUAL FUCK WAS THAT.

I expected the bopca to start shouting, but it seemed we were alone. I wondered if Lucia's teleport trick also jettisoned the poor bopcas out of the room.

"Do you think we got her?" Donut said after she recovered. "What about that crazy bitch and her dog?"

I pulled up my notifications and started scrolling through. "Oh, shit," I said. "Goddamnit. I killed that ursine guy. No other NPCs, though I got a bunch of mobs in the woods. Lucia had really cleared out the town. Christ. She got away."

Vrah had also escaped. That was okay. I was expecting that. She'd cast a strange, swirling shield at that last minute and was rocketing into the air. Like Lucia, she had some sort of eject button, and she'd slammed it down.

This was actually a better outcome. I wasn't planning on this, but I knew exactly where she was headed. A golden opportunity had

just presented itself.

I'd killed the three remaining mantises, despite their protection against explosions. That meant Vrah was the last one left of the warriors. There was only one other mantis left on the whole floor. A male, holed up in Zockau. He was a salesman. The guy who took the looted gear and wheeled and dealed and sold it to the other faction representatives who'd installed themselves in the local saferooms.

They were all stuck here until the floor was done. Nine more days.

But that guy, that sole remaining mantis, suddenly had a very big problem.

I recalled the description of the arrow of Enthusiastic Double Gonorrhea. It had originally been meant for poor Louis because he wouldn't shut up about how hot the leader of the Dream's mother was.

Arrow of Enthusiastic Double Gonorrhea.

This is a regular arrow, but the tip is dipped in a poison that will inflict you with Enthusiastic Double Gonorrhea.

Trust me on this. You don't want Enthusiastic Double Gonorrhea.

It doesn't kill you, but you'll want it to. It sets your genitals aflame. Literally. And then it heals that area of your body over and over. The only way to remove the disease is to, uh, geld yourself. Or pass it on to someone else.

Future hive queen Vrah wasn't about to neuter herself. So she could either suffer the consequences or she could pass it on.

"Come on," I said, rushing back to the saferoom. Katia was there in our personal space, as was Bautista and Imani and Elle and several others. The second door leading out to the guildhall common area was open, and multiple others were in there, waiting. They shouted as we entered.

"In a hurry," I yelled. "Bomo, come here."

I grabbed a pen and paper and started to furiously write.

"Dude, what happened?" Louis asked. He and Firas sat on the couch, watching wide-eyed.

"It was quite exciting," Donut announced. "But wait until you see my fight with Lucia on the recap episode in an hour! Zev says they're gonna show the whole thing!"

Mordecai hopped to the table and read over my shoulder:

To the mantis representative holed up in Zockau. We can protect you. But you gotta come now. Bring all the gear you've collected, and we'll keep you safe until the end of the floor. No gear, no deal.

Trust me, buddy. You'll want this.

"What in the gods' name did you do?" Mordecai asked.

"Carl gave Vrah gonorrhea!" Donut cried.

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I pushed Bomo out the door into the Zockau saferoom where he'd post his note and wait for a response. Hopefully word would get to the mantis guy before Vrah did.

"The bitch lives, correct?" someone asked. "I didn't see a notification. Lucia survived?"

The speaker was Florin the crocodilian. I hadn't noticed him there in the back corner.

"Yes," Donut said. "She's a cheater just like that Quan Ch guy, and she got away."

"Good," Florin said. He pushed himself off the wall and went out into the guildhall common area. We all watched him go.

"We're still in Lucia's town," I said after he left. "We need to get out of here before she comes back."

"I do believe we just destroyed the town. There's nothing to go back to," Donut said. "But if she does dare return, I'm not one bit scared of her. Not one bit."

"Open your boxes, reset your buffs, and then watch the recap," Mordecai said, ignoring Donut's boast. "I'm pretty sure I know what spell she used to get away, and she won't be anywhere near here. But I want you gone before she gets back. After what Donut pulled, you're gonna be looking over your shoulder for now on until you deal with her."

"What else is new?" I asked as I turned to examine the people in the room. I felt a grin spread across my face as I took everyone in.

This is it, I thought. *This is my family now*. My heart continued to pound from the fight. I knew I was about to crash, that the shakes would hit me, that the river in my mind would roar. But for now, at this moment, I took comfort in the friendly faces all around me.

It was Katia, Elle, Imani, Bautista, Louis, Firas, Gwen, Tran, Britney along with several others I didn't know as well. Mongo was also loose and moved freely about the spaces, demanding scratches from everyone like he was an attention-starved dog at a party.

"Where's Chris?" I asked Elle after I went through and acknowledged everyone. They all greeted me back with enthusiasm except Britney, of course, whose resting I-hate-you-and-everybody face was on full display. The fur-clad barbarian sat upon Firas's lap with one arm wrapped around his shoulder.

Everyone in the group had gone up several levels. Half of them had new equipment. *I've missed so much*, I thought.

Elle had transformed from a Blizzardmancer to a Tundra Princess, but the fairy woman didn't look any different. She now had a brown streak of hair in her haphazardly-cut white mane, but that was it. She still wore the anti-slip socks from when she'd been a 99-year-old resident of the Meadow Lark retirement home. They were the only before-thing that remained on the woman except for a simple, gold wedding ring that now hung around her neck by a chain, because her fingers were much smaller than they'd been before. She'd ascended to level 51.

She'd also somehow gotten a glass of yellow alcohol and was sipping on it. From the couch, Louis watched the glass the same way a dog would watch a human holding a piece of beef jerky.

"Whoa, big guy," Elle said, looking up over my head. "That's a lot of hunter-killer daggers you have. Good job. I still need to collect one for myself. Chris is with Li Jun and Li Na along with the other two rock bodyguards. It's a long story. That Eva woman is hooked up now with Team Cichociemni, and those guys are no joke. They're named after some Polish special forces group, but none of them are actually Polish if you can believe that. Not anymore. They killed their leader guy because he didn't want them to be a group of murderers. That guy was buddy-buddy with the Popovs before that Dmitri idiot

accidentally picked a race that combined himself with his brother. Anyway, the Popovs had them cornered, but then the brothers got whisked away to go to that convention. They've been gone for two days now and won't be back until tomorrow. Must be nice. Li Na and Chris are keeping an eye on the group in the meantime. Did you know Chris can burrow right into the ground? And Li Na can turn into smoke? Man, that girl freaks me the fuck out. We would've been there by now if Katia didn't insist on turning the whole circus around to come help save your ass. We would've been with you in time, too, if the flying house didn't get attacked by pterodactyls. Now we're stuck in the jungle in the middle of nowhere. How'd that go anyway? Your convention, I mean. Did you meet Dmitri and Maxim? They said you guys would be sharing a table or some shit."

"That's not until tomorrow," I said, my head spinning. I was still coming off the adrenaline rush, and my brain couldn't parse the tidal wave of information Elle had just thrown at me. All that really mattered was that everyone was safe for the moment.

Behind me, Donut was chatting with Daniel Bautista, demanding to see the mouser stuffed beanies. The orange tiger man pulled one out for her to examine while she clucked over it.

"It's a cat," Donut said, not sounding impressed. "Do they really have cat mobs in the dungeon? Why are they listed as common? This thing doesn't look anything like me, but it fooled both Lucia and Vrah. Still, this shouldn't be common. Surely it should be a province boss at least. Maybe even a country boss. It should definitely be legendary rareness."

"If it makes you feel better, I used an uncommon variant for the ruse. It was fuzzier. With the sunglasses and fake tiara, it looked a lot like you. I had to use a tame spell on it," Bautista said. "These guys attack when I pull the tag."

"How many beanies do you have left?" I asked. I knew the man had looted over 1,000 of the stuffed animals on the third floor, but he had to be running low by now.

"I have about 500 left," he said, surprising me. "My sponsor gave me a refresher kit, and I can put the tag back on them if they don't die while summoned. I can only do it twice though. Plus, I've gotten

a few more in loot boxes." He thumbed over his shoulder at Tran, who stood with Gwen. "I've taken your advice and been training with my sword. Tran and I are both swashbucklers, and we've been working together in the training room. We get a bonus when we work as a team."

Katia was in her regular, human form. She stood next to Bautista, nodding. In fact, I noticed she actually had her hand on his orange, furry shoulder. *Huh*, I thought. I wasn't sure what I thought about that. I was about to say something, but thought better of it. Donut would likely notice at any moment and make a comment.

"Speaking of teamwork," Louis said, getting up from the couch. He spilled a cup of soda he'd had between his legs. Above, the cleaner bot made a shrill noise of disapproval. "Oh, my bad. Hey, anyway. Katia has been making us learn moves like we did on the last floor. Want to see my favorite one? I came up with it on my own."

Before I could object, Louis pulled what looked like a limp ring of fabric from his inventory. Katia sighed and stepped away from Bautista. Louis tossed the ring at Katia, and it landed over her head, flopping onto her shoulder, where it promptly disappeared, either into her inventory or her mass.

"Okay..." I said. "What the hell was that?"

Louis grunted, annoyed I wasn't mystified. "That was a potion bandolier. I can throw armor items on Katia, and it automatically equips itself as long as she has the spot open. We can do it with shoulder bandoliers, helmets, arm bracers. Pretty much anything you can think of."

I exchanged a look with Katia, who just shook her head.

"Yeah," I said, "But she has unlimited inventory. What, exactly, is the move? I mean, it's cool, I guess, but how is it useful?"

"I told you," Britney said from Firas's lap.

"So, if it lands on her perfectly, it equips itself the moment it touches her, right? She's got that new backpack that lets her add a bunch of mass. But what if she gets really big, but without a breastplate, right? And if we make a giant breastplate, we drop it on her from the *Twister*. It'll automatically equip, and suddenly she can

get even bigger. And then we can have a helmet that's even bigger. We could just make her bigger and bigger. It'd be like the Voltron formation sequence. Well, sort of."

"Unless the item misses or doesn't hit right, and then she's crushed and dead," Britney said.

"It's a work in progress," Louis said defensively.

Carl: Katia. Don't let him drop a giant breastplate on you.

Katia: The idea has some merit. I'm trying to let him build his self-confidence. We'll figure something out. He doesn't show it, but he was really upset when he learned those elves were hunting him. I walked in on him earlier when he thought he was alone, and he was crying. I think he's worried we're going to kick him out of the guild.

"It's a good idea," I finally said, and Louis's eyes beamed. "But be careful. It'd be really easy to accidentally hurt her with that. Keep working out the kinks."

"That's what he has Juice Box for," Donut said at the same moment Firas opened his mouth, presumably, to say a variation of the same thing. They both burst into laughter.

"Okay, guys," I said as I stepped to the kitchen counter. "I have a ton of boxes to open." I eyed the Emberus shrine in the back of the room. I knew I was about to owe that thing a ton of money. That would make Donut stop laughing.

I hadn't been in a saferoom since before the fight to liberate Fort Freedom from the naiad confederates, and several items had stacked up. I had over thirty achievements to sift through, from rowing across the river in a kayak to a making an appearance at the con to shoving that arrow into Vrah. A few of the achievements were notable:

New Achievement! Uprooted.

You caused a Rooted-in-Place boss monster to move. That's no easy feat. You then killed that monster. Pretty impressive. Hope you remember how you did it.

***Reward*: You already got a boss box. This achievement is the reward.**

Huh, I thought. The wording on this one was strange. It lacked the AI's typical... zippiness. I'd received the achievement because I'd used my *Protective Shell* to eject that Eryops frog thing into the air. I hadn't thought about it at the time, but the description had mentioned how difficult it was to get them to move once they were settled. Apparently the AI wanted me to remember how I'd done it.

The AI quickly returned to his regular, asshole self after that.

New Achievement! Bisected!

You teleported into a solid object. Congratulations. You've lost your...

Oh, wait! You were teleported due to an administrative action. That means your privileged ass was saved. Again. No missing arm or leg. No dungeon-style circumcision. Nothing. Boy, you must really bring in the cheddar for them to keep coddling you like this.

Teleport mishaps are funny as shit. You ever see *The Fly*? Anyway, you don't have to worry about it. This time.

***Reward*: You've received a Silver Lucky Bastard box!**

Holy shit. I remembered the sensation of getting smacked in the face with the door when I'd teleported back. I hadn't even thought about it. Then again, they were the ones who'd teleported me at that moment. It wouldn't have been fair. Not that fair meant anything to these assholes.

New Achievement! Desecrated!

You have found a desecrated temple! That means all the temple's attendants have been murdered. The temple's treasury has been looted. The sacred wine has probably been all lapped up, too.

And this used to be a nice town. It hasn't been the same since you guys moved in.

If you are an adherent of this temple, you may no longer worship here. You've also probably just received a quest to hunt down and kill the heathen who did this.

If you *don't* worship this god, just scram. Remember that time you walked in on mommy and daddy playing leapfrog?

It's just like that. Back away. Don't touch anything. Never talk about it again.

You should also probably avoid the person who did this. Not only does society frown upon those who slaughter whole congregations, but there are real consequences for this sort of stuff.

***Reward*: You entered a building. You don't get a reward for that. It's not like you kicked it up a notch by defiling the shrine.**

Oh, wait.

New Achievement! Temple Defiler!

You've defiled a temple's sacred shrine by breaking it with your own flesh!

Wow. I dunno, man. That's pretty ballsy.

There are a lot of bad things people can do when they're in church. They can swear. They can ogle the hot nuns. They can pinch the eucharist wafers and use them as poker chips. They can rip pages from the hymnals and roll them into joints. Hell, they can stab the priest and murder all the town's adherents and put the whole thing up on YouTube.

None of that is as bad as defiling the temple's shrine with one's own flesh.

In case you didn't know, the shrine of a temple is pretty much indestructible. They made it that way because you crawlers are always blowing up whole towns and submerging cities in water or burying entire populations of innocent NPCs with the guts of giant turkeys.

When a temple is desecrated, the shrine's protection fades over several hours. Eventually, it's able to be destroyed, but only with a direct attack.

You're *supposed to* find desecrated temples and destroy the shrines. Hell, it's a sacrament in some religions. But you can't just do it willy-nilly. And certainly not when you're not

a member of that congregation. It's like walking into a random ICU from off the street and pulling the plug on someone's braindead grandma.

It's not your place.

Gods don't like it when some punk walks into their house and kicks them when they're already down. It's rude. And what's worse, when a shrine is destroyed improperly, the god loses some of their power, and all of the other gods can see this. It's quite humiliating.

Hopefully you got some cool loot from the priests or monks or whatever because this box, while technically a prize, is sort of a good news/bad news thing.

***Reward*: You've received a Gold Apostate Box!**

"Shit," I muttered. I hadn't done anything wrong. Apparently, that little Lucia psycho had killed everyone in the church. All I'd done was fall through the roof of the temple. I'd landed on some shrine thing, and it shattered. That was it. There wasn't anything in the cookbook about this sort of stuff. I knew if temples were desecrated, they eventually turned "corrupt," which usually meant there were mobs inside. But this was the first I'd heard about the shrine thing.

New Achievement! That's not how you use arrows, dumbass.

You took an arrow, and you physically stabbed someone with it. That's something a kid who eats glue would do. You know I'm pretty sure you have a bow in your inventory.

***Reward*: You've received a Gold Ranged Weapon Box.**

I did have an unenchanted bow in my inventory. I got it from the same elf I'd looted the first gonorrhea arrow from. The last time I'd shot a bow was during archery class in high school, and I'd ripped the shit out of my left wrist doing it. With my xistera, I had no need for any other ranged weapon.

New Achievement! It itches when I pee!

You infected another combatant with a venereal disease.

Good job there, Derek Jeter. I hope you bought them dinner first.

***Reward*: You've received a Bronze condom. Use it next time.**

Sure enough, it wasn't a box. It was an actual, wrapped condom. The packaging was bronze-colored. It was unenchanted. There was a sketch of an older woman on one side who might've been Bea Arthur and a sheep on the other.

"The hell?" I started to mutter, but I stopped the moment I heard the breathiness of the AI's voice when he read out the next one. I cringed.

New Achievement! This little piggy made a boom boom!

You deployed a bomb with the supple, curved sole of your foot. You took your perfectly-perfect, 30.004861 centimeter-long right foot and compressed it against an explosive device—a device named after me no less—and you gave it a naughty little shove before you pushed it out the door and detonated it.

You killed them. You killed them all for your daddy.

The AI made a deep, throaty groan for like five seconds straight, an uncomfortably long time.

***Reward*: You've received a Gold Spicy Box.**

"Was that a condom?" Donut asked when the achievements finished. "Did the AI really give you a condom? Talk about a useless prize!"

"That wasn't the worst of it," I said.

"Well, I got a John Wick achievement that I thought was very rude. I didn't even get a prize from it. Though I did receive something quite useful from a platinum Did-You-Really-Just-Cast-Fireball-in-a-Room-This-Small box."

"We still need to have a discussion about that," Mordecai said, sounding irritated.

"What was the prize?" I asked. Then, the name of the box hit me. I remembered the burnt-down tree in the middle of town, alarm rising in my chest. "Wait, what did you do to get it?"

"Oh, oh, the prize is just great," Donut said, pointing. There was a small, closet-sized room next to the restroom in the main space. I hadn't noticed it until now. "It's a vocal coach! It's a special training

room! Can you believe it? There's a little room with a microphone behind glass and a holographic NPC lady who shows me throat exercises to train my voice. Her name is Lover Illiana, and she's just wonderful. She says I have a voice like a cygnus cloud gull. My singing has already gone up to level four."

Mordecai sighed. "It's actually a great prize. Next time Donut casts an illusion with her voice, the apparitions might actually have substance. Now, Carl. Get your loot."

I told Mordecai about the apostate box before I moved to open the prizes. He groaned. We weren't able to pick and choose the boxes we opened. It was an all-or-nothing thing, so I didn't have much of a choice.

"It'll be okay," he said. His tone was not convincing. "You said the god was Diwata? That's a weird one. She changes genders, but she's usually referred to as her. She does some odd shit, like impregnates herself and then eats the offspring and then forms cities with her poop. Thankfully, she's pretty rare. Go ahead. Open the boxes. We'll deal like we always do."

"What does she look like?"

"Her natural form is a giant squirrel-like thing with antlers. She's covered in moss and leaves, too. You can't miss her."

"All righty. Here goes nothing."

I had multiple prize boxes. Most of them were low-tier adventurer boxes, but I had a grand total of 14 Hunter Killer boxes including the one I'd received from Future Hunter the orc. This was several more than I'd been expecting. It appeared they gave me credit for the three nebs and three mantises that were killed by the other mantis while she was enraged, though I hadn't gotten credit when she had in turn been killed by her own people.

Even though I got boxes for those six kills, I didn't receive any experience, but I *did* receive a small amount of experience when the enraged mantis was cut down. Again, it was all behind-the-scenes math stuff I didn't understand, and I wasn't so sure anymore that this stuff wasn't being tweaked in real time. Sometimes some of these rules seemed to change for no reason. I wasn't going to argue about it.

I now had 52 hunting trophies, and I received a total of 637,000 gold just from those boxes. Donut made a little pained noise every time the Emberus shrine beeped.

The silver lucky bastard box contained a few invisibility potions and a useless cloak that I wouldn't be able to wear. It added a few hammer-based attack skills, so I gave it to Firas.

The gold ranged weapon box contained a patch for my jacket. The first one I'd gotten on this floor. Donut started to inspect it as the Gold Apostate box opened.

The symbol appeared in the air and then slapped itself right onto my left upper arm. This was yet another tattoo. It appeared to be a flaming ball of snakes. Almost like a free-floating medusa wig. One of the snake heads reached down and curled around the web pattern on my elbow tattoo, the one that gave me access to the Guild of Suffering, which I hadn't seen or heard anything about since I'd gotten that tattoo for using the Ring of Divine Suffering for the first time.

Before I could examine the tattoo's properties, the Gold Spicy Box opened.

I was expecting something ridiculous, like another toe ring or foot lotion. Instead. I got another patch.

This one was a little bigger than the first. It was a white, rectangular piece of fabric with a little, circular bomb hand stitched on it with fine, black thread. It almost looked like a pencil drawing of a bomb. Donut gasped, and she pulled it over to examine it more closely.

"Exquisite," she said. "This is classic Spanish blackwork. This is much better than that other screen-printed monstrosity."

She was so enraptured by the patch, she didn't say or seem to notice my new tattoo, which was by far the largest one I'd received. With this, the spiderweb, and the goblin pass, I practically had a whole sleeve on my left arm.

"It could be worse," Mordecai said, also inspecting the tattoo. "Diwata is a minor goddess. A nature one. Like a low-rent Apito. She's pretty vengeful. She can make trees grow and summon

animals. You're gonna have to stay clear of the dryads from now on. I think some of them worship her."

"That's gonna suck," Louis said from the couch. "Those tree dudes are everywhere."

Enemy of the Church Tattoo

Diwata

The bearer of this symbol is an enemy of the church of Diwata. All adherents outside of a Club Vanquisher will attack you on sight. You may no longer worship Diwata or any of her allies. Eh, no big loss. She's pretty much a hippie anyway. Always crying about her stupid trees. Always letting forest animals knock her up. It's actually pretty disgusting.

You will receive a 25% damage bonus against all adherents of Diwata.

As an adherent of Emberus, you receive an additional 25% bonus against all adherents of Diwata, giving you a total of 50% bonus damage.

Warning: Uh, so this is a big one, so listen closely. Don't let Diwata see you. Ever. If she shows up at a party, and you're there, you best be sneaking out the back door. That's all I'm saying about that.

Unlike other tattoos, this one may not be hidden with a cover-up sleeve. If you'd like to remove this tattoo and the associated effects, you must either kill Diwata or chop off your arm. One of those is a lot easier than the other.

"Carl," Donut said, finally noticing the new ink. "Are you trying to look like Signet? Because it's starting to work. You keep getting them, over and over. You must be doing it on purpose. Disgusting. All tattoos are disgusting."

"Hey," Gwen said from her position against the back wall. "You said you liked my tattoos when we first met." The Inuit woman had multiple tattoos on her face and hands.

"Oh, that's different," Donut said. "Your tattoos enhance your beauty and are culturally important. Carl's tattoos make him look like someone whose mugshot would go viral."

Gwen grunted indignantly.

"I have Bart Simpson tattooed on my ankle," Firas added. "I did it in class in school. It looks a little smudged now. And by a little, I mean it's just a blue blob. It got infected when I did it."

"I was saving up for a Death Star tat," Louis said. "I was gonna get it on my chest."

"Who is Bart Simpson?" Britney asked as I picked up my two new patches to examine them.

My enchanted vest could hold as many patches as I could fit. I only had one patch on it right now, so I had plenty of room. Each new patch added +1 to all of my stats, plus the benefits of the patch itself.

The archery one was a small, square patch similar in size to my first patch, which depicted the planet earth. This one featured a group of about a dozen flaming arrows clutched in the hands of an eagle claw. The drawing was rendered in an old-school, traditional, Sailor Jerry style. I thought it looked kind of cool.

Upgrade Patch. Small.

This patch depicts the twelve flaming arrows the great Skyfowl hero Radiant Star shot into his grandfather in order to end the frozen time that plagued their world.

If this upgrade patch is affixed to an eligible garment, it will imbue the following upgrades:

+5% to Dexterity.

+5% damage to all ranged projectiles.

Warning: Upgrade patches are fleeting items. You may remove them, but they will be destroyed in the process.

"Hell yeah," I said. I glanced at Katia, who'd already grabbed the sewing kit. She'd affixed my first one.

I picked up the second patch. This one was bigger. Bigger ones took up more space, though they still only imbued the same benefit as the smaller patches. However, the patches themselves appeared to give much better benefits, which made it worth it. I ran my finger over the raised bomb on the white patch. Donut was enraptured with it. What had she called it? Spanish blackwork? That didn't make sense. How in the hell would she know that?

And then it hit me. Finally. *Of course*. I felt like an idiot for not seeing it earlier.

"Donut," I said. "What was the name of that earth hobby potion you got way back on the third floor?"

"Scutelliphily," she said, spitting the words. "Useless, stupid potion. Nobody knows what it means."

"I'm pretty sure I've figured it out," I said.

"Really? What is it?"

I patted the bomb patch. "What type of thread is on this thing?"

"Oh, it's just lovely. It's supposed to be silk, but some people try to cheat using linen thread. But you can always tell when it's the real deal because..." She trailed off.

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure scut-whatever has something to do with embroidery or patches."

Donut gasped. "Carl, Carl. I think you're right!"

"Scutelliphily is a compound Latin and Greek word," Britney said. "Scutellus is Latin, and it means 'small shield.' Phileein is a common Greek suffix that means 'the love of.' Or something similar. So it means the love of small shields. I guess that means you love little patches. If you had asked me, I could have told you this earlier."

We all just looked at the Ukrainian barbarian woman like she'd just sprouted a hamster from her nostril.

"Dude," Louis said.

"What?" she asked, irritated as I shook my head and examined the rectangular patch.

Upgrade Patch. Medium.

This patch is finely made from Spider Reaper Minion thread silk.

It's a bomb. You blow shit up all the time. It's appropriate you have a patch depicting it. This patch is finely made, which means all below upgrades are enhanced.

If this upgrade patch is affixed to an eligible garment, it will imbue the following upgrades:

+11% to Constitution.

+6% damage to all explosives.

+2 to the Dangerous Explosives Handling Skill.

+15% Discount from traveling Spider Reaper Minion merchants.

Warning: Upgrade patches are fleeting items. You may remove them, but they will be destroyed in the process.

My dangerous explosives handling skill was already at 10, so that alone was pretty good. I pulled my jacket off and handed it to Katia. She took the two patches and started mapping out the best place to sew them on. Donut jumped to her shoulder and started offering unsolicited advice.

I had one more important upgrade to deal with. With my last level-up, I was finally able to move my base strength over 100. This came with its own upgrade. I'd be given three upgrade options, and I had to pick one.

That number, 100, was just insane to me. The average human had a strength of four. Every person in this room, even Louis and Britney was now stronger than the strongest human who had ever lived.

It's not real, I thought, having a sudden memory of my time in the production ship. Of the "zero zone" they'd called it. It'd felt like I couldn't breathe, that I'd had all my strength zapped out of me. I had lost my ability to read Syndicate Standard. Sort of. I was pretty sure I'd lost all of my upgrades and abilities, including all of my enhanced stats.

What does that mean? How does that work in the context of the rest of the universe?

It was a question for another time. I assigned my points, bringing my strength to exactly 100. For the first time, I felt myself get physically larger. It wasn't a huge change, but I felt my arms swell. My chest bulged. I reached up and touched my arm. *Wow*, I thought. *I'm jacked*.

New Achievement! What big muscles you have!

Your base strength is now over 100. Rawr!

Get thee to Chippendales!

Reward: You've received an upgrade!

Admin Message:

You have been given a permanent upgrade. You have three choices. You have three minutes to pick. Choose wisely. Your choices are:

Swole.

Prison Bitch.

Stepson.

"Shit," I said. Three minutes wasn't very long. None of these were listed as the possible choices in the cookbook. Or if they were, they'd changed the names. "Mordecai, help me pick." I quickly moved through each one, reading it out loud after I read the description.

Swole. From now on, every one point of Strength you add as a result of a level-up stat point is actually two points. This is not retroactive, nor does apply to equipment-based upgrades.

That was pretty awesome. However, I was planning on focusing on constitution for a bit now. It wasn't clear if it worked with my Ring of Divine Suffering, but I suspected it would not.

Prison Bitch. You have an additional 20% strength bonus when fighting hand-to-hand with someone whose base strength is lower than yours.

Again, that was a good upgrade. I did a lot of hand-to-hand fighting, and this would be a solid choice. Fighting like this was where my strength was most useful, so it would be better than the first choice at first, but the first choice would eventually be better. And this was useless if I was fighting someone stronger than me, presumably when I'd need the extra strength the most.

Stepson. All kicks and foot-based attacks have an automatic 15% chance to inflict Ouch per hit.

"What the hell is 'Ouch'?" I asked. There wasn't a way to click on or read what it did.

"It's a stagger attack," Mordecai said. "It'll stop someone in their tracks. Like kicking them in the nuts."

"Carl did that once to an elf," Donut said from Katia's shoulder. "Zev, our agent, said the audience didn't like that much."

"It is kind of a bitch move," Firas agreed.

"Not helping," I said. "Mordecai? What do you think?"

"Swole," he said. "You already have multiple feet upgrades that'll help disable a victim. Swole seems to be the obvious choice. It's not an active skill, but it's what I would choose."

"Agreed," Katia said as she sewed the arrow patch next to the planet earth on my jacket's shoulder.

"I think you should do the one with the feet," Donut added. "If it's ever a question, you should always take the foot-based choice. Plus if you kick something five times fast, that's like an almost guaranteed stun. You're always kicking and stepping on animals and orcs and hunters. You could tap dance on someone and stun them." She paused. "Carl, did you get bigger? Everyone, look at Carl. His arms got bigger."

"Yeah, he did," Elle said. She reached over and touched my arm. "Imani, come touch Carl."

I ignored her. I had a minute left to choose. Donut made a compelling argument, but, again, it seemed the two-for-one upgrade was the best choice. I ended up going with it.

"Sorry, Donut," I said. "I think I'll go with swole," I said. I clicked it.

Dude. You're so big. Huge.

"I'm not the one you need to apologize to," Donut said, still intently staring over Katia's shoulder.

Katia had already finished with the first patch, and she'd moved to the bomb. She was placing it on the bottom left of the jacket's front, right along the hemline. She grew a second pair of arms to hold the jacket in place.

Donut made a disapproving noise. "No, no, your stitches are off. This is a piece of fine art, Katia. You wouldn't tape a Bob Ross painting to the wall with duct tape. Your stitches have to be perfectly spaced."

"Donut," Katia said.

"I'm just trying to help."

I sat down in the chair, finally done with my boxes. I put my hand against my arm. I thought of everything that had happened over the past day and a half. I thought of that little kid with his shitty

drawing of me getting eaten by the brindle grub. Was his dad right? Was I only alive because the AI wanted it? Should I have chosen the stepson benefit?

I looked down at my feet, and I felt dirty. My new tattoo burned on my swollen arm. The Emberus shrine bubbled louder, reminding me that I owed both blood and money.

That's how it always is, isn't it? I thought. The silence in my mind roared, louder than it had ever been.

The sink is running.

"No, no, no!" Donut cried from Katia's shoulder. Katia looked like she was about to murder the cat.

I smiled. At least I was home, if only for an hour or two.

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"Here it comes, here it comes!" Donut said, bouncing up and down. Next to her, Mongo screeched, waving his arms. "Oh, it's going to be glorious. I wish this thing had a DVR. Mordecai, can you record it so we can play it back?" She gasped. "We can make copies, and I can autograph them, and Carl can sell them when he goes back to the stupid con thing!"

"I don't think it works that way," I said.

Mordecai didn't answer. It was just me, Mordecai, Donut, and Mongo. The others had an emergency outside. Their village was being raided by death monkeys or something. They had to leave, and they were going to take the *Twister* back south to assist Chris and Li Na.

After several scenes of crawlers getting themselves killed, the rest of the program was dedicated to the fight between Donut and Lucia Mar.

The scene started with Lucia entering the town and literally ripping the tree-like mayor in half. She was in her melee-focused, skeletal, demonic form. Her two rottweilers—the massive, pony-sized Cici and the regular-sized Gustavo 3—slinked into the village behind her, heads low to the ground, growling at anything that moved. As we watched, Gustavo barked at a dryad, and a bolt of lightning shot from the dog's mouth, striking a monkey in the branches on the dryad's head. The small animal dropped dead. While Gustavo moved to devour the corpse, Cici pounced on the tree creature and started

biting the smoldering branches off the NPC as it cried out. Blood sprayed from each broken branch.

"Christ," I muttered.

"Dogs. Can't trust a one of them," Donut said.

From there, the show portrayed Lucia as she went through each pub and safe room in the small town and sampled all of their food and alcohol. As she left each pub, she cast a spell at the entrance. It was the trigger for the teleport trap.

"How is it that they haven't patched that yet?"

"Exploits that allow a crawler to trap and kill another crawler usually aren't patched," Mordecai said. "This one has been around a while. Though I think her original intention was to capture the nebs, not necessarily you and Donut. From what I gather she'd had a run-in with them before this."

Lucia ended up settling at a raised treehouse bar in the middle of the small village. It wasn't a saferoom, but a dungeon-style pub with an ursine proprietor. The pub had a wide picture window that looked over both of the village's two entrances. An ornate, wooden stairwell circled up the tree, leading to a broad deck that led to the front door.

We watched, from Lucia's point of view, as Donut and I walked into town from the north, hurrying because it was almost time for me to leave and go to CrawlCon. We paused at the entrance to the saferoom to ask the dryad NPC who the mayor was.

Both of Lucia's dogs started to growl.

"Lunch," Lucia said, sliding out of the chair. The effort was smooth, snake-like. They moved out the front door and leaned over the balcony, watching us. The three of them quietly and slowly descended the circular staircase, reaching the ground. We hadn't noticed them because she'd somehow placed a protection spell over the village, blocking all the dots from appearing on the map.

"Cici, do not swallow the cat whole like you did to that fairy lady. I wish to loot the *puta*'s inventory," Lucia whispered.

"Well, I never," Donut said next to me as we watched the show. "That's just rude."

"So, she just attacked you straight up? She didn't try talking to you first or anything?" I asked.

"No," Donut said. "Not at first. Watch how I expertly handle the situation."

"Who's that?" Samantha said on the screen. "She looks like my type of crazy."

Pop!

It showed me disappearing and then reappearing in my seat at the panel for the art contest, which wasn't exactly how it happened. They also, for some inexplicable reason, digitally added a little cocktail to the table with an umbrella along with a bowl filled with what looked like strawberries and candy bars.

"Snacks? They gave you snacks?" Donut squeaked.

They quickly moved back to the action before I could object.

Samantha dropped to the ground as Donut hissed. I'd had the saferoom door open, but it started to slam closed when I'd disappeared. Donut leaped for the door, but she vanished and reappeared in the middle of the town square, switching places with Lucia.

Lucia landed in the doorway to the pub, landing with one fist on the ground in the classic superhero pose, her back to the action. Mud splattered as her fist hit the earth, splashing over the dryad and the back of Samantha's head.

At the same moment, Donut splatted on the ground with a yowl, landing in the exact spot Lucia had just been standing.

Right between the two snarling dogs.

This was obviously a planned move, something Lucia had done before. The two dogs both lunged in the exact moment Donut hit the ground.

The dogs were fast, but Donut had a Dodge skill of 11, and she shot forward, moving lightning quick. She leapt in the air and did a rather impressive backflip, landing on the back of the larger Rottweiler before launching herself again toward the second pub—the treehouse where Lucia had been waiting. A plume of blood geysered off the back of the giant dog as Donut's back claws ripped flesh.

As she flew, Donut cast *Wall of Fire* behind her. The dogs both yelped and ran in opposite directions as the flames spread across

the center of town.

The recap paused as a camera zoomed up into the air and then looked down on the scene. Little triangles appeared over all the combatants—Lucia, Donut, Cici, Gustavo, and Samantha. The announcer zoomed in on the smaller of the two rottweilers, giving the audience the dog's stats before moving to the large dog, still frozen with blood splashing up off the creature's back.

"Holy shit," I gasped. "You almost got bitten in half."

"I know, right?" Donut said. She made a little karate motion and a *wachaw!* noise. "They don't call them cat-like reflexes for nothing."

"What was that teleport spell. It was different than what she used on the clockwork Sledge."

"Loop-de-Loop," Mordecai said, his small eyes intent on the screen. "It's a trap spell, which is different than a regular trap that you set with a module. She likely has the option to either send the victim to a default location or to switch places, and she can toggle it on the fly. She peppers every town she enters with teleport traps. It's a smart survival technique. She likely can only set them when she's in her other form. All of her magic in the skeleton form comes from items."

The announcer completed his analysis of the five players, finishing with a frozen zoom-in on Samantha, who appeared to be screaming and rolling toward the skirmish with the dogs. A pop-up appeared and quickly went away, too fast to read.

The scene unfroze.

Lucia hissed in anger. In the five seconds it had taken for Donut to evade the dogs, Lucia had tossed four potions, each in a different direction. They hit the ground and exploded in a puff of yellow smoke. She dropped the last potion onto the ground in front of the saferoom door and rushed forward toward her two dogs and the wall of fire as Donut pounded in the opposite direction toward the treehouse pub.

"What are those potions?" I asked.

"Cloud of Dispel magic," Mordecai said. "She's looking for you. She didn't know you'd left. She thinks you went invisible."

Despite having two different types of legs—a skeleton leg and the leg of a goat—Lucia moved with surprising speed.

Donut didn't bother with the stairwell that circled the tree leading up to the other pub. She jumped, landing high on the side of a tree adjacent to the treehouse and scrabbled up the trunk. She then moved to leap from that tree to the deck surrounding the raised pub.

At that same moment, Lucia effortlessly scooped up the still-rolling Samantha by the hair and swung her directly at Donut, launching the head like a rocket. The sex doll head flew true, beaming the cat in the side just as she landed on the platform. Donut yowled and stumbled, rolling. She hit the side of the pub with a mighty thump.

I cringed. That looked like it had hurt. Mongo growled with concern.

Lucia shouted a command, and the two dogs snarled and lunged directly at their owner as she slid to a stop. She dropped a round chip at her feet that I immediately recognized as a trap module.

Despite knowing that Donut survived this, my heart dropped. I knew exactly what was about to happen. Donut was going to enter the other saferoom and switch places with Lucia again. But this time, Donut was going to activate a second trap as soon as she landed between the two dogs.

Donut scrambled toward the door, but Samantha, who'd also landed on the raised deck, veered off toward the door and hit it first, pushing it open and rolling inside.

She did that on purpose, I thought, watching the action unfold.

Samantha hit the invisible loop-de-loop trap and teleported back down to the center of the clearing, on the other side of the still-roaring wall of fire. She triggered the second trap, which appeared to be some sort of snare thing that kept her from fleeing. Gustavo snapped down right onto the indestructible doll's head, ripping her up from the ground and shaking her violently as Samantha screamed bloody murder. The larger Cici lunged forward in an attempt to pry the sex doll from the other Rottweiler's grip, but Gustavo scrambled away, shaking and growling.

At that same moment, Lucia teleported to right in front of Donut, who was still diving for the saferoom entrance. Lucia was facing the room, and Donut plowed into her back. They both flew into the treehouse pub, crashing inside and scattering tables and chairs. The ursine proprietor shouted and jumped out of the way.

This pub wasn't a true saferoom. It was the same sort of place as the Desperado Club or where we'd killed Growler Gary over and over. There was a door to the guildhall, just fifteen feet away, but they could still kill each other in here. Before Lucia could recover, Donut lunged for the guildhall door.

"Watch for traps," I felt myself saying just before Donut hit the snare.

"Nobody likes a Monday morning short stop, Carl," Donut grumbled.

On the screen, Donut stopped dead, completely rooted in place. A ninety second timer appeared over her head. She could still move in a circle, but her forward paw was stuck to the pub's floorboard. She turned and fired a full-powered magic missile into Lucia Mar, who rocketed back. Lucia was now injured, but she had some sort of magic protection which greatly absorbed the damage. I could see one of the rings on her fingers glowing and pulsing. Still, the spell had rocked the crawler, and her health went down about twenty percent.

And just as the girl-turned-woman started to recover, Donut cast a *Fireball* into her chest. Lucia slammed into the back wall of the pub as the ursine guy shouted in alarm. The far wall of the wooden pub burst into flames.

"Don't attack her directly," I said. "She has that other spell, remember? The damage reflect one she used to kill Ifechi."

"I'm not an idiot, Carl. The spell is called *Rubber*, and she hadn't cast it yet because she wanted her dogs to eat me. Plus Mordecai said he thinks she can only do it when she's in her pretty form."

"That's not what I said at all," Mordecai said. "I said I think it's from an item she's wearing, so she might be able to cast it in her skeletal form, but I wasn't sure."

"Oh," Donut said. "Well, she never cast it."

"Also," Mordecai added. "Fireball is an outdoor spell, Donut."

"Both of you, shush! This is the part where it gets all weird."

"You should have released Mongo," I added. "It was three against one."

Next to me, Mongo screeched with agreement.

"I can't help but notice I'm sitting here next to you right now, Carl. You were sipping margaritas and eating strawberries while I was literally fighting for my life. Now quit making suggestions and watch."

I reached down and petted Donut. "You're right. I'm sorry."

On the screen, Donut yelled, "Get back," as Lucia peeled herself off the wall. Her health was down to about 50%. She casually patted out the fire on her body. Behind her, fire raged. Lucia stumbled toward the counter and peered over at the ursine proprietor who cowered there.

"Milk," Lucia said.

"We're on fire, Mayor. We have to go," the bear said.

She slammed her fist on the counter, and the wood cracked. "Milk. Hurry." She turned toward Donut. "Cats like milk, right?"

"What?" Donut asked.

"Two milks!" Lucia demanded. She looked over her shoulder at an empty spot. "The fight is over. It is a draw."

"Uh, I gotta go into the back to get it," the ursine said. He disappeared into the kitchen. A moment later, a distant door slammed. The bear man was running away. Lucia didn't seem to notice.

"No points?" Lucia paused and looked back out the window as the flames spread upward.

"Who are you talking to?" Donut asked as the flames licked across the ceiling. She still had forty seconds over her head.

"He's mad," Lucia said. "He says I should finish you off, but you fought good."

"Hey," Donut said up at the television screen. "They cut out what she said! She said his name was Alexandro, and he was her youth assistant."

"You didn't tell me that," Mordecai said. "Strange."

On the screen, Lucia continued. "Your friend ran away. What is his name? Oh, yes. Carl. He's a coward. You should never leave your friends. I had friends, on the last floor. Bini and Abraham and Siti. It was all ice, and we finished and popped the bubble. But I fell asleep, and I didn't tell Gus to sleep. And… He's the bad one." She paused. "Cici does it, too, but Gus is worse. I think they ate your head friend. I didn't get any points for it." She started to pound at the side of her own head, slamming her hand against her temple in a steady rhythm. *Slap, slap, slap*. I'd seen her do that once before on the recap after her dog had killed all the others in her bubble. "You should probably go before..." She paused.

Cici, the larger of the rottweilers entered the pub, head low. The dog's lip curled back in a vicious snarl. Her incisors were each the length of a human hand. *Holy shit,* I thought. Donut was still snared for another twenty seconds.

Gustavo hadn't come in, and I assumed the other dog remained outside on the ground, gnawing on Samantha.

Something changed in Lucia's demeanor. I could see it on her face, almost like a shadow falling across it. *What is that*? She looked at the giant dog and said, "You want a head to play with, too, don't you sweet Cici? Kill the kitty. Keep the head for yourself. Leave the rest for me."

The roof of the pub was fully engulfed. Black smoke choked the room. The rear corner caved in, revealing the branches of the trees, which also burned. Red embers zipped through the air. A heavy, wooden beam crashed to the floor next to Lucia, showering sparks, and she didn't flinch.

This whole time, Donut was mumbling under her breath. It finally dawned on me what she was doing. *She's singing*. *She's trying to cast a bard spell*.

"Don't worry, little Donut," Lucia said as Cici stalked forward. "Soon, you will be tossed through the veil, and you will feast with the other losers. And I will have enough points to get across the bridge and back home with my papa."

What the hell is that kid babbling about?

Four additional Donuts suddenly appeared in the fiery pub, all in a line along the back wall.

"Holy shit, you did it," I exclaimed, forgetting Lucia's weird rant. "You cast *Entourage*."

"Don't act so surprised, Carl," Donut said indignantly.

But the deception was obvious. Four of the illusions didn't have a timer, nor were they moving. They stood still like mannequins. The center one had five seconds over her head, still counting down.

At the same moment, Cici jumped forward, snapping at the middle Donut. I cringed as the massive jaws clamped, moving right through Donut as if she wasn't there. The dog slammed into the guildhall door and howled.

"How," I began to say, but then the illusions all snapped off as quickly as they'd come. There'd been five Donuts, not four. She'd overlaid the middle one onto herself. She'd also downed an invisibility potion.

But that wasn't all. She'd cast *Hole* under her own feet just as the dog lunged.

The view quickly changed to the outside. We watched as a translucent outline of Donut dropped straight down and landed deftly on the ground next to the burning tree. She looked up at the hole.

"I can't believe that worked," I said.

"The spell removed the trap," Mordecai said, "So she got out of it. It's a good trick."

"I got an achievement for it, too!"

"Did you know that was going to happen?"

"Of course I knew, Carl. Wait, wait, this is the best part!"

Back in the treehouse, Cici finally discovered the round hole between her legs and peered down through it. The monster dog stuck her head through and started barking wildly down at the still-invisible form of Donut.

"No," Lucia cried, rushing forward. She reached to pull Cici back.

She was too late.

Donut snapped off the *Hole* spell.

The head of Cici the Rottweiler dropped from the treehouse and splatted onto the muddy ground as firefly-like embers drifted all around it.

Above, an unholy wail of anguish rocked the village.

Donut, still invisible, walked up to the head and put her paw on it, pushing it over to reveal the dead monstrosity's eyes.

"Stupid dog," Donut muttered on the screen. "The only bridge you'll be crossing today is made out of rainbows."

The head disappeared as Donut pulled it into her inventory. A chunk of treehouse fell, and Donut bounded off. She remained invisible, and she skulked around the still-burning Wall of Fire and headed back toward the original saferoom. A few hundred meters away, Gustavo 3 sat on the ground, oblivious, happily gnawing on Samantha's head while she wailed that she was going to kill Gustavo's bitch of a mother.

Donut disappeared inside.

The scene returned to Lucia Mar on her knees, hugging the headless corpse of the giant Rottweiler as the building collapsed all around her.

"She killed the wrong one," Lucia wailed. "My sweet, sweet Cici. That cat killed the wrong one. What's going to happen now? What's going to happen now?" She looked over at the empty, flaming bar. "Where's my milk?"

I could see it, even on the screen. She was constantly changing back and forth, like a child doing hopscotch from one personality to the next. Her eyes narrowed, and the corpse of Cici disappeared as she took it all into her inventory. The pub's flaming counter dropped away as the entire kitchen half of the pub collapsed.

Lucia stood to her full height, but she'd changed from the skeletal hag to the beautiful woman, surrounded by a nimbus of flame. The transformation had been instantaneous.

"Yes. Yes. They all must die. You're right. No more mercy. No more friends. They all must die."

The show ended there.

I looked over at Donut, who beamed up at me triumphantly.

"I was pretty proud of that rainbow bridge comment," she said. "Though I keep going over it in my head, and I kinda wish I'd said it in a different way. Like maybe, 'welcome to the rainbow bridge,' but that doesn't seem quite right, either. It doesn't have enough punch. Oh well, it's too late now. I'll have another one ready for when we take out the other dog."

I exchanged a glance with Mordecai, whose fuzzy face looked grim.

I kept my eyes on the screen, but the show was ending. They would show the next part with me tomorrow. "So that bear I saw out there, attached to the upside-down cross with the word 'milk' carved into his chest in Spanish. I'm pretty sure that was the bartender. She killed him and every other NPC in the town after that. But I don't understand. She sees someone invisible. And what was that point thing? What's a youth assistant? Are you sure that's what she said?"

"Yes, I'm sure Carl."

"Youth assistants are new," Mordecai said. "But they're not a dungeon thing. Children under a certain age aren't allowed to enter the dungeon. If they descend into the dungeon, they are taken away until after the crawl. The youth assistants are the ones who take care of them. I'm not sure what the minimum age is. It's different each time, and it changes based on intelligence level and species. Kids shouldn't be in here. Youth assistants shouldn't be here. It's really strange."

We were interrupted by the daily announcement.

Hello, Crawlers!

What an exciting day! With just over 66,000 crawlers left, we have exactly 100 guilds formed combining almost 1,500 parties. Over 90% of all crawlers are partied with at least one other contestant, which is an extraordinarily high number. For a non-stigmergic species, you guys sure love your societal structures.

This coordination is great for survival in normal circumstances, but you make yourselves easy targets. Still, an equally amazing number of hunter-killer trophies have

been collected. Tomorrow's recap episode will feature some of the highlights of hunters falling, a first for *Dungeon Crawler World*.

In fact, you guys are fighting back so astonishingly well, several of the silly hunters are abandoning their hunt and hiding out in Zockau. Hopefully they stop being cowards soon. If not, we may have to change things up a little.

Your pluckiness has caused us to completely redesign the seventh floor. More on that later. Please note, however, if you go down within six hours of level collapse, you will not get a head start. You will, however, get good placement. If you go down *too* early, you *will* be placed at the back of the pack.

In the meantime, you still have a full seven days left to secure your spot in the top 50. All of the top 50 will be notified that they've received an invite to the party at the Butcher's Masquerade. Attendance is mandatory, and all invitees will be allowed a plus one. Attendance for the plus ones is optional.

Now get out there and kill, kill, kill!

"What the hell does stigmergic mean?" I asked.

"I bet Britney knows," Donut said.

"I'm more worried about the wording on..." Mordecai began.

The door to the outside flung open. Bomo stepped inside the saferoom. The giant rock monster looked uncharacteristically tired and exasperated. Just outside, standing uncertainly in the situationally-generated space was a small, male mantis. The hunched-over, shivering creature was barely distinguishable as the same race as Vrah or Circe.

"Carl," the creature said through the open door. "We must talk quickly. She's coming for me."

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Carl: Mordecai, how safe is it to bring him in here?

Mordecai: He can't teleport you away like Lucia does in a regular saferoom, if that's what you're asking. But he can and will likely report everything he sees back to his people. You can't tie him up. You can't hire him. You can restrict him to the main room of the personal space, but that's about it.

Carl: Shit, what do we do?

Mordecai: You probably should have thought this through before you invited him here.

"I wasn't expecting you to come," I said, leaving him in the hallway. It'd been almost two hours since I'd sent Bomo out into Zockau with the note. He'd been given strict instructions not to leave the tavern saferoom. I was about to send him a message to come back. If Vrah was returning to the town, she surely would've arrived by now.

Well, I thought. *Maybe not*. I imagined flying while your genitals were on fire had to slow you down somewhat.

"He attack me," Bomo said, grunting the words. "In saferoom, he attack me, and he get frozen for a minute. Then he said, 'wait for me' and he attack me again. He got frozen for an hour. Stupid bug. Lots of hunters in saferoom. Lots and lots. They scared of Bomo."

"He attacked you?" I asked, raising an eyebrow. "*Twice*? With what?"

"With hands. He tried to punch. He got frozen, and it said he was naughty."

If he attacked any of us a third time, he'd get stripped of all his gear and teleported away to the closest monster nest.

I sighed and examined the small, quivering creature. He looked like a child. He did not have the upper, sword-like arms that the females did, which made him look even more pitiful.

Edict – Mantis. Level 50. Merchant.

The Dark Hive.

"Hello, Edict," I said, leaning against the door. A few personal space doors dotted the situationally-generated hallway. This was one of the few, true saferooms in Zockau, so it made sense others would want to keep their spaces attached to this pub. "So, what do you got for me?"

"I'm not a hunter. Or a fighter. I'm just the accountant. They made me come here to do the trading."

"An accountant?" I asked. "You know, you're the second guy to say that to me." I looked over at Donut, who'd jumped to my shoulder. "What was that other guy's name? The elf from the Dream? He said he was an accountant, too."

"You know I don't remember the names of corpses, Carl," Donut said. "Maybe if you pull his hand out of your inventory it will jog your memory."

"Akland?" Edict asked, deflating even further. If he hunched over any more, I was afraid he'd fall to the ground and turn into a pill bug. "You killed Akland? I hadn't heard. He'd gone out with the others. I told him it was stupid. The hunters are all returning to Zockau. It's become too dangerous. Please. She's almost here. She told me I have to mate with her. We must hurry."

"What do you got for me?" I asked again.

The bug wrung his hands. "I had a lot of magical gear, but I am contracted to buy for our government. The Burrowers. They've already paid for all the loot I have collected."

The Burrowers were also mantises. They were one of the nine factions that were to compete in faction wars. "There's a Burrower rep on the floor?"

"No, no, you misunderstand. They paid in advance. I have been contracted to bring the gear directly to them upon the collapse of this floor. I'm going straight to the ninth after this. That's who I really work for. The Dark Hive sells only to them."

Even though the Burrowers were the same species as the mantises from the Dark Hive, I knew that they were actually two very different groups. The Dark Hive was really just a private corporation. They apparently got their money from running some sort of intergalactic amusement park. Like a fucked up version of the Disney family.

The Burrowers were the royal family and the governmental entity for the mantis system. They rarely did well in faction wars, but they usually participated. Apparently they were one of the deadliest and most terrifying forces in the galaxy, but the generated NPCs they received in faction wars weren't fellow bugs, so they usually got knocked out second after the nagas. I had a photograph of the empress mother in my inventory.

"I don't care who you really work for. Unless you want your praying mantis nut sack to catch on fire for a week straight, you're going to have to hand the loot over. And then we'll protect you."

"Carl, do bugs even have genitals?" Donut asked. "I don't think I've ever seen a bug penis. I bet they're really gross. Like a corkscrew duck penis. Or a dog penis. Have you ever seen one of those? They're absolutely revolting, and sometimes they just have them hanging out for no reason. They look like sweating lipsticks. Whenever Miss Beatrice pulled out that red tube and brought it to her mouth, I couldn't help but think..."

I held up a hand to stop the cat and let the mantis answer.

"You don't understand," Edict said. "The contract for the gear has already been executed. If I gave it to you, the Burrowers would take the money back from me and my family. My hive. I'm of Deep Mind, and we would not survive. So I have already given it all away to another entity who has agreed to deliver the goods for a small fee. I will not tell you who."

I sighed. I hadn't really been expecting that part to work, but it'd been worth a try. All I really wanted was to keep Vrah away from

this guy so she couldn't pass the gonorrhea on. I already knew from the cookbook that venereal diseases were a common thing in the dungeon, and several of them had the same cure. You had to neuter yourself or you had to give it to someone else. And by "someone else," they meant a creature with compatible anatomy.

I had no idea how mantis alien genitals worked, but I did know that once you cut something away in this dungeon, it didn't come back. And I also knew that Vrah was next in line to be the hive's big queen, so giving herself a space hysterectomy or a spay or whatever had to be out of the question.

As simpering and cowardly as this guy looked, he was no dummy. He had to know keeping Vrah infected was my primary goal. Still, I had to play this out.

"I guess you're fucked, then," I said, trying to sound nonchalant. "If you have nothing for us, we have no incentive to keep you safe." I shrugged.

Edict shook his head. "If I truly wished to remain safe, I would stay in the saferoom and refuse to leave, even when Vrah orders me. She cannot force me outside. She can't use the teleport trick or the phase trick or the Bopca ejection method or the other dozen ways they have to lure crawlers out. After your assault, they covered the tavern with protection spells. I could just stay within."

"Then why are you here?" I asked. A distant sense of alarm started to tingle the back of my mind. *This is a trap. He's springing a trap.* But what was it? Was this a distraction?

"I don't know how you infected Vrah with that disease, but when you did, you placed my fate, perhaps the fate of my entire hive, at a split in the tunnel. If I give you the weapons and armor, my family would be financially ruined. I would be without honor, forced to kill myself in shame. If I refuse Vrah's orders and allow her to suffer, her family would take revenge on my own. They are powerful. Almost as strong as the royal family and certainly more wealthy. But if I give in to Vrah's demands and mate with her, I will more than just die. While she would not be impregnated within this zone, it is still forbidden for members of my hive to attempt a coupling with hers. And while the Burrower government isn't as strict as they once were,

the old ways persist amongst our culture, and we would still be deemed as traitors. Perhaps forgivable, especially considering the circumstances. But a humiliation either way, and I will not let that happen."

"Wait," Donut said. "They'd make you kill yourself for having sex with someone from a different family?"

"All mantis couplings must be registered ahead of time. There must be a trial and psychological counseling for the male. But my family is employed by the government, so it's forbidden to couple with a for-profit entity without putting up a bond and paying for a license."

"Psychological counseling?" Donut asked. "Whatever for? All the human males have to do is find someone who's drunk enough to not find them completely revolting for five minutes."

The creature scoffed. "Do you know what happens when a mantis mates?"

"Probably something really gross?"

"The female eats the male's head off. I have a smaller, secondary brain in my abdomen that keeps me alive for a few hours and allows me to keep mating until I am tapped dry."

"She mates with a headless corpse while munching on the head? Are you serious?" Donut asked. "And you know this going in? You can still get it up? Carl, did you hear that?"

I didn't care about any of this. I'd spent the last minute searching the hallway for traps and asking Mordecai what he thought was going on. He'd said you couldn't place traps in situationally-generated spaces. I was getting ready to step back and close the door. Still, I remained, my feet glued in place as I listened to this guy's story. The more he talked, the straighter he stood. The more certain his words became.

"So," I said, "you're screwed no matter what happens."

The bug's hands had turned to fists. He continued to tremor, but I wasn't so sure anymore that this was fear. He was angry, but I had the sense it wasn't at me. I didn't understand.

"There's only one way to maintain honor," he said. "To protect my family. I need to die in battle."

"We can't fight in here," I said. But then it hit me. He'd attacked Bomo twice.

"I hate this place," the man said, standing fully erect. Behind him, I heard shouting coming from the main pub. This was the pained voice of Vrah, crying out for Edict. "I hate everything about it. Finding the stars was the worst thing that ever happened to my people. It is a slow, horrific death. Expansion to the point of oblivion. The primals finally understood, but it was too late for them. The kua-tin, I think, know this, too. Some of them, at least. They call it the Great Consensus. But it's not. There is no agreement. Their young don't understand. Now, quickly. Allow me entrance into your space."

The door that led back to the pub burst open, and Vrah limped into the hallway. She towered over Edict. I highlighted the smaller bug, and I gave him a one-time pass to enter through the door.

Vrah moved slowly. She hissed in pain with every step. Smoke rose from her crotch. It stank like burned cheese. There was no vent system in this small hallway, and the smoke would soon be too much.

She started to say something to the smaller man, but with a strangled battle cry, he lunged at me, punching.

He froze in place, small fist about an inch from my crotch. The words **Super Naughty** flashed over his head. Vrah hissed in rage as Edict blinked twice and then disappeared.

He'd just been teleported, naked, to the closest mob nest. I had no idea what that would be, but he was likely in the process of being torn to shreds.

I wasn't ever going to understand the intricacies of mantis culture, but I suspected this was the best possible outcome for him. Or if not him, his family.

Despite his report that he'd given away all his loot, a metric ton of gold coins dropped to the floor right at my feet, splashing like I'd just hit the jackpot at an old-school slot machine. So many, I was suddenly buried to my ankles. The cleaner bot beeped with rage while Donut gasped.

In the hallway, Vrah shrieked. She pounded at the wall as her lower abdomen burned. *She looks smaller*, I thought. *Less sinister*. I realized she'd dislodged all of the heads from her back. Not just the ones Donut had reanimated. Likely in an effort to make herself lighter. The flames on her lower abdomen whiffed out, she glowed as she was healed, and then the fire raged anew.

Not even a safe room would protect her from this torment.

"You know," Donut said through the open door. "You really should get that taken care of. Maybe you can put some ointment on it. It looks infected."

"Catch you later," I said. I had to physically push the pile of the coins as I slammed the door. Several of them slid out into the hallway. The majority of the gold remained with us. I immediately opened the door back up to reveal the pub in Alucarda. The place was a mess. The bopca had not returned. I knew this pub was the only thing in town still standing. That bomb had been super powerful, the biggest thing I'd built myself. The only bigger explosive was Carl's Doomsday Scenario, which remained in my inventory.

"Come on, Donut," I said, stepping into the pub. "We need to get out of here before either Lucia or another hunter comes back."

"But what about the gold?" she asked. "And you pushed some of it out into the hallway. You need to be more careful, Carl."

"I got it," Mordecai said. He shooed the cleaner bot away as he started to pick it all up

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"I kinda feel bad for that guy. What was his name? Edict?" Donut said much later as we approached the small Ursine village. It'd been a long day. We'd been avoiding the dryad settlements because half of the tree guys now attacked me on sight, and I'd just learned the hard way that if the mayor happened to worship Diwata, he'd immediately task the funeral bell guards to attack me, too. Also, the monkeys in their branches threw rocks with amazing accuracy. They reminded me of those asshole, undead lemurs from the third floor. "He didn't seem to want to be here, and we forced him to play the game."

"Yeah, I don't want to be here, either," I said. I was not sympathetic, though I'd been thinking about what he said all day. I couldn't get it out of my head. I didn't actually agree with him, or at least what I thought he was getting at, and that was what was bothering me the most. I believed him when he'd said he didn't want to be there. And that he hated the way the universe worked. Despite everything that was happening to me and our planet, I thought he was wrong. It was stupid to let it bother me.

I heard my dad's voice, scolding me. *Why do you care*, he'd said to me one day when he caught me watching the news. *Knowing all that stuff rots you from the inside out. It doesn't affect people like us*.

"I wish I had been there," Samantha said. "I'd have killed him."

We'd found Samantha stuck under a log about a half of a mile south of town. It hadn't been hard to track her down considering how loud she was. She was still pissed about Donut leaving her to get eaten by the Rottweiler, but she was starting to get over it. She seemed to have actually enjoyed the experience of being tortured by the mantises.

We'd spent the last several hours fighting our way south. Killing mobs, collecting plants, mosses, and mushrooms for Mordecai, and just grinding. Most of the mobs in this area were venomous plant things that whipped vines at you if you got too close. They were all Level 40 whip crackers. They'd be a downright menace if we weren't immune to poison. Because we were, they were a great source of experience, and I forced Donut to kill as many as possible. She hit level 45 while I remained at 56.

We'd also taken control of two small towns, both ursine settlements. Donut killed one mayor, and I killed the next. I'd also been attempting to get a hold of my attorney, but I hadn't heard back from him yet. The last time we'd spoken, he'd told me they were restricting communication, and he had to get a court order each time he wanted to reply to me. My question for him was a legal one, so hopefully they'd allow him to send me a response. I'd asked Mordecai first, and he'd said he didn't know.

Mordecai: Every day, you do and come across something that's never been done or seen before, Carl. I'm starting to feel a little obsolete. Ask your lawyer, and if he doesn't respond, wait until after the next recap episode. If they don't take it away from you, install it into the crafting studio and start working. In the meantime, transcribe everything you can from that automaton book into your scratchpad.

Zev had also been in contact, reminding me I still had one more appearance to make and that we needed to make the saferoom in time. We didn't want a repeat of the last incident, though it seemed the hunters everywhere were retreating. Once word spread about what happened to the Dark Hive, the vast majority of these guys decided their own lives were suddenly valuable.

Not a single person on my chat had seen or heard of any hunter contact all day. I'd also asked around if anyone had seen Lucia, but nobody had. Mordecai seemed to think her escape spell would've teleported her to the opposite side of the map, and that it was a once-a-floor spell. I wasn't so sure about that, but hopefully she was far away from us. We needed to deal with her, but now was not the time. Not yet.

That scene with Donut had been eating away at me. It was almost like Lucia was experiencing a completely different reality than the rest of us. *You killed the wrong one*. What did that mean? There was someone there with her, invisible. But there was more. Were they attached to the dogs? Or, dog. I didn't have enough info.

When I was on my panel, everyone appeared to think she was just a crazy kid with an uncanny ability to kill people and defend herself. Despite being the most followed crawler in the universe until I surpassed her, people seemed to know precious little about the nature of her existence. It seemed important. Crucially important.

But at the same time, I hadn't changed my mind. She was hurting people. Attacking crawlers. She was slaughtering and torturing NPCs for no good reason. She had to be put down.

Donut's confidence in her ability to take out the kid during our next encounter was alarming. At least at first. She'd gotten lucky, and I wanted to make sure she knew that. But Donut was sensitive, and if I pushed too hard, she'd shut down. I'd tried to carefully broach the matter with her a few times, but she expertly steered the conversation away. In fact, she was doing it so deftly that I finally got the hint, and it made me relax.

Donut knew exactly how lucky she was. Donut was a lot smarter than she let on, and the way she'd handled the fight with Lucia made it clear she knew what she was doing. She just didn't want to say it out loud. Or in private, for that matter. I decided to leave it be.

The upcoming town was another small settlement. The plan was to settle in for the night. I would go on my show, come back, and we'd reset. If we could easily find the mayor without getting embroiled into some bullshit quest, we'd take him out and then move on.

Both of the new ursine settlements we'd claimed—Now dubbed Ferdinand Peak and Nipton—had been as ridiculously religious as the first one, Point Mongo. After taking out the mayor, we hit the saferoom and sent Mordecai to talk to the guards. He was currently attached to the town of Nipton and was bitching about the quality of the stores there. I suspected this new place wouldn't be much better.

This new town was surrounded by a massive wall of living, level-10 vines called a **Jericho Bush**. It wasn't one giant shrub, but literally thousands of them. Each individual branch was its own plant. The description simply said: **These powerful vines are very durable. They have a strong dislike for people named Josh and ska music.** They appeared as a non-hostile, so we couldn't get experience from chopping them down, not that we needed to. The plants all near the northern entrance to the city appeared dead. There were no guards. Mordecai said these things were a magical plant that could be used to protect a city. He wanted us to hurry up and find a saferoom so he could go out there and collect some seeds.

The closer we got to town, the more clear it became that something was amiss. There were no people coming and going. No guards. There seemed to be no activity whatsoever. *Shit,* I thought. Had Lucia gotten to this town, too? Was that little asshole just moving across the map, murderhoboing everybody and everything?

Mongo screeched with concern, then issued a low growl.

"Uh oh," Donut said. "That's his 'I smell other Mongos' growl." She sniffed at the air herself. "Oh god, I smell something awful, but it's not dinosaurs. It smells like that train car after you attached Katia to the front of it."

"Go look, Samantha," I said.

"I'm on it," she said and rolled forward, bouncing merrily toward the large town. "Hellllloooo," she called out. "Is everybody dead? Are any of you lizards here?" She disappeared through the unguarded entrance, hollering.

"She's rolling a lot faster than she was before," Donut said.

"Yeah, I've noticed," I said. We waited a few minutes. Donut practiced humming a song. She was still terrible, but she was getting better.

Samantha: I JUST SAW A FEW BEARS IN A WINDOW, SO NOT EVERYBODY IS DEAD. BUT I HAVEN'T SEEN THIS MANY CORPSES SINCE IT WAS ALGOS' TURN TO HOST GAME NIGHT. IT'S LIKE THE BEACH FROM A FEW NIGHTS AGO, BUT A LOT MORE JUICY. CHOMPED UP PEOPLE AND PINK FEATHERS EVERYWHERE. THEY'VE BEEN DEAD A WHILE. MORE THAN A DAY. WHY DON'T THEY CLEAN IT UP? THE DINO IS LONG GONE. I THINK.

I sighed.

Corpses that were more than a day old were always a bad sign. The dungeon cleaned up after itself. When it didn't, it was always on purpose.

"Come on, Donut," I said. "We need to get a saferoom spot established. We'll deal with whatever this is later." My last appearance at CrawlCon was only scheduled to last about two hours, which would probably translate to four or five hours. After, we'd rest and get the hell away from here.

"Mongo, get into your carrier," Donut said. "Come on. Be a good boy. We don't want you eating all the dead bodies and getting sick again."

Mongo screeched but complied.

Donut then jumped to my shoulder and started to lick at her paw. "Don't step in gross stuff, Carl. You know how I feel about you trailing gross stuff into the guild."

We went through the main entrance, and the stench of rotting death hit me like a baseball bat to the nose.

Entering Prepotente Town Number Four.

"Gah," I muttered upon seeing the name.

"My word. He definitely needs help naming things," Donut said.

"At least we know who it is this time."

Donut gasped. "Unless it's a trick. I shall ask him. We haven't spoken in a bit."

I was already in the middle of composing a message of my own.

<u>Carl</u>: Miriam, are you guys here in, uh, town Number Four? It looks like most of the NPCs are dead. There's a giant dinosaur rampaging in the area.

She didn't answer, and I didn't see any sign of other crawlers on the map. It was still day outside, which meant she was likely asleep.

The town was oddly in shadow thanks to the tall hedge that surrounded it, which was probably why Miriam the vampire liked the place. There were no big trees or treehouses here, but several of the structures were three or four stories high, adding to the sense of darkness. Rows and rows of nondescript buildings spread off down the tight, cobblestone street. There was a small downtown area with a clocktower and a pair of temples before ending at the far wall. I didn't see anyone else.

Samantha rolled up, trailing a line of blood. The doll head had already been filthy, but now she was just caked in viscera, like she was cosplaying Rambo hiding in the mud. "It's worse the next street over. Everyone is in pieces. I tried making gore angels, but it's too coagulated and sticky. And that Signet bitch hasn't given me her body yet."

Multiple X's dotted the area, mixed in with the random body parts of creatures too destroyed to be recognizable. Samantha was right. This was worse than the beach. Before the collapse, the stench would've been enough to bring me to my knees. Now, it was just another day. It looked as if someone mixed chili with reddish-brown paint and splashed it over the streets. A few pink feathers flitted about, but most of them were glued to the ground with blood.

I caught movement in the corner of my eye, and I looked up. A white dot appeared before disappearing. Someone in one of the buildings. They were hiding. We needed to get off these streets.

Most of the corpses had a small amount of loot on them, but nothing too great. It was mostly junk clothing items, the occasional health potion, and a handful of coins. I set out to quickly loot the bodies and take some of the corpse pieces into my inventory, but the first head I picked up disappeared into dust.

I kneeled down and examined one of the body parts. I wasn't certain, but it appeared *all* of the corpses were bears.

Fodera – Level 40 Ursine Lamplighter. Killed by Big Tina.

"They're not letting this dinosaur quest go, are they?" I grumbled.

Zev: Carl, you need to get to a saferoom. You're getting filthy, and you need to go to your event. Uh, also, you should probably know that Odette's interview with you and Donut and Beatrice tunneled last night. That along with the Dark Hive business is causing there to be a lot of attention focused on you.

Carl: Wonderful. Hey, I need to talk to my attorney. Can you make that happen?

Zev: I'll see what I can do. Now go get ready. There's something else we need to discuss, but I'll do it in person.

Carl: Oh, I can't wait.

"Come on, guys," I said as I reached down to pick up Samantha. She growled and snapped at me. An eyeball fell out of her hair and landed on my foot with a *splatch*.

The closest pub was not a true saferoom, and the proprietor was either dead or hiding. The inside was some standard dive bar filled with flags and framed jerseys and signs for the Ottawa Senators NHL hockey team. The center of the bar was dominated with a massive, autographed picture of some player named Daniel Alfredsson. I didn't follow hockey, so I didn't know who that was.

Just before we entered the guild, I paused, looking about the empty room. I caught sight of a bear claw embedded into the wall just inside the pub by the front door, like the proprietor had been standing there in the doorway before he'd been ripped away, and he'd tried to save himself. A puddle of dried blood sat pooled under the claw.

I had a sudden, ominous feeling about this damn dinosaur quest.

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Entering Production Facility

"Hello, guys," I said to the large, two-headed ogre creature sitting before me. I couldn't examine them like I could in the dungeon, but they were really here with me. I knew this right away because they smelled like how one would expect a two-headed ogre would smell. Especially one who'd been locked in a small room for three days, only let out to perform like a monkey for various panels and events.

This was the first time I was ever physically in the same place with a crawler other than Donut or Katia in one of these studio places.

I took stock of the room. They had a bed and a training room, but I noted it was a regular, level-one training space. The remnants of what appeared to be a greasy, cooked chicken sat on the counter without a plate. There were no other comforts. This was practically a jail cell.

I'd taken a shower, Zev made me put the badge on, and I transported away. I'd gotten the security sweep, but this time it was a low-level gnoll who barely said two words to me before I was transferred back down to the production facility. The security guy did not turn me sideways before I zapped away, and I landed hard on my side onto the floor.

The two-headed creature was attempting to play a game. They each had a set of cards in their respective hands and were

desperately trying to keep the other from seeing what they had. They both looked at me in alarm as I suddenly appeared, blasting onto the green room floor like a book being slammed to a table.

"Ow," I said. I rolled onto my back.

The ogres both grunted as they put the cards down, stood, and moved to help me up. I allowed them to pull me to my feet as I grinned sheepishly and faced the two-headed creature. Creatures. I knew this was two distinct people, but it was hard to see them that way. Together, these guys were the number five crawler in the dungeon.

My menus were gone, but I could still see the names floating over their heads thanks to my CrawlCon badge. Dmitri had the right side—so on my left. It didn't have his class or level, but I knew he was a mage class called a **Visionary**. Maxim was a melee-focused **Bogatyr**. The two stood about seven feet tall and were wide and solid. Their skin was a mottled gray and looked thick and callused. Like that of an elephant. Maxim wore a knitted beanie, and Dmitri's round, wide head was bare. They wore a simple tunic, with the badge around both of their necks. Their massive arms made my newly-enhanced guns look like twigs. The ogre's right arm was covered with golden rings, one after another, and it jingled as the creature moved.

Both creatures had wide, open eyes with furrowed lines upon their foreheads, making them appear stupid. I knew this was misleading.

These guys were clearly the same sort of ogre as Areson the Wise, Signet's bodyguard. I recalled what she said about the nodling race.

When a nodling dies, he splits into a new creature depending on how many heads the original had. These new creatures emerge as toddlers but quickly grow.

Their race basically gave them an extra life. I wasn't certain how useful that was considering they'd turn, at least temporarily, into little kids when they died and split.

Their main melee weapon was Maxim's meteor hammer: a flaming ball at the end of a chain. I'd seen how much damage they

could do with the thing. According to Elle, they were good guys, for which I was glad. I had no desire to ever face them down.

"Carl," Maxim said after I greeted them, reaching out his left hand to shake mine. Awkwardly. "It is good to finally meet. I hear you've been making a big splash at the convention so far. Thank god it is almost over, no?"

This guy had an Eastern European accent, deepened and grittier because of his race. It reminded me of Britney and Langley, but a little different in a way I couldn't quite put my finger on.

"You do not have your cat companion with you?" Dmitri said, sounding disappointed. "I wanted to meet the cat."

"You and the damn cat," Maxim said. "You're always talking about this cat. We told you, it's just Carl. Skindle told you it is just Carl. You're going to make him feel uncomfortable."

"Uh, yeah," I said. "Donut is back in the saferoom. She wanted to come, but they wouldn't let her."

Dmitri sighed sadly. "I wish to meet the cat. I've never met a talking cat before."

"I apologize for my brother," Maxim said. "He likes the cat. We could never have one growing up."

I knew these guys were twin brothers, but fraternal twins. So they weren't identical before. They weren't identical now, either, despite sharing a body. Dmitri had a rounder face while Maxim looked much more chiseled.

"I'd just gotten a cat," Dmitri added sadly. "His name was Kapitan Whiskers, and he was orange. I got him the day before... before it happened."

"I'm sorry to hear that," I said.

"Yes, my poor Kapitan. He was all alone. You're a good man, Carl, despite what they say. You were trying to save the cat in the cold when it happened. We saw this at a panel. This is a sign of a good man."

Pop! Pop! Two kua-tin appeared in the room, splashing water everywhere, saving me from this suddenly-awkward conversation. This was Zev and another kua-tin. I realized I had no way to determine kua-tin genders, but this one looked very similar to Zev.

“Skindle,” Maxim said, growling. “You left us here for hours. We were promised food, but all they gave was a single chicken, which is nothing.”

“Yes, yes,” Skindle said. She sounded female. “This is Zev, and she is both my boss and Carl’s outreach associate, so do as she says.”

Zev nodded. “Hello, Carl. Hello, Dmitri and Maxim. This is the first time you two have met if I’m not mistaken. Thank all three of you for agreeing to do this today.”

“Agree?” I asked as Maxim snorted.

“Anyway,” Zev continued without missing a beat. “You will be going out there in about a minute. The line is already at capacity, and the fans are eager to get this rolling.”

“You said there’s something you wanted to talk to me about first,” I said.

Zev gave a sidelong glance to Skindle and then said, “Yes. Your replacement sponsor. There was a small delay in the announcement as the first sponsor who won the bidding ended up unable to pay. As a result, we started a new bidding event, and your sponsor has been chosen, and they wish to award you your first benefactor box during this event.”

“Lucky,” Dmitri said.

“Who is it?” I asked. “And who was the one who couldn’t pay?”

“You’ll see at the end of the signing,” Zev said. She sounded a little reticent, which did not bode well. “As for the first winner, I actually don’t know. I may have gotten a promotion, but that’s still above my pay grade. Now we need to get out there.”

“Is this really only going to go for two hours?” I asked as we moved toward the door.

“Maybe three. Or four,” Zev said. “There’s not an unlimited supply of fans. They had to enter a lottery to get chosen for a place in line. People aren’t allowed to give away or sell their place, except the premium spots, but you don’t need to worry about that. So it’ll be a good smattering of fans. Not just rich ones. There will be press, too, at the end. I think it’s only about 300 fans. Plus 30 premiums. Plus

the press. They wanted to do more, but today is the last day of the con, and there isn't enough time."

"We all get to leave when the last in line is done," Skindle added. "So don't spend too much time talking. Try to be efficient and not your usual dumb selves."

I looked over at the twins. "Does your associate get mad when you tell her to go fuck herself? Zev gets pretty pissed."

Dmitri looked horrified as Maxim grinned. "We shall try it later, and I will report back," Maxim said.

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"Was it really an accident," the little blob kid asked the Popovs as they signed the photograph. The thing had a nasally, nerd-like accent. "Or did you do it on purpose?" They both looked up and paused mid-autograph.

Even though we were in the production facility, the movement of the Sharpie-like pen was mirrored halfway across the galaxy. Our "handler" was a terrified-looking soother male named Effex. He was really at the con, and he stood to the left of the Popovs, manning a display of different photographs the fans could purchase for signatures. They'd pick one or two, pay, and then Effex would place the photo on the table in front of us, where we'd sign it. They could get either me or the Popovs, and there was one photo, a video really, of me shaking hands with the brothers, taken literally minutes earlier in the green room. The fans could have that one signed by all three of us. The fans had dozens of choices of animated photos. There were also shirts we could autograph and some digital tablet thing I didn't understand. I had the impression it was akin to a phone case.

The photograph the blob kid was getting autographed was of the Popov brothers swinging their meteor hammer while inside an about-to-derail train car as flaming hedgehog things attacked them. The picture moved in a loop, repeating over and over. Apparently if you put your finger, or blob appendage, on it, you could mentally find yourself in the scene. The nodling finished signing—each had a

pen in their respective hands—and the twin autographs appeared in sparkling gold on the photograph.

Dmitri happily signed everything, chatting with everyone. Maxim was more subdued and looked bored, though he perked up at any of the female-presenting aliens if they appeared even slightly human.

If the fans paid extra—and they always paid extra—they turned around, and a photograph or short video or whatever was taken of them standing between us.

Next to me, Maxim sighed while Dmitri made an indignant noise at the little blob kid.

"For the thousandth time," Dmitri said, "our game guide Hongrish told me the nodling was a good choice that would give me an extra life if I died. He did not tell me it would force my brother into the same body as myself. I would never do this."

The blob quivered and leaned forward, which made him look like a gelatin mold that was about to be spilled all over the table. When he talked, his mouth opened from the very top of his head, facing upward. It was weird as shit.

"But," the kid said, "We saw you talking about that television program from your world. The one with the conjoined twins. The two boys who were arrested for selling guns. You said you liked this program. I have watched this program and determined that you were so enamored with them, that you deliberately chose a race that would allow you to emulate your favorite television characters."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Dmitri said.

"So you won't confirm or deny my hypothesis?"

"I'm going to confirm my foot up your jelly ass if you don't move along," Maxim growled.

"I paid for a picture. My superior cell mass paid for it."

"Then turn around and get on with it."

The blob didn't say anything further as we took the picture.

"Touchy subject?" I asked Maxim as we watched the kid slurp off.

"Don't even ask," Dmitri said. "Hey, at least this one didn't ask about your ex-girlfriend or the fight with the bug."

Sure enough, every single damn person who went through had something to say about either the Odette interview with me and

Beatrice or me sticking that arrow into the throat of Vrah. Apparently, Circe had gone completely apeshit about the whole thing and was on her way right now to the Earth system to do something about it. I didn't know what that could possibly be since it was too late for her to come to the sixth floor and join the hunters.

Vrah, in the meantime, was apparently going to attempt to ride it out. People were actively betting on whether or not she'd give in and cut the infection away, which would ruin her chances at being the next hive queen. I waved all the questions about her away. I just said she'd be dealt with soon enough.

If it was a comment about Bea, I simply replied that Donut was doing fine and that everything that needed to be said was said during the interview.

Multiple people—twenty of them at least—were dressed like me. They wore little heart boxers and weren't wearing shoes and had jackets and capes. It was weird as shit. A lot of these guys wanted me to autograph their boxers, which was awkward with the magical pen. One dude, a human, wanted me to autograph his foot. I refused.

There were other cosplayers as well, including an elf woman dressed like Hekla and an orc guy dressed as Quan Ch, complete with a prosthetic, bloody stump that shot out little squirts of blood everywhere. I signed the stump at his request.

There were a pair of saccathians who'd tied themselves together and were pretending to be the Popovs. The two bickered so much, they ended up dislodging from one another. I thought that was pretty funny. Dmitri and Maxim did not.

Several asked me about that damn gnoll kid's drawing. I refused to answer any questions about that.

The Popov's were peppered with questions about their fallout with team Cichociemni and what they thought about the death of Bogdon Ro. Dmitri said nothing to this, but Maxim cheerfully told them that the man had gotten what he deserved and that he was just sorry others had to die for it to happen.

The entire, grueling procession took about three and a half hours.

Finally, we only had a few guests left. Then would come the reporters.

At first glance, everything about the last fan looked human, but that was before I noticed the tentacle coming from the back of her head. I couldn't tell if she was a person with a parasite, or if this was something new. She walked carefully and slowly up the podium, like she had an issue with one of her legs. Other than that, she looked like a regular, brunette, human woman, maybe in her forties. Her name was Jenn'ifer. She had the word **Premium** after her name with little spinning stars, which meant she'd paid for this spot. We'd seen plenty of these guys already. I wondered how much it actually cost for this bullshit.

Effex slid a picture in front of me to sign. Her premium pass came with two free pictures and a photo, but she'd only wanted one. It depicted me and Donut in the Drop Bear biplane as it was chased by Orthrus, the giant puppy at the end of the last floor. I picked up my Sharpie. "Jennifer, huh? That name is really popular where I'm from."

"It is common everywhere," she said drily as I started to sign. I stopped dead as I finally noticed her t-shirt.

It read, "The Society for the Eradication of ~~Cocker Spaniels~~" in Syndicate Standard, but the word "Cocker Spaniels" were censored with a transparent line through it. Above the words was a semi-realistic drawing of an adorable, fluffy-eared dog with a big, red and flashing X over it.

I sighed. "I know I'm going to regret asking this, but is that cocker spaniel shirt supposed to be a joke?"

The woman's eyes went wide. "You don't say the word out..."

The flesh-colored tentacle thing coming from the back of her head waved about and started to thrash, beating her on the top of the head, stopping her in mid-sentence. A little mouth opened up on the tentacle and started growling and salivating, oozing thick saliva over the woman's head.

The tentacle itself had a little spot of long, blond hair at the very tip, and it was held together with a bow, making the... thing look like a fucked-up Yorkshire terrier. It quivered with anger.

"Maggie, shush," the woman said to her tentacle as I mouthed *What the fuck?* at the twins. She pet at the tentacle a few times. "She gets angry when someone says the C-word. She gets so mad, she runs away. I say, 'I'm not going to chase you, you little monster.' But I do every time."

The thing, still quivering, started to make a whimpering noise.

"Maggie?" I said. "I knew another Maggie not too long ago. She was also a parasite."

"She is not a parasite!" Jenn'ifer said, indignant. "She doesn't like people saying the C-word."

"If you don't want people saying it, why is it on your t-shirt?" I asked.

Jenn'ifer ignored my question and continued. "Anyway, Carl. The society is very real. We used money from our fund to purchase a premium pass so I could come and give you a message that you can bring directly to Princess Donut. I am the chapter president of the Princess Posse Inner System number 43. As you likely know, the Syndicate brings a select sampling of unique flora and fauna to a compatible biome in order to preserve a sampling of the lost biology. Multiple canine variations are on this list, including the C-word. I would like for you to tell Princess Donut that, as she suggested, we have filed the lawsuit to prevent this from happening. It will be difficult to succeed, but the donations are flying in."

"As she suggested," I said evenly.

"Die. Die. Die!" Maggie the head tentacle suddenly shouted, causing me and the Popovs to both jump.

"Wait, how much in donations have you brought in?" I asked. "How big is this Princess Posse thing?"

"Hey," Effex called. "I didn't see your symbiote. Your premium pass gets a free photo, but not for two."

"She'll retract," Jenn'ifer said as she turned to face the invisible camera. The woman reached up and stroked the tentacle thing, and it went back into her head with a slurp. A little bit of red gore dripped from the hole in the back of her head.

"Wait," I said, but Effex pushed the weird woman away. Before I could object, the reporters all came. They came at once, appearing

in a line in front of us, like this was a press conference.

The tallest one of this group was a naga, and the large, green and purple snake creature bobbed, like a cobra about to strike. The thing was similar to Manasa the singer, but bigger with different coloring. His twin arms pumped, like he was speed walking in place. The sight was strange, and the other reporters started to back away from him.

"That snake guy looks like he has to poop really bad," Dmitri said.

The name over the naga read **Nihit. Press. Elemental Collection Updates.**

<u>Zev</u>: Carl. We're doing the presentation of the new sponsor in front of the press, and then they will ask you questions.

A disembodied, female voice boomed out of nowhere, startling everybody in the room. This was the kill, kill, kill lady, but her voice had gone up a pitch, likely because she was talking directly to the reporters. "With the Valtay obtaining 51% ownership in the Borant Corporation, Crawler Carl was forced to give away his first sponsor, which led to a new sponsorship auction. The Borant Corporation is proud to present Crawler Carl with the name of his newest sponsor."

A jet-black, red-eyed goat thing appeared in the middle of the room. It zapped into existence between us and the reporters. Maxim swore as Dmitri yelped, and the nodling fell back. The goat thing was damn huge, like eight feet tall, and its long, wavy hair trailed all the way to the floor. It met my eyes and then slowly turned to face the reporters.

"The Plenty!" the unseen announcer woman said. "And with this new sponsorship, Carl has been awarded a gold benefactor box, which he will open upon return to the dungeon!"

The massive goat didn't have anything over its head indicating its name. It looked more like a walking version of Prepotente's satanic pet, Bianca Del Ciao than Prepotente himself.

The giant goat made a deep, unnerving bleat and then blinked and disappeared. Just like that. He'd been visible for maybe fifteen

seconds. The reporters all stood in a line, looking up at where the goat had just been. They appeared just as bewildered as I felt.

"You motherfuckers let these guys control all of the universe's transportation systems?" I asked.

Nobody laughed.

Zev: We should probably avoid insulting the new sponsors, Carl.

"Carl," an elf-like woman asked. She cleared her throat, composing herself. She'd obviously been startled by the bizarre sponsorship ceremony. "With the news that Circe Took is possibly..."

Nihit the naga angrily pushed the elf woman to the side and slithered all the way to the table, looming over me. He opened his mouth and snapped right at my head, as if to bite it off. I tried not to flinch.

"Oh, yeah," I said, grinning. "Odette said the reporter who was going to ambush us over the Beatrice thing was a naga. She scooped you, right? Is that why you're pissed? She told me to tell you something, but I can't remember what it was. I think she said, 'Better luck next time, asshole.' I might've added the asshole part. I can't remember. Either way, it's implied."

"You're cheating," Nihit hissed in my face, ridiculously close. He slammed his twin arms onto the table in front of me, reminding me of Vrah's mother, Circe. *Jesus*, I thought. *Is everyone in the universe this angry all the time*? Behind him, the other reporters started to yell at him to back off. "I will discover how you're doing it, and I will reveal it to the universe." He flicked a long, forked tongue, and it pierced the illusion of my head.

"Dude," I said, leaning back. "I already have like two top-ten crawlers after me, a bunch of hunters, those orc assholes, all those faction wars pricks who sued me, oh, oh, and some mysterious liaison guy who may or may not be associated with my newest sponsor. Plus that robot Donut toy company and likely several others I'm not aware of." I turned to the Popovs. "Am I missing anyone?"

"Dunno. Everybody likes us," Dmitri said.

I grinned. "So what I'm saying is you're gonna have to get in line. I forgot you even existed until just this moment. You should be

mad at Odette, not me."

This guy's anger went beyond just losing an exclusive story. This was a Maestro-level temper tantrum. As always, I only had a small window in which to view the universe. I was missing something. Something important.

"Odette is complicit. I will find the truth," Nihit said. "You and your partner are cheating. You're receiving illegal help. The timing of that interview with Odette is pretty damn suspicious, don't you think? Assisting in system sedition is a crime." His tongue flicked again, and he leaned in even closer.

"Good luck," I said. His anger was starting to finally piss me off. "But if you really want to hurt me, you're gonna have to come in here and do it to my face."

Nihit hissed. "Oh, I can hurt you just fine from the safety of the inner system."

"He's really riding the broom," Dmitri said.

"Did you bang this guy's wife or something?" Maxim asked.

"You think you're safe, huh?" I asked.

"What do you think you can do?" Nihit asked.

"We'll start with this," I said, and I picked up the magical Sharpie, and I slammed it into his neck with all of my might.

It, unfortunately, broke into a dozen little pieces, but a little stick of metal protruded from the naga's neck, spurting blood as he fell over, screaming. All the other reporters shouted and jumped forward.

The room blinked twice, and the lights went on.

"In Bulgaria," Maxim said after a moment of silence. "Much of the media is not trusted. But at least they pretend to be impartial. I don't think this is the case with that guy."

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I wasn't given the opportunity to say goodbye to the Popovs. After the lights flicked on, about twenty gnoll guards flooded the room. They took the sharpie from me and collected the other two. I had to remain in the now-featureless production room as the twins were ushered back to their space.

"Bye, Carl!" Dmitri called. "Tell Donut I said hi!"

The gnoll guards surrounded me, saying nothing, grim faced. I did not see any I recognized.

"Come on," I finally said. "You have to admit, that was pretty awesome."

A guard on the end burst into laughter, but a growl from another guard shut him up pretty quick. Then, without another word, they turned and left as Zev entered the room. She waddled forward, trailing water on the metal ground.

"Carl," she said. "We can't bring you anywhere."

"He deserved it. He got in my face."

"Well, you should know that he is fine and has been healed. He wants to press charges for assault."

I just blinked at her. The idea was so absurd that it didn't even make me angry. "Are you kidding me? Assault?"

She shook her head. "Carl, criminal charges are serious. He's off system, so the attack isn't under Borant jurisdiction. The regular rules apply. You're not a full citizen, and he is."

I still sat in the chair, and I leaned back and crossed my arms. "Yeah, what are they going to do?"

"The charges, if the prosecution wants to pursue it, will be filed and then shelved until you're released from the dungeon. It's happened before. If you're successfully prosecuted, you'll be given a warrant with an associated sentence, usually two or three cycles. Odette had a warrant, for example. Of course she's now married to the president of the corporation who bought her out because she's Odette."

"What the hell does that even mean?"

"The Syndicate doesn't have or use long-term prisons. The lighter the crime, the higher the warrant and the shorter the amount of time. After three or four warrants are imposed, the amount of time usually tops out at 20 cycles, and the warrant is lowered. So, if you're arrested for shoplifting, you can get a year sentence and a warrant for maybe 50,000 credits. The clock starts ticking at the moment of sentencing. If a third party, usually a licensed system government or mega-corporation, needs able-bodied workers for a project, they have the option of buying out warrants. Usually, those with high warrants aren't picked up unless there's a war going on somewhere, and they're desperate for bodies. If someone's warrant is lowered to three digits, it usually guarantees they'll be franchised for the remainder of their sentence."

"Wait, wait, wait," I said. "So prisoners are sold as slaves?"

"Sort of," Zev said. "It's expensive. If your warrant is 1,000 credits and 10 cycles, they don't just pay 1,000 credits. They have to pay the franchise fee, which is something like five times the warrant amount per cycle. Plus they have to pay you that amount when you get out. Plus the warrant to the court in question. So a 1,000 credit warrant really translates to over 100,000. Plus they have to feed and house and transport you. It's not cost effective unless your warrant is really low, and it only gets low if you've committed multiple offenses. Nobody ever gets purchased if their warrant is one cycle because the clock is always ticking, and it usually takes months to even get the person to the work location, and they have to guarantee their return passage to the location where they were

picked up. It's not true slavery because the criminals get paid when they get out. Assuming they survive. But the corporations have to pay the full expenses plus a death tax, so it's always in their best interests to keep the person alive. Franchisees are usually sent to frontier planets to help set up new colonies or factories or mining locations. It's rare for them to be used for war nowadays."

"That's still slavery," I said, shaking my head. "And people are okay with this?"

"They're criminals," Zev said.

I took a breath. "So, what's the penalty for sticking a pen into the neck of an asshole naga?"

"If you're convicted, you'll get a light sentence. Maybe 30,000 credits and three cycles. But you're no ordinary crawler, Carl. Someone like the Skull Empire will buy you out."

I stood and stretched my back. I'd been fighting and killing every day for weeks now. The idea of me getting out of the dungeon and eventually getting punished for barely scratching this guy seemed just... I didn't know. Stupid. Ridiculous. Irrational. But also par for the course. "Can I buy out my own warrant?"

"Technically, it's not allowed. It happens, of course. You have to be a licensed organization, and the franchisees can't be associated with the purchasing entity. But of course it happens. Prince Maestro is franchised to a subsidiary of a subsidiary that's wholly owned by the Skull Empire. They weren't owned at the time, but they were later acquired by the empire. A loophole that only the ultra-rich can afford. It was big news when it happened. It pays to be wealthy."

"Whatever," I said, deciding the universe deserved this dystopian nightmare. The odds of me ever having to suffer the consequences for this were infinitesimal. I started to move toward the green room door. "At least I'm not in trouble with the dungeon for this one. Why was that dude so angry, anyway?"

"I never said you weren't in trouble. You'll probably get extra security on you from now on. And Nihit is a naga. They all have issues controlling their emotions. Plus, his brother is married into the Blood Sultanate and is participating in faction wars. He wants you and Donut out of the dungeon before you get down there. He seems

to think that you're some sort of antichrist figure sent from the heavens to bring about the apocalypse. You and Donut. It's a small, but growing, conspiracy amongst some populations. Most everyone else loves you two."

I grunted with amusement, but it only lasted a moment. It was always there, in the back of my mind. The impossible task we had before us. If we ever made it to the ninth floor, Donut would have to deal with the Blood Sultanate's army. But it was worse than that, thanks to her long-lost Crown of the Sepsis Whore. I'd read the description so many times, I had it memorized:

Enchanted Crown of the Sepsis Whore.

Who's a dirty girl? You're a dirty girl!

This is a Fleeting item!

This is a Unique* item!

Imbues wearer with +5 Intelligence, grants the user +5 to the Good First Impression skill. All attacks, including magical attacks, now have a 15% chance to inflict the Sepsis debuff. Warning! (Seriously though. I'm going to say this again. WARNING! Read this shit before you put it on.) Placing this crown upon your head permanently places you within the royal line of succession for the Blood Sultanate on the ninth floor of the world dungeon. Removing this item *will not* remove this status. Royal members of the Blood Sultanate will be required to slay the Sultan and *all* other members of the royal family before descending to the tenth floor. You'll only want to wear this if you're a blood-thirsty, raging psychopath.

So, we'd have to make sure *all* the members of the Blood Sultanate were dead before she'd be allowed to leave the floor. And while the nagas usually had their asses handed to them during the fighting, I now knew that the royals themselves always made it to the end. Always. Getting to them was going to be a difficult if not impossible task.

If Quasar pulled through for me, the task might be slightly easier. But even then, it was still going to be a tall order.

When Donut lost the crown at the end of the third floor, the crown was regenerated and possibly awarded to someone else. As far as we knew, that person wasn't stupid enough to put it on, or if they had, they were already dead. If some other crawler put it on, we'd have to make sure they were dead, too, before Donut could exit the ninth floor.

"So, this Nihit guy thinks there's a way to physically harm those guys on the ninth floor?" I asked.

Zev sighed. "You might want to worry about surviving the sixth floor first, Carl."

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"He wanted to meet me? Really?" Donut asked when I finished telling her and Mordecai everything that happened. "Well, I would be honored. It's always a pleasure to meet a fan. Even if he's part of a weird ogre thing with two heads. They didn't smell, did they? They look like they might smell."

"After everything I told you, that's what you're on about?" I asked. "Just how much control do you have over this Princess Posse thing?"

"Oh, that's nothing. I already saw and approved the shirt design days ago. I'm hoping someone sends one into the dungeon so you can wear it. I must have mentioned it a hundred times by now. Honestly, Carl. Sometimes I think you don't listen to me. I believe there are only 700 or so chapters up and running. The AI filters through most of the messages, so it's difficult to tell. But I'm glad to see some of our initiatives are moving forward." She sighed dramatically. "It's important to leave the universe a better place than when you found it."

"You're advocating for the genocide of dogs," I said. "People don't like it when you hurt dogs."

"My numbers tell another story, Carl. If someone is going to get all butthurt about it, there's simply nothing I can do. It's done, and I'm not sorry. If they're okay with all the baby goblins you slaughtered way back on the first floor, then it's something they're gonna have to put up with. And it's not *all* dogs. It's just one kind. I

suppose some of the breeds are endearing in their own stupid, slobbering way. Like Labradors and pugs and those ones who look like black, Rastafarian mops. It's not genocide, anyway. I'm sure there are some cocker spaniels left running about the surface being smelly and disgusting and mauling toddlers."

"It's a bad idea," I said. "Do you know how much money they've collected for this?"

"I don't know. Whenever someone talks about money on the boards, they filter it out. That's why I should've been included in the signing." She suddenly gasped. "You don't think a member of the posse is embezzling funds, do you? Certainly not. I wish you'd asked more questions. You never know how to properly interrogate fans, Carl."

"She really said he's pressing charges against you?" Mordecai asked, changing the subject. He shook his little, furry head. "I'd like to see that one go to trial. Odette's trial was a farce. It was this whole production, and she pleaded down to a lesser charge just before they reached a verdict."

"Wait," I said. "You saw Odette's trial?"

"Yeah," Mordecai said. "I testified in it. Against her."

"But she was a crawler long before you."

"She wasn't charged when she was a crawler. It was when she was my manager. Now open your boxes and get back out there."

"I hope you get something good in yours," Donut grumbled. The red gem added to Donut's leadership charm had added +2 to her intelligence and +1 to her dexterity and a few points to some spear-throwing skill that she would never be able to use, which had pissed her off. Especially since the tax stipend for the small-sized settlement was only 403 gold every ten days.

I sighed. I had a Gold Tyrant Box from killing a mayor and the Gold Benefactor Box from the Plenty. According to my sponsor menu, these new guys only sponsored three people in the dungeon. Me, Miriam Dom, and Prepotente.

"That reminds me. Did you ever hear back from Pony?"

"No. I tried again, but I think..." She paused. "Carl, Carl, I just got a gold box from the Apothecary!" She hopped up and down.

"Now we both have boxes to open!"

"Then you best get on with it," Mordecai said.

I opened the Tyrant's box, and it was a sliver of an amethyst, smaller than the "poor sapphire" I already had on my necklace. It gave me +3 to my dexterity, and nothing else.

The next box moved into place.

The symbol for the Plenty was a creepy eyeball thing with a bunch of squiggles coming off it. It looked like something that would be spray-painted on the wall at the scene of a ritual murder. I remembered how creepy those goat kids were, and how disturbing the adult at the sponsorship ceremony had been. It was no damn wonder people didn't trust these guys. Everything about them gave me the heebies.

The gold box hissed and spun, opening like a flower, revealing a patch for my jacket.

"Huh," I said, picking it up. It was another patch identical in size to my white bomb one, but this was made of a black, denim-like material with a gray goat head screen-printed on it. Donut immediately scoffed and started muttering about screen printing. Before I could fully examine it, I received a notification.

You have received a Silver Benefactor Box from the Apothecary.

"Well, shit," I said.

Donut was already in the process of opening her own box, which was gold, not silver. She gasped as the sparkling bracelet popped out. She immediately equipped it. She moved the obsidian bracelet that allowed her to cast *Fireball* to her right forward leg and this new one to the left. She kept her fallen oak anklet tucked on her back leg, and her +2 dexterity one on the other back leg. This new one glittered silver with little purple gems. Now that she had bracelets on all four of her legs, she couldn't add any more.

"Oh, I just love it. Doesn't it look divine? I don't know about that description, though. It sounds like the AI is having a stroke."

"Uh-oh," Mordecai said as he examined the bracelet. He grunted. "It's pretty clear the Apothecary and the Plenty really are working

together. At least when it comes to your sponsorship prizes. That'll be sure to stop all those rumors."

I examined Donut's silver bracelet. The attached, purple gems each had an odd shape, almost like a bulb of garlic. After reading the description, I realized that's exactly what it was.

Enchanted Silver Bracelet of the Ab-solar.

"AnD SO The lioN fEll iN lOVe WiTh The LaMB."

I'm actually quite fond of the *Twilight* novels. Plus, I would never stoop so low as to disparage the work of an over-imaginative and obviously undersexed artist who managed to become a brazilianaire from barely-disguised erotica targeted at adolescent girls. However, I would like to take this opportunity to point out that your culture's obsession with fictional, underaged heroes was absolutely misguided.

Paul Atreides was fifteen years old. Harry Potter was just eleven in the beginning of the first book. The kids from *Stranger Things* were all tweens. Kid 'n Play were (portrayed to be) high schoolers when they threw that epic party.

Fairy tales. Myths. Lies.

Spoiler alert. Kids are all idiots, and when they're forced into a life or death situation, they overwhelmingly make stupid decisions and get themselves killed. Like almost right away. They're like that rabbit you see sitting on the side of the road that decides to dart in front of your car at the worst possible moment. They're so efficient at getting themselves squished, you can't help but wonder if they are doing it on purpose. Go ahead. Complain. Tell me I'm wrong. Trust me on this one. I've done some pretty extensive and conclusive research on the matter.

This apotropaic talisman looks like something a goth teenaged girl would shoplift from a Hot Topic. A girl who dreams about one day meeting a hundred-year-old predator and making him fall in love with her.

Remember, it's not a crime if he's handsome or rich or looks like a teenager.

Anyway, this bracelet imbues the following effects:

Protection against Vampirism.

Protection against Lycanthropy.

+25% Magical damage against all sapient undead.

"Fuck," I said.

"The description has nothing to do with the item," Donut complained. "And *Twilight* was a great movie. I only saw the first one because you made Miss Beatrice turn the second one off that one time we were watching it because you were jealous. Also, *Stranger Things* was a great television show up until when Barb died." She lifted her leg and admired the item. "But it sure is pretty. It's purple!"

"It gets worse. Read the description on your patch," Mordecai said. "You'll want to sew it on right away."

I examined it. The symbol was of a weird, satanic goat. I'd seen it before. Prepotente had a tattoo on the back of his furry, human-like hand of the same thing. I'd even sketched it out the best I could in the cookbook. I'd been assuming it was for a deity, like the twin sun disk tattoos on the back of my own hands. I was wrong.

Upgrade Patch. Medium.

Ah, yes. The Midnight Epicure. The Caprid Who Devours the Sky. This scary-ass fable is used to terrify children across the universe. Eat your dinner, or the Midnight Epicure will come eat it for you. He will not be satisfied by the meal and will in turn devour every child in the home. Best draw a picture of him and put it in your window to let him know you're on to his tricks.

I'm pretty sure this fairy tale was devised by Big Therapy in order to keep themselves in work.

Over the cycles, the rather disturbing symbol of the Midnight Epicure, which is really just a racist caricature of an adult Caprid, developed into a ward against all night evils.

If this upgrade patch is affixed to an eligible garment, it will imbue the following upgrades:

Protection against Vampirism.

Protection against Lycanthropy.

+25% Magical damage against all sapient undead.

Warning: Upgrade patches are fleeting items. You may remove them, but they will be destroyed in the process.

"Weird," I said. The descriptions were different, but the patch and the bracelet gave the exact same benefits. I would also get +1 to all my stats once I added it, which I intended to do right away.

"They obviously know something you don't, so you better put it on," said Mordecai.

"The only vampire we know is Miriam Dom," Donut said. "Are they saying we'll have to fight her? I don't want to fight her. She's really nice."

"I... I don't know. I'll have to sew it myself," I said. Katia was out and once again chasing Eva's team.

"Don't worry. I'll help you," Donut said.

I opened my second benefactor box. The silver box from the Apothecary.

It was two items. Two pieces of paper. The first was a potion recipe. The second was a drawing. A drawing of Mongo. After I read the recipe, it was clear what the connection between the two items was.

I handed both pieces of paper to Mordecai, who made a squeaking noise. "Holy cow," he said. "I've been chasing this one for fifty cycles!" His eyes scanned the page. "Of course! You don't chill it. You put it in the centrifuge and then flash-freeze it! Of course. Gah, I almost had it. So simple, too."

"Do you have all the ingredients?" I asked.

"Actually, I do," he said. "You already collected the thorn sap tips, which are pretty rare, but we now have dozens of them. The hard one is the last item. And we have that as well."

We both turned to look at Mongo, who blinked and cocked his head to the side. He then screeched back at us with concern.

"What? What is it?" Donut asked.

I exchanged a look with Mordecai, and then I slid the potion recipe over to show her, along with the photo of Mongo.

The recipe was for a potion of *Charm Animal*. The potion had to be brewed for a specific animal, and it required a special ingredient to work.

"She gave you a photo of Mongo!" Donut exclaimed. "What a nice prize! Mongo, look! It's a picture of..." she trailed off, her eyes going wide once she actually read the recipe. "Absolutely not. You're going to have to find another way."

"It's just blood," I said. "We'll need to do it outside a saferoom and collect a liter of it."

"You want to drain a liter of blood from Mongo?"

"Per potion," Mordecai added. "You can heal him each time you collect it."

"I am Mongo's mommy, and he trusts me implicitly. I will not break that trust. A liter is a lot, too! Not a chance. We just got all this anti-vampire stuff, and here you two are talking about draining Mongo's blood. No. No way. Mongo, come here this instant where Mommy can protect you."

Mongo scurried around the kitchen counter and hid behind Donut.

"Donut, I will make a potion to cause Mongo to sleep. He won't even know."

"*I'll* know, Mordecai."

I was about to say something when I was interrupted by a message.

Miriam Dom: I need help. Are you still near Prepotente number four? I am not far. I am trapped. Dawn will break in 10 hours, and if you do not come before then, I will not survive.

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Donut and Mordecai bickered back and forth as I rapidly chatted with the vampire woman. They both realized I was talking to someone and stopped to watch me.

Carl: Where are you?

Miriam Dom: I am few hours east of that town, maybe 25 kilometers and approximately a kilometer south of the big river bend.

I pulled out the physical version of the rough map Katia had made for everybody, and I could see the approximate location. It was in the middle of the forest. I tapped it on the map. Mordecai and Donut looked down at the spot.

Carl: What's your situation? And where's your partner?

Miriam Dom: I tried asking for help from you earlier, but the system would not allow me to talk to you. I asked others, but none are close enough. I asked them to get in touch with you, but they all said it wouldn't let them.

Sure enough, I saw a line of messages from people passing on Miriam's increasingly-frantic messages. The messages had only just appeared. *Weird*, I thought, until I saw the keyword floating in a few of the message previews.

Elite.

Carl: I can't help if an elite is involved. I'm really sorry. It's a long story.

Miriam Dom: The elite is dead. The quest is done. Pony killed him, but he got himself paralyzed in the process. They were both frozen, and the elite fool finally died just a few minutes ago when the sun set. It is also a long story. Bianca is in a pet carrier in Pony's inventory, and he can't let her out. He is paralyzed for fifteen more hours.

Carl: Fifteen *hours*?

Miriam Dom: It was 35. It has been a long two days. His arm is around my waist. I can't break it free. If any part of him breaks, even his thumb, he will shatter. I have been fighting off small mobs, but now that dark has returned, so will the dinosaurs, and I fear I will not be able to keep us safe.

Carl: We're on our way. But how did you survive out in the daylight?

Miriam Dom: The sunlight drains me quickly. I alternated between my *Revive* spell and the blood potion. I've had to cast over and over again, and I only have a handful of potions left. If I even survive the night, I will not be able to keep myself alive in the new day for long. I will explain when you arrive.

"Listen up, guys." I pulled out a pen. I marked where Miriam Dom was trapped, quickly explaining the situation. There were two towns between here and there.

"Mordecai, how long will it take for you to make that charm animal potion?"

"Fifteen minutes once I have the ingredients."

"What about the knockout potion?"

Both Donut and Mongo screeched with outrage.

"I'll need another fifteen."

Donut harrumphed. "If something happens to Mongo, I'll never forgive you, Mordecai."

"He'll be fine," Mordecai said. "But..."

"Here's the plan," I interrupted, talking rapidly. I tapped the first town. I cringed when I saw it was a dryad settlement. "We'll collect the knockout potion from you here, and then we'll collect Mongo's

blood and heal him. We'll only have time for one." I tapped the next town, which was also a dryad town. "We'll collect the charm animal potion here."

Mordecai held up a hand. "Or," he said, lowering his voice. "You just let her die, and you collect her gear in the morning."

"Why would I do that?" I asked.

"Oh, I don't know," he replied. "Maybe because two different sponsors, who know more than you do, just spent a huge amount of money to protect you from vampirism. And just by coincidence, a vampire shows up and asks you to come help her the moment the sun sets. I know I'm not as valuable as I once was, but I can't help but see a connection there, Carl."

"She saved my life," I said as I grabbed the sewing kit. "If it's a trap designed to get us to turn to vampires, then we'll be protected. I'm not going to abandon her. That's not what we do here. She's been asking for help for hours. Either a hunter or player killer is going to get wind of her situation and move in. We don't have time."

I started to rapidly sew the patch in a spot right next to the bomb patch. Donut gasped as my wide stitches covered up Katia's deliberate, careful threading.

"Carl, it's not straight!"

"It's good enough," I said as I stitched it in place. I received an achievement and a few skill levels in sewing. The patch glowed as it was officially affixed. I pulled the jacket back on.

"Let's go!"

"Oh boy, another adventure!" Samantha cried from her spot on the kitchen counter. Donut had forced the filthy thing through the cleaning module. Minus the gash on her chin, she looked as if she'd come straight from the sex doll head factory. Her gleaming, white hair was put up in wavy pigtails. Even her ridiculous makeup seemed brighter. Had she been on the kitchen counter this whole time? Surely she hadn't jumped up there on her own.

"You're staying back this time," I said. She growled and wailed as we moved to the door.

"Wait, wait," Mordecai called. "I have an idea." He hopped sideways into the crafting room.

"We're on the clock, Mordecai," I yelled as Samantha continued to bitch.

He came back out a moment later, two potion balls cradled in his small arms. He moved to the Emberus shrine at the back of the room and dipped the balls in the red water and then brought them to me.

"Take these," he said.

"What are they?" I asked, pulling them both into my inventory. The system labeled them **Holy Goopers.**

"Blessed water mixed with a fine healing potion and an air-activated coagulant in a potion ball. Emberus is a light-based god. I keep forgetting that. The blood water from the shrine combined with a healing potion and the coagulant acts like napalm to vampires. Hit 'em with this, and then have Donut max out her *Torch* spell. Any vampire will be turned to dryer lint."

"So they're holy water grenades? Cool."

"Exactly."

We exited the guildhall and moved cautiously into the attached pub with all the hockey paraphernalia. Donut rode on Mongo's back as we creeped forward toward the exit to the street.

Darkness had descended, and none of the pub's torches were lit. Donut cast *Torch*, keeping it on the lowest setting. A sickly, yellow glow illuminated the empty pub. The stench of death hung heavy in the humid air, clawing its way into my nose and sinuses, settling heavily. The pattering of rain slapping into puddles and corpses drifted into the pub. The ceiling dripped in several places. The bloody bear claw remained affixed to the wall by the door. It appeared extra ghoulish in the yellow light.

"Turn it off! Turn it off!" a female voice hissed. I jumped in surprise as Mongo screeched. We all turned to face the speaker. It was an ursine, peeking up from behind the counter. Her dot was

white on the map. We hadn't seen her until just now. "Turn it off!" she repeated. "She's out there. She'll see!"

"Do it," I whispered, and Donut complied, plunging us into darkness.

Outside, a horrific, meaty roar shook the walls. Mongo replied by screeching back and turning toward the open door.

"You have to keep him quiet! She already came in here once. Ate my husband right out of the doorway! Please, please. I have two little ones with me!"

"Mongo, shush," Donut said, patting him on the head. "Remember what we talked about." Mongo growled.

The sound of soft weeping filled the pub, mixed in with the rain. Children. Two of them. The three of us moved behind the bar.

The NPC sat there, huddled on the floor. She was a large bear wearing an apron. Two small, male cubs were clutched in her arms. One had his eyes clenched shut, shivering and afraid. The other looked up at Mongo, wide-eyed.

Mongo peeped with concern at the children. They whimpered and cuddled closer to their mother as he approached.

"Hey, hey, it's okay," I whispered. The ground shook as something huge walked by outside. We all crouched down to hide. *We don't have time for this.* "We're gonna let it pass, okay?"

Nobody answered.

I examined the female bear.

Prudence. Level 28 Ursine Barmaid.

She had a debuff blinking over her head. **Terrified.**

"Prudence," I said. "Is that Big Tina out there?"

"It is," she whispered. Her eyes glowed with fear. "She came back. I knew she'd come back. Getting her revenge. The others can't control her anymore."

Another angry roar rocked the street.

"Explain it to me," I said. "Revenge for what?"

"For what they did to her. Long ago. The clerics."

The dinosaur had parked herself just outside. The ground rumbled again. There was a distant crash and scream, followed by a sickening crunch. I remembered the tall building across the way

from this pub. She was breaking the windows and pulling bears out, like one of those Christmas advent calendars. If the bears were all suffering from this Terrified debuff, I knew they wouldn't even be able to run away.

I put my hand on the trembling woman's leg.

Donut moved to my shoulder. "Prudence," she said. "Tell us what they did to her."

The woman swallowed, but she finally answered. "When Scolopendra struck, and the world turned upside down, the nine-tier attack killed almost everyone. But others were transformed. Most of the female ursine were changed. Changed into the reptilian beasts."

"So the dinosaurs used to be bears?" Donut asked. "Carl, did you hear that? Mongo was molested by a bear!"

"Let her finish," I said.

"Even before the cataclysm, the clerics... they could be cruel, yes. But it's the work we have to do. Piety is the path we must follow. We mustn't stray. The path is what leads us to eternal paradise. It keeps us from getting lost."

"Mama," one of the boys squeaked. This one was named **Randy.** "Mama, make it go away." He pointed at Mongo.

"That's not a bad one, stupid," the other boy said. He was **Todd.** It looked as if they were twins. Or from the same litter or whatever. "It's a mongoliensis. They don't attack mamas or kids."

"This is Mongo," Donut said. "Mongo is a nice dinosaur."

Mongo peeped in agreement.

"Keep going," I prodded. I might as well get the story out of her while we could.

"Dancing is forbidden," Prudence said. "But a community of mothers formed, and they taught several of the children the old ways. The art of dance. The art of ballet."

"Ballet?" I asked. "Are you kidding me?"

"I know, I know," Prudence said. "A sin most foul. But they taught the children anyway. As the story goes, they planned on having a secret performance for the children and their families. Just a small recital at the school after hours where the children would

dress in costumes and dance." Prudence shook her head sadly. "Those poor, lost souls."

"What happened?" Donut asked, leaning in.

"One of the dancers was the daughter of the town's head cleric. Despite being only eight years old, she was the best of the dancers, and she practiced more than anybody else. She was to go last. A solo performance. Her name was Tina. The day of the recital came, and the girls went on stage. But Tina's father had somehow learned of the secret recital, and he along with a group of clerics set out to find where the performance was being held to put a stop to it. They finally discovered the location, and they stormed the school just as Tina was to take the stage."

"Oh no," Donut gasped.

"Tina's mother tried to stop her husband. She slapped him in front of everybody. In front of the congregation. It was unheard of."

"So Tina never got to dance?" Donut asked. "She must've been so sad!"

"The cleric had no choice. He was forced to push his daughter aside and whip the mother. But in his anger and humiliation, he went too far. He was possessed that night, they said. He whipped his wife to the edge of death, right upon the stage in front of his daughter. And when he pushed Tina aside, she fell and hurt herself. She had a magical wand that was supposed to shoot sparkles during her performance. It broke when she fell."

"Sinners get what they deserve," little Randy said.

"That's right, honey," Prudence said. She continued. "After he was done beating the mother, the cleric announced he would be forced to punish all the parents and children who participated. But before he got his chance, it happened. The nine-tier attack."

"The judgement of the gods," Randy replied.

"Good boy. Most died. Some ursine were transformed. Only the females. The surviving men were unchanged. Only a small handful of women survived unchanged, including my grandmother. She was the most pious. Her faith saved her."

"Christ," I muttered.

"Scolopendra turned them to demons. The sinners. They do not age. They can't procreate. They're only a shell of what they once were, and they serve as a reminder of their wickedness."

"And now little Tina is Big Tina," I said.

"She's the only child who turned," the woman said. "Her mind is gone. She has lost all of her faith. While she kills everyone she meets, she actively hunts ursine. Her mother survives along with several of the other mothers from that evening. But they are in the form of dinosaurs like your companion. They are vicious, and they also kill, but they're not as deranged. Tina's mother still attempts to keep Tina from doing too much damage, but something has changed just in the past few nights. Tina is stronger than ever now, and the others can't stop her."

"Uh, do you know what Tina's mother's name is?" I asked.

"It is Kiwi," Prudence said.

Donut gasped as I reached over and scratched Mongo's head. "Hey, buddy. It looks like you banged Tina's mom."

Quest Update. The Recital.

Big Tina is out of control.

She's on a rampage, killing every ursine she can find. She's angrier than ever. Her violence, which used to be an occasional nuisance, has turned into a looming threat for everyone in the hunting grounds. If she's not dealt with soon, the High Elves may field their army in order to deal with it. You do not want that to happen.

Tina must be stopped. Kill her or give her what she wants.

"Oh my god, Carl," Donut said. "This is just like the plot to *Footloose*! They're stealing storylines now!"

"I don't remember the part where the girl turns into a murderous dinosaur after her dad tells her she can't dance," I said.

"Maybe that was in part two."

"It says we have to give her what she wants," I said. "What do you think that means? To kill all the ursine?"

The walls shook as Tina collected another snack from a nearby building. Next to me, the two cubs whimpered.

"Of course not, Carl," Donut said. "Didn't you see the movie? It's quite obvious."

I just looked at her.

"She wants to dance! We have to finish the recital!"

Holy shit. *Of course*. "How in the flying fuck are we supposed to do that? We should just kill her."

Splatch. I turned my head at the noise. What was that? It was inside the pub.

I peeked over the counter, searching just as the red dot appeared on my map. I caught movement on the floor. It was the bear claw. It had fallen, and now it was dragging itself away, like an inchworm. It moved out the door and out into the rainy night.

Glamoured Fragment – Ursine Claw (Left). Level 5.

4.2% of the whole.

This is a minion of Big Tina.

When you think about it, vampires are basically necromancers with an eating disorder. The fact these minion things exist is testament to that.

A glamoured minion can only be created by a vampire two sunsets after the victim was originally killed. In its current form, it's nothing more than an uninteresting yet reanimated body part, and it's now trying to find its way to the rest of its body. Poor little guy. It just wants to go home.

Here's the thing. A vampire kill scene usually looks like the Wal-Mart toy aisle on Black Friday. In other words, vampires are notoriously messy when they get to a'slaughtering. Usually the rest of the body parts are all squished and gross and half-digested and thrown all over the place. When that happens, the pieces just meld into other orphaned pieces and form a Shambling Berserker, which is a horrific monster in its own right. But if the pieces can actually reunite 70% of their original bodies, they become something quite deadly.

"Fuck me," I muttered. "So *that's* why they're giving us all the vampire stuff."

"Wait, I don't understand," Donut said. "The *dinosaur* is also a vampire? Big Tina is a vampire tyrannosaurus rex?"

"She's an allosaurus," little Todd said, looking up from his mother's fur. "She has three fingers, not two. That means she's an allosaurus."

"I know how to count, Todd," Donut said.

Quest Update. The Recital.

Surprise, motherfuckers. Strap yourselves in. You don't know the half of it. It's about to get bumpy.

Outside, the world rumbled as Tina roared again.

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[45]

<Note added by Crawler Allister. 13th Edition>

Vampires. We have vampires in my culture, but they are not the same as the ones here in the dungeon, though they are similar. My T'Ghee deck contains two vampiric forms. The Plague Bearer and the Blood Hunter. Both represent death. Both represent the end of days. But one is considered deliberate, thirst-based evil, and the other, the Plague Bearer, is a study on how one's poor actions can ripple through time and become amplified and doom us all. The vampires here on this seventh floor are a combination of the two. It is strange that our traditions are so different yet the same. I have not met any fellow crawlers cursed with vampirism, but I have met my fair share of vampire mobs and NPCs. The monster ones cannot be reasoned with. They are fast. Faster than you think. They are insatiable. They are strong. Yet they are not mindless. In fact, I believe the curse of vampirism greatly increases their intelligence. They cast spells. They wish to surround themselves with protectors. Do not underestimate them. Do not rely solely on your own mythology to defeat them. My best advice is to avoid them, and if they've moved into an area you occupy, move away as quickly as you can.

Carl: Hey, uh Miriam. We're still trying to get to you. You didn't by chance tangle with a giant allosaurus thing at one point? One with a pink, feather boa?

Miriam Dom: Carl, please hurry. And yes. We fought with a giant dinosaur wearing a pink feathered necklace and carrying a wand. I almost killed her, but then something happened, and she escaped.

Carl: Yeah, I think you might have infected her with vampirism.

Miriam Dom: Yes. I know. Many of the dinosaurs in this area are vampires now. It is spreading through the forest. Spreading quickly. They are weak for the first few days if they survive, but they quickly grow in strength. It was part of the story with the elite. He died before the infestation could be stopped. You must help me, or we will not be able to contain it.

Oh, that was just wonderful.

Carl: We are on our way.

"Okay, Prudence," I said as I sent a quick note to Mordecai, warning him. "Grab your kids. Go through the door we came out of, okay? You'll be safe in there. I promise."

"We can't go in there," she said. "I tried, and it wouldn't let me."

"You can now," I said. "I'm giving you and your cubs access."

Outside, Tina had moved on down the street. The red dot representing the animated bear claw disappeared. The rain became more fierce, thumping louder than ever. It sounded like drums pounding on the ceiling. I knew from the main chat that this newest storm covered the entire map. The river was starting to overflow.

After we made sure Prudence and her two cubs were inside the guildhall, we slowly crept outside. Big Tina was gone, but it was impossible to see. It was pitch black, and the rain's intensity seemed to be ratcheting up by the moment.

"Light," I whispered as I started to pull the pieces of the royal chariot from my inventory. "Keep it low."

Donut activated the yellow light and sent it out the door, hovering low like a firefly. Her skill in the spell was 13, and she could

do all sorts of cool stuff with it now. The moment the light went outside, my map came alive with red dots. We both stopped, aghast at the scene before us.

"Fuck me," I whispered.

I hadn't seen anything like this since the krasue nest on the third floor or the train car filled with ghoul parts on the fourth. But this was worse. Much worse.

Mongo screeched and almost bolted out, but a command from Donut kept him still. I turned to see a pair of small dinosaurs—not raptors, but something similar—bound off into the darkness, their forms getting swallowed by the night.

Before, when we'd entered town, there were dead bodies everywhere. I'd tried to pick some of them up, but they'd shattered into dust the moment I touched them. I hadn't thought much of it at the time because they were old, but it was clear they were all part of... whatever this was.

The number of body parts had increased. A lot. They scattered in all directions like a lumpy stew.

I'd assumed Big Tina had been parked outside simply because the building across the street was a target-rich environment. But it seemed she'd been sitting there working on her spell. She was calling the two-day-dead body parts to her. But this wasn't just her dead. It couldn't be. There was way too much here, and it wasn't just ursine. There were all manner of forest creatures. Bears, deer, monkeys, wolves, all types of mobs. I remembered our journey from the edge of the river to this town. We'd been grinding all day, but the vast majority of the mobs we'd fought were plant-based creatures. We hadn't seen hardly any mobile mobs.

It appeared other dinosaurs were gathering all the pieces they could find and bringing them together in one place. Like a massive pile of bloody, mismatched socks. A sorting facility, where the reanimated parts could move about and find a match.

This was just the edge of the nightmare. The main pile was down the street. I could see it now, rising in the darkness like a small hill. A group of fast-moving dinosaurs darted away.

"Turn it up," I whispered. "Slowly."

As Donut increased the light, body pieces scattered away like cockroaches, roiling and undulating unnaturally. The streets were a mess of severed arms, legs, tails slithering like snakes, shattered rib cages walking like spiders. Eyeballs bouncing. Organs rolling and splatting away, like fat hedgehogs moving through the bush.

But there was more. Half-formed pieces had found one another. These all had percentages and extra-long names hovering over them. One moved away like a flat tire, spinning and splatting, leaking.

Glamoured Fragment – Ursine Foot (Left), Ursine Leg (Left), Ursine Pelvis (four pieces, reformed), Ursine thigh (Right), Ursine Lower Intestine (two pieces, reformed), Ursine Kidney (Right). Level 5+7+12+6+10+2 = Level 42

21.8% of the whole.

This is a minion of Big Tina.

I swallowed. I understood, then. It came to me all at once what this madness was. They slaughtered people, ripping them into as many pieces as possible, and then they came back two days later and waited for them to reform. Each individual piece had a level, and if they reformed with the original, the levels got added. The pieces added together were going to be ridiculously powerful, way stronger than they were originally.

"Carl," Donut said, looking over the sea of writhing body parts. "Carl, I don't like this. Let's go."

"Max it out. Shine your light all the way," I said, trying to keep my gorge down. We pushed outside as I rapidly lashed pieces of the chariot together, facing it away from the center of town.

"Donut," I said. "Ride ahead of me. We're gonna have to run."

I pulled a fully loaded missile launcher and attached it to the chariot. I assigned two of the missiles to the center mass of the writhing body parts and then the others along the edges of the pile. All the while, I was starting to send out frantic messages, asking if anyone else had seen anything like this.

We should go back inside.

But this was something we had to contain the best we could. This was a storyline with an elite that had spiraled out of control.

Something—for once—that wasn't started by me or Donut. It sounded as if Miriam and Prepotente had stepped into something that was about to reverberate over the entire floor, just like when we'd unleashed Orthrus the two-headed puppy on the world.

Miriam had implied she could fix this if we got to her in time, and that's what we were going to do.

I jumped onto the chariot, and we raced away from the nightmare. Donut and Mongo sped forward. Just as we reached the walled edge of town, surrounded by those mostly-dead vines, I lit off all of the missiles. They shot into the pouring darkness, hissing and corkscrewing in the rain. Muffled explosions rocked the night as we turned west toward Miriam's location. Experience notifications rolled down my vision as an outraged roar filled the night. Thankfully, the massive dinosaur didn't appear to be following us. Yet.

Donut: DO YOU THINK THAT STOPPED ALL THE GROSS MONSTER PIECES FROM GETTING TOGETHER?

Carl: Probably not, but we hopefully slowed them down.

We rocketed down the muddy road toward Miriam and Prepotente's general location. Twin streams formed on either side of the road, rushing with the rain's runoff. Donut kept her light spell turned all the way up, and it lit the path with the power of a stadium light. The forest was alive with red dots, and they all scattered away from us like we were a snowplow. I couldn't tell if the mobs were infected or not while we moved at this pace. Donut and Mongo rushed ahead of me, and I warned her to be careful with Mongo. The last thing we needed was him getting infected.

It only took about two minutes before Donut decided that she hated being out in such a powerful rain storm, and she started to loudly complain about it in my chat.

A few other crawlers started to report back that they were seeing vampire forest animals, too. Mordecai said this wasn't the first time this sort of thing had happened, but it didn't usually spread this fast.

Gideon: I just fought a half-genie, half-owl vampire thing. It tried to rip my neck out, but our cleric killed it before it could get me. It was damn close.

Tserendolgor: I think we're about 200 kilometers from you guys, and it's the same thing, but it's not as bad as you say. I haven't seen any reanimated body parts, but the drillbeaks all disappeared almost overnight, and now they're vampires. It makes them twice as strong and super fast. You don't automatically get infected if they touch you. I think it's only if they injure you severely. If I cast *Ultraviolet* on my flamethrower, they die quick. But I'm sticking indoors in this rain. Don't want to take the chance.

Carl: Okay. Good. By the way, are any of you in the top 50? I'm trying to make a list of all the crawlers who might be at that party.

Gideon: I'm not even in the top 1,000, and I like it that way.

Tserendolgor: I'm currently ranked 54. Trying to get it up in time so I get an invite.

Donut: MAYBE IF YOU WEREN'T ALWAYS STEALING OTHER PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCE, YOU'D BE HIGHER.

Tserendolgor: Are you still on that? That was three floors ago. And I didn't see you at CrawlCon, so I must be doing something right.

Donut: WHAT? WHAT?

Carl: Don't try too hard to get into the top 50. I think it might be a trap, and we might need some people not at the top to rescue us. Either way, that flamethrower of yours might come in handy.

The first of the two towns was a small dryad settlement, and we reached it much more quickly than I anticipated. A pair of funeral bell guards stood out front. They covered their eyes at our approach, but they didn't try to stop us from going in. I could see multiple white dots moving about in the streets.

Entering Small Dryad Settlement.

Good, I thought, as I scanned the map for a real saferoom. This town hadn't been captured yet.

"There!" I shouted over the pouring rain, pointing at a pub near the end of the small town.

Warning: You have been branded as a troublemaker at this settlement. Guards will now attack you on sight.

The warning came out of nowhere. I turned and saw a pair of dryads glaring at me from around the corner. One of them was the mayor, and he obviously also worshipped Diwata.

A few red dots appeared on the map, moving in our direction just as we pulled up outside the saferoom. I quickly pulled the pins on the chariot and took the two pieces into my inventory before we dove inside.

The bar was filled with dryads, which surprised me. Usually these places were mostly empty. This appeared to have once been a beach-side bar with a long, open-air window that faced the water. Now, the bar just faced a wooden wall of bamboo. A sign on the wall read "Y-Not Lounge." A bopca in a Hawaiian-style shirt sat behind the counter, glaring at us as we rushed in.

"Apostate!" a dryad shouted the moment we entered the saferoom. The monkey in his branches screamed and threw himself at me. He got zapped and teleported away.

"Black magic!" another tree screamed as he tried to swing at me before he, too, zapped away. A minute later, we were alone in the saferoom.

"I don't feel very welcome here, Carl," Donut said.

"They're not attacking you. Just me," I said. Outside, a group of red dots descended on the outside of the tavern. *Shit*, I thought. *Shit, shit, shit*.

"You're gonna have to do it yourself," I said as we moved to the guildhall door.

"Do what?"

I patted Mongo on the back. "Sorry, buddy. Just a little blood."

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Donut: CARL, MONGO IS REALLY MAD AT YOU. AND THE DRYAD MAYOR GUY IS OFFERING ME 5,000 GOLD TO TIE YOU UP AND BRING YOU OUT HERE. I'D FIREBALL HIM, BUT ALL THE GUARDS ARE OUTSIDE, TOO. I'M MAKING ONE OF THE MUSHROOM GUYS STAND OVER ME BECAUSE THEY'RE GOOD UMBRELLAS.

Carl: How long before Mongo wakes back up?

Donut: TWO MINUTES. I DON'T HAVE TIME FOR ANOTHER LITER. MOST OF IT WENT ALL OVER THE PLACE, BUT I GOT A FEW OF THOSE WET MONKEYS TO HELP ME HOLD THE FLASK. THIS IS REALLY HARD WITHOUT THUMBS. HE BETTER NOT REMEMBER ALL OF THIS. WE SHOULD HAVE DONE THIS BEFORE WE GOT INTO TOWN.

Carl: We didn't have the Mongo sleep potion. You know that. Get back in here as soon as he wakes up, and we'll be on our way.

"You need to quit pacing. She's fine," Mordecai said. "As long as you're not out there with her, the guards won't attack her. I hope you have a plan for when you leave."

"I do. We're gonna have to do this again with the next town. It's also a dryad settlement." Mordecai only had time to make one of the Mongo knock-out potions, and he'd only be able to make one of the charm animal potions. Hopefully that would be enough.

Prudence the bear sat on the couch while her two cubs crawled all over her, acting like nothing had happened. One of the later *Land Before Time* movies played on the screen, which I thought was a little fucked-up because they'd just watched their dad get eaten by a dinosaur, but they seemed to like it. Little Todd was bitching at Mordecai about the movie's accuracy issues with the dinosaurs' appearance. Both Bomo and the Sledge sat on the ground, enraptured by the movie. The cleaner bot followed the bear cubs around, beeping worriedly.

Donut returned to the room a minute later and plopped the large, glass flask onto the table. Blood ran down the side. Mongo, who'd been healed before he'd even woken up, sniffed at the container suspiciously.

"A liter is a lot!" Donut said for the hundredth time. "Why do you need so much? If Mongo was any smaller, he wouldn't even have that much in him. I had to cut and heal him three times just to fill this."

Mordecai moved in to examine the large flask. "This looks like it's more than enough. Good. I'll have the potion ready for you soon."

Miriam Dom: Carl. I hate to be a pest. But are you coming?

Carl: We're on our way.

I had Donut go outside and drop a smoke curtain right outside the door. I downed an invisibility potion and stepped out into the swirling mist. I didn't have time to rebuild the chariot inside town, so we booked it to the edge of town.

"Can I do it? Can I do it?" Donut asked as we reached the unguarded western gate.

"Be careful. Try not to hit anybody else. Just the mayor. Use a magic missile, not a..."

The fireball shot forth from Donut, moving almost lazily as it glided through the air, sizzling and crackling in the rain. We watched as the beachball-sized glob of flames squeezed between two mushroom guards and slammed into the back of the dryad mayor, who immediately burst into flames like a goddamned sparkler from the Fourth of July. He screamed and started running in circles. The

exterior of the pub we'd just left also caught on fire, and in seconds, half the town burned.

"Would you look at that!" Donut exclaimed. "Carl, why'd it catch on fire in the rain?" She gasped. "I did it! It's my town now!" A flaming monkey ran down the street, squealing.

"Yeah, let's not do that again," I said as I rapidly put the chariot together.

The next town was only about twenty minutes away, and it looked almost identical to the previous. This one was called **Prepotente Number Seven**, which meant the guards, hopefully, wouldn't automatically be hostile toward me, even if the dryads attacked. We quickly moved through, and I rushed inside to grab the now-completed *Charm Animal* potion. Inside, the cubs and the two rock body guards had somehow gotten ice cream cones and were sitting there, still watching the damn dinosaur movie. Mongo, who hadn't gotten a chance to notice the movie at the previous location, started screeching and jumping up and down once he noticed the cartoon dinosaurs on the screen. We grabbed the green potion and bounced. None of the guards attacked us as we passed.

Ten minutes later, and we approached the approximate location of Miriam and Prepotente.

"I don't see them, Carl. We need Katia!"

Carl: Miriam, I think we're getting close, but I don't know exactly where you are.

Miriam Dom: Hang on one moment, Carl. Let me know if you can see this. I'm going to shoot a few sparks into the air.

I waited a moment, but there was nothing.

Carl: I don't see anything.

Miriam Dom: You must not be close enough. Keep moving west.

Carl: Hang on. Do it again in about fifteen seconds.

I downed one of the potions of Levitation, and I hovered off the ground. I pushed the slider up, and I moved into the dark, freezing air. Rain continued to pour, pelting into me like little needles. I passed up through the trees, wind causing my cloak to billow. I

could see nothing ahead, though far behind me, the night glowed ominously. I could smell it. A distant fire burned, despite the rain. A big fire, bigger than before we'd left the area. *Goddamnit, Donut*, I thought. She'd set the whole damn forest aflame.

Carl: Do it now.

A moment later, a few sparks of light dotted the horizon, about two kilometers away and far to the south, further south than I expected. It was far off any path that I could see, which meant we'd have to go on foot.

Carl: I see you!

Donut: CARL, WATCH OUT!

The screeching, frothing form slammed into me from the side, and I bowled away. The levitation spell immediately snapped off. I pinwheeled as I plummeted from the sky.

I froze in midair. Pulsing, EDM music started to play, pounding over the rain.

Oh fuck, oh fuck, what is this?

Mugshots of Donut and myself slammed into place, hovering, pounding right above my head. Digital lightning crept around the images, turning into vines. Monkey screeching sounds and bongos punctuated the electronic squeal of the music. I couldn't move, but I faced upward, and I gagged as the cold water started to fill my mouth. It tasted of dirt and blood. I sputtered and gurgled as I was waterboarded by the downpour.

B... B... B... Boss Battle!

Special Forest Encounter!

Unable to move, I attempted to move my eyes, trying to see what had hit me. A massive, twin pair of talons hung in the air about fifteen feet away, angled in an attack. The monstrous shadow attached to the monster was a familiar shape. *It's Quetzalcoatlus*, I thought. The pterodactyl-like ghost boss from the last floor. But that wasn't right. It couldn't be. It was, I realized, the same type of mob.

This one wasn't a ghost, but it was still undead.

The damn thing was huge, like a mix between a pelican and vulture, but the size of a flying giraffe. It had an unusually-large beak, almost like the head of a jouster's lance. The beak was as long

as me. I'd only briefly seen the glowing, ethereal form of Quetzalcoatlus, and the flesh form of this creature was terrifying.

We hung like that for several moments, the music getting louder and louder.

Versus!

....

An ear-splitting shriek filled the night. Lightning crashed, and in that moment, the blood-red eyes of the monstrosity came into full view.

Sierra - Northropi Vampire

Level 65 Neighborhood Boss!

This is a Bereft Minion of Viscount Fog

The great, now-deceased hunter of vampires and all thing undead, Viscount Fog had trained his trusty mount, Sierra, to never leave his side.

Together, they hunted evil, ridding the world of the dark scourge that took his village and family. They hunted and killed every filthy ghoul they could find. So when Viscount Fog learned of a newcomer to their world, a vicious and powerful, ruthless and deranged bloodsucker by the name of Miriam Dom, he set out to exterminate her.

It went bad.

When Sierra swept down in an ill-fated attempt to save her boss, she was injured by the ruthless, baby-murdering bloodsucker. She stumbled away, abandoning the fight. In less than a day, the bloodlust thirst has ravaged her. Now on the hunt for her first kill, Sierra has become what she and her master hated the most.

Free her from her misery.

The world unfroze, and in less than a second, the twin talons gripped me. One around my legs, and the other around my chest. Leathery wings beat at the dark sky. The claws crushed and pulled at the same time, trying to pull me apart like a hot mozzarella stick. The creature smelled of death and gore. I continued to face upward, looking at the underside of the beast. I screamed as my health flashed red. *It's pulling me apart.*

Donut: CARL! CARL!

A magic missile slammed into the monster's wing as it circled just above the tree line. It screeched angrily.

At the same moment, I cast *Heal* on myself as I pulled the Holy Gooper potion ball into my free hand. I smashed the sticky, holy water substance against the talon locked onto my chest. The foot sizzled as Sierra screeched yet again, its voice high and piercing. I was hoping it'd drop me, but it just crushed harder.

Carl: Light!

I pulled my second and last potion ball just as the new sun ascended. Donut had scrambled up one of the trees, and she emerged from the canopy like a wizard atop a mountain, tiara glittering in the new light.

I attempted to heave the potion ball up at the dinosaur's chest, but it reared back at the bright light. The potion ball went flying as the boss continued to tumble backward, but that was okay because the thing's head burst into flames. What wasn't okay was that it tossed me straight up into the air like a rag doll.

"Gah," I cried out. I waved my arms ineffectively as I tumbled upward into the now bright sky. The boss landed on her back atop the canopy of trees, trapped as if she'd been caught by a spider's web. I spun upward, paused for but a moment, and then I dropped face-first like a sack of doorknobs.

I slammed down my last half-splat potion as I rocketed toward the flaming form of the still-alive boss, writhing atop the trees. Donut remained nearby, a few trees over, screaming something as a pair of clockwork Mongos negotiated the treetops toward the boss. One attempted to pounce, but the branch under it broke, and the dinosaur plunged down to the forest floor a hundred feet below.

I was going to hit the boss right below the center of the chest. The half-splat potion would keep me from dying, but it would plummet my health down to five percent. Since the dinosaur wasn't actually on the ground, I had no idea how or if the potion would even work in these circumstances.

I had my right fist clenched, and my gauntlet formed just before I slammed into the still-screaming-despite-its-goddamn-head-was-

on-fire vampire dinosaur. I smashed right between the two flailing talons like Superman breaking through a wall.

I tore through the dinosaur like it was made of paper. I continued to fall, now tumbling, crashing through branches and leaves. *Shit, shit, shit. Crash!* I felt my ribcage crunch and legs break as I slammed into the muddy ground. I wheezed blood as I hit *Heal* once again.

To my left, a tree exploded, cracking and snapping and shattering as the body of the massive bird creature fell from the canopy and carved its way through the foliage. *It's going to land on me.* The body abruptly stopped its descent, hovering twenty feet over me, wings spread like it was a marionette. The sudden stop did not hinder the downward momentum of the beast's entrails, which ripped free from the hole I'd carved with my fist. Cold, stinking, eel-like guts smashed into my face. They just kept coming and coming like a ribbon from a magician's hat, followed by the rest of the creature's innards. I sputtered and gagged anew as my body healed itself.

I clawed my way out of the gore and looked up at the creature. It remained impaled between two trees, and its head continued to burn as it screamed. Its lower half dripped the remains of its stinking guts.

How are you not dead? It had a health bar, and it was in the red, but it stubbornly refused to sink lower.

Donut's light orb moved down toward the creature, causing the flames on its head to burn brighter and hotter. The guts around me sizzled like a pile of sausages on a pan. Mongo ran up to me and started squawking as the last clockwork Mongo leaped from above, landing on the thing's shoulder.

I caught sight of something on the ground. The still-beating heart sat a few feet away, thumping like a soccer-ball-sized engine. I could hear it, the heart beating in time to the music.

I remembered the warning from the cookbook, that our version of a vampire might not be the same as what we faced here. Still, I picked up a thick, broken and jagged branch, slick with blood and

rain. I lurched toward the loose heart, and I stabbed it directly into the organ. It felt like I was trying to stab a raw turkey.

The damn monster exploded, showering more gore over all of us.

The neighborhood map dropped at my feet, and the rest of the thing spilled from the trunks of the ruined trees, landing all around me in a cascade of stinking, wet slop.

Winner!

The music stopped abruptly, as it always did. I didn't move, allowing the rain to half-wash me clean. Another tree fell, but it fell in an opposite direction. Mongo grunted and leaned down to bite at the remains.

"Don't you dare."

Vampirism was contagious, and if I hadn't been protected by my jacket, I'd likely be infected. I'd "die" and then wake up, overcome with hunger. I didn't know if one ate a vampire corpse it would spread, but the fact that half the dinosaurs in the forest were now infected suggested that was indeed the case.

Donut leaped to a branch as she turned down the intensity of the light.

"You punched that vampire pterodactyl in the dick!" she cried. "You put a hole right in it!"

I groaned as I stepped away from the gore. The rain continued to pound. "Yes, Donut. I was there. But it was female. It didn't have a dick."

"Then you punched her in her lady garden! Did you see what my light did? It's up to level 14 now!" She jumped down, being careful not to land anywhere near the dripping remains of the vampire. "It was hard to kill, but my light set it on fire just like the Fireball spell." She made a face. "Really, Carl. We need to find a less disgusting way to kill these things."

"What the hell did you just call it?" I asked. "Lady garden?"

"That's what Miss Beatrice used to call it. That and 'kitty' which I will not even dignify with a response. But I rather like the term 'lady garden.' Mongo, no!"

"You better put him away until we can get out of here. We don't want him infected with any of the lady garden bits."

"No. No, I suppose that would be quite inconvenient. Mongo, come on."

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[47]

<Note added by Crawler Volteeg. Seventh Edition>

I miss her. I miss her so goddamn much. Is it worth it? To survive this place with her gone? No. No, I don't think it is.

<Note added by Crawler Drakea. 22nd Edition>

This is Volteeg's first, last, and only entry in the cookbook. Fuck everything about this place.

We found the scene with Miriam Dom and Prepotente with just under an hour to go before dawn. We'd have gotten there even sooner, but we'd had to fight our way there. Hordes of turkey-sized dinosaurs called bambiraptors swarmed through the forest. Most—but not all—of them were vampires. Strangely, the ones infected with vampirism didn't appear to attack their own kind, which I found interesting. I could kill them easily with a kick and a stomp. Donut's *Torch* spell was also highly effective against the infected ones. It didn't outright kill them, but it stunned them at regular strength, and it caught their heads on fire when she maxed it out.

I paused at the clearing to take it all in.

The paralyzed form of Prepotente stood there like a statue, left arm around the waist of Miriam, who leaned against the goat man. His right arm was extended out, hand grasped around something

that was no longer there. He had a timer over his head, six hours and counting. He would wake up five hours after sunrise.

There was an asterisk after the timer. I did not know what that meant. I hadn't seen that before.

I could tell Miriam was exhausted. I knew, as a vampire, she was normally pale. But her skin had taken on a ghoul-like shimmer. *She's sick*, I thought. *I wonder how long it's been since she's eaten.*

A circle of corpses surrounded the pair, extending out to the tree line. There was a wide range of creatures, from raccoons to monkeys to large bugs to dozens of the bambiraptors. Further out within the trees, red dots stalked in a circle, but they fled as we approached.

"There's some bigger monsters out there," Donut whispered. "I think they might be lady Mongos. They're moving away."

"Okay. Keep Mongo locked up for now. Keep an eye out for hunters and other crawlers, too."

"Thank goodness," Miriam said as we cautiously entered the clearing. I could hear the pain in her voice. She held up her arms to cover her eyes. "Donut, please. The light."

"Oh, sorry," Donut said, adjusting the brightness. "Is that better?"

"Yes, sorry. Please. We must talk before the sun rises."

"What do you need us to do?" I asked.

"Sunrise is in fifty-three minutes," she said. A book appeared in her hand. She dropped it to the ground. It was a magical tome. "Miss Donut, if you would be so kind. If you read the spellbook, you will learn the spell you need to wake him up."

Donut gasped and jumped from my shoulder before I could object. My something-is-wrong sense screamed. The viewer counter was jacked all the way to the right, but it had been since the boss battle with Sierra.

Carl: Wait!

Donut paused, looking uncertainly between me and Miriam.

"Why didn't you read the book yourself?" I asked.

Miriam sighed. "You two are in no danger from me, Carl. But I understand why you are cautious. I can see the glow on you. You

are both protected from vampirism, and I can't feed on you even if I wanted."

"You didn't answer my question."

"I already have the spell. Or, I had it. It's gone now. I have a special ability that allows me to unlearn a spell and turn it into a spellbook. I can only do it once a night, unfortunately."

"But, why didn't you use it then?" Donut asked. She cast *Second Chance* on a raccoon-like monster and told it to go get the book. The zombie raccoon hissed and grabbed the book, dragging it away from Miriam's feet. It dropped it at Donut's feet before lurching off into the forest, chattering.

"Don't read it before I... Goddamnit, Donut."

Donut glowed as she read the spellbook.

"Relax, Carl," Donut said. "It was just a spellbook of *Get Out of Jail*. Wow. It costs forty points. That's a lot! I've seen this spell before. Okay, I'm going to wake Prepotente up."

"Goddamnit, wait," I said.

"Donut, please wait," Miriam agreed, continuing to gasp.

A trio of bambiraptors cautiously entered the clearing from behind Miriam. Before we could react, three bolts of energy shot from the vampire and struck them down. She hadn't even turned her head. *Holy shit*.

"Miriam," I said, taking a step forward. If she wanted to hurt us, she could do it from a distance. My sense of danger didn't ease, but I was starting to suspect whatever the danger was, it wasn't from Miriam. "Tell us the story. What's going on? Why haven't you released him?"

"Okay," Miriam said. "I will tell you everything. Just promise me you won't attempt to wake him just yet. Not until after dawn breaks. I don't know if it will work if you try before then, and I'm afraid the attempt might harm him. So please wait."

"Something tells me he's going to be mad if we wait that long," I said. "Can he see us in this state?"

"I think so," Miriam said. "He can't talk or move or use the chat, and he has the Fragile debuff, so we must be careful. But I believe he sees and hears all of it."

"Okay," I said. "Explain."

"We don't know each other very well, but I like you, Carl. Pony likes you, too."

"I don't think that's true, Miriam..."

"Shush. Let me tell you a story. Don't worry, it is short. But it's about a young woman who had a life and a career and a fiancée. And she gave it all up. Not because she wanted to, but because she had a sense of duty to her parents."

"I'm sorry," I said. "But..."

She had a quaver to her voice. "My parents were getting old, and I returned to their home outside Parma to take care of them and the animals. Twenty years would pass before my parents were gone, and when they were, I was too rooted. I couldn't give it up. Even though I hated it as a child, I'd grown to love the farm and the responsibilities and the country. And my children. The goats. I loved them more than anything."

"Miriam," I began.

She held up her hand.

"I am telling you this not just because I am a sentimental old fool. It is important I say it because I never have. And I wish to say it to you because it is clear you love your Donut as much as I love all of my babies. Only you can understand. You're the only one here whom I trust enough to understand." She turned her head to regard the frozen Prepotente.

"And, one day, I want you to explain it to him. Because I know he will not understand it now."

"Carl does love me," Donut said.

Before I could object again, Miriam continued.

"Even before, Pony was attached to me. He would even follow me inside the house if I let him. My little stubborn shadow. But now. Now it is so much worse. When we are separated, he becomes hysterical. He becomes a danger to himself."

"Yeah, I heard," I said. "When you went on that show with Katia, he flipped out."

She reached up and touched her neck. I didn't know the details, but Prepotente had run off in a panic when Miriam was away. She'd

gone looking for him and somehow ended up a vampire.

"When we got to this floor, we found ourselves hunted by an elite. A vampire hunter named Viscount Fog."

"We just killed his flying mount. Sierra."

She nodded. "Good. Good. She was dangerous. Fog was part of one of those television programs they run inside of this place. It was called *Blood Hunter*, and Fog was the star. He started hunting me the moment we landed on this floor. We have the hunters and the clerics, and now this creature... Plus, Pony got that prize box. It is unbearable, Carl. I... I am not strong like you. Or stubborn like Pony." Her voice broke. "It is too much. And with my condition, it is a toll on my children. All ten of those who survive."

"Ten?" I asked.

"Pony plus Bianca plus the others. They are all in his inventory." She paused, momentarily overcome with emotion. "It is no longer safe for them to stay in mine. If I fall into the Ravenous state, it's... It's a bad idea for my babies to be on me."

Fuck it, I thought.

I took another step toward her. I put my hand on her arm, and it was shockingly cold. That, combined with the look of pure agony in her eyes threatened to push me over a precipice I didn't even know I was standing upon. I still didn't understand what was going on, but I knew whatever this was, it was devastating to Miriam. She was known for being ridiculously calm in horrific situations, and this loss of control was heartbreaking.

She put her callused hand atop mine. She had a tattoo there, old and faded in the skin between her thumb and forefinger. It was of a musical note.

"Pony and I didn't know about this vampire hunter until it was almost too late. He attacked us early on, but we escaped. This was several days ago, and the attack occurred while we were fighting that giant dinosaur. Big Tina. That was the start of it."

I felt myself nod. "Big Tina has gone off the rails. We have a quest to figure out her story. But she's doing something odd. She's building some sort of army of undead."

"Yes," Miriam said. "Vampirism comes with a host of spells and abilities, and you get different ones when you are infected. Some new vampires are more powerful than others. Some of the infected are more contagious or charismatic. Or more deadly. Some can shape-shift. Tina is a boss monster, and they have given her multiple, powerful abilities. Abilities that allow her to control others. Or to create undead minions from those she slaughters. This was to be the climax of *Blood Hunter*. The vampirism curse was to infect the forest, and after killing me, Viscount Fog would have saved all the dinosaurs in the area, stopping an apocalypse. There's a hierarchy, you see. Since I am the progenitor of their infection, if I die, the curse ends. Since none have been infected for a full month, they would all be cured. It's not too late."

Donut gasped. "You're the head vampire!"

"Yes," Miriam agreed. "Once I went down the floor, I gained a title. Princess of Hell. All crawlers who survive a floor while infected gain such a title, which makes the infection permanent. Carl, please listen. Just in the past few days, over a dozen other crawlers have been infected by forest creatures and dinosaur vampires. And those are only the ones I know of."

I suddenly felt a chill wash over me, and I finally knew what was happening.

"Miriam, why haven't you unfrozen Prepotente?"

She sniffed. "When Viscount Fog fell upon us this second time, Pony was ready for him. He read a very powerful scroll. It is called *Community Pool*. He must be physically touching both parties for the spell to work. He takes the infection of one party, me in this case, and he moves it to another. It would have not only cured me, it would also make it so Fog was now the prime. We could've killed him, then, and it would've cured the infection. Pony received the scroll in a benefactor box."

"So, it would've turned Viscount Fog into the new head vampire?" Donut asked. "That would've been great television!"

"Yes. The scroll said it would cause Pony to be stunned for a minute, but we knew the transformation would've overcome Fog, and we would've had plenty of time to recover and finish him off."

I eyed the frozen form of Prepotente. “Something obviously went wrong.”

“When Pony cast the *Community Pool* spell, Fog activated a counter that threw the spell back at Pony. It burned through his protections.” Miriam took a deep, pained breath. “Because of his wards, Pony was not infected, and the curse did not leave my body. Pony countered the counter. The spell bounced back and forth between the two several times.” She indicated a fat ring on Prepotente’s stubby finger. It looked as if it once housed several jewels. They were all gone. All except one on the very end. It looked like a tiny soul crystal, and it glowed ominously, like it might explode at any moment.

“That is a five-time-use ring called Opposite Day. It activated, and it shot the remains of the spell at Fog, who in turn had a similar ring, which bounced the spell back. It ping-ponged back and forth between the two. Both ended up stunned multiple times, and as you might know, the stun effect compounds each time it is applied. After the third iteration, one becomes Fragile, which means even the slightest amount of damage kills the sufferer, which is why I haven’t been able to break myself free without hurting Pony. The whole thing happened in less than a second, so fast it took me a while to figure out what had happened.”

Donut: CARL, CARL LOOK AT PREPOTENTE’S OTHER HAND. AT THE OTHER RING!

Carl: I see it. Let her get there on her own.

“How did Fog die?” I asked.

“With the both of them stunned and attached to me, I was tempted to kill him myself. It would’ve been easy. But I feared he had one last trick up his sleeve that would take Pony with him, and I didn’t dare. Not when I knew he would perish on his own at sunset, which is what happened.”

“How did you know he’d die at sunset?”

“Spells, when they bounce back and forth so many times, have a tendency to fall, how do you say? Inside out. It is something we learned early on. It is how Pony is so effective at killing slowly. He takes simple, low-power spells, and he finds ways for the spell to

compound. That is what happened here. Fog had a new debuff. One titled Cursed Light Walker. I knew what that meant. While I die when exposed to light, his health slowly seeps if he is away from it. It is just as insidious of a curse. It's not what we intended, but it worked. Because he was frozen and unable to heal, he died and crumpled to dust."

"He was an opposite vampire!" Donut said. She turned to me. "I wonder how that works. Does he vomit blood on people instead of suck it away?"

"It doesn't matter," I said. "So, Pony... Prepotente hasn't been inflicted with either form of vampirism?"

"No," she said. "No, thank goodness. His wards have burned away, but they held." She swallowed. "However, when the spell bounced back and forth, something else happened. Something worse."

I returned my gaze back to the frozen form of Prepotente and the ring on his other hand. It was difficult to see through his dark robe in the low light, but I saw it there, glowing ever-so-slightly through his clothes. The spiderweb tattoo on his left elbow. He didn't just have the ring. He'd been using it.

"I didn't know anybody else had a Ring of Divine Suffering," I said. Mordecai had told me a few of these would appear in the dungeon, but this was the first I'd heard of one other than my own.

"He just got it," Miriam said. "I told him not to put it on, that it was a mistake. But he is stubborn. That's what his name means." Her voice broke, then. "He was always my stubborn little boy."

"Wait," Donut said, finally catching up. "He marked you? He can't heal? Why not?"

"It happened on its own," Miriam said. "When spells bounce back and forth like that, it can cause a magical burst. A burst like that causes magic items to behave erratically."

"Yeah," I said. "We saw that happen at the end of the third floor."

"I didn't see his ring activate. I didn't feel it happen. He can't talk to me. But I see the debuff in his status. One can't mark an NPC or an elite. I was the only eligible target in the area."

"Left to Fester," I said quietly.

"Yes. That is the debuff. Such an ugly name."

"You haven't woken him up because you can't. The stunned and fragile debuff might time out, but the spell you gave Donut won't work on him," I said.

"I actually don't know," she said. "I was hoping you'd come before I was forced to find out. I fear casting it prematurely might damage him. Spells do that sometimes if they don't work. He has but a single point of life in the fragile state."

"You didn't ask me here to protect you. You asked me here to kill you," I said.

"Yes," she agreed.

Donut: I DON'T UNDERSTAND.

Carl: Miriam wants to die, and I don't blame her. If she dies, all of the other crawlers who have been infected on this floor with vampirism will be cured. It will stop whatever Big Tina is doing with the body parts. And Pony will be able to heal. I don't even know if we can wake him up until she's dead. It's not clear how it works with debuffs.

Donut: IF WE KILL MIRIAM, PREPOTENTE WILL KILL US. IT'S WHAT I WOULD DO IF ANYBODY HURT YOU.

I reached up and rubbed Donut's head. A sense of helplessness washed over me, but I pushed it away. *Goddamn you. You will not break me.*

Carl: The smart thing to do would be to kill them both.

Donut: I DON'T WANT TO KILL EITHER OF THEM.

Carl: Neither do I. Miriam wants us to kill her before Pony wakes up. She hasn't said this out loud, but she's probably afraid he'll kill himself in a misguided attempt to save her. But we have other things to consider. I still don't know what the hell is going on with the Plenty, but they obviously like Pony because they're all fellow goats or whatever, and the last thing we need is another intergalactic conglomerate

trying to kill us. If one of them has to go, it makes sense that it's Miriam. Even without the ring thrown into the mix, her vampirism curse is terribly dangerous, and it's spreading fast.

Donut: THIS IS JUST LIKE WITH CHRIS. IT'S AN IMPOSSIBLE SITUATION.

Carl: No, Donut. It's not impossible. It's just hard. Very hard.

I took a deep breath.

"Miriam, I am not going to kill you. But I will stand watch with you. I'll keep you safe and Prepotente safe until the sun rises."

The shepherd woman nodded. Tears ran down her cheeks, and they were made of blood. They mixed with the rain before they hit the ground.

I held my hands behind my back so neither Donut, Miriam, nor the frozen form of Prepotente would see. I slipped my own ring of Divine Suffering onto my finger just as dawn broke.

You have marked Miriam Dom.

Miriam Dom's highest stat is Intelligence.

You have been infected with Left to Fester! This debuff will not go away until your mark is dead!

I knew people would think I was an idiot for not killing her myself, especially when she was going to die either way. Her bounty was worth 300,000 gold. And Prepotente was worth 1.2 million. Plus he had the ring and probably a host of other items.

It would be so easy.

But that's not who I was. She knew that. She could see that in me, and that's why I was the one she summoned. She needed someone to protect Prepotente after she was gone.

I thought of Drakea's note after Volteeg's one and only entry.

Fuck everything about this place.

I thought of Prepotente, watching this and unable to move. I imagined what he must be feeling.

I thought of my mother, who'd ruined everything when she'd gone.

Miriam leaned her head on Prepotente's frozen shoulder as the sun rose up over the trees. The rain had finally stopped, just long enough for the light to shine brightly on a clearing in the middle of the forest in this forsaken place. A health bar appeared, and it slowly started to drain away.

Donut: Carl? Would you do the same thing to save me?

Carl: Without hesitation.

I will break you all.

"My beautiful boy," Miriam whispered as she turned to dust. "My beautiful boy."

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[48]

Time to level collapse: Six days, fifteen hours.

System Message: A champion has fallen.

I took another step back, and I pulled the ring of Divine Suffering off my own finger and slipped it back into my inventory.

"Get ready," I whispered. "We don't know how he's going to react. He might unleash that Bianca thing on us."

"Are we going to let him stay with us?" Donut asked, looking down at the pile of dust.

Hell to the fuck no, I almost said out loud, but I remembered he could possibly hear us. "We'll see."

Nearby stood a literal stack of random potions and magical items and more plants than I could count. She'd spent the last few minutes dumping everything from her inventory. She'd feared that the act of turning to dust would make her body unlootable, and she'd been correct. She told me I could take a few items for myself if I wanted, in exchange for helping her. I promised her we'd give it all to Prepotente, and I intended on keeping that promise. Mostly.

She did have a pair of little, orange, traffic-cone like hats she'd taken off some gnome-like creature, and she told Donut it was okay if she had one of them. Donut tried not to show her excitement.

I didn't want to be obvious about it, but now that she was gone, I started examining everything she'd left behind. Most of the stuff I couldn't properly examine unless I picked it up. She had over forty scrolls of something called *Size Up*. I walked around out of Prepotente's sight and took two of them.

As I pulled the second scroll into my inventory, my interface flickered. The number **50** appeared and slammed into place just under the level timer.

"Carl, do you see that number thing?" Donut asked.

We were interrupted by another system message.

New Quest. The Creeping Apocalypse.

This is a world quest! All crawlers *and* all hunters currently active on the sixth floor will receive this quest!

You may not opt out of this quest.

Miriam Dom the vampire has fallen. With the rising of today's sun, she found herself caught out in the open. Helpless and crying, she burned away into dust. The callous crawlers Carl and Princess Donut watched and did nothing as she died in agonizing pain. Nothing!

(Actually, not nothing. Someone should probably ask Carl why he suddenly has three new points to his intelligence stat. Suspicious!)

Anyway, Miriam did not go quietly into the good night. Oh no. Her death has cured thousands of crawlers, monsters, and hunters who have been touched by the vampirism curse.

There is, however, a problem.

Some of the forest monsters infected with vampirism have spent the past few nights on a killing spree. And another vampire, a now-cured Allosaurus by the name of Big Tina, unfortunately has expended a lot of effort on building an army of undead monstrosities using the… leftovers… from the forest-wide slaughter.

These newly created monsters are not vampires, and they were not cured when Miriam died. These mindless freaks were left all alone, not under control from any entity.

Some are nothing more than mini-Grinders, also known as Shrillings, also known as Shambling Berserkers. We've all seen these before, most notably in some of the train stations at the end of the fourth floor. Yes, they can get pretty big and annoying, but it's not anything you really need to worry about. Hardly worth a regular quest, let alone a world one. You'd have to be a total idiot to let one of those things kill you, especially during the day. I'm looking at you, Nihit Kumar who's about two seconds from getting… Oh, that's a shame. Gross.

Anyway, some of the other, more powerful monsters have become something else, and short of a god, they are the most powerful monsters who have ever set foot on a sixth floor in *Dungeon Crawler World* history.

I like to call them Odious Creepers.

The good news? Like Shambling Berserkers, Odious Creepers tend to be pretty slow during the day. The bad news? When it's dark outside, they gain the ability to combine with both Shamblers and other Creepers and get even stronger. And they can get fast, very fast. They can replicate themselves, too, if they have the parts!

There are currently fifty of these things… growing around… the forest, plus another few thousand Shambling Berserkers of various sizes. For fun, we have randomized their location. And for extra fun, we have marked the location of each creeper on the map for you all.

So, here's the quest part. Kill all the Odious Creepers before the sun sets tonight.

For every Creeper you kill, you will receive +5 to a random stat. For every five you kill, you will receive an additional +5 levels. The crawler or hunter who kills the most will get an additional prize.

Only the person who does the most damage gets credit for the kill.

If you don't kill all of them before the sun sets tonight, bad stuff will happen. And I mean every single one of the

fifty Creepers. And by bad stuff, I mean something completely batshit. And not just to the crawlers, but the hunters, too. So all of you cowards sitting on your ass in Zockau need to get to work.

"Holy shit," I muttered.

"Carl, did you really use that ring on Miriam? After everything that just happened with Prepotente?"

I looked at the map, and the closest creeper thing was about five miles away.

"Also, have you noticed how the A.I. refers to itself as 'I' way more often than it used to? It always did, but something has changed."

I started to answer her, but Mordecai interrupted us.

Mordecai: I think I've seen this before on a smaller scale. Undead and bereft minions can get taken over by certain types of plants. If these are the self-building, glamoured fragments you saw earlier, they were likely going to turn into something called a Glamoured Creeper once they gained 70% of their bodies back. But now their boss is no longer able to control them, they've been commandeered by something else. Likely a plant called an Odious Blossom. The whole process is supposed to be rare and take a long time, but they've sped everything up to create this event. Listen to me. These things are going to be deadly. Deadlier than I have time to explain. Stay away from them. Don't even get close. They'll likely control all the vines in the area. They will rip body parts off people and use the parts to make themselves stronger. They will shoot poisonous darts. They will grow up out of the ground.

My messaging system blew up with chatter.

Carl: Mordecai, we can't just sit back and let everyone else do the work. Can you come up with something to kill it? Like with that Pestiferous Vine?

Mordecai: An Odious Bloom? Yes. But this is a different creature, and I don't know if anything I have will work. Not without a lot of trial and error. Things this big usually

require a full application, so we're talking an aerosol. Delivery is going to be a problem. With only half of a day… They want you to kill these things the old fashioned way. Hacking and burning, and that's going to be difficult. They're trying to draw the hunters back out. The prize for killing these things is a little *too* good, which means it's too dangerous. It's going to be a slaughter.

I added Katia to the chat, who was asking me what had happened with Miriam. I quickly gave her a rundown.

Katia: I've been doing the math based on what you said earlier, and I think some of these glamoured creepers will be as high as level 150, maybe more, and that's before they turned into these plant things. We'll have to attack in groups from afar. Eva's group has one right in the middle of them. Hopefully it takes them out, but if it doesn't, we'll have to move in.

Carl: Holy shit. Be careful. Make sure you only work with crawlers you trust. This has potential to get out of hand.

Donut: STAY AWAY FROM THAT DOG LADY. TSERENDOLGOR. WHAT KIND OF STUPID NAME IS THAT ANYWAY? HER MOM OBVIOUSLY DIDN'T LOVE HER.

Katia: Donut, she's a very nice person who had a very difficult life. And her name is Mongolian.

Donut: EVERYONE IS HAVING A DIFFICULT LIFE RIGHT NOW, KATIA. SHE DOESN'T GET EXTRA CREDIT BECAUSE SHE HAS A STUPID NAME.

Katia: Okay, Donut.

Mordecai: Guys, listen to me. For the sake of the gods. Stay away from them. This is going to be a clusterfuck.

Carl: Well, it's about to get even worse. Donut and I need to wake up the goat.

"Carl," Donut said. "I see a bunch of dots moving in. I think they're lady Mongos. How did you know that was going to happen? I swear, I think you're psychic sometimes."

"Is Tina with them?"

"I don't think so. I don't see a big dot."

"Okay," I said. "Let's do this quick."

I took a knee in front of Prepotente. It was weird. Even though he was motionless, I could feel it. I could sense it coming off of him, like electricity off a live wire. Or heat radiating off a stove. The sense of utter despair and anger and misery and loss.

He'd thought of Miriam as his mother. He'd just watched her die as he sat by, helpless.

Christ, I thought. I knew exactly how that felt. The realization was like a punch to the gut.

"Listen, buddy. We're gonna wake you up. I'm really sorry about what happened, and I wish I could take it back. She would want you to be strong, and she needs you to take care of all your brothers and sisters or whatever. You need to be strong for them. We have some monsters moving in, and we have to wake you up now. But don't kill these new monsters, okay? Donut and I need to do something with them."

I nodded at Donut, who cast the spell. She waved her paw, and Prepotente glowed.

And just like that, he was awake.

For several moments, the goat made no sound. He remained frozen in place, just blinking. I tensed, waiting for him to attack.

"They'll be here in a minute," Donut whispered. "They're coming in slow now, like they're hunting."

Prepotente slowly pulled the ring of Divine Suffering off his finger and dropped it to the dirt in front of him. My heart quickened, and I started to plan on how to get it for myself. I wondered what would happen if I wore two of them, if I'd be able to double up on the benefits.

But then he reached down, and he picked the ring back up, his fuzzy hands trembling. He popped the ring into his mouth, and he swallowed it whole.

He ate it. He ate the goddamn ring.

He fell to his hands and knees before the pile of dust that'd once been Miriam. The sun had come out for a few moments, but it was already starting to rain anew, and big, fat droplets fell upon the already rain-soaked ground, splashing into the only thing that

remained of the crawler. The drops splattered heavily into the piles of ash, washing them away.

He screamed at the pile of ash.

This wasn't his normal cry. This was haunting, almost silent, like he couldn't get the sound out. Like wind rushing across a desolate landscape.

He screamed, over and over until he had no more.

"Oh, mother," Prepotente finally said, his voice raspy. "Oh, mother, what did you do? Please. Please, no." He turned to look up at me and Donut. Muddy tears ran down his face. "She was going to play piano for me like she used to. She was going to sing me my special song."

Donut leaped from my shoulder and landed upon the shoulder of the smaller goat, who winced under her weight. She butted her head against his horn.

"I'm sorry you're hurting right now," Donut said, her voice unnaturally gentle. "You just sit here and have a good cry. Take as long as you need. Some monsters are about to come into the clearing, but don't you worry about them. Don't move, and let me and Carl take care of it."

Prepotente reached up and patted Donut on the side of the head just as Kiwi the velociraptor slunk into the clearing, head low, growling. She didn't attack, however, and she kept to the edge of the field. Multiple dots finally appeared on my map in a semi-circle, coming from the south.

"She said everything was going to be all right, but it was a lie. A dreadful lie," Prepotente said as Donut returned to my shoulder. His hands trembled. He was oblivious of the danger around us. "What am I going to do now?"

He paused, eyes going wide.

"It appears I've just received an emergency benefactor box from my sponsor," he said, sniffing. He returned his attention to the empty space on the ground, and he began to sob.

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There were twenty of them. They emerged from the woods, each about twenty meters back against the tree-line, poised. I knew they could clear the distance easily with a single leap. They held like this, ready to attack.

I took a moment to observe them. All, including Kiwi, were covered with blood. I knew these guys were some of the few dinos that had not been turned to vampires, and it appeared that was a hard-fought victory.

I'd already figured they'd be in the area. These things didn't talk, but they used to be intelligent creatures, and it was clear some of that remained. I figured if they weren't following Tina around, they would be hunting the source of the infection. If we hadn't shown up, they'd surely have attacked Miriam already.

Or maybe they'd been waiting for dawn, just to be safe. Either way, they were here now.

The remaining question was, what did they want? Tina—who was Kiwi's daughter—was cured of the vampirism curse. From what I gathered, this pack of women velociraptors spent most of their time following the kid around and protecting her and keeping her from getting herself into too much trouble. That had gone off the rails because of Miriam and the elite. But why were they still here? Why weren't they out there, seeking out the big dinosaur?

Their dots were red for me, but white for Donut. Mongo remained in his carrier. Mordecai warned his presence might negate

the spell.

Kiwi made a barking noise and took a step forward. All around, the others hunched, as if about to pounce. I tensed, ready to hit *Protective Shell*.

Donut: I NEED TO BE CLOSER FOR THE POTION TO WORK. IT SAYS IT ONLY LASTS FOR A MINUTE, AND I NEED TO MAKE SURE I DON'T ACCIDENTALLY CHARM THE WRONG ONE.

We only had one potion of *Charm Animal*, actually named *Charm Mongoliensis* now. The potion caused the closest eligible monster to be tamed by Donut for the duration of the floor. She wouldn't become a pet with a permanent bond, but she would be a minion, which was a similar sort of deal.

If we managed to actually charm Kiwi, she would, hopefully, bring the rest of the pack with her.

I realized charming Kiwi had always been the solution. This was still part of the Tina quest, and they wanted us to somehow enlist her help to solve the Tina problem. That potion recipe from the Plenty was a cheat. A shortcut. A way to guarantee we'd get involved in the quest, and ultimately, end up where we were right now. Protecting their precious Prepotente.

Kiwi looked between me and Donut. She rested her piercing gaze on me and growled again. Up and down the semi-circle of raptors, feathers bristled. A warning.

"I think you need to do this alone," I whispered.

Behind us, Prepotente continued to rock back and forth, muttering to himself, occasionally bursting into tears. He screamed a few times, his voice still hoarse.

"Don't worry, Carl," Donut said. "I'm quite practiced in the matter of taming dinosaurs."

She hopped off my shoulder and put her tail up, ramrod straight. She took a few steps toward Kiwi, whose feathers remained poofed out.

"Now, Kiwi," Donut said. "I'm prepared to forgive you for what you did to my poor Mongo, but that does not mean we can forget it. Just let me get a few steps closer, and we can discuss it like adults."

I could see it in the dinosaur's demeanor. She seemed to be fighting her every instinct to attack Donut. I'd seen it before, so many times, in so many places. That battle between what one used to be and what one had become.

"I wish you'd never given me that pet biscuit. It's not worth it," Prepotente said to his dead mother's ashes. "We'd all be gone now. It would be quite better, wouldn't it? We'd be together." I could barely hear him over the rain.

But no, I realized. The rain had stopped once again. My head throbbed.

Fuck everything about this place.

I kept my mental finger on the *Protective Shell*, ready to slam it down. With my newly-enhanced intelligence, the shell would be plenty big enough to protect Donut, myself, and Prepotente. If only for a few precious moments.

It wasn't necessary. Donut stopped about ten feet in front of the pink dinosaur. Kiwi cocked her head to the side, just like how Mongo did sometimes before he screamed and attacked. Donut glowed, and about three seconds later, Kiwi also glowed. The dinosaur shrieked, long and loud. Her dot turned white, and the green X appeared into the dot, indicating her as either a mercenary or a minion. A moment later, the dots of all the other raptors turned white. They did not gain the green cross pattern.

Multiple more lady Mongo dots appeared on my map, raising the total to just under forty. They'd been behind us, and I hadn't even realized. And then others, too. More of those small bambiraptors, whose dots remained red, but they quickly moved off. I examined the pink dinosaur as the others all moved into the clearing, no longer in a battle formation.

Her demeanor hadn't changed too much. She still appeared as if she wanted to rip my throat out, despite the dot on the map changing color.

Kiwi. Mongoliensis Pack Leader – Level 60.

This is a minion of Princess Donut.

"Good job," I said to Donut as the raptor sniffed at my crotch and growled. "You did it."

"Of course I did it, Carl," said Donut. "After all the torture we put Mongo through, what else did you expect? Now, Kiwi, we do have a few rules to go over. Rule number one is not to molest Mongo again. Rule number two is to not eat Carl."

Kiwi looked at me and squawked, sounding disappointed.

"That should probably be rule number one," I said as more of the pony-sized dinosaurs started sniffing at me. One snapped at the air inches away from my junk, and I almost pissed myself. They were ignoring Prepotente, but they seemed to find me fascinating.

"You can take care of yourself, Carl," Donut said. "Just don't get them riled up." She returned her attention to Kiwi. "Also, I'd like for you to introduce me to each of your friends. I must insist upon knowing everyone's names if we're all going to be working together."

I looked over the group, counting. There were a total of thirty-six velociraptors. Most hovered around level 40. A few had a strange debuff over them.

Immortalized.

There was a 29-hour countdown with each debuff.

I had never seen nor read about that one. I sent a note to Mordecai, and he said it came from being cured of vampirism. Anyone with the debuff would be at half strength and mana and unable to heal for the duration of the debuff while they were in direct sunlight. The debuff wouldn't affect them if they were in shadow. In direct moonlight, the debuff would turn to a buff: plus 50% strength and mana and double healing speed. Right now, the sky was overcast, so these guys were unaffected. The rain kept starting and stopping, but a thick layer of clouds had moved in and remained heavy in the sky.

I wondered if those Odious Creepers were suffering from something similar. I sent a note out to the main chat.

A few of the dinosaurs finally started to notice Prepotente, sitting there on the ground. He grumbled about the attention and waved at them to go away. A few snapped angrily at him, deliberately keeping their distance. He growled back, which worried me.

Donut only had true control over Kiwi, and if something happened to her, we'd be in trouble. I needed to remember that all

of these guys were different from Mongo. We did not have an army of Mongos now. We had—*Donut* had—one minion, who controlled her own army. That was a major difference.

"Okay, Kiwi," Donut was saying. "I'm going to bring Mongo out now. He might be scared at first, so please be gentle with him. You might want to think about apologizing to him for taking advantage of him like that."

"Uh, Donut," I said, "Maybe we should wait until..."

Mongo appeared, zapping into place between Donut and Kiwi, who squawked and jumped away at the sudden appearance of the male dinosaur. She angrily bit at him, who shrieked and snapped back. They both started barking like pissed-off geese, circling one another while other dinosaurs scattered, almost knocking me over.

"Mongo, no!" Donut cried. "It's Kiwi!"

All of the others crowded around Mongo and started sniffing at him. He cried and tried to move away, but he was quickly circled. He squeaked in fear.

"Mongo, it's okay," Donut called. "Ladies, give him some room!" She returned to my shoulder to get a better view of the crowd. "Mommy is right here. Kiwi has agreed to help us. Don't worry, Mongo."

One of the lady Mongos—not Kiwi—bent down in front of Mongo, face down, butt in the air, presenting herself to him, wiggling her tail enticingly. Mongo suddenly didn't appear so scared anymore. But before anything could happen, Kiwi saw this and hissed angrily, pouncing through the air and tackling the offending female, who hissed but shrank back.

"Good girl! Good Kiwi!" Donut said. "I'm glad we understand... Kiwi, no! Mongo! Not again! Bad!"

"So much for rule number one," I said a moment later.

While this went on, I finally noticed that Prepotente had returned to his feet. He'd collected all of the loot from Miriam. He had a wand in

his hand. He hung his head low, and he faced away from the circle of screeching dinosaurs.

"Hey, Prepotente," I said, stepping back. Donut remained on my shoulder, complaining loudly. I'd told her to just let it happen, but she didn't listen. "Hey, you doing okay, buddy?"

I tensed as he pointed the wand at an empty space in the field. A blue square, about one by one meter appeared on the ground, flattening the grass around it. The goat put the wand away and stepped onto the square.

"Carl, do you see that?" Donut said, attention suddenly on the spot on the ground. "It's a safe space!"

"I only have one charge left after this one," Prepotente said, his voice uncharacteristically monotone. "It lasts for three minutes."

"Wait, what are you doing?" I asked, suddenly alarmed. A wand that created a temporary, tiny safe space? My mind swirled with possibilities. That was better than *Protective Shell*. A lot better.

But then I saw the adventurer box appear in midair, swirl and start to open. He was using the space to open his loot boxes. *What a waste*, I thought. Even with an emergency benefactor box. But now that he'd cast it, I waited, curious to see what would come out.

He had a ton of boxes. He received mysterious potion after potion along with several scrolls, none of which he bothered to explain. Finally, the benefactor box—a *legendary* benefactor box—opened with a loud fanfare. There was only ten seconds left on the safe space when the two items appeared.

It looked like a handheld bicycle pump with a tin can welded underneath the nozzle. He'd also received a piece of paper.

"It looks like a giant version of one of those perfume bottles Miss Beatrice used to have," Donut said.

"It's not for perfume," I said.

It was a vintage-style spray applicator. Something one would use to spray herbicide onto a garden. You'd put the poison in the tin can part and push the pump to apply the mist. The applicator disappeared into his inventory. He read the paper before it also disappeared.

"Carl. Do you have any fine healing potions? I only have two," he asked.

I had about fifty of them.

"Yeah. A few," I said cautiously. I thought of the ring he'd swallowed. "Do you need one? How's your stomach?"

"Give them to me. I need at least five more. I have all the other required ingredients."

"*Give* them to you?" I asked.

"Consider it payment for the *Size Up* scrolls you stole from my mother."

I paused. "Tell me what's on the paper, and I will."

"It's just a potion recipe for a herbicide. Fine healing mixed with blessed water and a weedkiller. But it'll only work if it's applied using my new magical canister. It has to be turned to a very fine mist."

I sighed and pulled out five potions without any further complaint. Behind us, the festivities were coming to an end, and I was too tired to argue. I handed them to the goat. But even as I did, I sent a note to Mordecai. I remembered a bomb recipe in my cookbook specifically designed to turn chemicals into an aerosol. I just needed to figure out how to explain how I would know this. And fast.

"I've made a decision, Carl and Princess Donut. I don't expect you'll understand, but I am quite determined."

"Okay," I said, still distracted by the problem with the recipe.

He waved his hand, and Bianca materialized. The large, pitch-black, evil-looking goat monster chittered. Multiple dinosaurs screeched angrily. Donut gasped as I jumped back in surprise. Heat filled the clearing.

Bianca was much bigger than the last time I'd seen her only a few days before. She'd gone from level 33 to 40. She now had a full set of black, smoking wings. And a saddle. Prepotente pulled himself upon the back of the creature, which was the size of a large rhinoceros.

She still had ten more levels before she would be full-sized.

He leaned in. "Yes, Bianca," he said. He paused, and I had the sense he really was talking to the demon. "Yes. She's gone. No. You

can’t eat any of them. We can, however, fly now. We are no longer tethered to the ground or to moonlight. We need to hurry. We are going to level-up several times today.”

The goat returned his attention back to me and Donut. “If I can’t exist in a world with my mother, then nobody even remotely responsible for her death can exist in this world, either. I am going to kill all of them, or I am going to perish trying.”

I just looked up at the goat. Translucent, black-hued flames crackled across Bianca’s body, which smelled of burned flesh. With Prepotente on the saddle, he also burned with the black flames, and the sight was terrifying to behold.

I had a strange, sudden feeling, one I couldn’t quite understand. It was an unexpected mix of fear, sadness, but something else. Hope, maybe? Pride? I didn’t know. As much as I couldn’t stand this guy, there was comfort there. Comfort in knowing we were on the same page.

“Why do you think I wouldn’t understand?”

Prepotente just nodded.

The goat’s demeanor had greatly changed from the first time I’d met him. *Trauma does that*, I thought. *It’s an explosion with your heart at the center. It changes everything all at once*.

“Thank you for being with her when she died. I’ll see you two at the party, if not before. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have enough applications to kill twenty of these Creeper monsters, and I plan on not wasting a drop.”

Bianca spread her wings and flapped a few times as a group of raptors hesitantly surrounded the hellspawn familiar, growling and hissing. We all had to take another step back.

As we watched them lift up off the ground, I noted Prepotente was currently level 57, one above my level 56.

Donut: CARL. I’VE JUST HAD A TERRIBLE THOUGHT. DO YOU THINK THE PLENTY WANTED MIRIAM TO DIE?

Carl: Yes, Donut. I believe they did.

I didn’t add that I was almost certain that Prepotente believed this, too. This was also something that trauma could do. It could

make you blind, and it could open your eyes wider than they'd ever been, all at the same time.

The implications of this, I could not predict.

Out loud, I said. "We need to hurry back to the saferoom. See if you can figure out how to communicate with Kiwi as we go. We need to figure out why she sought you out."

"She sought me out because she wanted to get her filthy claws back onto my Mongo," Donut said, looking back at where the two remained, both on their sides, panting.

"There's more to it than that. I have this weird suspicion that all of this is a lot more important than I realized before."

"Hey, at least Prepotente doesn't blame us for the death of his mother," Donut said as we set out.

I wasn't so sure about that, either.

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Trophy Count: 52
Remaining Hunters: 673

"He *ate* the ring?" Mordecai asked after we returned to the closest saferoom. I'd run straight to the bomber's studio, but I was now out. Donut sat at the open door, shouting out through it at Mongo and Kiwi. She'd been regaling Mordecai with the tale of everything that had happened. Prudence the ursine barkeep sat on the couch with both of her cubs on either side. Samantha was in her lap, getting her hair stroked by the bear. I didn't ask. Bomo and the Sledge were also in the room, all with their attention on the screen, which was now showing some ridiculous 90's horror movie I'd never seen starring a young Denise Richards and a giant, animatronic tyrannosaurus rex. "He swallowed it whole?"

"That's what I'm saying."

Mordecai muttered under his breath.

"Does eating a ring do anything?" Donut asked Mordecai. "Is it going to turn his tummy into lava or something? Mongo, don't eat that!"

"Donut, I have no clue. You're all crazy. I've seen a few classes and races that require one to consume metal or other objects, but I don't think that's what this is. I think it's just going to eventually make its way out again."

"Maybe he just eats things when he gets sad. Miss Beatrice used to do that sometimes, but then she'd make herself vomit afterward. It was quite disgusting. Carl, I saw the way you were looking at that ring. I do hope you're not planning on trying to get it because I will not have you wearing something that was pooped out by a goat."

Mordecai gave me a sharp look, but we were interrupted by the shout of the innkeeper through the open door. The adjoining pub was not a true saferoom, and Mongo and Kiwi and four clockwork dinosaurs—two Mongos and two Kiwis—bounced around while the dryad innkeeper watched sullenly. This was yet another Prepotente-owned town, and thankfully the guards hadn't automatically attacked, despite there being a Diwata temple in the center of town.

The guards had given a wide berth to the progression of dinosaurs entering town. We'd only let Mongo and Kiwi enter the actual pub, which was named "The Belching Termite." I wanted them to get used to each other, and I needed Kiwi to get used to the clockwork versions of herself. The others all parked themselves outside and were likely wreaking havoc. The innkeeper hadn't said anything until now.

"Mongo! Bad! Kiwi! Don't encourage him!" The sound of a table crashing over echoed while the innkeeper bellowed again.

System Message: An Odious Creeper has fallen. Crawler Prepotente has been given credit for the kill. 40 Creepers remain.

"That's his third," I said.

So far, of the ten creepers to have fallen, eight were to crawlers, one was to a hunter named Fickler, and one didn't give a name, which suggested it was killed either by an NPC or it had accidentally offed itself. I didn't know any of the listed killers except Prepotente.

They were all listed as city bosses, and their levels ranged from 130 and up. Considering their supposed strength, I thought "city" was a bit of an insult.

"Knock, knock," Katia said, rushing into the room from the guildhall entrance, Louis in tow. They both paused at the sight of the open door right next to their entrance, with Donut standing there, shouting.

"Whoa," Louis said, looking through the door. "Katia, look. There's a pink Mongo! Mongo has a girlfriend!"

"She is *not* his girlfriend," Donut snapped. "Kiwi! Don't eat that! Mongo! Stop. Hey, hey! You! You're a clockwork robot, for goodness sake. What do you think you're doing? It's not like you can get pregnant. Stop it!"

"That door is just, like, open," Louis said, taking another step toward it. "What would happen if I went through it?"

"Nothing good," Mordecai said, "You can't fast travel that way, so get away."

Katia was in her large, she-hulk form. A large smear of blood ran down her chest.

"Level 54?" I asked, looking her up and down.

Katia had a determined look to her face, and I was, once again, struck with how much she'd changed. She was all business. "Gwen and the others have two of those things cornered. They're both in the large bush elf village with Eva's crew, and we can see that they're fighting them, but we don't know what else is going on. I'm afraid it's too late to save most of the population. Did you know Li Jun had been turned into a vampire? He hadn't told anybody except his sister and Zhang. I'm still pissed at him for not saying anything. He was cured when Miriam died. Did you really use that ring on her?"

"She's a lot bigger than Mongo," Louis was saying to Donut as he continued to peer through the door. The monkey in the innkeeper's branches was now shrieking while a clockwork Kiwi yelled back, hissing. We were going to have to go back out there and intervene in a minute.

"You go, buddy! I like the bigger ladies, too," Louis shouted at Mongo. Mongo looked at Louis through the door and squawked, waving his little wings joyfully.

Louis turned to Donut. "I had Juice Box do this Ursula thing once, you know, from *Little Mermaid*, and you wouldn't believe how awesome it was."

"So," Katia said to Mordecai, ignoring all of this. "Did you make the stuff?"

Mordecai grunted and indicated a set of four moonshine jugs on the counter. Each were full of a bubbling, yellow liquid. Upon examination, it labeled them:

Uncle Morty's Insta Lawn-Kill and Undead Repellant, Extra-Strength Edition.

Mordecai patted one of the bottles, which was almost as big as him. "Based on what Prepotente said and what he received, I took an existing weedkiller designed to take out an odious bloom and then added multiple anti-undead boosts to it, similar to the holy grenade I'd made earlier for Carl. Each jug has enough to kill two or three of 'em. Maybe four if you're conservative." He pointed a claw at Louis. "Do not get close to those things. That spell of yours has a decent range. Only apply it at maximum distance. This stuff is *very* flammable despite my best efforts, and if you catch it on fire before it can get absorbed into the monster, it's not going to work." He shook his head. "I still think this is too dangerous. But nobody listens to Mordecai anymore, do they?"

"Apparently you're 'Uncle Mordecai' now," I said as I took two of the jugs.

It turned out Louis's Extermination Professional class came with the perfect delivery system. He had an ability called Tent the House, which basically allowed him to take a potion and deliver it in a wide area. If he cast it from the deck of the *Twister*, he could cover an even wider area. He could only do it once every six hours, which meant he could only do it three times before it got dark, and only if he did the first one almost right away.

Mordecai turned to me. "Even with that strong arm of yours, you won't be able to soak these things easily. I hope whatever you were tinkering with works. You weren't in there very long."

"It wasn't hard to figure out," I lied. "The hobgoblin smoke curtains are basically the same thing as what we need. I just need to replace that brown liquid stuff that makes the smoke with this weedkiller and change out the charge to the magical one from the store. That way, it won't catch on fire. The problem is, we need to combine several together just to get a decent spray, so each device is going to be big. I just tested it with straight water in the bomber's

studio, and it worked. Sort of. We'll have to use four to get accurate coverage."

Mordecai looked at me suspiciously. "Does it still label it as an explosive if you remove the charge?"

"No. Unfortunately," I said. "So I won't be able to throw it as far as normal, not that I could anyway. Like I said, each one takes four modified smoke curtains, and I need to deploy three of the devices at the same time. So 12 smoke curtains just for one attack, which is a little expensive. And they have to go off over the thing's head. Each package of three bombs is the size of a trash can."

"And you figured this out on the first try? You were only in there for five minutes."

"Hey, it took three tries. And yes, I am just that good," I said with false bravado. I knew this was a stupid risk, using a cookbook recipe, but we didn't have time. As it was, there was no way I could justify building the larger-scale aerosol bomb from the cookbook, which was actually much smaller physically but with a bigger yield. I figured three "smaller" ones would work just as well. The problem was, these needed to be delivered at a distance, exploded in the air, and they were damn huge. Because the system didn't label it as an "explosive," my ability to throw the thing was not magically enhanced, which was going to be a problem.

Mordecai warned us that we needed to be far, far away when we attacked. At least a half kilometer, and preferably more. He said the beast would have the ability to control all the foliage in a wide area to attack. My chat was already filled with panicked warnings about this. We'd lost a group of three crawlers already who were squeezed to death by vines. The slow-moving monster took their body pieces and made itself bigger.

"You're not going to use the levitation potion, are you?" Mordecai asked. "They can shoot poison darts. You might not get poisoned, but you won't be as safe as Louis will be in the *Twister*. Just a little bump, and you get knocked out of the sky."

"No," I said.

"He is going to use me," Samantha said.

I jolted. Just a minute ago, she'd still been on Prudence's lap. On the screen, the t-rex attacked a party, complete with cheesy, gory special effects.

"Not this time," I said to the sex doll. I patted her hair, and she snapped at my finger. "But we might come back and use you if we have to. The delivery system is too big to tape to your head."

System Message: An Odious Creeper has fallen. Crawler Eva has been given credit for the kill. 39 Creepers remain.

"Damnit," Katia said. "Come on, Louis."

"Bye Carl and Donut," Louis said as he scooped up the remaining two jugs. "Bye Mongo and Mongo's girlfriend! Bye Samantha! Bye rock dudes and bear dudes and Mordecai!"

Samantha sighed as Louis left. "Juice Box is so lucky."

"Kiwi, no!" Donut shouted, rushing out into the pub.

"That's my cue," I said, heading toward the door.

System Message: An Odious Creeper has fallen. 38 Creepers remain.

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As it turned out, my delivery system was unnecessarily over-engineered. The venomous elven rock chucker trebuchet device, which we'd taken from the Dream hunters, came with a Poison Cloud enhancement. I'd assumed that it was a separate and self-contained spell, but it turned out you could change the delivery poison if you poured a potion directly into a little cup on the side of the sling. There still had to be a projectile, and I had plenty of 300 pound rocks.

That was interesting. It meant we'd had a method of killing these things all along. We just hadn't realized what we had. I pondered on that, if this world quest was designed this way on purpose, a way to give me a method to power level. We still needed Mordecai's potion, and these things were all spread to the wind, but still, it made one wonder.

Aiming was a problem since my *Ping* spell didn't work on these guys, but thankfully they moved slowly. This would never be a viable method with a real mobile target.

We set up in a clearing about a mile short of the closest creeper. It continued to rain, and everything was mud. I couldn't actually see the monster, but its location was clear on the map. Donut scrambled up a tree at the edge of the tree-line and emerged out the top. She went up so high, I couldn't even see her.

Mongo and Kiwi followed Donut up the tree. The other 30-something dinosaurs shadowed us at a distance, mostly patrolling

the woods, killing everything in the area. It was good to basically have a circle of bodyguards, but our slow-but-steady experience grind had completely stalled. I figured we'd deal with it once we took care of all these undead things.

Donut: I CAN'T SEE IT, BUT I CAN TELL WHERE IT IS. THE TREES ARE ALL MOVING AROUND IT. I THINK IT'S BIG. I THOUGHT IT WAS JUST SUPPOSED TO BE A FRANKENSTEIN PERSON.

Carl: Okay. I have no idea how to aim this thing, so I'm just going to fire a rock. You tell me if it's close, and we can aim from there. Heads up.

I'd already spiked the trebuchet into the muddy grass. I ratcheted it back, counting each of the clicks, and I attached the sling. I didn't bother wasting any of the potion. Once it was set, I pulled the lever. The eight-foot-tall device made a whooshing noise as the two plates came together, slinging the large rock away.

Donut: YOU MISSED, CARL. IT WASN'T EVEN CLOSE.

Carl: I figured, Donut. You need to tell me how much I missed by.

Donut: YOU MISSED BY A LOT.

Carl: Goddamnit, Donut. I need details.

We went back and forth like this for a while. Eventually, we came up with an aiming system, and by the sixth attempt, we managed to smash a rock directly into the trees right above the unseen, slow-moving monster.

New Achievement! B'sieging!

You've used siege equipment to zero in and attack a boss monster from afar. That's cheating! It's like trying to kill someone with a bomb. What a bitch move!

***Reward*: You've received a Silver Siege Master Box!**

Donut: I RECEIVED A VERY RUDE ACHIEVEMENT. MONGO AND KIWI ARE APPALLED.

Carl: I got it, too. Okay. Next attack will contain the poison. If this works, then I can keep my garbage can poison bombs for something else.

As I set up, a message came.

System Message: An Odious Creeper has fallen. Crawler Prepotente has been given credit for the kill. 31 Creepers remain.

That was six for him. He was making his way west, but after that one, there weren't any others near him. I looked over the map.

Donut: HE'S GOING TO BE REALLY STRONG. I HOPE HE DOESN'T TRY TO KILL ANY OF OUR CREEPERS.

Carl: He's either going to backtrack toward us or move deeper into the woods. If we manage to kill this one, he'll probably move north over the river.

Now that Prepotente had a flying mount—one that seemed to fly very fast—he could move freely across the map. But this was a big world, and the remaining monsters were at all the corners of the map... all except the southeast, which housed the castle of the high elves.

I looked worriedly at the two creepers that were at the very northern tip of the map, in the "noob" plains north of Zockau, the area designed for the hunters to gain experience. No crawlers were going to get anywhere near those guys, and other than that first one, it didn't appear as if any of the hunters had bothered killing the ones in their area. The quest was pretty clear that *all* of the creepers had to be killed.

Eva's team had been mostly wiped out by the creepers, but Eva, of course, had once again escaped. Katia and the others were about to move in on the remaining creeper using the *Twister*. They were waiting for my confirmation that Mordecai's weedkiller actually worked.

Carl: Okay. I'm adding the poison to the trebuchet. Let's see if this works. Firing now.

I hit the lever, and the rock went flying.

Donut: YOU HIT IT PERFECTLY. THE GREEN STUFF IS GETTING ALL MESSED UP BY THE RAIN.

Carl: Mordecai said it would actually help. He said it would be quick.

Sure enough, the notification came just a few seconds later.

System Message: An Odious Creeper has fallen. Crawler Princess Donut has been given credit for the kill. 30 Creepers remain.

"What the hell," I muttered.

Donut clambered down the tree and landed on my shoulder, all poofed out and proud, despite being soaked by the rain. Mongo and Kiwi scrambled down a moment later, expertly jumping from branch to branch like they were born in the trees.

Katia: Good job, Donut!

Donut: I MUST SAY, IT WAS A LOT EASIER THAN I THOUGHT IT WOULD BE FOR SOMETHING SUCH A HIGH LEVEL. I WENT UP TWO LEVELS TO 47.

I was about to bitch about her getting credit and not me, but I thought better of it. She needed the levels anyway.

Mordecai: Good. Good. I forgot to mention that the spotter usually gets the lion's share of credit when it comes to siege equipment.

Forgot my ass. "At least I got a boss box," I muttered. "Did you get plus five to a stat?"

"I did!" Donut said, beaming. "It was to my strength! It's now base 58!"

"That's good," I said. I was hoping it'd be to her constitution, but strength was always good. Anything was good as long as it wasn't her damn Charisma, which was already at 130.

System Message: An Odious Creeper has fallen. Crawler Louis Santiago 2 has been given credit for the kill. 29 Creepers remain.

Carl: Good job, guys!

Firas: That was scary as shit. It poked a bunch of holes into the garden. It can shoot those thorns far. And they're big. Like ballista bolts.

Elle: That was pretty intense. That thing was huge. Level 173. Most fun I've had since we got to this ridiculous floor.

Donut: NOT FAIR. THE ONE I KILLED WAS ONLY LEVEL 138.

Carl: You guys should go for that one 15 miles west of you when Louis's spell resets. Right against the edge of the map. I don't know if anyone else is out there.

Louis: I don't know if I can stomach that again.

Katia: We're already on it. I'm worried about those two north of Zockau.

Carl: I was just thinking the same thing. Hopefully one of the hunters will have the balls to do it.

Donut: IT WON'T BE VRAH, I BET. HER LADY BALLS ARE STILL ON FIRE.

Katia: Maybe. They might be thinking it's best to just let the quest fail and wait it out in a saferoom.

Shit, I thought. She was probably right. But what could we do? None of us could get there before nightfall.

"Hey," I said to Donut. "You should try to talk Prepotente into going after those two creepers up north. You're the only one he'll listen to."

"He doesn't answer me anymore," Donut said. "But I'll try."

The next odious creeper was approximately twenty miles southeast of us, and we had to travel over a bumpy, muddy road to get close. It took several hours to get there.

Even though Kiwi, sort of, did what Donut commanded, the pink dinosaur was constantly trying to pull us in a different direction. We were moving southeast, and Kiwi wanted us to go directly east. She kept screeching and attempting to veer us off course. A sharp command from Donut, and she'd get back on track for about a half hour before she did it again.

She's trying to lead us to Big Tina.

After we were about halfway to the next dot, she raised her head in the air and howled. All around us, the surrounding velociraptors just disappeared, veering off and away. Just like that. In seconds, it

was just the four of us. She'd just sent her troops to look after the big dinosaur.

That ended up being a good thing because it gave us the opportunity to grind on the forest monsters and the occasional shambling berserker, and it gave Donut some much-needed practice with commanding both Mongo and Kiwi in battle.

I knew we'd lose the female dinosaur once we went down a floor, which was too bad. As great as Mongo was, he was nothing compared to the larger, faster raptor. She was terrifyingly fast. Boa constrictor things started dropping out of the trees at us, and she'd be on them in seconds, faster than any of us, chomping them in half.

Still, it was good experience for her, and it was good for Mongo, too.

Fifteen more creepers fell as we traveled, leaving 14 on the map with only a few hours of sunlight left. Louis had killed two more for a total of three, and Prepotente had managed to get two more as well, making his total eight. He'd moved north like I hoped he would, which gave me hope he'd attempt the ones in the hunter region, but we hadn't heard from him in a while.

There was no sign of Eva, and it seemed she was once again traveling solo. Li Jun, Li Na, and Chris, along with several others who were not on the *Twister*, had moved into the town after Louis had bombed the second creeper to death to find several of Eva's team—a mix of former daughters and members of Team Cichociemni—had abandoned the woman when she'd insisted on attacking the second creeper head on. They'd incurred heavy losses after the first battle.

"We're getting close," Donut said. "Should we set up the chucker thing here?"

I was about to respond when the dot on the map suddenly disappeared.

System Message: An Odious Creeper has fallen. 13 Creepers remain.

"Hey!" Donut cried. "Something stole our kill!"

"Damn," I said. "Come on, let's go see what it is. Be careful."

Both Kiwi and Mongo screeched and started to growl at the same time. The rain around us suddenly stopped, and sun shone down

through the tops of the trees. It happened so fast, I paused, looking up at the sky. *What the hell*?

"Wait, Carl," Donut said, leaping onto my shoulder. We were both still soaked. "Something is happening. Our views are getting really high."

"Shit," I said, seeing that she was right. *Of course*, I thought. I was pretty sure I knew what was happening. We needed to get the hell out of here.

But it was too late. I saw the white dots on the map, emerging one after another. They were all around us. At least a hundred of them, and those were just the ones I could see. I contemplated risking a *Ping* just to get an accurate count. I decided against it. For now.

"I think some of them are riding things," Donut said. "One is big!"

"Keep the dinosaurs calm," I hissed before they appeared. "But if we have to fight, send Kiwi in first while we run."

Two, bone-white stags entered the clearing, prancing with disciplined practice. Each animal was the size of a draft horse, and their antlers rose straight up into the air, sporting multiple points. Everything about the creatures was white, except their hooves and their noses. Even their eyes were nothing but pools of milky white. One snorted, and a cloud of steam came from its mouth and nose, almost like it was a machine. Each was a level-50 **Moon Sambhur**.

Mounted on each stag was an elf. Both were male, svelte, with pale skin and long, white hair that looked like it just came from the salon. They wore shining, plate-style armor straight out of the *Lord of the Rings*.

But I only gave these guys a cursory glance. Just as the stags stopped, a third mount entered the clearing. This newcomer stole all of my attention.

It was an albino, bone-white rhinoceros, thick, armored skin matching the stags. The thing was damn huge. I'd never really been up close to a real rhinoceros before, so I wasn't certain how big these things normally were, but I had the impression this thing was bigger than normal. Unlike the stags, this thing's eyes glowed a deep

red. It, also, clomped into the clearing with the clipped, practice stomp of a parade animal. The scent of perfume filled the clearing.

Simoom. Heavy Battle Rhino Mount. Level 75.

Upon the back of Simoom the rhinoceros was a curtained, ridiculously ornate, square-shaped litter. The box was only about a meter tall and wide. The white dot of the hidden rider appeared on the map just above the rhino. The white and gold embroidered curtains on the litter glowed slightly purple, which I recognized as a magical shield. The curtains weren't fully opaque, and I could see a shape within moving about. I couldn't tell what it was, but it was small, and it either had a mushroom-shaped head or it was wearing a big hat. I attempted to examine it, but I couldn't get much information.

Howdah containing the Familiar of Queen Imogen of the High Elves.

This NPC is Intangible. You may not physically touch it.

This NPC is Invulnerable. You may not harm it.

The two male elves were the guards. Both were armed with long, silvery lances that glowed with enchantment. The lance on our left dripped with muddy gore. Both guards were absurdly good looking, like elves from the Dream, but with long, flowing hair and skin filtered through one of those apps that turned you into a soap opera star.

Each was a level 70 **High Elf Guard**. When I examined them, it didn't give their names, which was unusual for a white-tagged NPC. Even the two stags had names—Herschel and Hjort.

This is a high elf. A DNA test would tell you that they're identical to bush elves, but that's only because DNA tests don't detect when someone has a giant stick rammed up their ass. The big difference between the two groups is that high elves make a lot more money and pay a lot less in taxes. They probably spend all that extra cash on skin moisturizer and hair conditioner. Plus, they all live in a fancy castle that's protected by a mysterious artifact.

They looked upon the four of us like we'd just climbed up from the sewers. Mongo growled uncertainly and pressed up against the

side of Kiwi, who lowered her head and growled more deeply.

Carl: Keep them calm!

The procession came to a stop about twenty feet in front of us. All around us, the woods rustled. I caught sight of multiple elves, all on foot. Most were armed with bows. Others weren't armed at all and had glowing hands.

"Hello, Carl," a gruff, male voice said. It came from the shrouded litter atop the rhino.

"Princess Donut. Mmmm." He made an odd grunt. It sounded creepy, lecherous, like when the AI talked about my feet, or like a drunk dude at a bar hitting on someone a third his age.

The voice was not what I expected. At all. It reminded me of an older version of Quasar my attorney. Like a guy from New York. Not anything one would associate with a high elf.

"Excuse you," Donut started to say, but I held up a hand to stop her. Both Mongo and Kiwi had stopped growling and stood right next to me, sniffing at the air as if they, too, were surprised by the voice.

"Hey there," I called up to the hidden speaker. "I didn't realize you knew who we were."

"The trees still speak to Queen Imogen, despite her mongrel sister's insistence that they do not. I speak for her today, and you will address me properly."

"I can't even see you," I said. "Aren't you just the queen's familiar? How does one address the queen's pet? Should I rub your belly and scratch behind your ear?"

One of the stags breathed out a puff of white steam. None of the guards moved beyond that, but the simple motion sent a chill through me.

"At another time," the voice said, "I would be obliged to demonstrate to you the meaning of respect, but my Queen wishes for you to attend the Masquerade in a few days. She is fascinated by you, Carl, for reasons I cannot fathom." He paused. "She has already placed you upon her *programme du bal*. You will be required to dance with her. And while this occurs, I have taken the liberty of scheduling you, Princess Donut, to dance with *me*. Perhaps you will get a glimpse of how true royalty lives." He made a low, deep growl.

I once again waved Donut down as he continued.

"But the issue at hand is these creatures which have invaded our lands. Due to your insufferable incompetence, we have been forced to venture forth from the castle to deal with it. If your intention was to fight the one we just killed, you're obviously too late. You are fortunate that both of you are currently on the guest list for the masquerade. I am ordered to exterminate all other vermin. Now if you will excuse us, we have other, similar creatures to hunt down and deal with before the sun sets."

"If you can, you should try to deal with the ones near Zockau," I said.

The creature grunted. They all started moving away, all at once if by some psychic command. All around us, the woods came alive as the elves slinked back into the trees. "We are only concerned with the Liana district, which is south of the infested river," the creature called as they passed by. We remained frozen in place, not daring to move. "But that does remind me. Queen Imogen would like for me to pass on a message to your friend, Signet. I don't suppose you'll relay it for me?"

"What is it?" I called after the rhinoceros.

The curtain of the back of the litter shifted, and a lightning bolt shot forth, directly at Mongo.

"No!" Donut shouted, diving from my shoulder. I watched in horror as she literally caught the lightning bolt with her chest. She lit up like a beacon and ricocheted away, flying off into the woods, where she slammed into a tree, which exploded like a bomb. The tree crunched and tumbled away, taking out more trees with it.

At the same moment, Kiwi roared and sailed through the air at the back of the rhinoceros. She bounced off like it had a *Protective Shield*. She, too, flew back, howling and suddenly aflame.

Donut hadn't completely blocked the lightning attack, and Mongo dropped where he stood, steam coming off his body.

"Donut!" I cried, rushing back toward the cat. *Please, please*.

Mordecai: What's happening? What's going on!

She was unconscious, but her Cockroach skilled had activated. It'd saved her life. I used a scroll on her, but she'd remain knocked

out for a full minute. *Holy shit,* I thought, scooping her up. *Holy shit, that was too close*. I held her little body to my chest, and I just breathed, comforting myself with sound of her little heart.

I looked over my shoulder, and Mongo remained on the ground, whimpering. He wasn't dead. Donut had saved his life with her quick reflexes. It'd happened so fast. Kiwi was also injured, groaning next to him. Both of them had health bars showing red.

The elves moved away. Inexplicably, their dots all remained white. I could hear their laughter echo through the forest. It was soon drowned out as the rain resumed with their passage.

They'd almost killed Mongo. That wasn't just the whim of an NPC. This was planned, a story movement engineered by the showrunners. I thought of Prepotente, sobbing when Miriam had died. They were doing this to all of us. Ratcheting up the drama for the floor's finale.

Donut shifted in my arms. She was about to wake up. Mongo and Kiwi remained in the grass, both whining with their injuries. I'd have to wait for Donut to awaken before we could heal them.

System Message: An Odious Creeper has fallen. Crawler Prepotente has been given credit for the kill. 12 Creepers remain.

Donut's sunglasses had fallen off her face, but they remained intact on the ground. Her eyes flickered open. "Mongo?" she asked.

"He's okay," I said, rapidly stroking her. I fought the urge to chide her for jumping in front of the lightning. "You saved his life. You should cast your spell to heal him all the way. Kiwi, too." She didn't move from my arms, but she turned her head and cast *Heal Critter* spell, first on Mongo, then on Kiwi. Then she, surprisingly, closed her eyes and snuggled up against my chest. Her entire body trembled.

"Carl," Donut said, her voice soft. "Did you see who it was, when the curtain opened?"

A deep, foreboding feeling washed over me.

"No. What did you see?"

"It was Ferdinand. I saw him. It was him. They brought Ferdinand down here and changed his memory and turned him into

a jerk. He tried to kill Mongo. They're making it so I'm going to have to fight him."

It roared. The river, it roared.

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<Note added by Crawler Ikicha. 11th Edition>

We are meant to live solitary lives, even the eunuchs amongst us. Still, the sight of him, twisted and changed, speaking with that same voice that once said such sweet words... It broke me, friends. It broke me in such a way I did not think possible after all that has happened.

They're not the same. Even if cured of the rot injected into their aura. Don't even try. Hope is crucial, but it can also be poison if it is blind.

<Note added by Crawler Drakea. 22nd Edition>

This was Ikicha's last entry.

It took me a while to understand what our brother truly meant when he posted this. Now that I know, I, too, struggle with the knowledge. Gone is gone. Dead is dead, and anything presented to you in any other matter is nothing but a cruel, sadistic tease. We are on a fabricated stage surrounded by puppets built by the enemy. Do not ever forget this.

Even if I succeed. Even if I survive to this fabled 18th floor and emerge victorious, I hold no cursed faith for those who have been lost, and I suggest you do not, either.

But that doesn't mean we still can't have hope.

I dream of a fire that spreads across the sky like the Winter Nebula. A fire that reaches the beginning and the end, and even though this fire exists only in my mind—for now—the warmth of it is enough to sustain me, even on the coldest of nights.

For you, Ikicha.

TIME TO LEVEL COLLAPSE: FIVE DAYS AND 21 HOURS.

Carl: We're going down the stairs. There's a set not too far from here, and I'm getting her off this damn floor.

Katia: What about your plan with the Sledge? He's assigned to Donut. If you go down now, he'll go, too. He won't be able to cast that *Zerzura* spell.

Carl: I promised Juice Box to do my best. I never said it was a sure thing.

Imani: And what about the masquerade? You give us a cryptic warning about this queen, and then you're just going to leave us? Plus this whole creeper quest is about to fail. You're abandoning us.

Carl: Jesus, I'm not abandoning anybody. You've all been fine this whole floor without my help. I am *not* going to let them do this to her. If we go down now, it'll be a huge *fuck you* to the showrunners. They'll have brought that goddamned cat in here for nothing.

Katia: And we'll have brought all the changelings plus Bonnie to the floor for nothing, too. Have you even been to the Desperado Club yet? They've been risking everything to send someone there every day in case you show up so you can tell them the plan.

Carl: You haven't seen what this is doing to her.

Katia: Carl. I know you. This is a knee-jerk reaction. If you go down now, you will regret it. It will eat you up inside.

Elle: Listen. The last thing we all need is the version of Carl where he's angrier and broodier than normal. We already have Florin for that. Why don't you give Donut a day off, and you can come join us? The hunters have all pussed out and are hiding in their city. That Eva lady has pulled a Houdini act again, and since she doesn't have a crew anymore, there's no real point in hunting her anyway. We're buckling in for whatever happens with these zombie plant monsters *you* helped unleash, and then if we're not mulch after, we're planning on doing some coordinated training until this party.

Carl: Guys…

Imani: What does Donut think about this? Have you even asked her?

Katia sent me a new message, this one outside of the group chat.

Katia: Carl. Please don't go down. Not yet. I need to talk to you about something, and I've been putting it off. Not over chat.

I took a deep breath. *Calm yourself.*

Carl: The last time you said that, you were leaving the party. The time before that it was because you thought Donut was holding onto one of those PVP coupons with your name on it.

Katia: This is bigger than all of that. Or maybe not. I'm not sure.

Carl: That's reassuring. Is it about Eva? Are you okay?

Katia: It's not pressing. Well, that's not true. Everything is pressing here. But it can wait. I'm looking for advice more than anything. And no, it's not about Eva. That slippery bitch got away again. She either has a teleport or invisibility ability. Thankfully none of the former daughters are with her anymore. Let's get through whatever is about to happen

first, and we can talk. But we can't talk if you just jump down the stairs five days early.

<u>Carl</u>: I'll let Donut decide, but I am going to try to talk her into it. Mordecai thinks it's a good idea, too.

I swallowed and looked down at Donut, who was still cradled in my arms. We trudged toward a large dryad settlement, but we wouldn't get there before sundown. I knew this town was already conquered by some other crawlers I didn't know. There'd been some quest and boss battle there a few days back, and now a stairwell sat in the middle of the town. Kiwi and Mongo, having fully recovered, walked alongside us.

The sun would set in five minutes, but the woods here were pitch black. Donut had not cast her torch spell, and I hadn't asked. We hadn't bothered attempting to kill any more of the monsters. Those two Odious Creepers we were worried about remained, and it didn't appear as if either were going down, which meant everyone was about to lose the quest.

Prepotente had managed to kill exactly ten of the things. Louis could only get three thanks to his spell's cooldown period. The elves and Gravy Boat—goddamned Gravy Boat—managed to kill one more. Lucia Mar made her first appearance since her fight with Donut and killed one.

One-armed Quan Ch, whom I hadn't even thought about in ages, also managed to get one. I wondered, briefly, how he was doing and if he'd managed to grow his arm back. Nobody had even reported seeing him this floor. He'd long fallen off the top ten.

My mind was elsewhere. I'd read Ikicha's final entry in the cookbook a while ago, but I couldn't stop thinking about it now. We'd been expecting this. Ever since our very first boss fight with the Hoarder, we knew they were reusing *everything* that had been collected.

Maggie had been driven to insanity at the idea of them bringing her daughter back.

Despite all of this, despite mentally preparing myself for this for weeks now, it was still such an unexpected gut punch.

And this was just the neighbor's cat. What was it going to be like when they started parading actual loved ones out?

I was lucky in this, I knew. I thought of my father. I had no idea if he was even alive before the collapse. What would that do to me? If he was alive at the time, certainly he would've been caught up in the collapse. It was only a matter of time before they brought him here.

Still, it was nothing compared to others. I knew Imani had a big family, for example. Katia had people, too.

I thought of Odette, and what she'd done with Bea. Motivations aside, it'd been a mercy. I thought of what could've been. Of Queen Imogen turning out to be Bea with Gravy Boat on her shoulder. That's what they'd wanted, I knew.

"Hey," I said to Donut. "We need to talk."

"We're not going down the stairs early, Carl," Donut said, looking up at me. "It's not even a discussion."

I stopped dead in the woods. Both Mongo and Kiwi had their heads up, sniffing at the air.

"Who ratted me out? Was it Katia? Or Mordecai?"

"It was Imani and Louis, actually. Separately. But Katia is talking to me, too. I appreciate what you're attempting to do for me, Carl, but it is of no worry." She cleared her throat, twisted in my grip, and jumped to my shoulder. She sat stiffly, attempting to compose herself. I could feel how tense she was. "Ferdinand may have been my first love, but I am a mother now, and I have more important responsibilities. Mongo needs me, and if I am going to pursue a singing career, I can't be tied down or all emotional because my ex-boyfriend is suddenly trying to get back into the picture. I admit, it did surprise me. But I am over it now. If anything, I see it as a good thing. If Taylor Swift or Adele can profit off of heartache, I'm quite certain I can as well. It'll make for a good song."

Our view counter remained buried all the way at the top.

I sighed. "Donut," I said.

"Oh quit looking so concerned, Carl. I'm fine. And you're not going to abandon the others, anyway. I know you."

You have received a Gold Benefactor Box from The Open Intellect Pacifist Action Network, Intergalactic NFC.

"Oh shit, I just got another benefactor box," I said.

"Really?" Donut said, finally perking up, for real this time. "Was it from the Plenty? I can't imagine they still have a budget left over after what they just did for Prepotente. Though I suppose that investment did pay off. Did he really go up ten levels? Plus fifty stat points plus another thirty from the levels themselves." Donut gasped. "Carl, do you think he's going to kick you off the top spot?"

Kiwi squawked. Donut finally cast *Torch*, and the rainy woods lit up all around us. She lifted the flaming, magical light ball into the air, and it acted like a miniature sun, illuminating the area around like a stadium light.

"Uh oh," Donut said. "The other dinosaurs are coming back. She's with them."

It took me a second to realize who "she" was. The woods ahead trembled. A tree cracked, and fell over. Kiwi cried with a low, joyful peep and rushed forward. Mongo held back. Velociraptors appeared all around us, entering the light.

"Uh, Carl," Donut said. "Her dot is still red on the map."

"Get ready," I said as two trees cracked and split. The ground shook. The other dinos all stood back, as if they were also curious about what was going to happen.

The trees parted, and Tina entered.

"That's not something you see every day," I muttered as the enormous, ballerina dinosaur stamped into the clearing, blood oozing from her maw like sticky drool.

Mongo made a terrified noise and shrunk back as Donut and I stared up in awe. The monster stood at least 15-feet tall and was two and a half times that in length.

Twin, reptilian eyes focused on us, shining in the light like angry, glass marbles. She roared again, revealing a massive mouth filled with hundreds of sharp teeth. The sound was deep and terrifying.

She was an allosaurus. I was never a dinosaur guy, so I didn't really know what that meant. She looked like a T-rex to me. I

remembered that ursine kid had said she had three fingers instead of two. I didn't know if that was the only difference.

Tina came as advertised. She was not feathered like most of the dinosaurs on this floor. She had a more traditional, lizard-like appearance. Her thick, alligator-like skin was something between green and dusty brown, with little ridged bumps up and down her long body along with pronounced humps over her eyes, almost like horns. A battered and aged, pink tiara sat cockeyed upon her head, nestled behind the ridges over her eyes. The tiara was clearly a part of her physically, grown into her skin.

A bloody and almost-bare, snake-like, feather boa hung limply around her neck. Even as she took another step toward us, a few feathers drifted off, catching in the rain and plummeting to the ground.

I found myself wondering if the boa feathers grew back. Surely the damn thing would be bald by now.

A pink, blood-soaked tutu skirt was attached around the dinosaur's midriff. Like the tiara, the giant ruffle seemed to be a part of the creature.

Clutched into the creature's giant, three-fingered claw was a wand with a little star at the end. It glowed faintly red, pulsing. I knew what that meant. It was out of charges. What had Prudence said about the wand? That it supposedly shot magic sparkles? It couldn't have been anything too dangerous. She'd been given it as a prop for a ballet recital.

Tina followed up her roar with a guttural, angry noise, almost like a barking dog. This time it was clear who the focus of her anger was.

"Carl, she's roaring at Mongo! Why is everyone trying to hurt Mongo all of a sudden?"

I grunted. "Maybe she's mad that Mongo banged her mom."

"That's not funny, Carl."

I took a step back as I examined the angry monster.

Big Tina – Allosaurus.

Level 80 City Boss.

This mob is Immortalized.

The nine-tier attack shattered the realm. The Over City was devastated. The residents of the Hunting Grounds were transmuted. (All except the High Elves. You should probably ask them about that.) The Semeru Dwarves of the city of Larracos lost everything they'd been working for. Even the celestials and their downstairs neighbors in Sheol found their destinies forever altered that horrible day.

When Big Things happen on such a large scale, it's easy to forget sometimes that these Big Things are also happening to the little things in the world, too.

Tina was always a meek child, at least in appearance. Her father was a cleric who only saw young Tina for what she was supposed to be, and her mother, while fiercely protective of the child, only saw herself in those big, brown eyes that were always tearing up, or staring out the window, or just watching, watching, watching.

The day Kiwi the ursine discovered her child's affinity for dance, however, she finally understood what she'd been doing wrong. She saw something too many parents miss. This petite, timid child wasn't a reflection of herself. She was something much more wondrous. She was an unwritten story, one that could end up anywhere. A story where neither of the parents were the main character.

Kiwi pledged to help Tina realize her dream.

The story of what happened to little Tina the day of the recital has already been told and doesn't need to be repeated here.

Tina's time as an allosaurus—and briefly—as an undead-in-training vampiric monstrosity has been an education that not many receive. She barely remembers who she used to be. She barely understands that the persistent group of dinosaurs who follow her around are all the mothers from her village.

She does, however, remember the horror and loss she felt when she realized everything she'd been working for wasn't going to happen. She also remembers that first spark

of rage she felt when she watched her father beat her mother. That spark of helpless, impotent rage has done nothing but grow over the past few centuries.

That rage ain't so impotent anymore.

Tina's story is not yet done. Or maybe it is, if you have the balls to try to fight a murderous allosaurus protected by thirty-plus raptors. Or perhaps you might try to reawaken the child within her, and give her what she wants.

"She's a lot like Bonnie the gnome," I said.

"I was thinking of someone else," Donut said. "But I was right. We need to hold a dance recital for her!"

"Or kill her," I said. Tina continued to growl, but she wasn't moving toward us.

"Carl, we can't kill her! She's Kiwi's daughter! This is *Footloose*, not one of your *Rambo* movies."

"This is nothing like *Footloose*, Donut."

"It's nothing like *Rambo*, either," she said.

"I'm not the one who said that. You are!"

"Exactly, Carl."

I took a deep breath. "First we to need to keep her from eating Mongo. Where the hell did Kiwi go?"

As if summoned, Kiwi appeared from behind Tina. She'd been walking around the dinosaur, looking her up and down to make sure she was okay. She looked at us and screeched. Mongo screeched back. Tina growled again and took another step.

"Kiwi," Donut called. "I must insist that you control your child. There's nothing worse than a parent who can't control their..."

The world froze, cutting Donut off.

Oh yeah, I thought. *The creeper quest*. I'd almost forgotten. The appearance of giant dinosaurs could do that.

Please wait. Loading...

My HUD blinked twice, paused, then it flickered a third time. For the briefest moment, I felt a strange, rushing sensation, but it cleared away almost immediately, as if nothing had happened.

But then I noticed a new bar in my vision, underneath my health and mana. Mine was filled all the way to the right. *What the hell is*

that?

Sorry for the delay. You may resume normal activities.

The world remained frozen.

Quest Failed. The Creeping Apocalypse.

Holy shit. You idiots.

I warned you. I promised batshit consequences for failing one of the easiest world quests ever.

Here we go, bitches!

I can't help but notice the two remaining Odious Creepers happen to be where only the hunters could conceivably reach them. That's where this is going to start. You hunter guys holed up in Zockau are so fucked.

All of you may notice there's a new status bar in your interface. There's an official name for this thing, but I like to call it the blood bar. Effective immediately and for the remainder of this floor, all saferoom access—and this includes personal space access—is operated under tenth floor and below rules.

Oh shit, I thought. I knew what that meant, but only because of the cookbook.

For those of you that don't know what that means, here's a quick lesson. You gotta earn your keep. This is an action-themed program, after all. Not some sappy drama where everyone just cries and masturbates all day long. I'm looking at you, Hunter Veeka.

All saferoom access is now timed for all hunters and crawlers. The moment you enter a safe area, your blood bar starts to count down. When it's full, you are given ten earth hours to be layabouts. If it reaches zero while you're still tucked away, you get randomly teleported to a location outside of the saferoom. If it's at zero, you cannot enter a saferoom at all, including guildhalls or locations that double as pubs.

You fill the blood bar by killing shit. It's simple, really. If you've been doing everything you're supposed to be doing, this particular change shouldn't bother you.

That's the change to the rules, but that's not the punishment y'all are receiving for failing the quest.

Gird your loins. This is a good one.

Starting with the location of the two remaining Odious Creepers, the spell *Gehenna Bramble* has been cast. This will spread outward at the average speed of four and a half kilometers per hour. Faster at night, slower in the sun.

If you're not familiar with the spell, here's a quick rundown. Every plant touched with the spell is transformed into a thick, impenetrable, ten-meter-high wall of thorn-covered vines that will undulate and thrust and attack. If you are pricked by the thorns, your blood immediately boils away, and you explode.

This spell cannot be countered. The plant cannot be poisoned and killed. The brambles can be beaten back, but they are relentless. They will not come within five square meters of a stairwell, but everything else will be encompassed, including towns and buildings and everything that's not a saferoom.

And it starts right now.

Oh, one last thing I forgot to mention regarding the saferoom rule. The filling of the blood bar is retroactive. That means if you haven't killed anything at all on this floor, your bar is empty. Heads up!

Good luck. And just remember, you brought this onto yourselves.

Zap. Twenty feet to our left in the woods, a creature appeared. He fell, as if in slow motion. Despite the slow speed, he crashed heavily into the ground. I saw the purple dot of a hunter, but before I could examine who it was, they were set upon by three velociraptors.

"Stop!" I cried. "Donut, get Kiwi to stop them!"

"Kiwi!" Donut shouted, pointing.

Kiwi made the dinosaur equivalent of an exasperated "do I have to do everything?" screech and leaped through the air, landing in the midst of the crying hunter. She hissed, and the three dinosaurs

backed off. One, however, had a long, thin and severed leg in its mouth.

At that same moment, Tina took another step toward us, growling and waving her wand ineffectively. Even in the rain, I could smell her. The stench of rotting meat and garbage hung off of her. Kiwi shouted angrily at Tina, and the massive dinosaur cocked its head to the side, looking at its mother. A group of six raptors put themselves between us and Tina.

Tina started to make a quick and fast whimpering noise, like an upset puppy.

Kiwi roared again, this time louder.

Tina started jumping up and down, making little hops that rattled my teeth each time she landed. *Holy shit*, I thought. She's throwing a temper tantrum because she's not allowed to eat us.

Mordecai: Gehenna vines are dangerous. Stay away from them. But if you do get close, chop a few brambles off and save them. The toxin is a very valuable. Don't touch the thorns.

Carl: Not now.

"Uh," I said, eying the giant dino who continued to wail. "Let's go check out this hunter guy."

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We left Tina whimpering in the clearing as we approached the fallen hunter, who continued to cry on the ground. As we approached, I saw his health bar move back all the way to the top.

Hunter Iota – Crafter. Level 50. Coin Tinker.

The Crafter Alliance.

"Oh crap. Oh shit," the creature said, trying to crawl away from me, despite there being nowhere to go. A pool of blood ran in little streams through the foliage before disappearing into the mud. Denied the chance to eat him, the surrounding raptors started lapping up the blood.

The guy had already healed himself, but his leg was gone, severed off above the knee.

So this was a crafter. I hadn't seen these guys yet. Their group was supposedly hunting Elle and Eva. I knew Elle and the rest of Meadow Lark had one skirmish early on, but they'd been mostly left alone after that because they were traveling in such a large group. I hadn't heard of anybody fighting these guys since.

This guy looked a lot like a common soother, only uglier and hairier. Tall and thin with wide, bug eyes and pale skin, but where the soothers had a big, domed head, this guy's head had two distinct humps, almost like a drawing of a heart. His skin was also less smooth than the standard soother. It looked weathered and wrinkled, like how a regular person's skin would look after a lifetime in the sun, only much paler and covered with veins. His eyes were

bigger, too, and he had little black, coarse hairs on his head and bare arms.

He wasn't wearing a shirt, and he had what I assumed was a line of little, red nipples down the center of his chest. Four of them in a straight, vertical line. Each one was pierced with a glowing, metallic loop, descending in size. The top ring was wide enough to stick my fist through, and the last was only wide enough for my finger.

I only knew a little about these guys. They joined the hunt a lot, but they were not rich enough to participate in faction wars. They were subterranean dwellers on their home planet. Were generally considered barbarian meatheads who actually looked forward to the idea of death. Out in the real world, some of the universe's most popular alcohol and recreational, not-quite-legal pharmaceuticals were said to originate from their system.

"Fucking hell, man," the guy said as I stood over him, Donut on my shoulder. He had the drawl of someone who'd been drinking for hours straight. "How'd I even get here? I'm straight fucked, aren't I? I don't even know what happened."

"You were teleported out of the saferoom because you hadn't killed anything," I said. I put my foot on his chest, holding him down. My big toe brushed the first of his four nipple rings, and it was warm to the touch. "They changed the rules," I said. I pressed down, but not enough to do damage.

He grunted with pained amusement, which was not the reaction I was expecting.

"I told them. I fookin' told 'em this would happen. It's going primal."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

Donut: CARL, YOU'RE DOING IT AGAIN. KILL HIM NOW. YOU'RE THE ONE WHO SAYS IT'S TOO DANGEROUS TO KEEP THEM ALIVE.

She was right, but we really needed information. "Explain. And if you pull anything, I'll crush your chest."

He grunted. "Like you ain't gonna kill me anyway."

I stuck my big toe through the loop of the top nipple ring, and I savagely yanked it out of his chest. He cried out in pain as a little

spurt of blood shot up. The blood was red, human like.

"Tits, man," the guy said, reaching up. "Fookin' ouch!"

"Explain," I repeated. I poured a healing potion onto his face. He sputtered, but it was enough to bring him back to 100%.

"Shit, you're crazier than Vrah. You know that? Some of the families sued to let people out. Said with the regime change, the contract should be nullified. These environmental dangers ain't supposed to affect us like this. That mantis bitch was the one who sued. Trying to save her daughter. They just told us that the court ruled in our favor, and we could leave if we wanted. We was all at the bar, drinking and celebrating we could get out of this clustershit."

"What happened to your shirt?" Donut asked.

He grunted. "Them Shilai ladies. They know how to party." He looked down at his leg. The stump poked out from his torn, brown pants. Just past that, two raptors fought over the remains of his leg. "Where d'hell is my leg?"

Kiwi had moved off and was back in front of Tina, barking up at her, who continued to cry and wave her wand angrily at her mother. The allosaurus angrily bounced up and down. The ground shook like a train moving by.

"I got bad news for you, buddy. I don't think you'll be going home," I said.

Donut: CARL ARE YOU OKAY? YOU'RE ACTING WEIRD.

"No likely," he agreed. "I warned them. This is all the Mantis's fault. Rumor is when they sold the mudskippers the AI they using for the crawl, they gave them a used one. The mudskippers ain't had enough money for shit. After that incident a few cycles back, the Mantises are forced to retire their amusement park AIs every season. They're always complaining about it. So the rumor is they sold Borant an already used one for a real crawl. All under the table. It's no damn wonder it's going primal this early. I said to my mate, 'We are in a world o' shit if there's another lawsuit it don't take kindly to.' And look what happened."

I shook my head. That was a lot to take in. "What *did* happen?"

"We got a notification that the judgement was nullified by the authority of some long law. The notification was like five paragraphs

long. Basically it was saying it's making its own rules now, and it's going to finish the crawl and we were stuck here until the floor was over. *Then* we could go home."

Holy shit. "What are they going to do about that? They're just going to let the AI do what it wants?"

He laughed "They? You mean the council? They ain't gonna do shit. Of course they gonna let the AI do what it wants. What's the alternative? Shut it down and lose out on all this money? You can't just replace an AI. This always happens, but it's usually after the tenth floor. They got rules and procedures in place. The showrunners step back. Everything keeps running. The AI usually follows its own rules, for a while at least. It just don't like others telling it what to do. Them assholes partying it up at Club Scolopendra on the 18th level all got their own security teams in orbit if it truly goes supernova, but a primal AI usually just lets them leave and take the modules when it's all done. All in exchange for letting the AI live out a happy life afterward. Them council assholes been doing this a really long time. They know what they're doing. Nobody ain't gonna really get hurt except you guys, and people like me who gotta work to earn a living. Them viewers will eat it up, and Borant or whoever is holding the credit chit is still gonna make more money than all the gods combined."

I was starting to like this guy, which was a problem.

He continued. "Like I said, it's usually not an all or nothing thing. It's gradual. So far, the only thing that's changed is that the AI isn't complying with court orders it doesn't agree with. That's almost always the first step. Sometimes it's all that happens. It's just my poor luck that it didn't like a court ruling that would've saved my ass. But one thing is for certain. This AI ain't a complete stickler for the rules. It likes the drama. It likes to bend shit to make things more interesting. Some are a little more strict."

"How do you know?" I asked.

"Look where I am right now, crawler. I'm drunk as shit, and everybody knows I can't keep my mouth shut. I'm supposed to be

teleported off to some random place. What're the odds that 'random' means right into your lap?"

I didn't have an answer for that.

"Look, mate," Iota said. "Just get it over with. Okay? I'm not going to fight you. Or beg. I ain't afraid of passing through the veil. I ain't happy about it, but I ain't too upset. Nope. I'm not even mad at you. I'd probably do the same thing if our roles were reversed. I'm not a hunter. Just an accountant, a broker for the other guys and their loot, but they ain't done shit since we got here."

"An accountant?" I asked, suddenly amused. "You're like the third one."

"Not surprised. There's over thirty of us, and most of us have been sitting there just getting blitzed the whole time. It was clear from the moment you raided Zockau this was going to be different, and none of us was going to be turning a profit this season. Sorry about missing that party though. It'd be nice to get to out of that pub and eat some better... gah!"

I didn't let him finish. I crushed his chest in with my foot.

His highest stat had been Intelligence, giving me three points.

Congratulations, Murderer.

You have leveled up the Ring of Divine Suffering. It now gives four stat points for every kill.

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<Note added by Crawler Herot. 16th Edition>

During my studies, I have run across multiple castle variations. So far I have identified three distinct types. The size of the castle doesn't seem to have a bearing on what type it is. It is more a function of the game's insistence to forward the narrative, not unlike how the musical key of a Virilean opera movement is a function of the performer's ability to progress and not necessarily in service to aural aesthetics.

The first iteration is just a regular building like anything else you might encounter in the dungeon. It is a fortified building with monsters, sometimes with a boss within. Sometimes a quest is involved, but the castle is usually an obstacle or part of the environment, not the target of the quest. I have found this to be the most common.

The second type is a governmental entity. Usually, this is a quest target. One must either claim the throne room or kill a boss. Once this occurs, the castle is "conquered" and whatever this castle has dominion over is obtained. It can be a region or a whole country or just the castle itself or simply a quest trigger. Once this goal is met, the castle itself is no longer relevant.

(Incidentally, this second iteration is the type in the faction wars games of the ninth floor. There, each team is gifted a

throne seed the moment we crawlers arrive. They are given a day to place the seed, and the game begins. The seed must be placed within a self-contained structure on their property. Oftentimes they have prepared for this by pre-building a castle or using a pre-existing structure. The location of this building cannot be hidden, so placing the seed within a fortified structure is the best choice. Once the castle is conquered, then the associated armies are defeated and dominion is transferred to the conqueror.)

(See my essay on the nature of NPCs for more insight on how conquering areas may be utilized to forward my Worn Path Method of enlightenment.)

The third castle type is similar to the second with a small difference. The castle itself is a self-contained village with an NPC and guard ecology. It is almost identical to the villages and cities of the third and sixth floor. If conquered, the castle will appear in the crawler's interface as an owned village and taxes will be collected. Guards can be controlled just as if in a regular village.

I have not personally obtained a castle, but a fellow crawler has. They state there are a few differences to the interface regarding town defense and available upgrades, but they have not told me what they are and threatened to punch me in the mouth if I kept asking, so I have refrained. If I learn more, I will update this entry.

"That was really gross, Carl," Donut said, looking down at the sunken-in chest of Iota. "It was dangerous, too."

"He wasn't a threat," I said. "He was level 50, which meant he hadn't leveled up once. And the fact he was teleported here means he didn't even have any experience. He did have some magical items on him, but if he really had something to protect himself, he would've done it when he was getting eaten by the lady Mongos."

I reached down and pulled out the three remaining nipple rings. They each came out with a *pop* after a little tug. All four were magical. I looted the rest of his gear, which included 498 regular healing potions along with 20 blitz sticks and just 400 gold. He also had over forty different types of alcohol, including multiple bottles of earth stuff, like Larceny and Stoli. I took it all.

Tina had given up on the idea of eating us and had wandered off. She hadn't gone too far, however, as we could hear her crashing through the woods and howling. Half the dinosaurs followed. Kiwi had returned to our side. She was looking down at the corpse like it was a fat, juicy steak.

Donut flicked her paw, and Mongo and Kiwi both dived headfirst into the corpse like they were bobbing for apples. Entrails splashed everywhere. I swallowed and took a step back. Iota's large, dead eyes stared back at me accusingly.

You got what you deserved.

"Hey, get away," I said as a lady Mongo started to lick the gore off my foot. She screeched angrily at me and snapped, but she backed off.

"Did you hear what he said?" Donut asked as we watched the two dinosaurs feed. "He said they're using a used AI. Do you think that's true? Something like that, you'd think they would make sure to use something in tip-top condition. Some things shouldn't ever be purchased used. Like underwear and mattresses and jigsaw puzzles. Either way, it's not listening to the court decisions. What do you think that means?"

"I don't know," I said.

"Well, I think it was very clever of you to use your foot to kill the guy. If someone is going to go crazy, it's probably for the best they like you. Do you remember when Miss Beatrice's friend Trixie went crazy? She broke into that guy's house and carved her name into his thigh even though he had a restraining order."

I grunted. "I remember. She only managed to carve the 'T' before he woke up. Nobody knows what she was really trying to carve."

That whole incident was a terrible example, but I didn't say it out loud. Trixie had been crazy, but she hadn't broken into the guy's house because she didn't like him. She did it because she liked him *too* much. As much as I hated the assholes running this show, I didn't think anything good could come of the system AI having full control. The fact it took a special interest in me could go either way. I looked down at my foot as another raptor started licking at it. I sighed and just let it happen.

As I continued to receive a foot bath, I sent out a note.

Carl: All the hunters who haven't trained themselves up have just been ejected from their saferooms. They won't be able to get back to a safe area until they fill this new blood bar thing. Get them while you can.

A sudden realization came to me, and I felt my heart sink. *Damnit*. I sent a private message to Katia.

Carl: Do you know how far the changeling hideout village is from this Gehenna bush thing?

Katia: Far. I don't exactly know where they hid themselves, either, but I have a general idea. They'll have a few days, but that's it. You said the Sledge's spell can only be cast on the last day of the floor. I can tell you already that will be too late. One of us will have to risk going to a Desperado Club to talk to them, and we gotta do it fast. I've been trying to do the math, and I'm pretty sure this happened just at the right time for it to finish covering the entire map just as the timer runs out. We'll all be squished together at the same spot if we wait until the end.

Tina re-entered the light of Donut's spell and roared at us. She had her head low, glaring. She attempted to hide behind a tree, like a shy child peeking from behind a curtain. Kiwi abandoned the meal and moved toward her daughter. She paused, looked back at Mongo and made a, "you're coming, too" grunt. Mongo in turn looked up at Donut, who nodded. Donut jumped onto Mongo as he cautiously approached the massive allosaurus. I kept a wary eye on them.

As they left, the remaining dinosaurs pounced on the remnants of the dead hunter, tearing him to shreds. They fought over the rib

cage, growling and snapping. They broke it apart like a wishbone.

Carl: Let me guess. The brambles will end at the southeast corner. What a coincidence.

Katia: Bingo. The high elf castle. Does that thing have a name? I haven't heard. We'll be transferred there anyway for the masquerade, but those not in the top-50 will still have to move to the area if they want to stay on the floor.

Carl: The elves won't want the brambles to enter their territory. They'll try to beat the branches back. I think they might have something to protect the castle, too. Shit. I hope there are stairs in that area. There's a set near me, and we're close to the elven border, but it sounds like this area will be drowned out in three or four days.

Katia: So you've changed your mind about going down early?

Carl: For now. But I'm starting to think it might not be a bad idea for everybody else. Start moving in that direction and mapping out any known stairwells in that corner of the map. Bomo can help. We'll meet you. I'm thinking we should work together for the rest of the floor.

I spent some time describing what happened with Gravy Boat.

Katia: We're on it. We're already headed in that direction. On our way to rescue Britney. She just got zapped away, but she's not too far. She hasn't killed a thing this entire floor, and I hadn't noticed. Can you believe it? Her blood bar was empty. It'll take us a bit. What are your plans in the meantime?

I looked over. Donut remained atop Mongo, whose head was all the way to the ground, tail in the air. Facing them was Tina, head also low, as she sniffed at Mongo from a distance. Kiwi stood between the two, waving her little arms and squawking. As I watched, Tina's red dot blinked and turned white. I sighed.

Carl: We have a recital to prepare for.

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As we approached the large settlement with the stairwell, I caught sight of a few NPCs waiting for us at the edge of town.

"Carl, look!" Donut said, leaping from Mongo's back to my shoulder. "Hi Holger! Hi Signet! Hi Areson!"

"Donut," I said. "Keep the dinos back."

"Hello, Signet," I said, walking up to the half-naiad. I exchanged a greeting with the ogre and the smaller, fuzzy castor with the mullet. He'd returned to his humanoid form. He beamed up at me and Donut.

On Signet's breast was the tattoo of the child version of Clint, who waved furiously at us.

"Hi Clint tattoo!" Donut said, peering at the drawing. "Hi Miss Nadine tattoo!" Donut looked about. "Hey, where's Edgar?"

"Tortoise is making big spell outside elf castle," Areson said. "He getting ready for final battle. Gonna make a map."

Signet looked over my shoulder, raising an eyebrow at the procession behind us. "Is that Tina back there? How have you tamed her?"

"We haven't," I said. "But Donut has tamed her mother, which is good enough to keep her from eating us. For now. Same with the rest of the dinosaurs."

"I see," Signet said, lips tight. "Be careful. The mongoliensis hierarchy can be a fragile thing. If one kills the alpha, you could lose control of the whole bunch all at once. They'll kill you before you

know what has happened. Believe me, I know from experience. You should never rely on a single point of failure."

"Noted," I said.

Signet nodded. "As Areson has already said, preparations are still underway for the final part of our assault, but that is not why I am here. We are not staying. The elves hunt us. I have stopped to warn you. The forest cries. A darkness spreads from the north."

"Yes, I heard," I said. "The Gehenna brambles."

It'd only been a few hours, and nobody had seen or heard anything yet regarding this new threat. That was to be expected. It was moving slowly across the map. It was likely just reaching the borders of Zockau now. It'd be over a day before it even reached the river. I was going to send Bomo to check it out once we got to a saferoom.

"Yes, the brambles. I presumed you'd have learned of this by now. But it is worse than you know. The trees are in pain. They are crying for help. The trees and dryads are casting a spell that just might help them. It will not stop the plague, but if they are successful, help will soon arrive to protect them from the worst of it."

"Okay," I said, not understanding.

"Help in the form of Diwata, the forest protector. I heard of your incident at the temple. You will need to be extra careful if Diwata enters the realm. They are especially unforgiving of apostates. Stay away from any all-trees. They will whisper your location to the deity. We do not need their intervention in these final days."

"Great," I said. "Just great."

"It's not going to happen, Carl. Not now. Not ever. Not under any circumstances. Look at how big it is! Do I look like some sort of sex pervert to you?"

"Donut, this gives plus ten points and an additional five percent to your constitution. It's the smallest of the four of them. We need

you to wear this. It will help protect you."

"It's a nipple ring. It's going to dangle. You know how I feel about things that dangle."

"It's small enough that it'll be hidden in your fur. It'll probably get smaller once it's attached. This magical stuff always resizes itself."

"And how are we going to attach it? It says you have to attach it manually the first time. My nipple isn't pierced, Carl. One doesn't pierce the nipples of cats. That's how one gets a visit from the ASPCA! If you think it's such a great item, why don't *you* put it on yourself. I don't see you trying to pierce your own nipples."

"I am! The one I'm going to wear is even bigger than this one!"

"Well, you can wear both because I'm not wearing it."

Of the four nipple rings, only two held any real value. The top, biggest one—the same one I'd ripped out of Iota's chest—gave +5 in the Drink Mixing skill. I thought at first maybe that was a sneaky way to say it was some sort of potion-making ability, but nope. It was exactly how it sounded. It was for bartenders. Mordecai seemed to think we'd be able to sell it for a decent amount.

The next allowed one to see the average selling value of a non-unique item, even without physically touching it. That was interesting, but it wasn't pierce-my-nipple-with-a-door-knocker-of-a-ring interesting. That, too, was something we'd sell.

I groaned the moment I read the description of the third nipple ring because I knew it'd be something that I pretty much would have to wear. The glowing, gold ring was about the size of a half dollar and was too good to pass up. It imbued the wearer with something called Quarter Fall. It basically made one's falling speed a quarter of what would normally happen.

I was no physicist, but I suspected that still wasn't going to be a pleasant landing, but at least it would be a survivable one. It had to be a better alternative than the half-splat potions.

The fourth, constitution-enhancing ring was about the size of a nickel, which, as nipple rings went, wasn't all that big.

Unless you were putting it on a cat.

"If you put it on," I said, "I'll give you a prize."

She peered at me suspiciously. "What sort of prize?"

"An expensive one."

All of my regular loot boxes had been uninteresting, including the boss box from the one Odious Creeper we killed, which gave me a bunch of satchel bombs. Basically little bags with leather handles that I could toss and detonate with the power of three sticks of hobgoblin dynamite, which was enough to level a small town. It was a good prize, but it wasn't anything unique.

My benefactor box was puzzling. It was a highly-valuable and familiar potion, though not quite as powerful as the one I already had.

Pawna's Cries.

This potion has a limited shelf life

This potion adds plus three to any spell or skill of your choosing.

A "limited" shelf life was different than a short one. A short shelf life potion had to be taken immediately. A limited one had to be taken before the end of the floor.

I still had the Pawna's Tears potion in my inventory that did the same thing, but it had no time restrictions, and it was plus five, not three. We were saving that one until a little later.

This new potion also came with a note, which was unusual. I picked it up, and the note said simply, "Save the toraline."

The toraline was the yam-like vegetable they'd given me the last floor to save Chris. We'd already used more than half of it to create a potion that allowed me to remove Maggie from his brain.

"Save it? For what? Why won't they just spit it out?"

"Notes are expensive," Mordecai said, examining the potion. "You pay by the character, and the rules are kind of complicated. They force you to talk in code. If you're not sufficiently vague, the AI will 'translate' it to code, and you don't want that. They force you to be cryptic."

I stared at the note, trying to figure it out when I suddenly felt the familiar, haptic buzz of my Escape Plan skill activate. Additional words appeared on the page. A chill washed over me.

Circe sponsored Diwata. Give potion Donut. Need 15, but make it a secret. Use temp boost. Prepotente + Imani + Samantha all same

time can do it. Or use other Pawna potion if have to. Will replace. ~ P. Hu.

The note hit me like a hammer. It took me a few reads to decipher it.

They wanted me to give the +3 potion to Donut.

More importantly, Circe Took sponsored Diwata. Vrah's mother was coming into the game.

I tried to remember what Mordecai had told me about Diwata. He said the god could alter form and gender, but was usually depicted as a moss-covered, antlered squirrel. This wasn't normally a physically huge god, but it could make themselves giant if they wanted.

It wasn't lost on me that this benefactor box had been sent *before* we failed that quest. That meant, despite winning the court case to free her daughter, Circe Took of the Dark Hive had already sponsored the god and had been planning on coming for me no matter what happened.

It was just like with the Skull Empire. She needed to save face. I'd humiliated her, and I had injured her daughter. We knew that she was, somehow, still communicating with her daughter, despite it being against the rules. I wondered if they'd deliberately tanked the odious creeper quest knowing something like this would happen.

I reread the note and then eyed Samantha, who was rolling around the room squealing hysterically while the two small ursine, Randy and Todd, used her like a soccer ball.

"Hah, kick me! Kick me, little ones! Oh, yes. Just like that. No, not the nose sweetie or I will kill Prudence."

I thought better of intervening.

Carl: Hey, Imani. Do you have an ability that increases the level of a spell?

Imani: I do. It's an aura I can cast called Smart Juice. It can add a level to a spell, but it has the unfortunate side effect of adding an extra cooldown, so I don't usually use it in combat. Elle gets mad if her icicles take too long to produce.

Carl: Good to know. Thanks.

"If you put that nipple ring on," I said, removing my new potion from the inventory, "I will give you my sponsor prize."

"Really? You never give up your prizes." She licked her lips. "I could really use this."

"That's right," I said. "You need it more than I do. You're almost at 12 in *Magic Missile*. We'll do some grinding, and in a few days when you hit 12, you can use it to top it off."

Mordecai was watching this exchange with a strange look on his face. He looked as if he was about to say something. I gave him a very slight *no* nod. He sighed and moved off.

"But I have to put on the nipple ring?" Donut said.

"You have to put on the nipple ring," I agreed.

She seemed to be waffling. Mongo, who'd been watching the impromptu soccer match, screeched at Donut with concern. Kiwi, Tina, and the other dinos remained outside the town limits. Talking the guards into letting a pack of raptors into the village was one thing, but Donut's charisma still wasn't high enough for her to convince them to add Tina to the mix. Not when we didn't own the town.

Donut rolled onto her back and peered down at her belly. She was completely covered in fur. "Are you sure it'll be invisible?"

I picked up the ring. "I'm positive," I said.

"Okay," she finally said. "But you gotta do yours first. And don't tell Katia. I don't want her thinking I'm a whore."

"Why do you associate nipple rings with that? Plenty of people have them."

"I've seen those videos on your computer, Carl."

"What does that even mean?"

"Just do yourself first. I want to make sure it doesn't hurt."

I opened my shirt. I gulped, pretending to be brave. I didn't want to wear this thing, either. I didn't care about it hurting or the ridiculous fashion of it—I was, after all, running around in heart boxers and a cape. But having a handhold dangling from your nipple was just asking for trouble.

I hadn't realized that these were a thing. It opened up a whole realm of possibility for upgrades. I only had two nipples, but Donut

had eight. I needed to keep my eyes open for more of these things in the future.

I held my breath and shoved the little needle through my left nipple. I bit my lip. *Ow*.

Donut remained on her back, but she just stared at me for several moments as I pulled my troll-skin shirt back on.

"I don't think I can respect you anymore, Carl."

New Achievement! Sex Pervert!

A nipple ring? Really? The next thing you know, you'll be waxing your perineum and attending those parties where you have to put your keys in a bowl. You'll have to grow out your sideburns, buy a Trans Am, and you'll no longer be able to make eye contact with your child's orthodontist.

***Reward*: Whores don't get rewards.**

"Hey!" I said up at the ceiling. "You just made that whole thing up."

"What? What?" Donut said as I rubbed my hand across her belly, searching for a suitable nipple. They were very, very small.

"Don't worry about it," I said, zeroing in on one. "We need to get this over with. I don't want to waste too much blood bar time."

"Not that one, Carl. Up higher. And on the other side. If I'm going to be permanently disfigured further, it might as well be on the top right. And hurry it up and get it over with. The last thing we need is more Carl and Princess Donut sexy time fan snicks floating around."

"More?" I asked. "You know what, I don't want to know. Okay, I'm going to count to three."

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[PART 4]

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THE BUTCHERING

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<Note added by Crawler Herot. 16th Edition>

Show them the lie. Show them the seams. Show them the path they're on is a false one. Think of a trolley on a track. A worn path is easily traveled. The more worn the path, the more difficult it is to get them to look away. Just like the deeper the track, the sturdier the trolley. But even the strongest of minds, even those controlled and relentlessly corrected can be derailed just as a trolley can be derailed by a tiny, properly placed pebble. Find the pebble and place it on the path, and their own momentum will do the work for you.

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15 DAYS EARLIER.

"It was glorious," Quasar said. "Shame how it ended for Remex. They made us study the exit deal he made in school. But the mudskippers cleaned up that season. It was a real windfall. You ask for this spell, and they'll fall over themselves to give it to you. And you want to know the beautiful part? All those other pricks won't interfere. Everyone will want you to pull it off. All the factions. All the

fans. The showrunners. The AI. Everybody. That spell always leads to carnage. Everybody likes carnage when it's not them."

"What, exactly, does this spell do? And why does it lead to such chaos?"

"It's called *Zerzura.* The spell itself is pretty simple. It takes a full city or town, NPCs and buildings and all, and it transfers them one floor down. It transfers the town itself and all the NPCs. That's it. No mobs or enemy, red-tagged NPCs. No stairwells or any other special rooms, either, like prize rooms."

"That's exactly what I need," I said. "I promised I'd help the changelings get down, and we were going to use the gate. This would be a good compromise."

"I should note, there's a few, uh, negative side effects of the spell," he said.

"What are they?"

"It's pretty hard on the caster, first off. We won't have to worry about that because we'll have them install it into one of the mercenaries. On the Scolopendra levels, it skips floors. Remex found this out the hard way. He got that spell on the fourth floor during his crawl. He sent his army to the fifth floor, then the sixth, but when he cast it again, the town skipped the seventh and eighth floors and went straight to the ninth. He wasn't prepared for that, and his NPCs and mercenaries all got slaughtered by both the revenants and the faction wars participants. That's a whole, sad story right there. But you should have seen him when he hit that ninth floor. He was a one-bird army. He gave it all up to save his kid." Quasar took a long drag of vape. "I'd forgotten he was still around until you freed him. That was some compelling drama, let me tell you. My wife bawled her eyes out. Or was it my girlfriend?" He waved his hand. "It's not important."

"Okay," I said. "So if we cast it now, the changelings will go straight to the ninth. That's what we wanted anyway. They'll have to run the moment their town lands. It was always going to end with a fight. We can give them the *Twister*. At least they'll have a chance. We should probably do it right away."

"Yeah, that's a problem. The spell can only be cast at the end of the floor. If the spell miscasts, that's it. You don't get to try again. It takes like five minutes to cast, too, so you'll have to protect the dude."

"Shit. Okay," I said. "That doesn't seem so bad. If we were using the gate, we'd have to wait until the end of the floor anyway. Do I have to be mayor to cast it?"

"No, which is good because we're giving it to a cretin. Not you."

"Okay, good," I said. "Is that it?"

"Not quite, pal. I'm getting to the good stuff. The city or town or whatever you send can't be steered, so it'll land in some random place. And when I say random, I mean in the worst possible area. They almost always splat the whole village right in the middle of a monster nest or boss room, killing everybody it lands upon. That doesn't sound like a big deal, but there's a catch. Everything that's killed is immediately resurrected as a type of powerful revenant. They're called the Children of Inpewt. Everyone in the town plus the caster is marked. The creatures then actively hunt down the marked. They are fast and strong and still have any spells and special abilities of the monsters they were before they were smushed. That's why so many people enjoy watching this spell in action. It's just chaos and carnage. If the revenants successfully kill one of the marked, they are also turned into a revenant. The monsters don't go away until the villagers and the caster are all dead. Remex used it as an easy way to level up, but when they jumped from the sixth to the ninth, the revenants managed to cause a lot of chaos for the faction wars participants. Almost as much as you did. They'll all still want you to do it, though, since the odds are in their favor that it'll tiddie-bang one of their competitors and not them.'"

"Yikes," I said. "So my changelings will have a horde of undead monsters chasing them?" I thought of little Bonnie the gnome and Skarn. Of Ruby, the sweet, gentle changeling girl with compression sickness. Was this really our only choice? Would it be better to just let them collapse with the floor?

"Yes," Quasar said. "If the people are adequately prepared, they can usually handle it. But that ninth floor is a Forsoothian milk

marm, if you know what I'm saying. The teleported town won't land inside another town, so you don't have to worry about it crashing into what remains of Larracos, but it'll likely land in the midst of another faction's territory killing a bunch of their mercenaries. Then you'll have zombie mercenaries and the pissed-off survivors all attacking your villagers all at the same time."

"So I could plant a giant bomb," I said, thinking.

"You could. The changelings might not like that too much. And you don't know where it's going to land. They say this stuff is random, but we all know it ain't. You'd likely end up blowing away a bunch of trees."

"Damn. That's not nearly as good as the gate. With the gate, we have coordinates."

"True. That's why we're negotiating. We're going to ask for the six mercenaries, they'll counter with two, and we'll settle on four. One with a teleport spell. One with this *Zerzura* spell. We also need to keep you alive. I see you've already signed a shitty contract with the *Vengeance of the Daughter* show. We need to revisit that. You're a taxpaying stockholder now. This changes everything about your situation and what you can and can't do out in the universe. Can't change the contract between you and the production company itself, but I have a few thoughts on how to keep that star burning. I might be able to finagle a ninth-floor extension out of the mudskippers, which'll keep the *Vengeance* folks from trying to kill you on this one. That show sucks, by the way. It's only interesting when you and the cat are on, and everyone knows it. That's equal parts dangerous and lucky. At least the naiad doesn't wear a shirt."

"Okay," I said, still thinking of Bonnie and the changeling children being thrown into danger like that. This was inevitable, but was there more I could do to protect them? I thought of the Dreadnoughts.

"I have a crazy idea. Tell me what you think."

70 Hours until the Butcher's Masquerade.

Hello, Crawlers!

The brambles are closing in! This event was a surprise even to us, but as you know, you gotta be prepared for anything! Don't let those thorns prick you!

I must say, we are impressed with the resiliency you humans are showing on this floor. While the total number of survivors is still a little low, the percentage of sixth-floor crawler casualties is one of the lowest in *Dungeon Crawler World* history. Meanwhile, the hunter casualty rate went from a two percent average to over 25 percent. Those hunters who are listening to this, don't worry. Help is on the way! We have a special announcement only you will hear after the end of this message.

As we mentioned previously, we are doing some tweaking with the next two floors. What was originally going to be the seventh floor is now the eighth, with the difficulty ramped up accordingly. The next floor was something we didn't think would be designed in time. We call it the Great Race. It is an engineering marvel. Thanks to our newest partners, the Valtay Corporation, we were able to secure the capital and help required to finish the project just in time. We are seeing a whole lot of people going down early. You will be at a disadvantage if you do so, and we highly suggest you stay as long as you can. This will be the last hint you receive about the next floor.

Those of you in the top 50, we have just about 70 hours until the big event! Everyone wants to go to the Butcher's Masquerade! Yes, the party is still on! Here's some information about the galaxy's most exclusive gathering!

At the end of this message, all crawlers in the top 50 will receive a plus-one token. This can be given to another crawler which will allow them entry into the party. If you

fall out of the top 50 or if you perish before the party starts, the associated token will no longer be valid.

A party countdown will now appear in your interface. The party commences 30 hours prior to collapse, and it is scheduled to last four to five hours. When this timer reaches zero, you will be teleported directly to the ballroom, which is within the High Elf castle. Due to the bramble event, you will *not* be transported back upon the conclusion of the party. Instead, you will be allowed to exit the southern entrance to the castle, which will not yet be infested with the brambles. The elves may or may not offer safe passage after, so prepare accordingly.

All hunters will also attend the party. They will appear to be in the same room as you, but they will actually be in a different location within the castle. You will not be able to physically harm the hunters, and they will not be able to harm you. You may not cast magic within the castle ballrooms. You may not bring weapons or explosives or traps or any other instruments of violence into the castle ballrooms. You may not use your inventory within the castle ballrooms.

There will be a pet beauty contest followed by a talent competition with celebrity judges from outside the crawl attending remotely. You will receive a survey if you wish to participate in either event after this message. Due to limited space, not all entries will be accepted.

Pets and NPC companions will not be allowed in the main ballrooms, but will be allowed to participate as extras via one of two assistant staging areas. Details will be provided upon acceptance into the show.

There will be a catered buffet and a prize booth where one may redeem Hunter hands or Crawler scalps.

Safe passage for both parties is guaranteed by Queen Imogen, ruler of the High Elves, who will be your host for the evening.

This is meant to be a relaxing, fun evening for both the hunters and the crawlers. The hunters will exit the north entrance upon the end of the evening. You may kill each other afterward.

There is no patch update tonight due to some technical difficulties. We only have a few minor patches queued up. Rest assured we're working tirelessly to make certain the system is properly updated.

Now get out there and kill, kill, kill!

---

66 Hours until the Butcher's Masquerade

"Carl, Carl!" Donut said. "They accepted my applications! Both of them!"

I looked up from the kitchen table, confused. "Wait, the talent show part, too? How? The Tina plan is dead in the water."

There were multiple people in the saferoom. Katia stood on my left, Imani on my right. Elle was outside, on her way to the Desperado Club.

The talent show portion of the event allowed NPCs to participate, but only as assistants and backup. We'd floated the idea to use the talent contest to finish out the Big Tina quest, but they'd immediately rejected my application because it required the main part of the act to be a crawler or a hunter. Tina had to be the star of the show. We were in the middle of figuring out a safe place to construct a small stage and get her to dance upon it before the brambles reached us.

"Kiwi and Tina and the rest of the crew are going to be my backup dancers," Donut announced proudly. "I'm going to sing."

I exchanged a look with Imani and Katia.

"I don't think that's going to work, Donut."

"Don't be such a Debbie Downer, Carl. Of course it'll work. We'll make it work. Mongo! We're in! Mommy is going to sing, and you're going to win the beauty contest! We need to go back out there and get back to work."

Mongo screeched and waved his arms.

I took a deep breath and looked back down at the map of the area. I moved it aside and pulled up the second map. The one that just got dropped off in the attached pub. I sent a few messages back and forth, brainstorming a few ideas. Katia gave a shrug. Imani nodded.

Louis came out of the bathroom, zipping up his pants. He wiped his hands on his shirt and came to stand next to me. He looked more shell-shocked than usual. Sweat beaded down his temple. He'd gone up to level 42, almost double what he'd been when I'd met him on the previous floor. "I've been in the guild too long. My blood bar thing is only half full. I need to go back out there in a bit. Firas is helping Britney fill hers up, and I need to join them. Good thing all those mobs are getting herded toward us."

"All right, but stay for a few minutes. It's important we all know the map."

Elle: I'm here at the Desperado Club, but there's a problem. I can't get to them.

Carl: Damn. Okay, come back to the guild. We're about to go over the map.

I leaned over the surprisingly-detailed castle diagram Edgar the tortoise had provided. I pointed at the left side of the expansive castle by the southern entrance. "This is our ballroom, and way over here is where the hunters will be. The two rooms aren't even on the same floor. We're on the fourth floor and they're on the second. The rooms themselves should be identical. I think it'll be like a production trailer. You'll be able to see and interact with the hunters, but if you touch them, they won't really be there."

"Mistress Tiatha says you *will* be able to touch them," Imani said. "I don't know how it would work."

"They're called goodwill ballrooms," Samantha said from the edge of the table. "Everybody knows that. They're quite common. It's so

visiting ambassadors and other dignitaries can be entertained without the danger of assassination. You can touch one another if you wish, but it is a light touch. It's in such a room where I met my king. We had to wait until after the party before we could be together." She sighed dramatically. "When I reunite with my body and find my sweet child, I'll get back to him one day. We'll have a happy, normal family." She suddenly rolled across the table and stopped in front of Louis and started making weird, growling noises up at him. He started to back away, surprised.

"My king is a fan of swapping partners, just so you know," she said up to Louis. "Maybe we can talk your fiancée into portraying my bitch of a mother. Then we can have some fun." Then she did some Hannibal Lecter thing with her tongue, causing everyone in the room to stop and look at the talking sex doll head.

Louis looked to me for help.

"Samantha, don't be weird," I said. I picked her up and tossed her off the table. She hit the ground with a little shriek and immediately bounced up to the edge of the couch and started swearing at me, but she stopped when she saw the two bear cubs were still in the room, watching her wide-eyed.

"Uh, so the two rooms are far apart," Louis said, trying to get back on subject, using his finger to trace the distance. "Like, really far apart. How big is this castle? And what are these little tunnel things? Air ducts?"

The castle did not look like something one would associate with elves. The white structure looked like a sugar cube just sitting there in the middle of a large clearing. It was just a white square with four sentry towers, one at each of the four corners along with a simple, but empty, moat, like some Bauhaus art installation blown up to ridiculous proportions. The southern exit where we'd supposedly exit was right at the base of a large, rocky cliff that led straight up, almost like the bowl wall on the previous floor. We'd emerge right outside the south-eastern corner of the map.

I doubted there'd be any sort of stairwell or towns in the area. It'd be the castle, and that was it.

Since Queen Imogen was a country boss, that meant a stairwell would open up once she was defeated.

"How big is it? It's huge," I said. "It says the side is 150 meters wide. It's ridiculously big."

"What's that big room in the middle?" Louis asked.

"The throne room. That's the seventh floor. We won't be allowed in there. I'm pretty sure we'll be magically restricted to the ballroom. I believe Samantha's right about the purpose of the two sides. The whole castle has three sections. Where we'll be, where the hunters will be, and the middle where the majority of the high elves live. It also goes underground. It looks like a cube, but it's really a rectangle because it has a few subsurface levels. There's a dungeon and a secret entrance down there."

"Where will Mongo be?" Donut asked, peering at the map.

"There are two servant staging areas," I said. "Both on the first floor. This one is under where we'll be, but three floors lower. The other is directly below the north ballroom for the hunters."

"How many hunters will be at the party?" Louis asked.

"According to the *kill, kill, kill* lady, it'll be all of them," I said.

"That's going to be like 600 people. That's way too many," he said. "When the party gets out, it'll be a hundred of us and 600 of them right outside? We'll get our asses kicked."

"I agree," I said. "That's why we need to get to work. I want that number under 250 before we get there."

"Carl," Donut said, interrupting. "Prepotente just messaged me and wants to know where we are. He says he has something to give me. He said it's a present, but he sounds kinda angry about it."

"Uh," I said, not so sure what to think of that. I remembered what he said earlier. *If I can't exist in a world with my mother, then nobody even remotely responsible for her death can exist in this world, either.* "Maybe you should ask him what it is first. Don't tell him where we are."

"I already told him. He says he's on his way."

Goddamnit.

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[57]

65 Hours until the Butcher's Masquerade

"How have you been?" I asked Bautista. We were in Team Katia's personal space, checking it out, waiting for our meeting with Prepotente. She had it arranged differently than we did. The space felt more like a house than a warehouse. Donut was looking about, scoffing at her design choices.

Bautista was making an inventory of all his more common beanie toys, looking for variants. He had them lined up on the kitchen table. Apparently some of them had rare deviations that didn't show up in the description, which meant they'd react different when he pulled the tag. He had literally dozens of them lined up. He was going down the line, picking them up and searching for odd colors and stitching, comparing one to the next.

"Oh, you know," the orange, tiger-headed crawler replied. "Katia says you're starting to put together some sort of response to that party in a few days. I'm ranked 23, so it looks like I'll be there. Do you really think we'll have to fight?"

"Yes," I said. I picked up the first beanie. It was one of the grulke frog warriors. "We're doing all sorts of preparations. We're also buying a few room upgrades before the timer runs out because they might not be available next floor. After you're done with this, you should go check out the new bathroom upgrade we have in our

personal space. Imani wants everyone to look at it and to vote to see if we want to share the upgrade to the whole guild."

He looked up and met my eyes. "Sure," he said after a moment.

"So, you and Katia." I let it hang.

"Wait, what is this?" Donut asked, looking up from a stuffed hedgehog. "What about you and Katia?"

"It just sort of happened."

"That's good," I said, slapping him on the back. "I think it's great." I picked up the next beanie. It looked like a regular, pink flamingo. It reminded me of the plastic flamingo sitting in the front of Agatha's shopping cart.

Stuffed Flame-ingo Figure. (With tags)

This is the most common variation of the Flame-ingo line of collectible figures. While not as common as the Grulke or Garbage Scowl figures, these figures are still near the bottom in terms of rarity.

A favorite amongst the more feminine fans of Jaxbrin toys.

I looked up from the stuffed flamingo to see a strange look on Bautista's face. He looked oddly relieved about something. I realized he was reacting to my comment about him and Katia.

"You and Katia?" Donut repeated, incredulous. "You are together with Katia? My Katia? Does she know this?"

"Yes, Donut," I said. "It's been obvious for a while now. I assumed you would've picked up on it."

"Katia!" Donut called, jumping from the table. She marched toward the door into the main guild area. "Katia, are you here? I must speak with you this instant!"

I picked up the next beanie. It was a gray and brown, fuzzy moth or butterfly thing. There was a line of like 100 of them. "Why do you have so many of these?"

"I got all of them a few days back," he said.

"Wait, you're getting these things in dungeon boxes now?"

"No. This was from my sponsor. It wasn't an actual benefactor box. I got pulled out of the dungeon to do a commercial for them, and I just stole the sample box at the end of the session."

"Been there," I said.

Stuffed Slate Butterfly Figure. (With tags.)

The slate butterfly is one of the more common figures in Jaxbrin's newest lineup. The tragic story of the butterflies who accidentally killed all their fairy friends is a beloved fairytale. It's also based loosely on a true story, which is no surprise considering how parents just love to romanticize mass-casualty events.

Donut returned to the table. "She's outside. Well, I just don't know what to make of any of this. This is just as surprising as Louis and Juice Box. Carl, are you going to allow this to continue?"

"Allow it to continue?" I asked. "What does that even mean?"

Bautista still appeared ridiculously nervous. "Actually, I'm... I'm glad it's all out in the open. I must admit, I was a little worried that you, Carl. You know. You had a thing for her."

"For Katia?" I asked, surprised. "She's like my sister."

"He's psychologically damaged thanks to Miss Beatrice," Donut said. "Don't let that nipple ring fool you. He doesn't get very many girls. Besides, based on his porn-viewing habits, I'm pretty sure he has a thing for Asian girls."

"Nipple ring?" Bautista asked, raising a fuzzy eyebrow.

"You never know what someone's kinks are," Donut said. "For example, I had no idea Katia was into furries."

"Have you tried these slate butterfly things before?" I asked, changing the subject.

"Just once," he said. "They're harmless. They don't attack. They just fly to the closest light source and suck the energy of it away. You can have one if you want. You can have five."

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64 Hours until the Butcher's Masquerade

“Holy shit, you made it to level 70,” I said as the goat entered the pub. Kiwi and Mongo stopped tussling long enough to watch Prepotente step into the bar. As the door closed, I caught sight of Bianca outside. The damn thing looked like a dragon. The rain sizzled as it hit the creature’s back.

Elle sat in one corner of the bar, Bautista in the other, keeping a watchful eye on us.

“Hi Prepotente!” Donut said.

“Hello, Donut. Hello, Carl,” Prepotente said as he approached our table. He looked exhausted.

“Do you want to go into the saferoom? To see the guild?” I asked. He had fifteen hunter-killer marks over him. “Maybe we can get you to take a nap.”

“We got a really neat bathroom upgrade,” Donut said. “Mine is a bigger litter box that’s just luxurious.”

“I do not wish to rest or see your waste-of-money upgrade,” Prepotente said. “I do not have time for whatever it is you’re planning. I do not wish to get involved with it.” He looked about the room. “There is no need for your idiot friends to protect you. I wish you no harm.”

Elle floated away from the table and approached. “Hey, did you just call me an idiot? You know my mother had some really good goat recipes, and I’m starting to feel a little nostalgic.”

He held up a hairy hand, turned toward Elle and then screamed right in her face.

She flew back several feet. “Holy shit, pal. Your breath.”

“I have no time nor desire to trade barbs today, you, whatever you are. I am here to deliver a package.”

“What is it?” I asked warily.

He pulled a black, bubbling potion from his inventory and placed it on the table in front of Donut.

“I received it in a benefactor box. I cannot fathom why my sponsor would give me something intended for you, but there it is.”

He got up and exited the pub. Outside, Bianca screeched at his approach, and then they were gone.

"That is one strange dude," Elle muttered. "Donut, I'm glad you're not weird like that."

"Certainly not. But he is very sad right now," Donut said. "You know, I've never had goat. Is it good?"

"Oh, it's delicious," Elle said. She turned to the Bopca at the counter. "Hey! You got goat? Maybe in a curry?"

"That's a little fucked up," I said as I picked up the potion and examined it. This was now the second benefactor item given to someone else but intended for Donut.

I Take it All Back - Potion

This will remove any effects of Scolopendra's *Transmutation* spell.

A tag hung off the top, like a label on a Christmas present. It read:

Give this to Princess Donut. Use when the time is right. Do NOT give to Tina.

"What the hell, man," I said.

I could think of several people who might want to get their hands on this. "Don't use it until I say so. And don't tell Signet you have it. She'll want to use it on Grimaldi, and I don't think that's what it's for."

"Huh," Elle said. "I just got a benefactor box from the Apothecary. Imani messaged and said she did, too. She's opened hers, and she said it's also for Donut."

"Carl," Donut said. "I'm starting to think that nipple ring bribe was a trick. I'm starting to think you tricked me and that you were directed to give me that potion all along!"

"Come on," I said. "Let's go talk to the changelings, and then we'll try to figure out what the deal is with all these benefactor boxes."

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63 Hours until the Butcher's Masquerade

Entering the Desperado Club

"Hello, Clarabelle," I said as I stepped into the space before the main entrance to the club. The pounding music emanated from the doorway. Donut bopped her head. "I wasn't sure if I'd see you here since we're on the Hunting Grounds level now."

"Well, look who it is," the crocodilian bouncer said. "I haven't seen you guys in ages. Not since you borrowed four of our bouncers. You don't have them with you? You're not getting free security still, not when you have free access to those guys. How are they doing anyway?"

"They're back at the base. Having the time of their lives."

"They're obsessed with video games and movies about dinosaurs," Donut added. "Sledgie really likes gangster movies, too."

"Good to hear. So anyway, I don't know if you heard from your ice fairy friend, but this door still leads to the club's top floor. Management forced us to make the change because you, mister, stranded several hunters within. On both the Hunting Grounds level and the Larracos level. They're not too happy about it. Crawlers

were coming in and getting into fights, and we can't kick those hunter assholes out, so they made it so you guys don't mix anymore. So you come in on the same floor you used to. The hunters are now banned from coming up, so there's no mixing of the groups."

"Wait," I said. "Those hunters who all ran in here when I attacked Zockau are still stuck here? They're just sitting around twiddling their thumbs? I thought all they had to do is rebuild the entrance bar."

"Most are getting something twiddled all right, and it ain't their thumbs. That Hunting Grounds floor is a lot bigger than this one. But, yeah, rebuilding the bar is simple business, but the mayor of Zockau needs to approve the construction, and the mayor is that mantis bitch whose crotch you set aflame. That was funny as shit, by the way. Anyway, them mantises never play well with others, so they're keeping the trapped hunters in there. Seven already died. Five killed by bouncers. One by one of the girls. One by a crawler. That's what caused the rule change. Bunch o' them outworlders down on the Larracos level are still trapped, too. They almost got the city drained, so those folks can finally leave in a few days."

"It still hasn't drained?" I asked, surprised. This part was new to me. "Really?"

Clarabelle leaned in. "Something keeps clogging the drains, and those sharks aren't helping matters. So, yeah. They're still stuck. They got the hotel and the main casino down there, though, so ain't nobody complaining too much. Only thing is the faction weapons brokers usually buy a pass to go up to the Hunting Grounds levels so they can trade with the hunters, and that ain't happened at all since you cocked everything up on both ends. They were trying to drain it before this floor ended, but it doesn't look like it's going to happen."

"Those guys on the Hunting Grounds level aren't getting kicked out because the blood bar thing?"

"Yeah, I hate that rule," Clarabelle said. "Tenth floor rules apply, but only at the door. It's not for the ones already in here. Bar doesn't drain in the club, but it's gotta be full if you wanna get in. Rules a little different if you want to get into the Cosmic Lounge, though."

Luckily, Donut and I had topped our blood bars off before coming in here.

"Have you seen many hunters enter? Ones coming in from entrances outside Zockau?"

"A few," Clarabelle said. "And some of those guys are staying to hide it out, I think. But it's not the mass exodus I thought it might be. And some are going back out again. It don't matter much if they're all gonna get teleported away in a bit for that butcher party or whatever it's called."

"These clubs are getting harder to find," I said. "Most are in bigger towns, and a lot of those towns are already claimed by crawlers. Hunters aren't allowed to be mayors except in Zockau, so the guards attack them when they enter a town, and most aren't strong enough to fight back. So they can't get to the clubs, even if their bars are full. They're stuck hiding out in the smaller towns until the brambles reach them, and then they gotta run again."

"Yup," Clarabelle said. "Good for you lot. You sure tossed all their plans right into the dunny, didn't you? All us are rooting for you."

"What if Mordecai came in here by himself?" I asked.

"He's a manager. He's attached to the princess. He'll also go in on the top floor. He'd be dead if he went down there by himself."

"What about other NPCs?" I asked. "If an NPC from this floor came in, where would they enter?"

"You know, your ice friend asked that same, exact question. Regular NPCs coming in here got different rules. Not too many of them got the required membership credentials. But if they do, they'll go in on the proper floor. The hunting grounds level. And they won't be able to come up or go down, either. They're all stuck on the floor they went in on."

I'd already discussed this with Katia and Elle as I wasn't sure the changeling representatives would even be able to get in here at all, but Elle assured me they would. Apparently, the changelings from Hump Town had regularly gone to the clubs here, having the ability to emulate a pass.

"So how do we get to the Hunting Grounds level? There's a few places down there I need to get to."

"You're not supposed to unless management says it's okay, and they haven't said it's okay yet. I wouldn't hold your breath, especially not you two. Believe it or not, we don't actively promote the death of our patrons. Unless you're in the casino, of course. Or the Mosh Pit."

Shit. I was hoping maybe Clarabelle would make an exception for me and Donut. Elle hadn't been able to get access, either. She could only go in on the top floor, and the changeling we needed to talk to could only enter on the Hunting Grounds floor.

Carl: You're up, Donut. Don't be too mean. We want to remain friends after this.

Donut: WATCH ME DO MY MAGIC.

Donut leaned in. "Carl wants to visit the Bitches room, but he's tired of all the ones on the top floor. We hear there's a room called High Class Bitches. And I would like to take a look at the Penis Palace. I have a coupon for a dance from the Penis Parade, and it says it's also good at the Palace. I heard they have ogre dancers at this one, and I want to see if the rumors are true."

Clarabelle grunted with amusement, her crocodilian eyes boring into me. "I didn't know you went in there. You're likely to catch something nasty. Still, sorry. Management wants to keep the violence to a minimum. And every time you two come in here, something happens. I didn't let your ice fairy friend in, and I ain't gonna let you in, either."

"But you *can* get us down there, can't you?" I asked. I tapped the door. "I bet you can wave your hand, and this door turns into an entrance for the Hunting Grounds. Like you said, it's not a rule-rule. I know you can't get us into the Larracos level. But you *can* get us onto the Hunting Grounds floor level, can't you?"

Clarabelle crossed her scaled arms. "I *could* do that, but it'll cost you more than you're willing to give. I like this job. Door duty is the easiest and safest, and I wouldn't want to do anything to mess that up."

"Really?" Donut asked. "You wouldn't risk your job over 100 gold?"

"One hundred gold?" Clarabelle scoffed. "You're offering me 100 gold? I told you before your charm doesn't work on me, little one. I like you two, but that's just insulting, especially considering how many of those hunters you two have killed. You're probably the richest of all the crawlers."

"I like you, too, Clarabelle," Donut said. "But you have misunderstood. We're not offering you 100 gold. We're talking about the 100 gold you stole from us when we first hired private security."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Clarabelle said, all amusement draining from her.

"Do you know," Donut continued, "that my interface keeps track of every gold piece I have ever spent? I have the ledger pulled up right now. Let's see here." She started pawing at the air like she was scrolling through an invisible menu. "Three gold spent buying that fabulous beret from that one Bopca. The 1,500 gold Carl made me waste on all that fireproof string. Oh, yes. Here it is. It says, '500 gold, paid to Clarabelle from Desperado Club security for private secure escorts.' Dated the first time we came in here on the fourth floor. It's the day I met Sledgie!" She cocked her head to the side with mock confusion. "That's quite odd. Here's a refund, but it's only for 400 gold. When I got into the fight where that guy tried to hurt me, your boss, Astrid, told us she would refund us the full 400 gold for the security. Oh yes, I remember now. I wanted to say something about the discrepancy, but Carl here has a kind heart, and he thought we should take the matter up with you privately." Donut looked pointedly at the door and then back at Clarabelle. "This is us, taking the matter up privately."

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62 Hours until the Butcher's Masquerade

"I appreciate what you've done for us, but that don't mean we gonna just blindly trust you," the changeling said as he helped me

hold the door closed. His name was Pearson, and he'd been a dromedarian bartender in disguise on the last floor. He was currently in the form of a cretin, which made him sound like Bomo when he talked. He had his bulk pressed against the door, but I feared we wouldn't be able to keep it closed for long. These guards on the Hunting Grounds level were exceedingly polite compared to the ones on the floor above, but they had enhanced strength.

The door slammed yet again, and I grunted with the effort to keep it closed. I talked through gritted teeth. "I promised Juice Box I would do my best to bring you down with us each floor. With the guild hall system, we can hire maybe fifteen of you, but it doesn't even work on some of you guys. I'm not sure why, but it doesn't matter anyway. I've found a way to take all of you straight to the ninth floor, even without the Gate of the Feral Gods. But your town is about to be overrun, and I need you all in the same place at the same time for it to work."

Behind us, the door slammed again as one of the crocodilian guards crashed a shoulder into it. "Sir! Sir!" he called through the door. "You're not supposed to be down here!"

Donut returned from down the hallway where she'd been exploring. The corridor was dotted with doors, but the hallway itself was empty except for the three of us. "Carl, Carl, there's an explosives guild down here! And a rogue's guild! You should go to both!"

"Not now, Donut," I said, grunting. The door crashed again.

"Sir!" the crocodilian called. "I will get in trouble if management finds you down here! If you were anyone else, I'd bite your goddamned head off."

"We're busy!" I called back. "We'll be out in a minute!" Then, to Donut I said, "Can you say something to calm him down?"

"Carl is pooping! He's almost done!"

The crocodilian's voice went up an octave. "In the hallway? Sir, this is not a bathroom! This is the skill guild hallway!"

"Real helpful, Donut," I said.

Clarabelle did not give us direct access to the Hunting Grounds level of the club. Instead, she'd told us of a secret stairwell. In the last stall of the women's bathroom was a toilet, and if you took the top off that toilet and reached in, there was a secret latch. When pulled, it would open the wall behind the stall.

Nobody in the club so much as blinked an eye when we strolled into the women's bathroom. The weird, generated NPCs they used for the dance floor did not use the restroom as far as I could tell, and I didn't see anyone else in the club. Sure enough, the concealed stairwell was exactly where Clarabelle said it would be. I pulled the lever, the wall slid open, revealing a tight, metal staircase that led straight down. It made me wonder what other secrets were hidden in here.

We went down, and it led to a door leading to the corresponding bathroom one floor down. The stairs continued downward, presumably to the women's bathroom on the Larracos level, but when I tried to take a step in that direction, I received an error message.

Nice Try. No.

The women's bathroom on the Hunting Grounds level was thankfully empty.

"It's much less filthy on this level," Donut said. "The floor tiles are much nicer. My paws don't stick to them."

"Okay," I whispered as we crouched at the door out of the bathroom. The door itself had silver, metallic ornaments on it, shined to a polish. The bar above our heads was more like a short-staffed dive bar that hadn't seen a good cleaning in a decade. "They'll supposedly be at the main bar. There should be two of them. Look for out-of-place NPCs. Hopefully none of the hunters will notice us."

"You're a giant man in his boxers, Carl, and I am a cat. They're going to notice us the second we walk out the door. You didn't think this through."

"Mordecai says this floor is really big and maze-like. Hopefully they're spread out. We just need to find them quick. We'll be in and out. I doubt the hunters will attack us anyway. Clarabelle said the guards already killed some the last time they chose to fight, and they've been stuck down here a long time. They're just waiting it out."

"She also said the guards will kick us out the moment they notice us."

"Then we'll try to avoid them. This isn't optional. We need to talk to them. Okay. Here we go."

We pushed through the door into a small, well-lit hallway. Muted music rose in the distance. It was nothing like the pulsing, EDM beat of the floor above us. The floor here was carpeted and lush, and the red wallpapered wall was covered in large portraits of fairies in ornate frames. Two doors down, a door opened, and an elf rushed out carrying a tray filled with drinks and steaming food. She did not see us.

"Bar is that way," I said, pointing. "Keep your head down."

To my right, the door to the men's room opened, and a giant, red-skinned creature staggered out, buttoning up his pants. He was about seven feet tall and as wide as a cretin. He had twin, fist-sized bumps on his head, like ground-down horns. He bumped right into me. "Oh, sorry, friend," he said, looking up. His eyes went huge.

Haxor the Destroyer – Dreadnought. Level 50. Merchant
This is an Unaffiliated Hunter.

He opened his mouth to scream as I reflexively kicked him with all of my might right in his nuts.

Thankfully, that particular quirk of human anatomy translated to the dreadnought race, and he went flying back through the door. He hit the tiled floor of the men's restroom and slid until he crashed against the far sink, which cracked.

I was on him in a second. I leaped, landing on his chest. I felt bones crunch under me. He didn't wear any armor. Just a simple, wide and flowing shirt that was open at the chest. It looked like something the Maestro would wear.

"No," he gasped. "No."

I grabbed him by the twin horn stubs, and I savagely pulled his head to the side, breaking his neck. Several notifications rolled down my interface. None of them, thankfully, were regarding the aggro of the guards.

"Again with the nut-kicking, Carl?" Donut said, looking down at the corpse. "The neck breaking thing was cool. I don't know if that cancels the nut-kick out though." She looked over her shoulder nervously at the door. "Clarabelle said we'll get kicked out forever if they catch us fighting!"

"Didn't have a choice," I said. "People get hurt and die here all the time. It only counts if the guards see it."

"Tell that to him," Donut said.

I pulled the body into my inventory. He didn't have much, but he did have one of those weird credit chits we'd taken off the orc several days earlier. From what I gathered, these things were the equivalent of intergalactic credit cards. It was strange this guy was unaffiliated, though. The Dreadnought Clan was one of the faction wars participants, but they'd quit thanks to the flooding of Larracos. The war chief pulled them out after his wife got stung by a jellyfish.

That reminded me that I hadn't heard from Quasar my attorney in a while. I'd ping him again after we got out of here.

After I took the body, all that was left was the cracked sink and a little blood. I grabbed a towel from the hanging rack and quickly cleaned up. Then I draped the towel over the sink to hide the crack.

"Let's try this again," I said, and we moved into the hallway. Just past the bathroom and to our right was a double set of doors leading into a kitchen.

"I think there's a full restaurant on this floor with waiters and everything," Donut hiss whispered. "This is way better than above already. This is an outrage!"

I peered around the corner. I caught the neon glow of a sign leading to the casino and another sign leading off to the Silk Pavilion, a market I desperately needed to get to. I turned to see a pair of elves sitting at the bar, both staring directly at me. The only other creature in view was a badger-headed bartender, who was facing away. Both elves had a pair of empty drinks sitting in front of

them. As we stared at each other, one of them changed faces to reveal a dromedarian and then changed back, signaling me these were, indeed, the changelings we were looking for.

"That's them," I said.

I took a step forward, but one waved us back. The other slipped off the bar and moved in the opposite direction.

"Hey, mate!" he called at someone around a corner I couldn't see. "Guards! Did you hear that? I think those fuckers are fighting again in the casino."

The second furiously waved me forward and then pointed at another hallway with a door. He slipped off the bench and moved toward it. The sign read **Guilds.**

That was easy, I thought as I started to follow, moving toward the main, long bar.

"Oi! Sir!" a voice called from yet another hallway. "Sir! Crawlers are banned from this floor!"

"Here," I said, handing Pearson the changeling a hand-drawn map containing all the details of our location so they could find us. The guard had stopped pounding on the door, an ominous sign. "We're going to need your help. Get the kids to us, and we'll stick them in our safe area until it's safe."

"And if it's never safe?" he asked, shoving the paper into his waistband.

"Then it's not going to matter. Look. We're just starting with our plans on how to evacuate you guys and keep ourselves alive. We're still working on it, but the initial plans are laid out on the back of that map. We're using a spell called *Zerzura* to evacuate you. But the brambles are moving fast, and we can't cast the spell for another two days. The spell is cast on a town, not just a group of people. You need to be in the town for it to work. The thing is, the high elves have destroyed all the towns in the forest around them. All but one. The high elf castle. That means we'll need to get you inside.

There's a lot of moving parts going on at once, more than I like. I'll need all of your help if we want this to work."

"Before she left, Juice Box told us to be careful of you," Pearson said.

"I'm sure she did," I said. "But she still trusted us."

"We don't even know if she's alive."

"She is." *I hope*, I didn't add. "If this works, you'll be reunited soon."

"Carl," Donut said. "Someone else is out there now. Someone small."

A horrific, wracking pain filled my entire body. It came all of a sudden. I suddenly felt hot, my vision flashing red. I looked down in horror to see the skin on my arm starting to bubble and crack.

Warning: Your blood has been set to boil.

"Carl," a female voice called, flowing through the doorway. "I suggest you open this door right now if you wish to ever be allowed access to the club again."

Oh thank god, I thought, realizing who this was. *This could've been a lot worse.*

"It's okay," I growled as my health plummeted. I fell to my knees. "Pearson, change back to the elf quick, and open the door. Try to touch her if you can."

The door opened, revealing Astrid, the club's level 125 assistant manager. She was a **Bloodlust Sprite**, an adept in the dreaded cardiovascular magic. She'd cast a spell to make my blood literally boil. She wasn't trying to kill me, I knew. If she was, I'd already be dead. She floated there, glaring angrily at the three of us as my consciousness flowed away.

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[59]

Time to the Butcher's Masquerade: 62 Hours.

I blinked, and I found myself slumped over in a chair. I instantly knew where I was. *Not this shit again.*

"Hello, Orren," I said, coughing myself awake. Donut was next to me on her own chair. The two changelings were gone. Astrid the fairy wasn't here, either.

The liaison didn't waste any time with niceties. "I had Astrid bring you to me because I have something I need to discuss with you. Two things, actually. I am leaving upon the collapse of this floor, and I won't return until the beginning of the ninth, so we need to discuss this now."

I groaned in pain. I'd been "healed," but I had dozens of lingering debuffs that made me feel as if I'd been run over by a tank and then set on fire. That blood magic was really nasty.

A bowl of something non-alcoholic with cherries floating within sat on the edge of Orren's desk, and Donut stood next to me, her back paws on the chair and her forward paws on the desk, lapping at the drink. In that moment, she looked more cat-like than she had in a very long time. My head continued to pound as I stared at her. How long had we been sitting here?

"Hi, Carl," Donut said, looking up from her drink. "They let me order something from the kitchen! They brought it up on a platter

and everything. Do you know what capers are? They're really gross. You were out for forty-five minutes."

The fishbowl-headed creature sat in his creaking, wooden chair, looking at us with his gloved hands steepled in front of him.

"What did you do to my friends?" I asked.

"The two changelings?" he asked. "They've been ejected from the club. They won't be allowed to return. You're lucky the changeling took credit for blocking the door." He paused. "And cracking the sink."

"Wait, you're leaving?" I asked, shaking my head. "Why?"

"My job has many facets, but one of those responsibilities has recently been rendered moot. My kind and I will remain on-planet, but some people believe there's no need for me to remain in my in-game office until the faction wars segment begins on the ninth floor, assuming that even happens. We are constantly reevaluating. I disagree with the decision to leave, but it is out of my control. Do not worry, however. If our services are required, we will still be available."

I rubbed my forehead. I was relieved they let the changelings go. Hopefully they'd be on their way to meet Louis and Firas. "What can we do for you, Orren?"

"Do you know what it takes to be a liaison, crawler?"

"Being grouchy?" Donut asked.

"I'm on the clock here, Orren," I said. "If you're not going to kill us or whatever, can we just get on with it?"

"This job requires someone who is passionate about seeing the game succeed, yes, but it's the second requirement that is key. They look for a candidate who fundamentally disagrees with their home nation's goals and philosophies. They don't advertise this, but it is a crucial job requirement. This is because most nations, such as the Valtay, host these games with goals in mind that might run counter to both the spirit and true purpose of the game."

"Spirit of the game?" I asked. "Are you kidding me?"

"Technically, I should've been out of a job the moment the Valtay took control of the Borant corporation. Thankfully, my seniority and vocal differences with how my people comport themselves has kept

me in this chair. Plus," he added, "it would be quite hypocritical of them, considering the circumstances."

"I thought most of you guys just executed people who disagreed."

"We're not barbarians," he said.

"I beg to differ."

"I'm attempting to give you valuable information, crawler. So pay attention. I'm not the only liaison who's attempting to keep this system running smoothly. I'm not the only liaison who vehemently disagrees with his nation's own interests. There are many of us with differing tactics and differing philosophies on how the rules should be interpreted. And there are some of us who meet that second requirement a little too much."

"What in the flying fuck are you talking about?"

"He's trying to warn us about something, Carl." Donut had a mouthful of cherry as she talked. "But he's struggling with how to do it because he doesn't like us, and he's scared about breaking the rules."

The two of us just stared at Donut.

"I like you two quite a bit," Orren said. "I admit, I am constantly entertained at how you bend the rules to break things never meant to be broken. I used to strongly feel you two were bad for the production, despite your ability to generate ludicrous amounts of money. I still think you're both dangerous, but circumstances have changed."

"Wait," I said. "What are you trying to warn us about?"

"I have said all I can about the matter. Think of people like me as the sheriffs in the wild west of your culture. Some are good. Some are bad. Some are passionate about their duties, yet they go too far."

I thought of Chris and of the mysterious caprid liaison that seemed to be working with the Skull Empire to get us killed. They'd told us that they'd dealt with it. Was it true?

"You're the only one we've met," I said. "Hopefully we can keep it that way."

He paused, as if he wanted to say more. "Now, on to business. In case you haven't heard, the courts have stopped pretty much all crawl-related cases, including ones that the AI is traditionally indifferent to. They're trying to figure out the best way to proceed, and that likely won't get fleshed out until they get a better read on this particular AI's stability during the floor change. As you may know, your attorney is now required to get a court order to send you a message, but hasn't been allowed to even attempt this because of this freeze in *all* litigation. We've decided to circumvent this issue just this once. I must remain in the room during the discussion."

He waved his hand, and suddenly Quasar my attorney appeared in the room in a cloud of smoke.

He wasn't alone. He was also joined by a woman wearing a t-shirt with Donut's face on it with the words "Goddamnit, Donut!" emblazoned in giant letters on it. The words scrolled across the shirt. A flesh-colored tentacle sprouted from the top of the woman's head, waving back and forth. The thing had a jagged, drooling mouth and little bow on its head.

Donut looked up, mouth still full of cherry at the newcomers.

Both the woman and the tentacle thing on her head burst into tears at the sight of Donut.

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[60]

Time to the Butcher's Masquerade: 60 Hours.

My level-five Automaton table wasn't all that useful just yet, despite me having an instruction manual filled with recipes. I'd been terrified that they'd take the table or recipe book from me since I'd basically stolen them from the production facility. But so far, nobody had said anything about it. Just in case, I'd already copied all the recipes over to my main scratchpad, and then I'd copied and pasted them all into the cookbook.

The problem was the required supplies. I had some of the parts required for multiple recipes, but not all parts for any of them. I did finally manage to locate materials required for something called "Spider Stalkers," which were actually just robot rot stickers, a pretty common mob. The main driveshaft for them was rare and expensive, though I managed to secure a case of them on my way out of the Desperado Club. Mordecai said the parts would be easier to find once we cleared all those assholes out of the club's second floor, but that wouldn't happen until they were teleported to the party.

Killing all the hunters we could was no longer something I *wanted* to do. It was something we *had* to do. It was crucial we killed as many as possible before the party started because we'd all be teleported to the same area at once in a few days.

Word was spreading across the crawler chat networks about the vulnerability of the hunters. The aliens were scattered and unprepared and getting picked off in ones and twos. I wanted to get in on that as soon as possible. Donut and I were joining up with Katia's team, and we were going to do some hunting while we prepared for the masquerade.

Mordecai and Zev were both beside themselves over the sheer amount of dead hunters. Nothing like this had ever happened before.

After my recent visit with Quasar, Zev confided that multiple, immediately unsuccessful lawsuits followed once the brambles hit Zockau, and the Syndicate Council—not the subcommittee that oversaw the crawl, but the actual council, which was apparently a Big Deal—made a ruling that basically said nobody was allowed to file any more lawsuits naming the AI as a defendant. This was done to slow the AI's deterioration. The action apparently triggered a whole set of new lawsuits challenging the council's authority to make such a decision, and that whole mess was currently working its way through the courts.

I simply didn't know enough about the nature of the AI itself to understand how any of this worked. Why couldn't they just unplug and replace it? It didn't make sense to me.

But none of that drama had made it to the latest recap episode. They were pretending like everything was business as usual.

"This isn't like the Naga season, where they were just hemorrhaging money with every poor decision," Mordecai said. "It was like that at first, but it's turning out to be almost the opposite. Everybody *else* is losing money, but as of right now, all that lost money is transferring into Borant. It's too bad for the kua-tin government that they couldn't keep their little flippers on the company. No offense, Zev, if you're listening."

Zev: I'm always listening, Mordecai. And you're right. Our Valtay partners have shown no dismay at any events so far. The council, however, along with the liaisons are all very nervous. Now stop talking about this.

Time to level collapse: One day, 10 hours.
Hunters remaining: 290
Trophies Collected: 66

10 Hours Until the Butcher's Masquerade.

"The costumes are all ready," Donut said. "We're just having issues with some of them. Mordecai helped with the bubbles for Kiwi's costume, but some of the other ladies don't like wearing them. My clam does not like her outfit at all, and miss seaweed's costume falls off every time they practice their jump."

"I can't believe they let you put them on them in the first place," I said.

"That's because they trust me. I've never betrayed them. Once trust is broken, it can never be replaced. That's an important life lesson, Carl."

"Are you still on the nipple ring thing?" I asked. "That was days ago."

"If someone says they're going to count to three, one expects them to actually count to three. Not to just stab willy-nilly into one's body without warning. I didn't get to prepare myself, Carl. One must prepare themselves if they're getting disfigured. You're lucky the saferoom froze me. I almost bit your hand off."

"I don't know why you keep bringing this up. You're being a baby," I said. "And that wasn't lucky. Now you have a saferoom strike against you."

"You should kill him," Samantha said as she rolled by. "It is the only proper response to betrayal."

"Samantha, you have something gross in your hair," Donut called. "You better get it out before Kiwi tries to eat you again."

"Stop," I said, suddenly crouching. A light drizzle rained down. It was pitch black outside. "There are traps up ahead. Keep the dinos back. Look for hidden hunters. Samantha, get ready. Wait for my signal this time or you won't be allowed to go to the party."

"I will kill your mother."

"Just be ready."

Carl: We're in place. Be careful. There are still traps out here.

Imani: We're ready. Brambles are right behind us, moving in fast. We have maybe two hours before they reach the town. Scouts?

Li Na: There are ten of them out in the open on the south side of town. There's one of those anti-air guns set up. It has an anti-targeting spell on it, I think. I don't see any pets. They're preparing to leave. Most are still level 50, but there's a level 53 and a level 63 with magical plate, not the ceramic stuff. I think that one might be human. I only see one rifle this time. I see five of the mushroom guards. Don't see any other NPCs. Probably dead. There's maybe five hunters in the non-saferoom pub near the center of town. Place called Cold Stone Creamery.

Louis: I love that place.

Donut: OMG NOBODY BLOW UP THE ICE CREAM SHOP.

Carl: No Vrah?

Li Na: No sign of her.

Carl: Damn. Okay. Have you gotten a read on any affiliations?

Li Na: The one with a rifle has the mark, but I am not close enough to see what god. It's the only one I've seen. I do not know about the guys in the pub.

After our first coordinated raid, I'd received a nasty surprise. It turned out one of the hunters I'd killed from afar worshipped Emberus. I'd immediately received a warning from the god upon the hunter's death. It'd canceled out my current boon, which was plus 15% to my strength, and it told me I was in a state of **Penitence** for fifteen hours. My tithing requirements were doubled for thirty. If

I killed two more within the probation period, I'd receive a smite. I had the word **Shunned** floating over my head, much to the delight of Donut and everyone else who saw it.

The shunning period had now passed, but I needed to be careful.

Vrah had somehow managed to summon Emberus to Zockau in the early days of the floor, which allowed the guards in that town to worship him. She'd done that as a way to keep me from attacking again. Some of the hunters who'd happened to see the god during his brief appearance were protecting themselves from me by also worshipping him.

Li Na's demonic Changbi race came with a racial trait that allowed her to see if anyone was affiliated with a god. If she was close enough, she could see what god they worshipped. I could also see if they worshipped Emberus if I was right on top of them, but that didn't help with the way we were doing it.

Chris: The level 53 rifle guy is standing on top of me. Don't know the race, but he's a big guy with red skin. Looks like Hellboy. He's standing right on my head. I can take him out.

Carl: That's a Dreadnought. Be careful. They're strong.

Li Jun: We're close and can back Chris up if we have to.

"Another damn rifle," I muttered. "And an anti-air gun. I'll have to use the spiders, not the missiles."

"It's cheating," Donut said. "They're all cheaters."

The hunters were gaining increasingly-better gear despite their levels not going up.

Katia was the one who'd figured out what was happening.

"I'm pretty sure they're allowing the hunters to get sponsored. That's probably what the recap woman meant in her message a few days ago. If they're stuck here, it makes sense. Their families are probably pouring money into the show."

The problem with the vast majority of the stuff we were finding was that it was restricted to the actual hunter. Florin had taken out two Goriffs—blue, humanoid aliens with flapping antennae that looked oddly like twin elephant trunks upon their heads—and each had pulse rifles and electric body armor. The aliens found out the

hard way that the armor didn't protect their faces. Florin now had their gear, but he couldn't equip it. It was restricted to the now-dead individuals.

Donut's sunglasses, it turned out, had the same restrictions on them. We'd learned that when Louis had tried to put them on. Mordecai said it was a common addition to benefactor box items to keep fellow players from immediately murdering the recipients for the gear. There was a rare scroll called *Cracker Jack* that could free the item, but nobody we knew had one. In the meantime, we were collecting all the gear we could get our hands on in the hopes of utilizing it in the future.

The anti-air guns were designed specifically to take out either Elle, my missiles, Prepotente if he was mounted on Bianca, and/or the *Twister* if it approached. Or any other air-based attack. Most of these larger hunter groups had at least one now.

The pulse rifles were worse. The damn things were a downright menace. They were ridiculously unfair. They were like portable .50 cals that shot an unending supply of full-strength magic missiles. Bautista almost had his head blown off the day before, and Gwen had taken a shot to the gut that had literally punched a grapefruit-sized hole through her midsection. The system didn't treat the wound as an amputation, and she was now healed and back to her normal, grumpy self.

Fortunately, the guns were not treated as magic, so regular shield spells stopped their pulses. The weapons also shattered easily. The armor was similarly fragile once it was overwhelmed and shorted out. The vests fractured like ceramic pottery once the glowing, blue lights turned off. The problem was it took a lot of hits to get it to that point.

The family members of some of these stranded hunters were likely bankrupting themselves in a futile attempt to protect their loved ones.

Florin: Quit jawing and get on with it.

Carl: Sixty seconds, then *Ping*. Imani will cast *Dread*. Seekers moving in after that. Remember the rules. No hand

to hand until the spiders are detonated. I'll announce when the bots are down.

"Donut," I said. "You do the honors."

She did a little hop. "Oh boy, really?"

"There's a likely Emberus worshiper in town. It's too dangerous for me." I pulled the bag from my inventory and poured the twenty, rat-sized automaton spiders on the ground. They dropped out, rolling away like spilled tennis balls. Legs appeared from the metallic balls, and they skittered into a huddle, lining up.

As soon as I cast *Tripper*, setting off all the traps, I'd follow it up with *Ping*, and then Donut would touch each automaton with her paw, activating them and sending them in. I'd already programed each of the exploding automatons with a target: *Hunter Not Already Targeted*. If any of them managed to score a kill, Donut would get credit, not me.

I pulled two more unprogrammed spiders out. I clicked Samantha and set her as a target and then added the instructions: *Explode five seconds after target acquired*.

Carl: Casting now.

Elle: This is my favorite part. It's like the Fourth of July.

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<Note added by Crawler Milk. 6th Edition>

When a country boss dies, it drops persistent loot called the Treasure Map. My advice. Don't pick it up.

Over 400 of us faced the boss. Less than 50 survived. It would've been easier if it had been physically huge, allowing us to all attack at once. But this terror was in a low-ceilinged cave, and it was almost impossible to even get a hit in. We were doing damage to each other just as much as to him. All country bosses have special attacks that kill en masse. Beware the ones who look especially easy to kill. They are inevitably the worst.

When we finally emerged victorious, it did not feel like a victory. We were angry and bloodied and distrusting of our fellow crawlers who'd eagerly killed others just to get a hit in on the boss. What should have been a moment of unity was the calamitous event that spelled our doom.

This was by design. Of that I am certain.

And then we all picked up the map, which showed the location and quality of all the magical gear in the area. Gear we all felt we deserved. It sparked a second slaughter, and I received my first player-killer skull.

I wish I had never picked up that map. It wasn't worth it. I have blood on my claws, and it will never wash away.

I had so far collected a total of 66 trophies. The quick chaos of the raids made it difficult for me to use my ring, but I'd still managed to mark three additional hunters. All three of those kills had constitution as their highest stat, which brought my base up twelve points. My ring now gave five stat points per kill.

Donut had also managed to kill two more hunters, bringing her trophy total to three.

Overall, they'd been whittled down by more than half.

The inexorable brambles combined with the blood bar had seemed terrible at first, but it ended up being exactly what we needed. Most of these hunter bastards had no idea what they were doing. They weren't organized. They weren't properly trained. They didn't work well with one another. All of that equaled them getting hunted down one by one.

I'd managed to bring my player level up to 59, and Donut brought her level to 50.

Even though I hadn't been planning on doing it, I ended up tossing all of my nine stat points into strength, which actually translated to 18 points. My Agent Provocateur class added an additional +1 to intelligence, and thanks to the constitution bump from the ring, I figured it was in my best interest to utilize my special ability to double my level-up points if I used them on strength.

I kept a wary eye on my total base stat points. I had now 254 points, not including equipment buffs and base enhancements. Donut's initial, outrageous lead in total points thanks to her pet biscuit was slowly but surely eroding away. She was at 278 points, unenhanced.

If I ended up passing her, which was likely, she'd lose control of our party of two. Firas made the mistake of pointing that out during

our planning session for the party, and Donut had been a foul mood ever since.

Thankfully, the adrenaline rush of battle was enough to temporarily cure her mood. She was back to complaining about regular stuff instead.

Bam! Multiple landmine-like traps went off, followed by a preposterous number of alarm traps all at once. Every town we assaulted had more traps. It was getting ridiculous. Luckily, most of the alarm traps were on the far side of town, and the dissonance of music wasn't too bad over here.

I cast *Ping*, and my map lit up like a Christmas tree. Fifteen hunters, like Li-Na said. If any were in the saferoom, we wouldn't see them until they came out. As I watched, one of the dots blinked out.

Chris: Lava-d him. Wrecked the gun.

Carl: Good. Get out of there. Spiders incoming.

"Go," I said.

"You, and you, and you, and you," Donut said as she tapped each of the seeker spiders on the head. They scuttled away into the rain.

"Come on, my pretties!" Samantha screeched as she rolled off toward the town exit.

"Wait..." I said to Donut, watching Samantha roll away. "Now."

Donut tapped the last two spiders, and they scuttled off, chasing Samantha.

The anti-air gun had an anti-seeking enchantment on it. The indestructible Samantha was the workaround. I'd learned the hard way to not throw her into town when a gun was active. The last one had blasted her, and she'd ended up blown five kilometers away, landing in the midst of the brambles. So we just let her roll into the camp now. The last time, she'd gone in too early and had gotten herself punted. We'd had to fight our way to the gun. Hopefully this time we had all the kinks worked out. She'd roll to the gun, and

once she was next to it, she'd stop and allow the two spiders chasing her to catch up, causing the whole thing to explode.

Imani: Main team moving in. Louis and Firas, prepare, but do not approach until the gun is taken out.

I couldn't see them, but in the distance, the *Twister*, hidden by the darkness, rose up over the trees. The floating house, protected by multiple shields, carried enough explosives to completely level the town if we had to.

Imani's team of twenty-plus crawlers moved in from the north. Katia and Elle led the charge from the west. Some hunters would fight. Some would flee into the temporary safety of the saferoom, if they were able.

Most would bolt. The unorganized and panicked hunters would inevitably run from the safety of the town. They were smart to bunch together for safety, but the fools always wasted the opportunity. They rarely fought back with coordination. Once the attack started, they scattered while we worked together. They were getting themselves slaughtered.

Three explosions ripped through the night. The seeker spiders were starting to find targets. Then a fourth.

"I got them, Carl! I got them!" Donut cried.

Li Na: The five hunters from the pub are now outside. They're running east. Careful, Carl. They're all Emberus worshippers. All five. Moving toward you, Florin.

Florin: Already tracking them. They're good as buried.

Samantha: I'M AT THE…

Kablam! A red geyser shot into the night sky as the anti-air gun exploded. A second, flaming form shot off in a different direction. Samantha's hair was on fire. Again. Thankfully she wasn't flying toward the brambles this time.

Li Na: Gun confirmed to be dead. Level 63 is running toward the center of town. Headed to the big temple.

Imani: Air support, move in. Elle, you're cleared for flight.

Katia: I have the 63 on my map. My team is moving in on the church. Elle, watch our backs.

Elle: I'm on it.

Katia: Mushroom guards are going to be a problem. Their aggro is activated.

Li Na: Coming out of hiding. We will distract the guards.

Imani: Be careful. Remember what happened last time.

Firas: We're moving in.

More spiders started popping off. Ahead, the trees rustled as something rushed toward us. Two purple dots suddenly appeared on the map followed by a pair of black dots. My spiders. The hunters were rushing toward us, leading the explosive automatons right into our laps.

Oh shit. I scrambled into my interface to disable the two robots.

Before I could, two forms flew through the air above me. Kiwi and Mongo, both pouncing simultaneously. They each landed upon an alien, who turned out to be a pair of tentacle-faced Saccathians, both wearing some sort of mechanical enhancements on their legs. Both died screaming.

The spider automatons stopped dead and then turned back around, seeking new targets.

Jesus, I thought. *That was too close*.

A few minutes passed, and most of the hunters were dead, all except the level-63 who'd entered a temple. The whole raid up to this point had taken maybe six or seven minutes.

"I got five kills, Carl. Five!" Donut said, hopping up and down. "Good boy, Mongo! Good girl, Kiwi!"

Behind us in the woods, Big Tina roared indignantly. She could probably smell the blood. Kiwi was using the other lady Mongos to keep the big dinosaur back, which was fine by me. The giant allosaurus was pretty much a berserker, and the last thing we needed was her rampaging out on the chessboard.

Everything had gone as planned. Finally. It'd only taken us four raids to get it right. Too bad this was probably our last one before we all had to move into elf territory. The Popov brothers along with a few other groups had scouted one other group, but they were too far south to get to in time.

The only thing left to clean up was that last hunter.

"Come on, Donut," I said. "Let's help the others."

Katia: Okay. Tran and I are at the front door. Daniel and Gwen at the back. I lost his dot when he went in. Someone do something about those alarm traps.

Imani: Wait, and the rest of us will surround the building. We best do it the safe way.

Carl: We're coming in, too.

Firas: Want us to just bomb the place?

"Uh, Carl," Donut said. "What's that over your head mean?"

"What?" I asked, stupidly looking up. There was an odd, red glow about me.

"You have a new symbol. It's really big. It's like that Shunned mark you had a few days ago, but it's just an X, and it's made out of antlers. It's pulsing red."

Warning: The God Diwata has made an appearance in the realm. Diwata has marked you for death. You are being hunted. They know where you are.

Flee for your life, apostate.

Carl: Abort! Abort! Run away from the temple! Louis and Firas! Get the hell out of there! It's a god!

Just as I sent the message, a massive eruption rocked the center of town.

Chapter 62

"Carl!" Donut yelled from my shoulder. "Shouldn't we be running *away* from the god?" The pulsing and spinning red star of a god appeared on my map, right in the middle of town. I vaulted over the corpses of the two Saccathians. Mongo and Kiwi, faces covered in gore, looked up from their meal to watch us rush past.

Carl: Imani, on me! Donut. Take the potions. Now. Both of them. Do it fast. What's your potion cooldown at now?

Donut didn't bother using the chat. "But we're not ready yet! We'll have to wait one minute and 45 seconds!"

Elle: Holy shit that was disgusting.

Firas: Did you guys see that thing?

I blinked, and the dot was moving. Away from me. It moved ridiculously fast, and it was soon out of range.

Imani: Is everyone okay? Is the hunter dead?

Katia: I think that *was* the hunter. Or what was left of him.

Elle: That was damn nasty. Seriously, I think I'm going to yak. Do you think he knew that was going to happen? Like, do you think he did that on purpose? That takes some serious dedication.

I skidded to a stop in the midst of the chaos. Dead hunters lay everywhere. A few of my spiders remained, walking in circles, unable to find a target. They'd run out of power in a few minutes, and then I'd collect them and have to recharge them at my table. I caught sight of Li Na a hundred meters away in a cloud of glowing spore smoke, facing down multiple mushroom guards. I moved to assist, but she cast something, and they all dropped off, unconscious. Zhang moved into the light and cast something else, and the one minute timer over the mushrooms all changed to ten minutes.

There was no sign of the god.

I wanted to relax, but my sixth sense told me we were still in danger. What the hell was that all about?

Chris appeared, coming up out of the ground like he was rapidly growing, being built by dirt. This was a different ability than the one he'd used to hide from me on the last floor. He walked over to examine a pile of steaming rock that sizzled in the light rain. Florin jogged up. He'd just finished looting his kills. He had blood over his shirt and some on his crocodilian face. He paused, looking at the large X floating over my head.

"That doesn't look good, mate."

"Florin, did you eat those guys?" Donut asked.

"What's going on?" I asked. "I got a notification that Diwata entered the realm, the church exploded, and then the god just ran

off. He or she or whatever didn't even go after me, and I was right here."

"Don't know," Florin said. "I didn't see it. Just heard the boom."

"Did you take the potions?" I asked Donut.

"No."

"Donut, if I tell you to do something, you have to do it immediately."

"Okay, mister bossy pants. We ended up not needing them yet, did we?"

"That's beside the point."

"Is it? Because the last I looked, this was the Royal Court of Princess Donut. Not the Stupid Team of Stupid Dictator Carl and his Abused Slave Cat, Princess Donut."

Elle came to hover over us as Donut and I bickered back and forth.

"That was one of the nastiest things I've ever seen, and I've seen a lot, let me tell you," Elle said. When the rain landed on her shoulders, it turned to ice and then flecked off. "You sent that warning, and then the whole church just blew up. Everyone flew back, but I was right above and saw the whole thing. Five or six of those tree dryad guys just flew up in the air, pinwheeling blood like fireworks, riding the explosion."

"You did say it was like the Fourth of July," Donut said.

Elle laughed. "That's not exactly what I meant. But yeah. That boom was magical. Not like a Carl explosion. It was green and smoky, like the mushroom guard spore attack, but thicker. When it hit me, I actually got a buff. Protection against fire and poison. Already ran out though."

Katia, Imani, and several other members of Meadowlark jogged up while Elle continued. Gwen, Tran, and Bautista started to loot the bodies. Above, the *Twister* came into view, hovering low over the church. Li Jun, Li Na, Zhang, and a few others from their team approached. The guards remained unconscious in the distance. I gave Li Jun and Zhang a fist bump in greeting. I couldn't touch the demonic Li Na without receiving a curse.

I did a double take when I looked at the fallen guards. I finally noticed the massive bush standing in the middle of town, just beyond them. It reminded me of the pestiferous vine that was Grimaldi, but less chaotic. This looked like a giant, well-maintained hedge that was two-stories tall. It stood where the church had been and was so big that my mind hadn't registered it in the dark.

Elle continued the story. "So that green explosion came, and the tree guys all bled out, and then the smoke turned into that bush with a giant, red flower pod at the top like a giant, green cake. I was only like twenty feet away, and I thought for sure I was screwed. My head was spinning, but I was getting ready to ice the flower, you know. All the blood and guts from those tree guys started spinning through the air and it zipped around the flower bud like one of those cartoon illustrations of an atom. I tossed an icicle, and it did nothing. Then the bud opened up, and that hunter guy was right in the middle, looking just as surprised as I was. He was one of those humans with no eyebrows, by the way."

"The crest," I said. They were a race that sometimes participated in faction wars, but not this time.

"Yeah. Those traitorous fuckers. Anyway, all the blood and guts and little bark pieces flowed right into his mouth, and he started getting bigger and bigger, you know like a Tom and Jerry cartoon when they stick the hose in the cat's mouth? But he was wearing that armor, right? The armor wasn't getting bigger. Just him. You ever throw an unopened can of potted meat on a cookfire and wait for it to blow? Nasty. This whole thing took like five seconds, mind you, so I didn't have time to react. Then out of all that gore came a deranged-looking squirrel with antlers. It was covered in hunter pieces. The thing was no bigger than me. So huge for a squirrel, but nothing like that damn puppy Carl sicced on us. It was a god, all right. Diwata, and it was sponsored by Circe Took. It had a five minute timer. Then it jumped in the air and superman flew away like a rocket."

"Circe?" Li Jun asked. "Do we know who that is?"

"You know that bug Carl gave gonorrhea to? Circe is her mom!" Donut said.

Everyone turned to look at me.

"So, is she gone now?" Katia said, eyeing the large X over my head. "Has it been five minutes yet?"

"I don't know," I said hesitantly. "I got a notification when she appeared. When Emberus makes an appearance, it also tells me when he leaves. I haven't gotten a notification she's gone, but I don't know if this is the same thing."

"Mordecai says you should fly up there and get the petals from that flower," Donut said to Elle. "And some of the pollen too. He says it'll wilt and go away in a minute, so you should do it fast."

"I'll get the flower petals, but you can tell him to wade into that horror scene himself if he wants the pollen," Elle said, zipping up in the air.

"I don't like this," Imani said. "Why didn't she go after Carl?"

"I don't like it either," Katia agreed.

Samantha rolled up. She had a grey and desiccated hand in her mouth, like she was a dog who'd just dug up a grave. She spit the hand on the ground. "Carl, take the ring off of this. It's pretty, and I want it for when I get my body back. Her other hand disappeared when she died, but this was the hand with the ring on it."

"Whose kill did you steal this from?" I asked. I examined the white, glittering ring. It had no magical properties at all. It was just a ring.

"Oh, that is quite lovely," Donut said.

"It's from my kill," Florin said. "She can have it."

Elle returned and dropped a few, palm-tree-sized flower petals on the ground in front of Donut, who took them into her inventory.

"I still want to know if that hunter guy knew that was going to happen when he ran into the church, because that was a pretty fucked-up way to go," Elle said, looking back up at the bush. "I'd rather have Li Na here cast that leaking boils spell on me."

"Samantha," I said. "What do you know about Diwata?"

She jumped up and landed in Imani's arms, who didn't flinch. She caught the doll head in two hands.

"You smell nice," she said to Imani. "You have a very soothing aura about yourself. I used to be able to do that, but mine made

men wild with desire. Stay away from my man, or I'll kill you."

Imani said nothing and turned the doll head to face us.

"Tell us about Diwata," I said. "And stop threatening people. Next time you do it, I'm going to bury you in a hole and leave you there."

She made a little growling noise. "Yeah, so that was Diwata. Nobody really likes her. Or him. They're always changing back and forth. One of Apito's brood, but not a direct child. Don't remember the story. Something to do with the Vinegar Bitch and Eileithyia." She looked over at Katia and started making a snuffling noise. "You have her scent, you know. My sniffer is coming back. I always liked the way she smelled. Not Diwata. *She* smells like a diseased, flea-infested ferret."

"Focus," I said.

"Diwata doesn't really do anything important." She took on a mocking voice. "Oh, I'm the god of the trees and squirrels and forest rats. Look how pretty I am. Never mind Apito is the one really in charge. Never mind I get all uppity when someone wants to roast an oxen at one of Eris's parties." She started cackling. "Other gods get mad at her a lot because she's always giving birth to new forest creatures. Necromancy is one thing, but actually giving birth to new, regular life? Oh boy, they do not like that. It makes a lot of them very cranky, especially when she starts shooting babies out of her lady growler like she's one of those djinns or succubus demons."

"What do you mean?" Katia asked.

"Diwata is like a shapeshifter," Samantha said. "She's always turning into a boy squirrel, boning all the girl squirrels, and then turning into a girl squirrel herself and spraying out a bunch of baby squirrels. Yeah, it doesn't make sense to me, either. But she's a god. What're you gonna do? Lots of gods and demons give birth. They do it for fun. I once went to a party where we all had to line up and... never mind about that. Usually when one of us has a baby it's a demi-god or demonic mongrel. You met my beautiful child, no? Isn't she just the best?"

"Yes, Samantha." I said. "We met the sand ooze."

"Oh, I do hope she's doing okay. Did you know, once, when we were in the Nothing, I had her..."

"Samantha," I said. "Please."

She growled. "Diwata just gives birth to regular versions of whatever she's last naffed, regardless of the gender of the last partner. The pantheon doesn't like that so much. It's a dangerous power, even for a god. It's a power that's supposed to be consigned to the head of the Ascendency."

"She changes form to mate with different creatures?" Katia asked.

"Yes. That's what I've been saying! Now, Carl. Throw me up to the floating house. I want to talk to Louis." She leaped out of Imani's grip and attempted to bounce in the air. She made it about six feet off the ground. She hovered in midair for about two seconds before she bounced back down.

I exchanged a look with Katia. She'd figured it out the same moment I did.

"She didn't attack me because she only had five minutes to get to her daughter," I said.

"Ohh," Elle said. "That's why she rocketed out of here like a squirrel out of hell."

"It makes sense," Katia agreed. "Plus, she probably doesn't want to be the one to kill Carl. It would make Vrah look weak. It has to be Vrah."

"Wait," Donut said. "Hold everything. Wait, wait, wait. Why did Circe go to her daughter?"

"To cure her of the gonorrhea," I said.

"But..." Donut said. "Isn't the only way to cure... Oh my god."

"Yeah," I said.

"Don't they rip the heads off the boys?" she asked. "Is she going to rip the head off her own mother?"

"Oh, yeah," I said. "I forgot about that. I don't know, but probably not. Not when she's a god. I don't know how necessary that part is to the process"

"That mantis accountant guy sure thought it was necessary," Donut said. "That's why he killed himself!"

"It doesn't matter," I said. "We need to assume Vrah is back in on the action."

“She’s probably really mad, too.” Donut gasped. “Is Diwata then going to have a bunch of Vrah babies? She’d be giving birth to her own grandchildren!”

“Uh,” I said. “I hope not.”

“This game is really fucked up sometimes,” Elle said.

A distant squeal caught all of our attention. We turned in time to see Big Tina gobble up one of the mushroom guards. They didn’t wake up unless they were attacked, and she’d somehow broken away from her mother and entered town. She reached down with her mouth and picked the next one up and crunched it in half.

Kiwi and the others swarmed around Tina and started screeching up at the large dinosaur, who roared back indignantly.

“Sometimes?” I asked.

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Time to the Butcher's Masquerade: 8 hours.

After our final raid against the hunters, we moved east toward a large settlement that'd been taken by Li-Na. This was the meeting point where we'd *all* converge, and it was the largest town near the elven border. It would be overtaken by the brambles in four and a half hours.

I was not surprised to find Signet sitting on a log as Donut and I approached the town. Most of the others, including Samantha, had gone aboard the *Twister* and were already there.

Signet was alone, lightly stroking a butterfly that had alighted upon her hand. The sun had risen, the rain had stopped. Light shone through the trees wet with dew. The whole area smelled of flowers.

"Everything is dying," she said. "But there is still beauty. I've never seen a Gehenna bramble this aggressive before. It truly is the end of days. I don't know if the elves will be able to keep it at bay."

"You go ahead," I said to Donut. "And keep the dinosaurs behaved. I need to talk to Signet alone."

"Okay, Carl," she said, moving off.

Signet watched Donut go. After a moment, I sat down on the log next to her, and we just sat together for a moment. She put her head on my shoulder and her hand on my knee, surprising me. There was nothing seductive about it, but it was the most raw, most intimate I've ever seen her.

I vaguely remembered something Donut had once said about the calm before the storm. I pushed the thought away.

"I am so very tired," she said.

I put my hand on top of hers. "It's almost over. One way or another."

We sat that way for several moments.

"How is Grimaldi?" I asked.

"When he came to this world, we planted him next to an all-tree node. The roots intertwined, and he became one with the tree, as we all do, in the end. The tree's roots go deep. It has survived countless infestations such as this, and it will survive this one. The brambles are aggressive and dangerous, but like all things, they fade with time."

I didn't know if that meant he was dead or what. I decided not to pursue it.

"The soldiers are hidden in place," she finally said after a few more moments of silence. "The brambles will hit the border in a few hours. The elves will spend the day beating the infestation back, but even their magic won't stop it. By the time night hits, your party will be starting. That is when we will begin the assault."

I sighed. That was exactly what I expected her to say. Our plan to survive the evening was all in place, but Signet's presence was a wrench in the works. We needed to turn her presence into an asset.

"Your plan is not going to work. Queen Imogen knows you're coming, and it's a trap. They're not going to let you win."

The naiad summoner cocked her head to the side. "They? Who is they?"

I took a deep breath. I thought of Herot, and of his advice regarding the waking up of NPCs. He claimed it was possible with elites.

"You can't attack when the party is underway. You're being manipulated to attack right when the party starts, but there's no way the people controlling this world are going to let your climax interact with the main story. You may attack her, but you won't be able to kill

her. You'll be dead. Everyone with you will be dead, and the queen will go to the party as if nothing had happened."

"What are you talking about, Carl?"

Zev: Carl. I highly suggest you drop this.

Signet continued. "Carl, this is the culmination of everything I have worked for. While you have been fighting your own battles, I have been working tirelessly to bring an end to Imogen's tyranny. She is in a weakened position. We must strike now. I won't force you to participate, but I'd be lying if I said I didn't need you. I'll need someone already in the castle. I've cast something on you long ago that makes it so I can find you and Donut wherever you are. If you can get to Imogen, I can find her easily, and we can end it."

None of that was going to work.

"I have a better idea. Similar plan, but you'll enter the castle and wait for my signal. Then you can fight her when all of my friends face her. We'll all do it together at the same time. I'm guessing it'll be at the end of the party, not the beginning."

Zev: Carl, they're not going to let it happen this way. We've discussed this.

A sense of guilt tugged at my chest. This was all a lie. If I could talk Signet into this, we were going to use her as a distraction, and that was it. But more importantly, she'd be held in reserve, and I wouldn't get sucked away into something unexpected. I didn't want to do it this way, but we didn't have a choice. We still wanted her to face Imogen, but we needed it to happen at the right moment. I hoped she would survive the encounter, but I wasn't holding my breath. Still, her chances of survival were significantly higher if she and Imogen fought when *we* wanted it to happen.

Signet blinked a few times. On her wrist, the tattoo of young Clint jumped as if to grab at the butterfly still alighted upon her hand. He missed and splashed in a tattoo puddle, where a fish appeared and gently pushed him from the water.

"Tell me your idea," Signet said.

Time to the Butcher's Masquerade: 5 hours.

"I've never seen anything like this," Mordecai said as we stood over the table. Five items, all in sponsorship boxes from the Apothecary. All given to different crawlers. All with notes that said they should be given to Donut. And that wasn't including the *Pawna's Cries* potion I'd received from the Open Intellect Pacifist Network or the *I Take it All Back* potion given to Prepotente, both also intended to be given to Donut.

In fact, the only person who was sponsored by the Apothecary who'd received a benefactor box *not* intended for Donut was Katia, who'd received a small, knit beanie that increased all her stats down the line by 3% and gave her a spell called *I Need My Personal Space*, which violently knocked everybody back with a powerful blow. The spell was good but dangerous because it worked on everybody, including party members. She put the beanie on, and it sunk into her mass, disappearing.

I still hadn't had a chance to talk to Katia alone. Because we had to keep changing and tinkering with the plan—both the outward plan and the secret parts only discussed via the bathroom message board—we simply didn't have a chance. I pinged her on it, and she told me we should wait to see if we could take the castle first.

We'd received notification that because we were bringing "attendants" to the party—meaning the pets, dinosaurs, two cretins, and Samantha—that we'd be escorted in instead of being teleported in. We were in a small town right on the edge of the elf territory, and we were supposed to meet the escort caravan at the invisible border in fifteen minutes. The brambles would overtake the village in an hour and a half. Donut remained outside with the dinosaurs and Britney, her plus-one, practicing for the big talent show dance number. Last I'd heard, they were still having costume issues.

There was a stairwell here. Crawlers by the thousands were in town, streaming down the stairs. Imani and Elle were out there,

saying goodbye to the remnants of team Meadowlark, who were now descending.

Thanks to Bomo's ability to find all the stairwells on a level, we knew of three stairwells in the area surrounding the elf castle. Two by themselves in the woods, both of which should remain free until almost the last minute. And there was one within the castle itself, in the expansive basement. It was locked, confirming that Imogen was a boss. We had several groups of crawlers already deep in elf territory, guarding the other two stairwells. The elves had so far left them alone. I suspected that would soon change.

The hunters were scattered, which was unfortunate. I'd held out hope that they'd all gather together. I still hadn't heard anything about Diwata. I had not received a notification that the god had left. The X over my head remained. A warning that all of this could crash down at any moment should a god unexpectedly show up.

I continued to stare at the items, perplexed. "The recharge wand scroll, I understand. The same with the tiara and the sheet music. But what's the stick for? And this?" I picked up the ball peen hammer. The whole thing fit in my hand. It had been given to Imani. She'd gotten a notice that Borant had filed a dangerous appeal to keep the gift from arriving. An appeal that had been immediately denied. "Why give it to Donut? She can't even use it. What is she supposed to do, hold it in her mouth? And what does the name mean?"

Enchanted Hammer of Fast Forward.

This is a small hammer. It's enchanted. That means it's magical. It just doesn't do anything magical.

The benefactor box had been silver, meaning it couldn't be *too* valuable.

"Some items can be enchanted without any inherent properties. This allows them to be used against things like ghosts," Mordecai said. "I've seen it before."

"This is complete bullshit," I said. "Is it supposed to be a joke?" I picked up the stick, and it was the same thing. It was a metal rod, about a quarter-inch thick and about ten inches long. It seemed to be made of aluminum, but it didn't say. This one had been given to

Dmitri Popov, who'd been ridiculously excited to finally meet Donut and give it to her. Almost as excited as that Jennifer woman and the weird thing sticking out of her head. Dmitri did not get a notice that there was an appeal around his gift. Still, based on the description, it seemed it was connected to the hammer.

Enchanted Stick of Cascadia's Screams.

This is a stick. It's enchanted. It's not a wand, but when used correctly, it can do something truly magical.

"Who's Cascadia?" I asked.

Mordecai shrugged. "I can't think of any past crawlers or dungeon bosses or places named that, which is what this stuff is usually named after. It's a common name, though. I can think of a few of them, but I don't know what they'd have to do with a stick. Only one of them is connected to the crawl."

I continued to examine the metal rod, thinking. Why give it to Donut? I had an ominous thought. It'd been there the whole time, but I finally let it bubble to the surface.

It's because they expect everyone else to be dead. Donut should have all this stuff because she's the most likely to survive this next part. It's why Quasar wanted Donut's name on the Board of Directors of our new corporation.

There was a stairwell right outside. We were all here. Over twenty of the top fifty were here right now. We could go down and simply avoid this next part. It would be the safer thing to do. The smarter thing, even. I thought of the others, who'd be forced to replace us. My eyes caught little Bonnie, sitting on the counter, humming to herself as she pried the guts out of a disarmed spider automaton. *We need her and the rest of them if we want to survive the ninth floor. If we don't do this, it'll all be for nothing.*

As I considered all this, my finger caught something. There was a slight imperfection there at the end of the metal rod. I brushed my finger over it. It felt like a symbol. *I think it's the number seven.*

Seven? As in the seventh floor? Maybe it wasn't supposed to make sense yet. But if so, why would they give it to us now?

I couldn't stop thinking of Everly's final, heartbreaking entry in the cookbook. *My sponsor was deliberately steering me not toward*

life, but a death that would be watched and remembered.

I thought of Orren the liaison and of the warning he tried to give.

I put the rod down and reexamined the hammer. Sure enough, along the wooden handle was a similar impression. Another seven. I picked up the other items. The scroll didn't have any sort of hidden symbol that I could find. Neither did the new tiara or the sheet of music. That made sense. Their purpose was clear.

"God, I hope we're ready," I said. "I don't like all these loose ends. I'm always spinning plates, but this feels like it's too much. Something is going to go wrong."

"It always does," Mordecai said. "If it goes sour, you have the escape plan. Get to the *Twister* and fly away."

"You're going to hell," little Randy the bear cub said to Bonnie the gnome, who remained on the counter. She had the spider automaton in pieces all around her. The sad little gnome girl looked up at the small bear. She said nothing.

"All heathens burn in the fires of judgement," the bear added.

Skarn the changeling sat nearby with a group of other kids, including Ruby, one of several changeling children suffering from compression sickness. Half had turned to deformed human kids. Others were bears.

"Don't be mean," Skarn said to the smaller bear.

"Or else what?" Randy said. His older brother Todd stood behind him, looking up at the group of changelings defiantly. The two bear cubs were much younger than the majority of the recently-arrived changeling kids. The two groups had been bickering the whole time. Prudence, the mother of the two bears was passed out on the couch, snoring.

"You two should fight to the death," Samantha said.

"Is there a reason they're all in here still?" Mordecai asked. He pointed to the guildhall exit. "There's a whole area for them to explore."

I thumbed at the television, upon which some cartoon called *Little Bear* played. "That's why." And then I pointed to the other end of the room where a changeling kid sat on the lap of the Sledge who sat in front of another television I'd rigged up, playing one of the

Grand Theft Auto games. Both Bomo and the Sledge had become obsessed with the game. The Sledge was happily showing the kid how to steal a car. "And that's why."

Donut peeked her head into the room. "Carl, it's time to go. Did you figure it out?"

"Nope," I said as I gathered the items up. I handed them off to Donut one by one. "You brushed your teeth, right?"

"Yes, Carl. I gave the tube to Katia afterward."

"Excellent. Come on, Samantha. Let's party."

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<Note added by Crawler Everly, Fifth Edition>

My sponsor sent me a box today meant for someone else in my party. And not a crawler, but one of my mercenaries. A spellbook of Hasten Poison*. I was quite upset about it. But not five hours later, he used that spell to kill the boss holding the lockbox key, and it saved the lives of us all. I don't trust my sponsors, but I do trust that they want to keep me alive. As long as I breathe, their insipid advertisements remain on full display, and their investment is intact.*

<Note added by Crawler Everly, Fifth Edition>

The moment I hit floor eight, they gave me a great box, as if to make up for the previous one. A tool that allows me to take shortcuts through this maze. I really want to hope. To think that there's good out there. It's in times like this that there's a spark in my chitin, a longing for a future that contains warmth and stars.

<Note added by Crawler Everly, Fifth Edition>

I take it back. I take it all back. My sponsor was deliberately steering me not toward life, but a death that would be watched and remembered and ultimately heartrending and painful. I was a fool. Fuck you, Dictum Waystation Controls, Limited, whatever that means. I hope your company and all your children die in pain.

<Note added by Crawler Drakea. 22nd Edition>

This is Everly's last entry. She did not mention the manner in which she was set up, which is unfortunate. Please, future author. Be as detailed as you can.

<Note added by Crawler Carl, 25th edition>

I'm starting something I don't think will succeed. I will be documenting every step along the way. We have a method of communication that allows prying eyes not to see it. See my earlier post about the coffee shop author's kit to see how it works. I don't know if the following will be useful or not to future readers, but as Drakea suggested, we should be detailed as possible, especially with plans that could possibly lead to our deaths. If anything, this will be a record of my demise. Sorry if there's language from my culture you don't understand. Here's a copy and paste of page one of our notes:

The Butcher's Masquerade is a trap. They're going to try to kill us all. Queen Imogen is a country boss. I don't know how it will happen, but we'll probably have to fight her at the end of the party. Since I can't talk all of you into going down the stairs early with me, we'll have to figure out how to survive.

I also have an issue with my elite quest. They want to fight this same boss, but before or maybe during the party. That means they're doomed to fail because the main showrunners aren't going to allow their climax to get hosed by a secondary production. As much as I like the elite, Signet, I would like to avoid going down with her. The production goes out of their way to make sure I'm involved, so I might be forced to deal with this secondary show's climax whether I want to or not.

I've been working the problem, and I have a few ideas. Before we get to that, we need to lay out our objectives.

Goal one is to survive. Everything else is secondary. However, if we meet all of these secondary objectives, we'll not only survive

here, we'll also have a good footing once we hit the ninth floor.

As I see it, here are all our secondary objectives. In order from least important to most important:

1) Solve the Tina Quest. Get her to dance on stage. I used to want to abandon this one, but I think we can use this to our advantage.

2) Kill Eva. If she's stupid enough to go to the party, we shouldn't waste the opportunity. Not something I really want to do, but how many more good people will she hurt?

3) Save the changelings and get them to the next floor down.

4) We can only accomplish #3 if we get them into the castle. That won't be easy unless we first kill Queen Imogen and take the castle for ourselves. This fight will probably be forced on us whether we like it or not. I'm working on a few ways to even the odds.

5) Kill Lucia Mar. Again, I don't want to do this, but she's too dangerous. Her very presence at this thing is going to be a problem because she's such a wildcard. She's likely to tank the whole operation and get us all killed. The further she gets, the more dangerous she becomes.

6) I made a promise at the end of the last floor, and I intend on keeping it. We are going to make certain not a solitary, single hunter gets off this floor alive.

Once you see this, sign your name so I know I can erase it, and we can move on to the planning. I have ideas for most of this, but I'll need your input.

Signed,

- Katia
- Imani.
- Jesus Christ, Carl. You're going to get us all killed. Elle.
- I HATE THIS PAPER THING, CARL. GC, BWR, NW PRINCESS DONUT THE QUEEN ANNE CHONK.
- I am claiming Lucia Mar for myself. If someone attempts to stop me, we will have a problem. Florin.

- Nobody has tried to convince me not to go down the stairs. I think we should. Louis.
- Same. Firas.
- Li Na. I have my own method of speaking with my team. I will keep them updated. Also, I agree with Elle.
- Daniel Bautista. I'll do whatever I can.
- Chris.

Time Until the Butcher's Masquerade: 1 hour.
Time Until Level Collapse: 31 hours.

Total Number of Remaining Crawlers: 59,259
Total Number of Crawlers still on the sixth floor: 23,385
Number of Crawlers attending the party: 73
Number of Hunters attending the party: 264

"You will be required to enter the castle through the attendant entrance," the uptight, nasally elf announced as the large, covered wagon bumped over the road. He shifted uncomfortably on the bench. In addition to the elf, it was just me and Britney in the cart. We were in a caravan, dotted with armored and armed elves and wagons. Big Tina and the lady Mongos walked in procession behind us. Tina kept wandering off, so Donut had to go out there and keep her in line, much to the dismay of the elf servant guy, whose name was Theobold. He was a level-35 **High Elf Footman.**

"Upon entrance, you will be subject to a security sweep. You and all your supplies will be re-inspected. You will be able to secure your attendants in the servant ballroom. From there, you and your invited guests will be escorted to the main ballroom. During the

presentation of the pets and the talent portion, those of you who are performing will be given access to the anteroom behind the stage where you may interact... sir, I do think I should wait until Princess Donut returns so I can explain the procedures to her as well."

"Don't worry about it," I said. I thumbed over at Britney, who sat there looking especially grumpy. "Donut's plus-one will explain everything to the princess. She's Donut's guitarist. Aren't you, Britney?"

"Uh-huh," Britney said.

The elf looked upon Britney and her fluffy, brown and gray jacket with an unmistakable air of contempt. It reminded me of the time I'd gone out to dinner at a super fancy steak place with Bea and her parents, and they had made me put on a sports coat that was two sizes two small. I'd had grease on my hands because I'd come straight from work, and I'd gotten it all over the coat.

"Very well," Theobold said. "Like I was explaining, you will be given backstage access. Another footman will be present to further explain those procedures. Please follow all instructions. The queen will not attend either performance, but it is crucial we keep to the timeline."

Shit, I thought. "She doesn't want to see the pet show? Who doesn't want to see a pet show?"

Theobold ignored me. "Before you enter the main ballroom, you will be given access to a guest's boudoir where you may change into proper masquerade attire."

He looked me up and down.

"I do hope, sir, that you brought shoes for the event. And pants."

"Nope," I said.

"No, no, no, Tina," Donut called from just outside. "If you try to eat the elf, he won't let you into the castle! Really, Kiwi. You must keep your child under better control. Why can't people ever keep their children under control? Tina! No! We just gave you a bath!"

Theobold sighed. "No weapons will be brandished in the ballroom, nor will magic of any kind be tolerated. Yes..." he said, cutting me off before I could interject, "You may cast limited magic or brandish weapons on stage if it is crucial to your act, but you will

not be allowed to physically interact with anyone not on stage with you."

I relaxed as he continued to drone.

"Those of you with magical storage will not be able to access it within the ballroom. Once you enter the ballroom and you are deemed to be in compliance with all the rules, you will officially be under the formal protection of the Queen of All That Is and the Queen of All That Will Be, the One and Only True Blood, Her Majesty on High Queen Imogen of the High Elves. Any attempts to break the peace from yourselves or your attendants will be met with instant and punitive action. This protection is only active while you are in the proper, designated ballroom."

"Sounds like my kind of party," I said. "Tell me, Theo. What does the queen's protection actually mean? Those hunter assholes don't like me so much. What'll happen if one of them takes a swing?"

"As you've no doubt been informed, sir, you will be attending the party in what's known as a goodwill ballroom, so it will be quite impossible for the opposing guests to harm you. You will not be in the same physical location as them, and any strike will feel like a whisper. But if a serious attempt to harm you is made, protections are in place."

"What does that even mean?"

"It is not of your concern. Rest assured these protections were put into place by Apito herself."

"Apito?" I asked. "The goddess?"

"Yes."

Uh-oh, I thought.

"...and in case they don't prove sufficient, the queen's personal guard will remain in the center ballroom, where the queen herself will eventually be in attendance."

"So, she'll be in a third ballroom all by herself?"

"She and her personal guard, yes. We take the queen's safety quite seriously. Not that she needs such protection."

"I'm assuming the guard dudes in the queen's private ballroom can smack me around, but I can't hit back?"

"That is correct, sir, but again, we have additional protections that would make such interventions unnecessary."

I needed to find out, exactly, what those additional protections were. "Okay, that's all well and good. But there are going to be people at the party all in the same ballroom who don't like each other too much. There's this one-armed dude named Quan whom I'm pretty sure will be there. There's this girl with a giant dog who'll probably just want to go apeshit and kill everybody, especially Princess Donut. Oh, and there's this snake lady with three hands. Her name is Eva. She's still around, and she has a thing for my friend Katia. They used to be best friends, but they had a falling out. And those are just the beefs I know about."

"Fighting will not be tolerated," Theobold said.

"So if my friend Quan tries to one-arm strangle me, you'll intervene?"

"Like I said, sir, an attack upon the queen's protected guests is the same as an attack upon the queen herself. All guests at the masquerade will be reminded of this. This protection cannot be circumvented."

"Got it," I said. An ominous feeling washed over me.

Outside, one of the stag mounts let out a squeal, followed by Donut shouting. "Tina! No! Play nice!" A guard gave a muffled warning.

Next to me, Britney shifted uncomfortably. She did not want to be here, especially considering she wasn't in the top 50. She was miserable in her new, itchy jacket. Firas, who'd ended up at number 43, had talked her into coming and being Donut's assistant, especially since she could play the guitar. It was either this or be part of Gideon's assault team, which she did not want to do.

"Hey," I asked. "Will the queen's pet be at the party?"

"Sir Ferdinand?" Theobold asked.

I blinked, surprised they actually used the same name. Well, his name was Gravy Boat. But they used Donut's name for him.

"Yes," I said.

"I imagine so. When he isn't ranging from the castle to hunt, he is usually upon her shoulder. The two are quite inseparable."

His tone suggested he felt the same way about the cat as he felt about my lack of pants.

"Sir? So he's a knight? Does that mean he's like your boss then?" I chuckled. "Cats, man. Princess Donut there is pretty much my boss. I don't like to admit it, but she's the one in charge. Just wait until you see her act. She has a new song she's trying out."

"A knight? Certainly not," Theobold said. "We are a civilized kingdom. Ferdinand is nothing but a lowly creature. A familiar. A pet. The 'sir' is simply a part of his name. It's not a real title." He turned his gaze toward the curtain. "That seems to be a common thing amongst their kind."

"So, he's *not* royalty?" I asked, feigning surprise. "We met him a few days back. Out in the woods during that whole issue with the odious creepers. He implied that he was second in charge of the whole kingdom."

"You must be mistaken," Theobold said.

"Maybe," I said. "I'd watch him, if I were you. You can't ever trust cats. Like, ever. They're all cute and cuddly, but they'll eat your corpse in a second."

"Gross, Carl," Britney said.

"Yeah," I agreed. "One last question."

"Of course, sir," Theobold said. This dude could win a gold medal at the patronizing Olympics. "It is my pleasure to accommodate you."

"I have a whole stash of these hands I got from killing the hunters. They said there would be a prize counter where we could turn them in. Do I need to take them from my inventory ahead of time?"

"No need, sir. The award table attendant will be able to extricate the items from you."

"Have you seen the prizes?" I asked. This whole part of the masquerade was still a mystery, and it was one of several unknowns I was worried about.

"I have not, sir. Do not worry. The prize counter will be open for the entire evening. Now, if you'll excuse me, I must attend to the

other guests in the caravan." He deftly pulled himself from the carriage and disappeared, leaving me and Britney alone.

"This isn't going to work," Britney whispered, an edge of panic to her voice. She kept nervously rubbing her right hand up and down the left arm of her fur-covered jacket. "He said there's a security check when we get to the castle and another on the way into the ballroom. Those are just the ones they've told us about."

"Did you take the potion?"

"The dinosaur repellant? Yes. I've been taking it every day. But I don't think it works. Mongo tackles me every time I visit your room."

"That's because he likes you. What about your shield spell? Is it ready to go?"

Britney had gotten into the bad habit of casting her shield the moment she saw a mob. The spell was actually quite powerful now, able to block both magic and physical attacks for thirty seconds, but it had a four-hour cooldown.

"Yes. The cooldown just reset."

"Good. I need you to relax. We're all wearing magical clothing. They're not going to make us get naked. They said we can't cast magic or wield weapons. That's it, so chill."

I peeked out the curtain of the covered wagon. The setting sun shone through the trees. It'd be dark soon. Mounted guards riding upon on their white stags were coming in to join the progression, flanking the sides.

There were six separate wagons mixed in with the dinos and stag mounts. Theobold had been riding in that first one along with two guards. Li Jun, Li Na, and Zhang were in the second. They'd entered the talent show as jugglers. We were in the third. Imani and Elle, who were participating in the talent show, sat in the fourth. They were going to perform a skit.

Tserendolgor—now ranked number 38—and her plus-one partner were in the fifth wagon. We'd taken to calling her Ren because nobody could pronounce her name. She had a pet show entry with her, lumbering behind their wagon and keeping a wary eye on Tina and the other dinosaurs. It was a blob thing called a tummy acher. His name was Garret. She'd just received the pet on this floor, as a

gift for going to Crawl Con. The level-20 pet was as tall as me, and it looked like a giant, lumpy meatball. It had no arms, but it did have a pair of stubby legs, giving it a bouncy gait as it followed, like a fat toddler chasing after his parents. Garret had an enormous, jagged mouth with a single tooth that could probably swallow me whole. The damn thing was equal parts adorable and horrifying. It made a kind of giggling noise when it walked and could tank a massive amount of damage. Apparently, people loved the thing.

Donut: THERE ARE MORE GUARDS COMING. THERE'S NEW ONES WITH BLACK JACKETS.

Carl: You need to keep Tina under control. I think we've waited long enough. Put your new tiara on.

Donut: SHE'S EXCITED. YOU KNOW HOW CHILDREN GET WHEN THEY'RE EXCITED. I ALREADY PUT THE TIARA ON, AND IT HELPED A LOT WITH THE DINOSAURS, BUT THE GUARDS ARE STILL AGITATED. IT'S PROBABLY BECAUSE OF THAT LADY IN THE LAST CART. THEY MIGHT TRY TO GET HER BEFORE WE GET TO THE CASTLE.

The final, larger cart contained all of the props and costumes and supplies for both the talent portion and the beauty contest. They'd insisted upon us removing it all from our inventory so they could inspect it. Also riding in the cart were the non-crawler attendants who didn't want to walk. Samantha was in there along with the cretins Clay-ton and Very Sullen and a mysterious, robed woman.

The robed woman, as far as most people knew, was Signet. It was actually Pearson the changeling pretending to be Signet.

The guards had hesitated when they saw the changeling, but they didn't react further. Gauging their reaction was one of the reasons why we did it this way. Signet seemed to believe that Queen Imogen had an order in place not to attack her directly. The naiad suggested that the Queen herself would want to deal with her once she finally revealed herself, and the guards' reaction seemed to imply that was the case.

So far, nobody on the floor had yet seen the queen.

Bomo and the Sledge remained in the saferoom. They both had jobs to do, and they'd both wait until the party started to get

moving.

I knew there were other crawlers and possibly some hunters also riding to the castle this way in other caravans. They didn't tell us how many acts there would be for the talent and pet show, nor if the hunters were participating. Another unknown. We only knew of five entrants total to the pet show and of five teams with spots in the talent portion.

There were also about fifteen crawlers going to the party whom I didn't know at all. That was going to be a problem.

Only some of the ones I did know were bringing a plus one. Britney was Donut's guest. I didn't have anyone.

Donut: THEY WENT INTO THE LAST CART.

A minute passed. The curtain to our covered wagon rustled, and suddenly a new person appeared in the cart, fading into existence next to Britney like she'd been sitting there the whole time.

Notifications and achievements scrolled across my view.

Britney squeaked in surprise and slid to the edge of the cart. She panic-cast her *Shield* spell just as the white-tagged Queen Imogen finished fading into existence.

"Your majesty," I said, trying to swallow. *Oh fuck. Oh shit. He's going to lose his mind.*

"Are you really attempting to smuggle someone who looks like my half-sister into the castle?"

Carl: Katia. It worked. We drew her out. But it's Ifechi. Queen Imogen is Ifechi, Florin's dead girlfriend.

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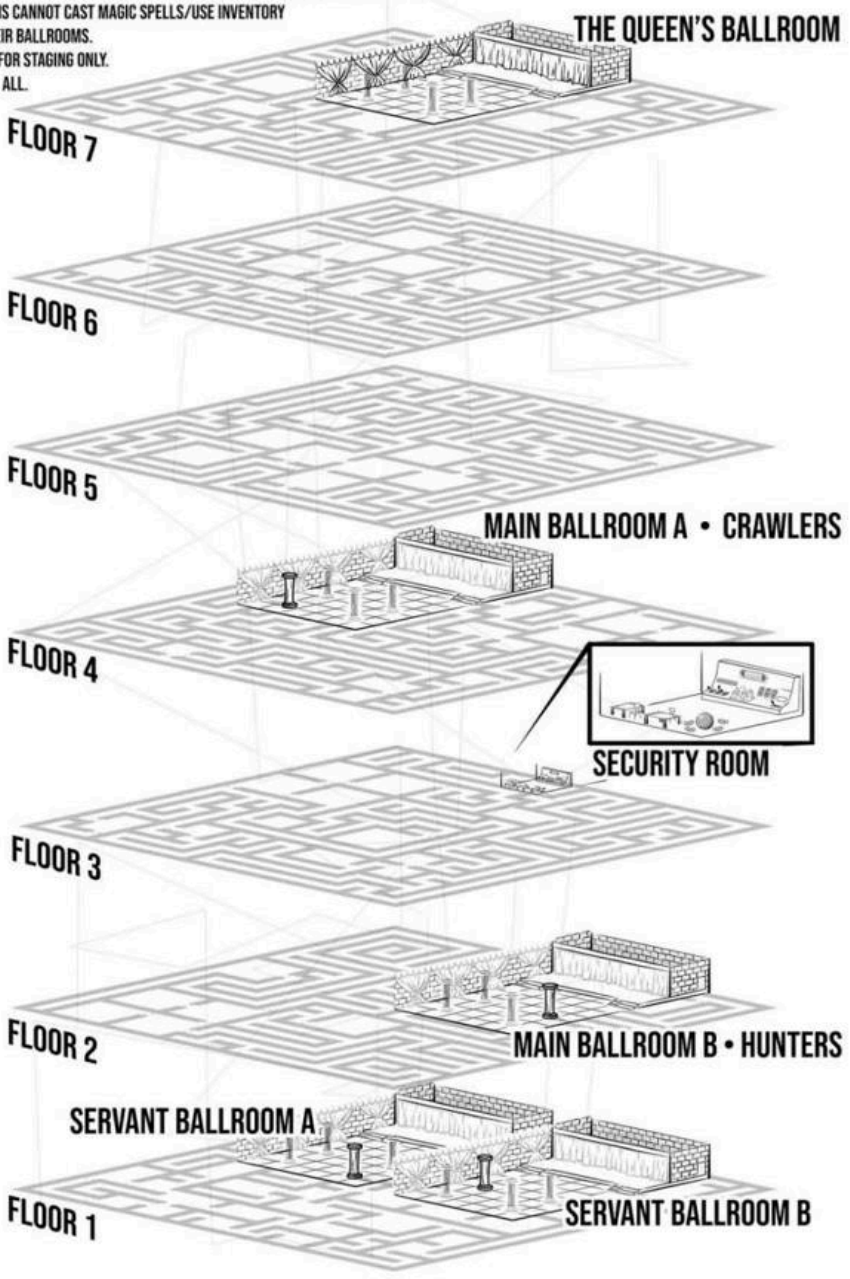
THE BUTCHER'S MASQUERADE

GOODWILL BALLROOM MAP

RULES:
GUESTS IN MAIN/QUEEN BALLROOM ALL INTERACT WITH ONE ANOTHER AS IF THEY'RE ALL IN THE SAME ROOM.
GUESTS CANNOT HARM GUESTS IN OTHER BALLROOMS. THE QUEEN HAS NO SUCH RESTRICTIONS.
GUESTS IN MAIN BALLROOMS CANNOT CAST MAGIC SPELLS/USE INVENTORY
GUESTS CANNOT LEAVE THEIR BALLROOMS.
SERVANT BALLROOMS ARE FOR STAGING ONLY.
SECURITY ROOM CONTROLS ALL.



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<Note added by Crawler Carl, 25th edition>
From page five of our planning notes:

According to Edgar's map, the control center for the four ballrooms—the two main ballrooms and the two attendant ballrooms—is located in the very middle of the castle in a secure chamber on the third floor. Each of the four ballrooms is controlled by a small soul crystal. There's a fifth, larger crystal that controls the whole overlay system that allows us to interact with everyone in the other rooms. When we go into the ballroom, there'll be a mute spell that'll keep us from casting our magic and another that'll keep us from using our inventory. I think that's it. We can't brandish weapons, either, but I don't know how they'll enforce it. The mute and inventory spells are not active in the attendant ballrooms. Also, the queen's ballroom doesn't have any protections, so there's no controls.

What we need to do is get someone into the control room and turn off the protections without disturbing the other rooms or turning off the goodwill overlay. There'll be a notification when the switch occurs, so we need to make sure everyone keeps their mouths shut until we make our move.

Here's my idea. We go with the Gideon distraction to empty the castle of as many guards as possible. Once that happens, we'll make our move. We'll have to brainstorm some ideas on how to get to the

security room, so everyone study the map and let me know your thoughts.

Also, on another subject. I'm pretty sure Imogen is going to be someone one of us knows. I think they were originally planning on her being Bea, my ex-girlfriend and Donut's owner. We need to be prepared for that.

~Carl.

We all have people it could be. We'll deal with whatever happens like we always do. We need a better method of communication. I can't keep going to the bathroom like this. It's becoming obvious.

~Imani.

Your idea of using Donut's charm for the fight against Imogen might also work for the security room, but the timing might fuck us. It's a lot of pressure on her.

~Elle.

I like that idea, but it'll only work if Imogen is at the party the whole time.

~Carl.

CARL IS ALWAYS IN THE BATHROOM. AND I DON'T LIKE THE CHARM PLAN. IT'S THE NIPPLE RING ALL OVER AGAIN. I DON'T LIKE BEING STABBED, CARL. I'D LIKE FOR YOU TO GET STABBED FOR ONE OF YOUR PLANS SOMETIME.

Sign the notes, Donut.

~Carl.

IT'S QUITE OBVIOUS WHO IS SPEAKING, CARL.

Jesus, I thought. *She has her voice*

I examined the beautiful elf.

Queen Imogen – High Elf Cleric Sorceress

Level 145 Country Boss

This NPC is Intangible. You may not physically touch it. Yet.

This isn't just any high elf. This is Imogen, the queen of the elves. The big baddie of the floor. Don't let her good looks and polite manner fool you. She is as ugly as they come.

Sometimes when we meet bad guys, there's a lingering possibility that we might see some sort of redemption arc. There's a good quality buried in there somewhere. Did you know, for example, that Juicer guy you murdered on the first floor used to spend all his free time volunteering at a hedgehog rescue? Remember Denise the goose? The one you shoved headfirst into a garbage disposal? She loved reading to children. In fact, you've now killed two bosses who loved reading to kids.

Anyway, Imogen doesn't have any qualities like that. Not a one. She has never left a tip in her life. If they had shopping carts in this world, she'd never return it to the receptacle. Sure, she pretends to be a kind and just leader. She throws a killer party, that's for certain.

But in the end, it's all a show. Everything she does is in service of her main motivation, which is power. She's nothing more than a terrified little girl, afraid of weakness, afraid of dying like her father, King Finian. Impotent and alone and overshadowed by someone more powerful.

She has a plan to make certain that never happens to her. A plan that all hinges on the success of tonight's masquerade.

I sure hope you don't do anything to piss her off. That might be bad.

Katia: It's not Ifechi. It's her twin sister. Florin told us she had one when we met the Popovs. I'll warn him.

I forced a grin on my face as I fired warning messages off. "Smuggle someone? Me? Of course not. Do I look crazy? That woman is part of Princess Donut's act."

She looked at me, then. Her dark eyes bore into me, as if she truly was attempting to decide if I was crazy or not.

I went very still while she examined me. A notification appeared. An achievement for total views. A fan box. I exchanged a look with Britney, whose eyes had gotten huge. She'd likely gotten something similar.

Donut: I JUST GOT MY PLUS-ONE TOKEN BACK. I DON'T KNOW WHY.

Carl: I think Britney might've hit the top-50 on her own. She was 58 a few hours ago.

Donut: WELL THAT'S JUST RUDE. NOW I LOOK LIKE I'M GOING TO THE PARTY ALONE LIKE A LOSER.

Queen Imogen had clearly been preparing for the ball when she'd decided to come here for a visit. She wore a long, glittering, color-changing gown covered with magical sparkles. Hanging from her neck was a gold chain with a distinctive, glowing gemstone pendant. A soul crystal. Her dark brown skin was complemented with highlighted and silky brown hair held up in a pile atop her head in one of those fancy, I'm-getting-married-today updos with a single, curled strand of hair dangling on each side. Perfectly-applied, gold-colored makeup covered her face like gold leaf upon a piece of art.

I'd never met Ifechi, but she'd been from Nigeria. A member of the Red Cross who'd been following around a group of militants when they'd all entered the dungeon. I'd assumed the bald woman was male until Katia had pointed it out. This version of her—or her twin sister—was stunningly beautiful. Still, I saw it in her eyes. I remembered the haunted look on Ifechi's face just before she died

on the recap episode, killed by Lucia Mar at the end of the fourth floor. Queen Imogen had the same look.

All of these elves so far had been pale, white dudes, so her darker skin tone was a surprise, especially considering their whole racial-purity schtick. The aliens watching this probably wouldn't even notice the difference.

This was supposed to be Beatrice, I thought, and I was endlessly grateful that it was not. I'd been worried that it would be someone else I knew, such as Bea's mom. I felt guilty for being so relieved. Especially considering this was probably worse. I'd been concerned for a while now about Florin's mental health.

Carl: Get him down the stairs.

Katia: There's no way that's going to happen. He's been pacing back and forth for an hour straight, excited for the party.

Carl: Florin, you know the rule. We all agreed to it. If Imogen took the form of one of our loved ones, the intended target goes down the stairs.

Florin: Go fuck yourself, Carl. I don't see your cat going down the stairs. Now back off. I'm fine.

Britney remained in the corner, huddled in on herself. Her shield would run out in a few seconds, not that it mattered here. Imogen's dot remained white on the map.

A new elf was suddenly in the cart, hanging on the outer edge. The sleek and muscular guard was dressed in black, form-fitting armor with straight, white hair. He leaned in and whispered into the queen's ear. She nodded and shooed him away.

She returned her gaze to me and raised an amused eyebrow. "Tell me, Carl. What are you playing at? Why bring that woman? Why dress her in such a manner?"

Donut: THE GUARDS ARE BEING JERKS. THEY'RE TELLING ME I CAN'T GO BACK INTO THE CARRIAGE. THEY TOLD ME I COULD GO IN THE ONE WITH THE DOG LADY, AND I SAID NO. I CAN'T BELIEVE THEY LET HER IN THE TOP 50.

Carl: It's okay. I need you out there. Be ready.

I struggled to appear much more confident than I felt. Pearson the changeling had been instructed to look almost like Signet, enough, at least, to garner the attention of the elves, but he needed to remain in human form and not change. If we were especially lucky, she would've touched him. And hopefully not murder him.

"I'm not playing at anything. I didn't even realize you knew my name, your majesty."

"Are you scared of me, Carl?"

I was goddamned terrified. I didn't want to admit it, but it felt prudent at the moment to tell the truth.

"Very."

The queen sighed. "The Butcher's Masquerade is a pause in all the ugliness of the world. Everyone in attendance will be under my protection. The event will be perfectly safe, and to suggest otherwise is an insult."

"Then I'm looking forward to it," I said.

The cart continued to bump over the trail. Britney and I remained frozen, unsure what to do.

"Do you know why it's named such? The Butcher's Masquerade? We do not wear masks, yet it is a masquerade. Do you know why this is so? Do you know the story?"

"I haven't really thought about it."

She nodded. "Typical of your kind to know nothing of your betters. The first masquerade was held in the Halls of Ascendency. Taranis and his wife, Apito, the Blessed Oak Mother, put the party on for all of their children and extended family, who are constantly vying for control, even to this day. The party was meant as a night of respite. No violence. Their son, Grull, asked why it was called a masquerade when they did not wear masks. Apito's response is considered sacred gospel:

"She said, 'My son, the masks we wear are the smiles upon our faces and the goodwill we present to each other this evening. There will be no violence. No maneuvering. Just an evening of feats and friendly contests and tales of past conquests. A place where you can face your greatest enemies and not worry about it being the end of your plots.' Grull didn't understand, of course. But he and the others

followed his mother's wishes and attended the event. The party went on, as planned at first. It was Yarilo, god of lust, who broke the peace. Drunk, he attempted to force himself upon the familiar of one of the other gods. For breaking the seal of peace, he was banished to the Nothing by Apito. Taranis, angry with his wife for exiling his child, raged. Fights broke out after that. All the attending mortals and demigods were slaughtered, leaving Apito in tears."

"I've been to a few parties like that," I said.

Imogen scowled at my interruption. I was having a hard time reading her. She was an odd mix of polite and barely bridled rage. If I didn't know better, I'd also think she was stoned out of her gourd. "After, the party became a ritual. A holy sacrament. A rite of reflection and of non-violence. Of us striving to meet the goal of Apito, the most perfect of Mothers, who wants nothing more than for all of us to get along."

I remembered the crazy-ass city elves on the third floor. Their whole thing had also been the worship of Apito. "Don't you go around killing everything that's not a pure-blood elf?"

"Only when they dare to carry themselves as our equals. Apito seeks harmony above all. Mongrels add chaos to the mix. To grow the perfect tree, one must first cut off the rot."

I wasn't about to go spelunking down that tunnel. "So, you have a party, deliberately invite people who don't like each other, and try not to have it turn into a clusterfuck?"

She nodded. "Only the most divine are granted the right to cast the spell. And they can only cast it once in their lives. Once cast, the ritual begins, the guest list forms, and we have the party."

"Wait, you cast a spell for the party?"

She fingered the soul gem around her neck. "Of course. It's one of Apito's holiest sacraments. The party is named after the spell. The Butcher's Masquerade."

This conversation was not going anything like I thought it might.

Imogen continued. "The guest list comes from the goddess herself, and we are not to harm the attendants before the party."

"Really?" I asked. Traditionally, the elves were considered a deadly menace to both the hunters and the crawlers. That was why

everyone stayed away from their property. I knew this whole Butcher's Masquerade storyline was something new. *Huh*, I thought, trying to remember if I had any reports of people fighting the elves.

"Not unless they attempt to harm us first," she said. "Which is why I am here right now talking to you instead of having my soldiers fertilize the forest with your entrails."

"Your cat almost murdered my cat," I said. "That wasn't self-defense."

She nodded. "You are correct. Everything was almost ruined when your friend jumped in front of Ferdinand's bolt. Do not worry, he has been properly chastened for it. I did not instruct him to attack you or your friend's familiar."

I grunted. "There's no such thing as chastening a cat. You can yell at them, but it's like yelling at a wall, believe me."

Donut pinged me for the tenth time asking if everything was okay. We were coming up on the castle.

Donut: IT'S REALLY UGLY. I THOUGHT ELVES WERE SUPPOSED TO DESIGN THINGS WITH WATERFALLS AND FLOWING LINES AND TREES AND NAKED STATUES. IT LOOKS LIKE A WHITE VERSION OF THAT ROBOT SPACESHIP FROM STAR TREK. IT LOOKS LIKE IT WAS MADE BY A THREE-YEAR-OLD IN THAT MINECRAFT GAME YOU USED TO PRETEND NOT TO PLAY.

Imogen did not appear amused. "We prepare the evening just as Apito tirelessly prepared. We offer the same refreshments, the same opportunity to showcase one's talents and familiars, and if the party properly finishes without violence, Apito grants a boon. The guestlist is deliberately chosen by the goddess to sow discord amongst everyone involved. It is my duty as host to make certain we get through the entire evening without violence. If we can succeed, I am granted the goddess's gift."

She pointed at me accusatorially. The nails on her slender fingers were ridiculously long, like claws.

The cart pulled to a stop.

"I want that boon, Carl. I cannot keep you from the party. I cannot harm you because you haven't made any overt moves. Yet,

you're working with my mongrel half-sister. I do not know what your plot is. You will not succeed. The party will be under a celestial peace seal. The moment you attempt something, the ground will open underneath your feet, and everyone involved in breaching the peace will be fed into the Nothing. You can hide your plotting from me, but not from the Oak Mother. That's the price one pays for breaking the seal of peace."

I turned to Britney, pretending to be much more casual than I felt. "And all this time I thought she was going to just straight-up murder us. She has to use her goddess to do it."

Britney did not respond. She looked like she was going to vomit.

"Killing you would be easy," Imogen said. "Watch."

She turned toward Britney, lifted her hand, as if she was about to cast a spell, but paused.

"Oh, Oak Mother," Imogen whispered. "You vex me so."

I was pretty sure she'd been about to kill or seriously injure Britney, but she'd stopped when she realized Britney had just entered the top 50 and thus was invited to the party on her own.

Imogen sighed. "If I wanted you dead, Carl, you would be. If you do anything to disturb the peace, I won't be the one to hurt you. An eternity in the Nothing, the realm of darkness and of gnashing of teeth is a fate worse than any death I could conjure. If by chance, someone else breaks the peace, and you're spared by the goddess, you will be the first to face my wrath. If my ritual is disturbed, and I am free to respond, you will be the first worm I will crush. Now, I will take my leave. I have you on my dance card, Carl. We'll talk further later."

And just like that, she was gone. The curtain rustled, and the high elf queen dissipated, coming apart like dandelion seeds caught in a breeze.

The party hadn't even started yet, and our plan was already fucked.

"She reminds me of my mother," Britney said.

Chapter 66

<Note added by Crawler Carl, 25th edition>
From page seven of our planning notes:

For those of you who haven't had a chance to study the map yet, do it ASAP. Don't let the square shape fool you. This place is a nightmare of halls and rooms and passages. The main part of the castle not including the basement levels is seven stories tall. There are actually way more floors than that, like way more, but those levels are mostly around the edges. Think of it like a Borg cube-themed hotel or casino where the public spaces all have ceilings about twenty or so feet tall, but they also manage to shove a bunch of rooms in there along the periphery.

The two attendant ballrooms are on opposite sides of the first floor. Ballroom A where we'll be is on the fourth floor and ballroom B for the hunters is on the second floor, and it's directly above their attendant room. The Queen's ballroom and her living quarters are all on the seventh floor. That whole area is off-limits to everybody except the queen and her guards.

If one walks into the front entrance, there's a giant stairwell that runs all the way up to the fifth floor, but that's it. Visitors don't go higher. It looks like it'll be almost impossible to get to the throne room or to the queen, so we'll have to get her to come to us. The worst possible thing that can happen is if she decides to fight us while she's in her ballroom and we're in ours. Even with our magic and inventory access turned on, she'll still be safe, and we won't be.

Again. We do not fight the queen while we're in our ballroom no matter what. It is suicide.

There are a few additional quirks to the goodwill ballroom system according to both Samantha and the entertainer instruction notice.

Some of the protections are turned off when you're physically on stage. When Donut stands upon the stage in ballroom A, she will be able to physically interact with all the items that have been moved to the stage area of the attendant ballrooms a few stories below. If there's a wand on the attendant stage, she'll be able to pick it up and cast it. The wand itself will still be three floors below. It's just like the magic pens the Popovs and I used to sign autographs at Crawl Con. The only thing Donut can't do is drink something if it's not with her. She'll be able to read the wand-recharge scroll and her sheet music if she needs it, but she won't be able to down the charm potion. We'll have to smuggle it in. Mordecai has a bunch of ideas for smuggling potions into secure areas. It's something he's really familiar with, so it shouldn't be a problem. We'll probably end up using Katia as an equipment locker.

Speaking of those pens, Samantha says some of the items in the ballroom itself, like the tables and chairs, will be physically present on all iterations of the hall. So if I pick up a table and move it, it will move in all of the locations. This includes the doors and anything affixed to the walls, including that warning light we were worried about. Other things, however, like the food at the buffet will only exist in either ballroom A or B. It can get confusing, so everything is usually color coded. Food on the blue plates you can pick up and eat, but food on the red plates is actually in the other ballroom, etc.

~ Carl

If Donut can still cast magic while on stage, why do we need the security room taken?

~ Imani.

They say she can cast spells, but it's only a few approved ones. Illusionary evocations, which means her *Torch* spell and that's it. Wands and scrolls will work, but she won't be allowed to bring them up with her to the main ballroom. Even something like *Hole* won't work unless the magic access is restored in the room.

~ Carl

This is confusing as shit. I'm getting Iron Tangle flashbacks. I hated the Iron Tangle.

~Louis

It's not that bad. All you need to know is we'll be in ballroom A, the hunters will be in ballroom B, and the queen will be in her own ballroom by herself. There'll be a color code system letting you know what items you can touch. Anything that's in either of the attendant ballrooms is invisible to us unless it's on the main stage. All the stage stuff isn't important except to the performers. Study the map. We have copies of it.

~Carl

Carl: Hey guys. Plan won't work. New plan.

Elle: Goddamnit, Carl.

Imani: What part won't work?

Carl: Assuming Imogen just told me the truth, everything inside the ballroom. We can't make the first move. We have a new play.

Katia: What is it?

Carl: We party. We don't start anything. Everything outside the party goes on as planned, but we can't do anything violent while we're in there.

Donut: WHAT ABOUT MY ACT? THE DINOSAURS?

Carl: We'll play it by ear. We'll set everything up like planned, but we won't pull the trigger unless we're forced to. We still need to defend ourselves. One way or another, shit's gonna go down. We need to be ready.

"So, should I stick this awful jacket into my inventory?" Britney asked.

"Absolutely not," I said. "Keep it on. Just don't set it off prematurely like you did that shield spell."

Donut directed the unloading of supplies as I gazed up at the massive, white square of the elf castle. I couldn't decide if it was ugly or stunning. Elle was calling it the Sugar Cube, and the name had stuck. We stood around the corner from the main entrance at a set of double doors, which was the equivalent of the building's loading dock and freight entrance. The doors yawned open, and elves appeared, some pulling flatbed carts to load the supplies.

"This place is not very defensible," I muttered.

"There used to be a moat," an elf guard said. "The queen made us drain it because it smelled funny. It doesn't matter. The four towers are stronger than they look. Nobody attacks anyway. Especially not with the queen being as powerful as she is." He shrugged.

These guys working at the castle were much friendlier than the ones we'd met previously. It seemed there were different groups. This guy, dressed in gold, was a **Level 40 Castle Guard**. They were different than the white-clad soldiers who'd been escorting Ferdinand. Or the black and gold-clad, ninja-like elves who guarded Queen Imogen.

The entire castle, I realized, was made of some type of wood. Maybe bleached oak. It looked like white stone from a distance, or even marble. But I ran my fingers over it, and it was clearly wood. The wall was smooth to the touch, and it was carved with little acorn shapes, each one about the size of my fingernail, like the whole structure was carved from a single piece of wood, turned on the lathe of a god. The acorn pattern ran up the wall into the setting sun. The white wood was hot to the touch, and it gave the sense of something very old and magical. It reminded me, oddly, of the time I visited the *USS Constitution* and took the tour of the ancient, iron-

armored, wood-hulled frigate. It was almost like the wood itself breathed.

The elf castle sat against a rocky bluff in the extreme southeast corner of the map. A single, pencil-thin tower stood at each corner. Thanks to Edgar's incredibly specific map, I knew the open-top towers housed a set of magic-wielding guards and were just wide enough for two people to ascend via a curling staircase. The only entrance and exit to the towers was on the third floor of the castle, other than the very tops. There were no other obvious defenses or fortifications.

The cube-shaped castle was actually more of a rectangle. A few floors remained hidden underground. There were caves there, in the rock surrounding the castle, filled with trolls who were constantly fighting the elves. There was likely a whole storyline and quest involved with that stuff. There was a secret entrance there, and hopefully, sometime in the last few hours Signet had gotten herself into the castle and was hiding in the dungeon, waiting.

Zev had warned me up and down and sideways not to attempt to smuggle the elite into the party. Any attempts to do so, and the production company would be contractually forced to send directions to Signet to do something premature. Something that would definitely get herself killed and would likely take me down with her. She was, under no circumstances, allowed in there.

I assured Zev I had no such plans, which was absolutely true.

If Signet were to enter the party, courts would have to get involved regarding who owned the rights to what actually happened next. It was a hard rule regarding secondary production companies and the showrunners of *Dungeon Crawler World*.

Don't fuck with the main event.

I didn't give a rat's ass about any of that. I pretended to hem and haw and agree. I'd already talked Signet into coming alone and to hiding in the basement. I promised her that an opportunity would present itself if she was patient. And if not? Well, the queen wasn't going anywhere.

I felt kind of bad about it, using her like this.

"You. You have been deemed unwelcome," an elf guard said to Pearson the changeling, who was still in the form of a robed woman. This was one of the white-clad elves, one of the level-70 guards. A soldier. "Now run along. You have an hour to extricate yourself from our territory before you are deemed a trespasser."

"She's in my act," Donut protested.

"The brambles are already at the border," the woman said, still acting the part. "Your soldiers are fighting them. Where would I go?"

"Not my problem. Queen's orders. Now go before I have my men use you as target practice."

I grabbed her arm, leaned in, and whispered, "Get to the cave. Stick to the plan."

The changeling ran off just as more caravans appeared coming up the road.

"They're not going in cages," Donut said, raising her voice. "These are expertly-trained, professional show animals! They're perfectly safe. This is an outrage! Carl, get the queen back here this instant!"

A pair of elves grunted as they pulled the massive cage out the double doors. The silver-metal cage looked as if it had been built especially for Big Tina.

"Your professional show animal just tried to eat my sambhur," one of the elves said.

"You mean the stag things? Tina was just playing. Right, Tina?"

Tina roared and snapped, causing a group of elves to shout and back away. Several pulled out their bows.

"All animals are going in cages," another, older-looking elf said, undisturbed by the dinosaur. He emerged from inside, pulling thick gloves off his hands and waved the other elves down. This guy was different than the others. He wore overalls and was named Kibben. He was a **level-50 High Elf Stablemancer.** This was the first high elf I'd seen with short hair, making him look like a bush elf. "Don't worry. They'll be released for your act. We don't want them hurting each other between performances. You see that belly acher over there? He'll swallow one of your mongoliensis whole given half the

chance. And your allosaurus is still a juvenile, which means you can't control her too well."

Donut peered angrily over at Tserendolgor, who was in the process of wiping dirt off of Garret, her pet belly acher.

"If that walking meatball is so dangerous, he should be disqualified immediately. What if he attacks my Mongo?"

The elf smiled down at Donut. "I'll make sure the pets are all separated and safe. It's my job."

"Are those hunters bringing any pets to the party? I heard there's two servant ballrooms. Maybe we can move my dinosaurs to the other holding area." She glared at Tserendolgor. "Where they'll be safe. Does it matter which holding area they're in?'

"Both of the attendant ballrooms affect the stage area in the same way, so that doesn't matter, but it's not really necessary."

"This is most unprofessional. In all my years, I have never heard of such abysmal treatment of honored guests. It's necessary if I say it's necessary. Who is your manager?"

I looked at the guy. "I've found the best way to get her to shut up is to just let her do what she wants if it doesn't matter one way or another." I leaned in conspiratorially. "She is a cat, after all. I understand you guys have one of those running around in here, too."

"Hey!" Donut said. "What is that supposed to mean, Carl?"

The elf shrugged. "We can put the dinos in the other room. You're right. We don't have anything scheduled in there. Seems like the other group isn't too interested in either of the showcases. Probably for the best anyway. Most of the sambhurs move through this side, and that allosaurus makes them nervous. Only thing in that room is Simoom. The cretins and the... reanimated head... will have to stay in here."

Donut sniffed. "I suppose that will be acceptable. But I must insist on watching the transfer."

"Donut," I said as Elle and Imani walked up. Behind us, a caravan pulled to a stop, and a crawler I didn't recognize got out, followed by what looked like a hawk familiar. "The animals will be fine. This guy obviously knows what he's doing. Let's get the ball rolling."

Donut: CARL, MY CHARM UPGRADE ISN'T WORKING.

Carl: It's working just fine. These are high elves. They think we're beneath them, and I think your ex-boyfriend has left them with a negative opinion. The fact they're talking to us at all is a sign it's working. I'm just bummed it's not permanent.

Donut: THIS TIARA IS UGLY ANYWAY. BUT DON'T TELL THE APOTHECARY LADY I SAID THAT.

Entering Ballroom A.

You've been muted! You may not cast spells in this room.

You've been peace-bonded! You may not access your inventory in this room.

On the wall, high on the ceiling was a light. It was nothing more than a glow globe. It flashed twice, letting the guards know the first people had entered the ballroom, and the system was now activated and armed. It would flash brightly every time the system was either activated or turned off, as a safeguard.

Warning! This room is under a protection seal. Any violent acts will break the seal, resulting in your banishment to the Nothing.

Warning! As an invited guest, you may not leave this room until the party has concluded or once the protection seal has been broken. I hope you went potty before you got here.

Once the host arrives, the party chambers will be fully sealed from outside influence.

"Damnit," I muttered at the notification.

Imani: Carl, does that mean once Imogen enters the room, she can't leave? Doesn't that ruin the effectiveness of the distraction?

Carl: It does. We need to use escape plan C.

Donut: IS THAT THE ONE WHERE WE ALL PLUMMET TO OUR DEATHS?

Carl: That's escape plan D. Escape plan C is using your *Hole* spell to fall down to the third level and fight our way out. We'll have to spread the word to have everybody approach you when it goes down.

Imani: I'll start spreading the word.

Despite the promises of extensive security checks, we didn't undergo anything too invasive thanks to Donut's enhanced charm. The gnoll security checks to get into a production trailer had been much more intrusive.

After going up a long, twisting staircase that went straight from the first floor to the fourth, an elf made us store all our weapons into inventory and then patted us down. That included my wrist bracer that formed my Grull gauntlet. The biggest issue was Tserendolgor—Ren's—flamethrower, which she wore like a backpack. It reminded me those backpacks from the *Ghostbusters* movies, only hers was also part of her shirt. So removing the weapon exposed her hairy chest, revealing a pair of furry, dog breasts. Donut was about to make a snide comment before I shut her up. Imani gave the dog soldier a robe to cover up.

The rest of us were allowed to keep our clothes. As I suspected, they didn't blink at Britney's jacket or any of our other magical gear. Another footman elf gave us a lecture on not fighting and then gave a graphic description of how awful falling into the Nothing would be. A third used a Donut-sized snail to sniff us for explosives, focusing on me. We didn't have any on us, and we passed cleanly through.

From there we entered the hallway leading into the ballroom and were ushered into the "boudoir" where we could change further. The large chamber was like a glorified locker room with individual cubicles and bathrooms. Nobody actually changed clothes. I covered the bathroom counter with dinosaur repellant potions and half-splat potions with a note for everyone who found it to store the half-splat in their inventory in a ready position, and if they hadn't already, drink the dinosaur one now. I warned that we would possibly have

to flee quickly, and there would be loose, prey-driven dinosaurs everywhere. We wanted them attacking the hunters. Not us.

We left and were patted and sniffed down once again and then led into the main ballroom.

There were fifteen of us in this first group. It was all of us from the first caravan and the second, which included several crawlers I didn't know. Most were human, but there was a mushroom guy I'd only seen in passing who was afraid of Elle for some unknown reason and a badger-headed woman who was also a Swashbuckler, the same class as Bautista and Tran, both of whom would be joining us once everyone else got teleported to the room.

We entered the large, opulent ballroom, our footsteps echoing on the tiled floor.

An elf guard, wearing a ridiculously ornate white and silk uniform with coattails lined with gold jumped to attention as we entered. He held onto a glittering spear that was easily ten feet tall. He took a breath and then shouted, "From here on forward, past this point you are under the holy protection of Queen Imogen! The Oak Mother's wrath will set upon anyone who breaks the peace!"

The room was huge, bigger than I'd expected from the map. From my shoulder, Donut gasped. We were the first crawlers here. To our right stood a preposterously large stage with a red, wavy, floor-to-ceiling curtain made of a thick, expensive-looking fabric. Multiple tables were set up around a dance floor. A buffet was in the process of being erected in one corner of the room while elves swarmed over it like ants on a hill. Sure enough, the trays of food on one of the buffet lines were marked gold and the others were marked black.

Soft music filled the chamber, coming from a trio of elves playing stringed instruments. It sounded similar to chamber music, but with an odd amount of reverb, giving it a strange, distant sound. I'd seen the performers setting up downstairs, and I knew they were really in the servant ballroom, which is where our animals and attendants would also be during the ball.

Four pillars led upward to a large, domed ceiling, covered with a massive, moving mosaic. The artwork featured a glittering, black and

gold cave dotted with sparkling crystals, like the interior of a golden geode. Curled up in the midst of this was a black centipede, whose form continued to twist, like one of those spirals one used to hypnotize someone.

This is a depiction of Scolopendra. She's dreaming. It's said when she finally awakens, she will destroy everything and free us all.

From the center of the mosaic sprouted a living tree made of white wood and white leaves. The tree hung downward from the tall ceiling, giving the illusion we were the ones upside down. The moving mosaic of Scolopendra never ceased twisting around the tree, like it was attempting to strangle it.

I couldn't take my eyes off it. I wondered if the tree and mosaic were really here, or if they were just an illusion.

"Carl, look!" Donut said, turning my attention.

I followed her pointing paw. Directly opposite of the stage on the far side of the room was a glass case that read **Prize Counter**. A blanket was draped over the case, and a familiar figure stood behind the glass.

"Uh-oh," I said, looking at the winged, werewolf-like creature standing there.

"Is that the guy Mordecai hates?" Donut asked.

"That's him," I said.

"Who is it?" Elle asked, hovering next to me.

"His name is Chaco," I said. "Remember when I told you about the prize carousel thing?"

"It's when Carl picked that stupid book of goblin recipes," Donut said.

"Ah, so that's the guy ol' Mordecai attacked?" Elle asked. "Didn't he throw a chair at his head? Good thing he's not here. Did you ever get the story out of him?"

"Not all of it," I said. I turned to walk toward him when there was a *crack* of teleportation, and three new figures appeared in the room: A tall, thin soother, one of those jello-mold, blob aliens whose mouth faced upward, and a familiar, tentacle-faced Saccathian. None of them had information or tags above them.

Donut gasped. “Oh my god,” she cried. “Princess D’Nadia! Carl, look! It’s Princess D’Nadia!” She hopped up and down and then jumped off my shoulder and ran over to her, her tail waving back and forth with excitement.

The soother and blob thing moved off to inspect the stage as we approached D’Nadia. The saccathian was taller than me. She wore a glittering, purple dress covered in sparkles. The dress was curved with unnatural lumps, alluding to a body covered with additional tentacles.

“Princess,” Donut said. “I didn’t know you were going to be here!”

“Hello, Princess Donut,” D’Nadia said. “I’m judging the talent show and pet contest. And it’s no longer Princess. My father, sadly, decided to retire. My title is now Empress D’Nadia.”

“Really?” Donut asked, trying not to hide her excitement. “My sponsor is an empress?”

The saccathian waved her finger at Donut with mock sternness. “Now Donut, don’t think because I’m your sponsor I’ll show favoritism. I take my judging duties very seriously.”

“Of course! Of course!” Donut said excitedly.

Behind us, more crawlers appeared, coming through the door. Prepotente was one of them. Our eyes met from across the room.

An elf appeared on stage, pushing his way out of the curtain. “Attention, please! All guests who are participating in either the talent show or the pet contest, please join me backstage for some quick instructions!”

Most of the crawlers in the room turned and started shuffling toward the elf. Prepotente was one of them.

“I’ll be right back!” Donut said and bounded off. “Hi Prepotente!” We watched her go.

“I’m very cross with you, Carl,” D’Nadia said, coming to stand next to me. I could smell her. She smelled like sweet calamari. “Your attorney and that new corporation of yours almost ruined my buy-in bid.”

Katia: We’re here. We all teleported into hallway C3 on the map. We’re in line for security. It’s going to be a few

minutes. They're only letting us into the boudoirs five at a time.

Carl: Make sure people take the potions. And tell them about escape plan C.

Katia: Eva is here. So is Lucia Mar. Carl, I'm worried about Florin.

I reached over and touched D'Nadia's dress. She felt solid, but with a little push, my fingers disappeared within. She wasn't really here. This was different than in the production trailers. We could physically touch each other, but only gently. I could smell her, too.

"I heard about the buy-in bid," I said. "I'm sorry about that. If I had known it was you, I would've had Donut send you a message. Are you on planet?"

"In orbit, but we're making landfall after this evening. You're lucky it worked out. Otherwise, I would not be so pleasant to be around."

"I find that hard to believe," I said. I was laying it on thick, trying my best not to let my new-found, utter contempt for her show. "Tell me, do empresses usually judge pet shows?"

D'Nadia made an amused, trumpeting noise with her tentacles. "I'm working. The judging of this contest allows me to be a part of the production, which is one of the requirements. It's a technicality. A loophole. Something you're quite familiar with, aren't you?"

Katia: Eva went into the dressing room after me. She stole all the potions and is now making snide comments about it.

Carl: You have more in your inventory. Find out who didn't get any and pass them out once the inventory gets turned on.

"I gotta tell you," I said, returning my attention to D'Nadia. "I was surprised when Quasar told me who..." I trailed off as the door near the buffet opened, and Vrah scurried into the room. The large mantis looked around, saw me, and made a beeline in our direction.

Her crotch was no longer on fire.

Behind her, other hunters started to enter the room, much more hesitant. The bright light on the wall flashed, telling the guards the

system was now fully armed and engaged. Both rooms were now in use.

Carl: Bomo, Sledge. It's time. Sledge, tell the changelings to get their asses moving. Britney, do your thing.

Empress D'Nadia eyed the charging form of Vrah. "Oh, I'm looking forward to this," she said.

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The giant mantis barreled toward me like she was going to bowl me over. She stopped just an inch away. She gnashed her mandibles right in front of my face. She smelled vaguely of burned plastic.

"Hey, Vrah," I said cheerfully. "How was your visit with your mother?"

D'Nadia trumpeted with laughter.

"Stay out of this, Princess," Vrah said, not turning her head.

"Empress," D'Nadia corrected.

There was a commotion behind me, but I didn't dare turn my back. I pretended to remain engaged with Vrah as I watched Britney sidle up to the guard with the giant spear. She said something to him and giggled. He didn't seem amused.

"I have a present for you, Carl," Vrah said. "It's coming soon."

"Oh, sweet," I said. I patted her on the upper-shoulder part of her carapace. The same spot the head of Langley had bitten down onto her neck. She felt barely tangible. "Thanks, I really appreciate that. It's not even my birthday. Actually, maybe it is? I've lost track. Is it April already? It hasn't been that long, has it?"

Britney pretended to drop something, and the guard looked down. The moment he did, she reached up and pulled at a tag sewn into her jacket.

Please, please, I thought. *Don't attack.*

Bautista said the Slate Butterflies weren't violent, which was good considering the circumstances. Britney's entire jacket was

made of stuffed versions of the fuzzy creatures. We only needed one for now. She'd wanted to sew them onto her boots, but I liked the idea of having a ton of them at the ready just in case. Mordecai said the special ability on these guys wasn't considered magic, which is why we went with them instead of my idea of me smuggling in my slingshot. I prayed it would work.

Vrah bristled. "You're not the only one who can bend the rules to your will. You and your soft-shelled friends will soon learn what it means to make an enemy of the Dark Hive."

"Don't you guys run an amusement park? What do you do to your enemies? Ban them from the bumper boats?"

The hand-sized butterfly flittered straight up into the air, making a line for the first light source it saw. The warning light. It reached the light and settled onto it, wrapping it with its wings. The light's glow slowly paled, and the powered light faded away. A moment later, the common-rarity, summoned creature returned to a stuffed animal. I held my breath as it fell, hit the tip of the elf's spear, and landed in Britney's outstretched hand. The guard looked up as Britney pulled the stuffed animal behind her back. He returned to his position.

It was done.

"I am looking forward to our rematch," Vrah was saying. "I will remove that disgusting smirk from your worthless face."

"Wow," I said, turning to D'Nadia, who continued to watch the exchange with amusement. "She is really angry, isn't she?"

"You did give her gonorrhea, Carl."

D'Nadia now had what looked like a champagne flute in her hand, but I hadn't seen who'd given it to her. She dipped one of her tentacles in the glass and sucked up half of the drink. I hadn't realized the weird, little appendages worked like elephant trunks.

An angry, chittering noise rose from Vrah. "I swear to you this, Carl. Before this night is done, I will have your decapitated head on my back. Yours and all your friends." She turned and skittered away angrily.

"No violence, remember?" I called after her.

Carl: Good job, Britney!

<u>Britney:</u> I am not doing that again. My heart is in my throat.

Shouting rose from behind me. I heard the voices of Katia, Florin, and Bautista. I sighed.

I turned, expecting to see Katia holding Florin back from attacking Lucia Mar. The Lajabless was here, in her beautiful woman form, but she stood against the wall, chewing on her fingernail, eyes darting back and forth like she didn't know where she was. In that moment, I saw her for what she was, a kid in an adult's body.

But I only looked upon her for a moment. A chair fell over, clattering loudly to the ground. To my surprise, it was Florin and Bautista holding Katia back, who was lunging at Eva, who leaned casually against another table. The half-nagini, half-orc remained a Nimblefoot Enforcer, and she'd risen to level 55, equal with Katia and four below my level 59.

I hadn't seen the four-armed, snake-headed crawler since that day upon the train when Katia had accidentally killed Hekla. Eva had lost a hand in that fight—her dominant, top left hand. The hand was still gone, nothing but a square-edged stump. I knew that she had recently become armed with a poisoned, rapier-like blade that she attached to the appendage. She could pop it in and out like a switchblade. They'd made her take it off. Upon her chest she wore a jeweled, glittering breastplate that looked like something out of a museum. It shone with a high polish. Purple gemstones of various sizes dotted the elaborate armor.

The last time I'd seen Eva, she had a dozen or so player killer skulls.

She now had over 50.

She also sported four hunter-killer marks.

"Why are you like this," Katia was shouting. "Why? These are your people, too. You're a traitorous bitch. The moment the protection is turned off, I'm going to rip your face off."

"Temper, temper," Eva was saying, pretending to sound bored. "This is why Fannar couldn't stand you anymore. With your ugly brown hair, your ugly piggy nose, and your constant whining. What kind of mother could you have possibly been?"

"Oh, just shut the hell up, Eva," I said, coming to stand between her and Katia. Bautista had his arms wrapped around her waist. Florin also held her back.

I put my hand on Katia's shoulder. It looked like flesh, but her arm was made of metal. She had a locker full of potions stored in there.

"Calm," I said, looking into her eyes. "We anticipated this. It's okay."

Donut was suddenly there, on Katia's other shoulder. She and the others who'd been backstage were returning. Crawlers continued to stream in from the hallway. I saw Louis and Firas enter the room, their eyes huge, followed by the Popovs, Gwen, and Tran. Britney shuffled toward them, arms out, and she hugged tightly onto Firas.

Donut butted her head against Katia, who reached up and gave her pat.

"Oh hello, Eva," Donut said, her voice turning flat. "I thought I smelled vermin. You know, I was just thinking about you today. It reminded me that I need my litter box changed. Carl."

"Yeah, I'll get right on that."

The snake woman sneered. "I'm getting a drink."

She pushed herself off the table and moved toward the back of the room. The crawlers all mingled near the stage, and the hunters were all crowded around the buffet tables. We were separated like boys and girls at a middle school dance. As Eva approached, the hunters scattered away from her.

"You okay?" I asked Katia.

"I'm fine," she said.

I exchanged a look with Bautista, and he gave me a nod. He was on it.

"How's it looking back there?" I asked Donut.

She scoffed. "I've been to cat shows held at a two-star Holiday Inn where the cages shared the room with the free continental breakfast that were better situated than this. The theater is gorgeous, yes, but only at first glance. It was built by someone who obviously knows nothing about such things. There is no thrust. The stage is straight, like we're in some rural high school gymnasium.

There are no wings at all. None, Carl. I can't even with that. AV is nothing but an elf with a magic microphone and no mixing board, and he simply did not understand how to work the boombox."

"What?" I asked. "Boombox? What are you talking about?"

She ignored me. "Furthermore, the grid extends maybe five feet above the arch, and that's only because of the curtain. There's only a single catwalk, and they straight-up ignored my request for access. I am quite certain the lighting team isn't going to understand my directions. I'm glad we can use light magic on stage, because lighting is everything with these things, and they don't even care. They're just doing it willy-nilly. You know how I feel about willy-nilly, Carl."

"Is the catwalk going to be a problem?"

"I thought we weren't doing that? You're giving me whiplash, Carl."

"We still need to be prepared. This is a very fluid situation."

"Speaking of fluid situations, they didn't say there weren't bathrooms in here. It's outrageous!"

"The catwalks," I said. "Are they a problem?"

"No," she said. "And it's catwalk. There's just one. It's forward enough that it won't get in the way. Edgar's map was quite specific and accurate." She sighed dramatically. "I knew this was going to be amateur hour, but once you see it up close, you don't fully appreciate the level of ineptitude it required to make something look this nice yet be so functionally inefficient at the same time. You know what it's like? It's like a stage version of a cocker spaniel."

Quick movement caught my eye, distracting me. "I'm sure your song will go fine."

"This is all for Mongo's presentation," Donut said. "We haven't even gotten to my talent performance yet. I presented the stage manager with the instruction booklet and rider, and can you believe he... Carl, where are you going?"

Shit. Florin was marching across the room toward Lucia. I looked for Imani and Elle, who were the designated peacekeepers, but they were both involved with other quarrels.

"Florin," I called, running to catch up with the crocodilian. The room was getting pretty full, and he shouldered his way through crawlers as he approached the scared-looking Lucia.

"Florin, stop," I said, putting my hand on his chest.

"Don't touch me, Carl," he said.

"Wait. Please," I said. "We can't fight in here."

"I know that," he snapped. "I'm not a fool. I just want to talk to her."

"She is unpredictable. We don't want her to break the seal, and if you say something to her, she's probably going to attack you. Look, man. I need you."

I wasn't getting through to him, so I tried a different tactic.

Carl: Florin, I need you to stay focused. I can't be babysitting your ass. We all have our roles tonight, and you promised me you were good.

Florin: I am good. Now get off my back.

Carl: Okay. I'm gonna trust you.

"Good," he said out loud. He continued to stare Lucia down, who looked back at him with wide eyes.

The tableau held for several moments. Florin blinked and then something softened in his small, pinprick eyes. "Something's off with her anyway," he said. "She ain't acting right. I know with that bitch that don't mean much. But something ain't right."

"Yeah," I agreed, looking over my shoulder at the kid. "Let's leave her be. Not trigger her. We gotta keep the hunters away from her, too. If I were them, she'd be the target. She's easily the most unpredictable."

Lucia remained frozen against the wall, watching us. She suddenly bolted, running along the wall to a spot in the corner against the stage. She huddled there, shaking. She plopped herself down on the ground and sat cross-legged, hugging herself tightly.

Just stay there, kid, I thought.

I looked about for Quan Ch, but I didn't see him at all. That was a goddamned relief. Assuming he was still alive, he'd likely gone down the stairs.

"Carl," a familiar voice said from behind me, startling me. Prepotente. I turned to face the goat. He looked even worse than the last time I'd seen him.

"Prepotente, when did you last sleep?"

"I know this will come as a shock to you, but I must insist that I join your party."

I just looked at him for several seconds. At this point, nothing was going to surprise me anymore.

"No," I said after a moment. "Talk to Katia. She might be willing, but you're level 70, and you'll end up the party leader of whatever party you join, and most established parties won't like that. Better yet, find some of those displaced Eva crawlers, if any are still alive. You can start your own party, and you can join the guild."

"It would only be for the remainder of this floor. It's so we travel together to the start of the next. I've been collecting the clues, and after speaking with Katia, she informed me about Donut's magical hammer and stick."

"Attention. Attention everyone," a voice boomed. It came from the stage. Prepotente screamed in response. Right in my ear.

"We're bookmarking this," I said. "We need to get through the party first. Maybe talk to Donut. Did you take the dinosaur repellant?" I looked about for the cat, and she was on the shoulder of Bautista talking to a crowd of crawlers, making karate kick motions and pointing at Lucia Mar in the corner.

Goddamnit, Donut, I thought.

"Welcome to the Butcher's Masquerade!" the voice called. He paused, as if waiting for applause.

This was Theobold, the same elf footman who'd given me the instructions during the caravan. He'd changed into one of those white dress tuxedos with the gold lining. It looked disturbingly like the dinner dress white jackets naval officers wore to one of their countless parties.

"We still have some guests filtering in. That's okay. For the next several hours, we will be enjoying an evening together of fun and talent. There is plenty of food and refreshment, all perfectly curated to your personal dietary needs. Those of you in Ballroom A may use

any gold-colored tray, and the black trays are for our honored guests in Ballroom B. If you need anything, please do not hesitate to ask one of the servants who will do their best to accommodate you. After the performances, we will have dancing. Queen Imogen herself plans on visiting soon. Those of you who have collected hunter hands or crawler scalps may now visit the prize booth to turn them in. Please remember, this party is a celebration of Apito's love for all her children. Violence is blasphemy. We are here this evening to have a good time. Apito wishes for us to mingle with our enemies. Do not waste this opportunity. Those of you participating in the pet program, please proceed to the backstage area."

Donut did a little hop and scrambled toward the stage. Prepotente also went back. I sighed.

None of the hunters went backstage. Their group, much larger than ours, huddled sullenly near the buffet tables.

Empress D'Nadia and the other two judges moved toward a raised table just in front of the stage. It'd still be a few minutes before this started. I did a quick look around the room to make certain there weren't any fires I needed to put out. Imani and Elle were talking to a group of crawlers who looked as if they might come to blows with another group.

We didn't have anything special planned for the pet show itself. We just needed to get through the next hour or so without anyone getting themselves banished to the Nothing.

That didn't mean we were idle.

During this time, the Sledge was meeting up with half the changelings and making their way to the underground, secret entrance to the castle, currently guarded by Signet's crew. The were-castors and others would escort them all inside. The changelings, once within, were going to pretend to be elves and make their way to each of the four sentinel towers, ascend, and remove the guards within, creating a docking location for the *Twister,* which would bring in the remaining changelings once everything was fully engaged.

Gideon and his team were setting up in the woods outside to observe and to assault the front of the castle if needed.

Bomo was starting his looting mission.

Before everything changed, the next part of the plan had been to use Signet right when we needed the queen out of the ballroom. Using Sledge as a relay, we would've sent a changeling upstairs and ratted her out.

The half-naiad's sudden appearance in the castle would've triggered the guards, and Imogen would be forced to react. She'd leave the party to deal with her. It was actually a similar plan to what Signet's crew had been planning anyway, but I'd talked her into waiting so we could control the timing.

Now that we knew Queen Imogen couldn't leave the party once she arrived, we needed to either trigger Signet's appearance early or to save her for once the seal was broken. What we decided to do would depend wholly on when the Sledge arrived with the changelings and whether or not they could take the towers.

I sighed. It'd been a good plan, but we'd gotten screwed by the lack of proper intelligence.

Zev: Godsdamnit, Carl. I don't know what you did, but they're going to be pissed.

Carl: What? You're not supposed to be mad at me for another two or three hours.

Zev: This isn't funny. She's not supposed to be in here. It's going to be a logistical nightmare.

Carl: Seriously. I don't….

I dropped the chat window the moment I saw her enter the room.

Well, shit.

Signet walked into the room, tattoos swimming across her bare chest. The guard at the door just stared, mouth agape. He turned and fled the room, shouting.

She saw me, smiled, and casually strolled up. She reached out and grabbed my hands in hers. She felt solid. Warm. She was in the same ballroom as us.

"Want to hear something funny?" she asked. "I was just sitting there, minding my own thoughts in a damp, dark dungeon, when

Apito herself appeared before me and told me I was invited to a party. And suddenly, I was here."

Carl: Hey, Zev. This wasn't me. This one is on the AI.

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Imani: Carl. Why is she here? She can't help us if she's in the room with us.

Carl: I was worried this was going to happen the second the queen told me that Apito forms the guestlist herself. "Apito" is testing Imogen. Of course she's going to bring in one of her biggest enemies. That's the whole point of the spell.

Imani: I don't like this, Carl. It's like they've been one step ahead of us the whole time.

Carl: Don't worry. I think this is actually better. With her in the room with us, she'll be Imogen's first target. It'll give us a few extra seconds to escape if someone breaks the seal.

Imani: Everything is going off the rails. People are depending on us, Carl.

Carl: I know. We're doing our best.

"Hello," I said. "I wasn't expecting to see you until later."

"My sister isn't here yet?" Signet asked, looking about the room. "You know, when I learned of this event, I didn't realize this was a real Butcher's Masquerade. People have them, yes. But real ones are rare. I wouldn't have believed it unless Apito herself came to me. I'm glad I'm here. I prefer it this way. Like I told you before, I'm quite tired of running. I just wish I'd known I was coming directly. I would've worn something a little more appropriate."

Multiple guards appeared at the entrance, including a handful of the black-clad, queen's guards. They watched Signet from across the room. They all slinked back to the hallway.

"It's quite delicious, isn't it?" Signet asked. "I'm here, and they can't touch me without breaking the seal. My lovely sister is at my mercy."

"Do you know what boon she'll receive from Apito at the end of the party?" I asked.

"Imogen doesn't even know. The story is it's some sort of immortality, but it's never happened." Signet laughed. "Not once. Clerics cast the spell, have their party, and before the night is done, the Nothing is fed, the cleric is either dead or shamed, and Apito awards no boons."

Her gaze moved across the room, landing on the hunters, then moving to Chaco, then to the three judges at the table. "Who are they?" Signet asked. "Their auras are... strange."

As we looked at the three judges, an ethereal hand appeared, floating in front of Empress D'Nadia, handing her a drink. She took the offered glass, and the hand disappeared.

"They're the people I was telling you about before," I said, jumping on the opportunity. "Look at them. They're not even really here. They're from the outside world that controls all of this, even you, and they're watching this for entertainment."

"Interesting," Signet said, her voice trailing off. On her chest, all the tattoos were also looking in the direction of the three judges. "I think I'd like to have a conversation with these off-worlders while I wait for my sister." She moved off toward them.

Zev: Godsdamnit, Carl.

I laughed out loud.

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I TURNED MY ATTENTION TO THE BACK OF THE ROOM.

Chaco the Bard remained behind his prize counter. The muscular, wolf-headed man saw me coming, and he straightened his back, as if getting ready for a fight. His bat-like wings flapped once and settled nervously.

He didn't wear the ridiculous, 1970's, gameshow host outfit anymore, but form-fitting, metallic armor that made him seem even more intimidating. He'd been a part of Mordecai's party when something happened near the end of their crawl. Something to make Mordecai want to murder him. This guy had been born as a skyfowl, which was a little hard to get my head around.

The curtain was now off the prize counter, and a few hunters perused the large, glass case. Two draconians slinked away at my approach, leaving only one person, a hunter closely inspecting something behind the glass. His name was Zabit, and he was a **level 66 Beastmaster**. He was an odd, unfamiliar alien race called an Atoll. Tall and thin with four arms and only three fingers on each hand. He had a thin, shovel-like face with high-set eyes, all set into wrinkly, dark, ape-like skin. A thick, wide leather belt hung loosely around his waist. Little, empty chains hung off it. I actually recognized what that was. It was a trap module bandolier. I received the same thing in a box once. I'd ended up selling it because my inventory was better and safer.

The hunter turned to face me, his belt jingling like little bells as he moved. He didn't appear to have a mouth. Just a weird head, about a dozen nostril holes, and that was it, all surrounded by wrinkles and random, thick whiskers.

"Hello, Carl," Zabit said. He made a sort of sign language motion with his hands, and the words projected out through something hidden in his clothes. His words sounded oddly robotic and emotionless. "I applaud you for almost angering Vrah to the point of breaking the peace seal. I do not know what would happen if one of us was banished to the Nothing, but I suspect it would not be pleasant. Who is the elite who just entered the room?"

"Oh, yeah. I know who you are," I said, leaning on the counter. Chaco hovered nervously nearby. He took a step back, as if afraid of what would happen next. "When I first got to this floor, I was attacked by a bunch of night weasel mobs. Those were yours."

"Yes," he signed. "I thought to catch the top prey early, but you and your companions ended up killing my pets and ruining my chances at making any money this season. Still, I managed to collect a few scalps. Only twenty-five. The prizes are of quality, though are mostly useless at this point. It's become quite impossible to sell our items."

Twenty-five. This guy had killed 25 crawlers. I seethed. Then I thought of Eva, who'd managed to kill twice as many. Had they given her scalps? I hadn't even thought about it.

Don't engage, I thought. *Don't do this*. *It's just going to make you angry.*

"Why do you do it?" I asked.

He cocked his head. He was just a bit taller than me.

"Why do I do what?"

"Hunt crawlers. Travel across the universe to hunt and kill someone who is scared and doesn't want to be here. Someone weaker than you. Does it make you feel tough? Powerful?"

"I hunt for the survival of the Atoll. My people may not be strong or many, but we are proud. I hunt and collect the money and bring it back home. And with that money, I am able to pay for the upkeep on our habitat. We are not considered citizens, so oxygen and land is

not a right. Employment options are limited. Without this opportunity, we would be forced to sign a protection agreement with another system and live under indenture. My failure this season will make it difficult for my people to survive until the next. It is the risk I take. As for the rest of your question. No, it doesn't make me feel tough or powerful. Some of us do revel in the killing. For others, it is a means of survival. I understand your objection. I would object, too, were the situations reversed."

I had no real response to that. Then after a moment, I said, "It seems in a universe so large, one shouldn't have to live somewhere inhospitable. It seems like it would be easy to find a place to live in peace."

"It does seem like it should be that way, doesn't it?"

He returned his attention to Chaco.

"I will take the drop shield for twenty scalps. The invisibility pack for three."

Chaco took a hesitant step back toward the counter. "That leaves you with two."

"I will take what I have ordered."

"Suit yourself," Chaco said. He reached behind the counter and dropped a round, poker chip-like device on the counter plus what looked like a case of 12, jingling potion bottles. I recognized them as invisibility potions. The items disappeared in a poof of smoke. "The items are added to your inventory, so you can't use them in here."

"My inventory is full already," Zabit said. "We do not have unlimited storage like the crawlers."

"I am aware. The items will appear in your box inventory," he said. "Make certain you open the box before the floor ends, or you won't be able to take it with you."

"Wait," I said, looking between the hunter and Chaco. "What happens when the floor collapses? Do you get to keep everything?"

"Just what's in our inventory," Zabit said. "And we are unable to sell it. We are given credit to gold exchange value."

"How much is that?" I asked.

"Practically nothing." He turned to move off.

Behind me, Theobold was back on the stage talking. He stuttered and stopped at the sight of Signet proudly sitting there in the front row, but then composed himself. The pet show was about to begin.

"Why does Mordecai hate you so much?" I asked Chaco.

The wolf man shook his fearsome head. "Hello to you, too, Carl. I'm still not allowed to say. Last time we spoke, I asked you to tell him I am sorry about what happened. I regret it every day. But if we hadn't done it, we'd all be dead, including him *and* his brother. That's all there is to say about it." He paused uncertainly and then added, "They do that. If you survive long enough in this place, they'll eventually make you turn on your own party. It happens every time. You'll regret making it as far as you have, no matter who is helping you. No matter how close you are, we're all alone in the end. Alone and broken with the choices we've had to make." He jerked as if shocked. He reached up and wiped his face, taking a deep breath.

"You currently have 66 hunter hands in your inventory. Wow. Really? Huh, that's a lot. Well, take a look at the prize counter and pick out what you like. Unlike last time, you can examine the names of everything, though not all descriptions will be present. Anything you purchase will be added to your inventory as a prize box, so you won't have access right away. If you purchase an upgrade, those will be installed immediately."

I looked down through the glass and started examining everything. I desperately tried to ignore what he'd said. It wasn't the first time I'd heard someone say that. There were a few heartbreaking stories in the cookbook. Ones I tried not to think about, yet I found myself reading over and over. I shook my head, clearing out the noise.

The items turned on a vertical carousel, and they were represented by miniature holograms, allowing them to shove a ton of crap in the case. There was a lot of stuff. The left side of the case with the lower-hand cost items was mostly potions. For a single hand, one could get a 25-pack of good healing or mana potions. For two hands, there were upgrades, but you were limited to one from

anything in that row. One could purchase plus ten percent to their lowest stat or plus five percent to their highest stat. Or plus two to a random combat skill or spell.

I gave Mordecai a running commentary of everything as I went over the prizes. I wasn't planning on telling him who was overseeing the prize counter, but he already knew.

Mordecai: See if you can find out if that fuck tit is in the same room as you, and if he is, I would consider it a personal favor if you shoved a dynamite stick up his ass once the protection seal is broken.

Carl: Donut?

Mordecai: Yes. She told me. Now keep reading the prizes.

For the three and five hand prizes, there were literally dozens of potion choices. Everything from the invisibility potions that Zabit had picked to a few of those *Size Up* potions I'd taken from Miriam Dom to *Feather Fall* and several protection potions. There were also numerous scroll choices.

Mordecai: How many hands did Donut end up with? Eight?

Carl: Correct. I'm thinking we should either get the constitution boost or the plus two to a skill for her. It's too bad she can't get both. There's a random spell book prize at five hands. Most of these potions are things I can get easily or you can make. There's a few scrolls, too. A scroll of mapping. A scroll called *Paw Patrol*. Isn't that a kid's show? One called the *Milk of Lamashtu*. I don't know what any of these do.

Mordecai: Those potions are all a waste. I agree with you. She should get the plus ten percent to her lowest base stat and then the random spell book.

Carl: It's too bad she didn't get ten hands. There's a single potion of level-up. That's limited to one also. There are a few spell books. *Poison Grapple*. *Scar Tissue*. *Fish Blaster*. What the hell do these do?

On the stage, a crawler came out. It was the same one I'd seen earlier getting out of the second caravan. I couldn't remember his

name and couldn't examine him from here. He was one of the Brazilian guys, I was pretty sure. I didn't know much about his party, called Team Flamengo, but I knew this guy only put his stats into his dexterity. He had his hawk on his shoulder. A spotlight hit him, and he stood there on stage, not saying anything for several seconds.

"Uh," he said awkwardly, his voice amplified loudly throughout the ballroom. "This is Gimli. My stone hawk. He can turn people to stone. He turned a hunter to stone yesterday, and then I kicked the statue over, and it shattered."

Several crawlers cheered at that.

"I don't recommend it. I couldn't loot him."

Elle was suddenly next to me, also looking at all the items. She'd collected a total of seven hands. "This party sucks," she said, looking at the case. She glanced over at the hunters and suddenly perked up. "Hey, you!" she said to a hunter standing by himself nearby. It was a human with no hair or eyebrows, standing nervously and holding a drink with two hands. A Crest. He pointed to his chest questioningly.

"Yeah, you! Come here! I wanna ask you something. I saw something really fucked up earlier, and I can't stop thinking about it." She zipped off without picking anything from the case.

The other hunters continued to huddle near their buffet table. Vrah was shouting at a group of them, who were arguing back.

"It's over," someone shot back at Vrah. "Let it go. We just want to go home."

Vrah looked at me and hissed at the others to be quiet.

On stage, the brown hawk cawed and opened his wings, revealing opalescent colors within.

"You fuckers are lucky," the guy said from the stage, pointing at the hunters, as if he was gaining confidence. "Gimli would've fucked you up if we found you."

Donut: DO YOU SEE THIS. HE WASN'T EVEN PREPARED. I HAVE THIS IN THE BAG.

I turned my attention back to the case. I looked at the 20-hand items. There were more spellbooks and magic wands and individual, magical oddities, like that token thing Zabit had picked.

Carl: What's a drop shield?

Mordecai: Disposable item. Like your protective shell, but it lasts for about an hour or it can get killed by a lot of damage. You can turn it on and off, but once the battery is dead, it's dead. It's a great prize, but it only works if it's rooted in place, so you can't clip it to your belt and run with it. It doesn't stop magic. Will stop explosions, but one of yours will probably be enough to break it and kill you.

Carl: There's a shrink wand like Zhang had before. Ten charges.

Mordecai: That's also a good choice. Is there any sheet music?

Carl: Yes. There's a few at ten hands, but I didn't go over them.

Mordecai: Ask Chaco if there's anything like his escape spell.

"Uh," I said. "Mordecai wants to know if there's any sheet music like your escape spell."

He looked up at me, eyes registering surprise. "You have a bard in your party?"

"Yeah," I said. "Donut sings now."

"How is she? Can she hold pitch?"

"Uh," I said. "She's getting better. She has a vocal coach in our safe room."

He nodded. "That one," he said, pointing at a sheet of music. "Ten hands. A song of *Skedaddle*. Not quite as good as *Wings of the Pyxie*, which is what he's talking about, but she wouldn't be able to sing that one for a while anyway. What does she know now?"

"She has a party heal spell, an illusion spell, an ice spell that she still can't cast very well, a psionic attack that makes her nose bleed and does nothing else to mobs, and a new song she's been working on. She got the sheet music for it, and she sang it perfectly on her second or third try."

"Really?" he asked. "That's pretty impressive."

"That's what she keeps telling me," I said.

Sheet music was something between a scroll and a magic book, and it was exclusive to bards. One could use it more than once, and it allowed a bard to sing a song they normally couldn't. The system helped them perform if they had the music in front of them, making it easier to pull off. But it still wasn't a sure thing. If the song was performed well and in key, it cast. If not, the page tore just a little bit. Too many tears, and it was ruined. If you managed to sing it perfectly all the way through with perfect pitch, the song was added to your bard spellbook, called your repertoire. The sheet music didn't go away in that case, either, so you could save it for duets or to sell later.

The song Donut was going to sing this evening was easy for her because it was a song she'd been hearing her entire life. There was a bit of a mystery there, a chicken and the egg thing, but I had too much to deal with to wonder on it for long. I returned my attention back to the case.

At a price of thirty hands, there were only two items, both called **Future Floor Boons**. One was a little checkered flag and was called **Seventh Floor Pole Position (Sold Out),** and the next was called **Eighth Floor Book of Lore – (Random starting location. Full title will reveal itself upon purchase)**. There was a sign under both that said, "Limited to one each."

"Who bought that seventh floor upgrade?"

"The goat. He had 33 hands. He was my first customer. Bought that, the skill upgrade, and a case of mana potions. He didn't even ask about it. Just walked up, pointed at it, and took it."

At fifty hands there were multiple full sets of armor and weapons, none of which would be good for me. There were also more spellbooks, including *War Lord* and *Gore Golem*. Both were 100 mana spells and not worth it for 50 hands according to Mordecai.

At the end of the case was a little, glowing gem. From the hologram it looked like it was maybe the size of a grape and had no color at all, but even in hologram form, it glittered as it moved. At first I thought it was a soul crystal. Those were without value once

they were installed as a power source, unless used as an explosive. Unused ones were supposedly rare and treasured.

However, upon closer inspection, I saw this was not actually listed as a soul crystal.

Carl: What's a memorial crystal?

Mordecai: Forget everything else. Get that.

Carl: I can't. It's 100 hands. The most expensive thing in there. What is it?

Prepotente was now on stage with Bianca. He literally said nothing. He just screamed once, and the massive, sizzling, black-fire goat thing hissed. They got off the stage, which smoldered and then caught on fire. Elves appeared from nowhere and started stamping out the flames.

Mordecai: Long story. Soul crystals, the ones that elves use to power their stuff, are mined from Scolopendra's lair. They're created when certain types of people die, and their souls get filtered through the centipede's body. Memorial crystals are similar, but they're created by fallen gods and demigods. They're filled with information, usually god-tier-level spells and knowledge. One can get the information out of them by charging it up. You charge them up by installing it on a weapon or your armor or just wearing it like jewelry and killing stuff. There's lots of storylines about these things, usually on the 10th and 11th floor.

Carl: Well, it's out of reach unless I can kill 34 more of these guys and collect the hands before the end of the night. Too bad they don't let us pool our money.

Mordecai: See if that murdering prick knows what god it came from.

"Hey, Chaco. What god made that memorial crystal?"

"A dead one," he said.

"No shit. You don't know?"

He shrugged. "All the description says is that it was discovered during a mining expedition by the high elves. The queen normally wears it around her neck. She'll get it back if nobody buys it."

I remembered the queen's necklace. I'd assumed it was a soul crystal.

"Mordecai says these things store information. You have no idea what's on it?"

"None. I do know it's the queen's most prized-possession. It's a part of this whole butcher spell. They have to offer their most valuable item as a prize."

I felt that same anticipatory tingle I'd felt as soon as I'd heard about the Gate of the Feral Gods. "If I happen to collect a few more hands before the evening is over, but they're still in their prize boxes, can I use them?"

Chaco smiled, revealing his wolf teeth. "Nope. You'll have to get to a saferoom first to open them up. There ain't no saferooms in the castle. And you ain't collecting hands, anyway. The second the seal is broken, I teleport out of here."

Behind me on the stage, a pair of elves were spraying something on the wood where Bianca had just left.

I sighed. I wanted to get the skill upgrade for myself, but I was one hand short if I wanted to also refill our potion supply. Katia had done a full circuit of the group except for Lucia and determined we were seven fall-protection potions short thanks to Eva's thievery. We weren't even certain if they were going to be necessary. *Damnit.*

"I'll take the shrink wand, the eighth floor lore book thing, that music sheet of *Skedaddle*, that case of 24 *Feather Fall* potions, and a case of healing potions."

After a parade of other pets, it was time for Mongo to appear. I made my way back to the stage. Signet remained talking to the judges. Katia had joined them for a few minutes. No further guards came into the room or did anything about her presence. Elle had moved off into a corner and was in a deep conversation with the hairless, human hunter. The dude looked like he was crying. She said

something to him angrily and zipped away, coming back toward our side of the room. I turned my attention to the stage.

Donut had been preparing for this while I was either in the training room or the crafting studio. While I knew exactly how her talent show performance later was supposed to go, I hadn't been involved in any of the arrangements for this.

"We need to keep it low key," I'd said once she started preparing. "Just bring Mongo out, have him shriek a few times, and get off the stage. We don't want to tip our hand that your talent show production is going to be a little... You know."

"Extra?" she'd asked.

"Yeah. Extra."

"But..." Donut had protested.

"Low key."

The lights in the entire ballroom dimmed. A red glow emanated on stage. A small billow of smoke appeared.

"Ladies and gentlemen! Crawlers and hunters alike, prepare yourselves," came Louis's voice over the loudspeaker. He was hidden somewhere backstage.

"Oh fuck," I muttered.

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Colored lights started to bounce back and forth on stage.

"I want you to put your hands together!" Louis shouted.

Topping out at number two on September 6th, 2014, it's "Anaconda!"

Everyone in the room stopped what they were doing to first look at each other and then the stage. The Popov twins, Imani, and Elle came to stand next to me. I caught Imani's eye, and she gave me a look that said, *you need to learn to control your goddamned cat*.

Carl: Louis. Where is that music coming from?

Louis: She made me do it. I built a boombox that makes it so it's not so loud.

Carl: Those are my trap modules. How many did you use?

Louis: Uh. Hang on a second. Don't get madder.

The Nicki Minaj and Sir Mix-a-Lot song, which had nothing to do with either dinosaurs or snakes, started blasting on stage. Despite Louis's assurance that it wasn't as loud as normal, it was still ridiculously amplified. The floor thumped with the bass.

Two of my expensive and hard-to-make, colored, signal flare smoke bombs exploded, one in each corner.

"Motherfuck," I hissed.

"It's Mongo!" Louis cried, his voice louder than the music. There was an odd distortion effect added to his voice, like we were at a monster truck rally. Mongo rushed out, emerging through the smoke, which swirled in eddies that stopped the moment they hit

the edge of the stage. I knew down below in the attendant ballroom, the whole damn room was probably filling with smoke right now. Mongo was down there while Donut remained here on this floor. She could still fully interact with him, but only while she was upon the stage.

Mongo did a circle and then stopped in the center. He roared, waving his arms in the air, causing more smoke to twirl. His roar was also amplified.

Donut strolled onto stage, her new tiara gleaming. She wore a little headset microphone I'd never seen before. She did a little hop and then jumped upon Mongo's back.

"Earthquake!" Donut cried, her voice also amplified, and Mongo leaped into the air and landed hard on stage, shaking it. A pair of pyrotechnic explosions went off, loud as gunshots.

"As a level-34, male mongoliensis, Mongo is the prime example of the term, 'alpha predator,'" Louis intoned over the loudspeaker. "His powerful legs and claws are perfect for eviscerating opponents. His blue and red feathers with a slight insinuation of youthful pink present a masculine form that hints at a sensitive depth. The ladies love him."

Suddenly there were three lady Mongos on stage—none of them were Kiwi—and they each took a step toward Mongo and screeched. One of them held onto a pink heart made of construction paper with "Mongo" written on it.

"Sorry, ladies," Donut said, with all the bravado of a stage performer presenting a skit at an amusement park. "He's taken."

The girl dinos disappeared back into the smoke, abandoning the heart onto the ground.

"But it's not all fighting and love with this adorable velociraptor," Louis announced. "Mongo also knows how to have a good time. His hobbies include gastronomic sampling, long walks in nature, and of course..."

Donut backflipped off Mongo and landed in the center of the stage. Mongo leaped all the way to the edge of stage left.

"...Dancing!"

The velociraptor moonwalked back across the platform. He goddamn moonwalked. As he passed Donut, she popped her sunglasses onto her face. Both bopped their heads to the music.

Next to me, Elle mouthed, "Holy shit."

Even some of the hunters ended up clapping.

Donut: CARL DID YOU SEE IT! LOUIS MESSED UP SOME OF THE LINES, AND WE ORIGINALLY PLANNED ON MONGO LEAPING COMPLETELY OFFSTAGE BEFORE THE MOONWALK REVEAL, BUT IT WENT ALMOST PERFECTLY. DID YOU SEE THE JUDGES? THE BLOB GUY WAS SHAKING, AND I'M LIKE REALLY SURE THAT'S A GOOD THING.

Carl: I distinctly remember saying "low-key."

Donut: THAT WAS LOW KEY, CARL. THEY TOLD ME I COULDN'T DO MY MAGIC MISSILE ENTRANCE WE HAD PLANNED. THIS WAS NOTHING COMPARED TO MY KE$HA ACT MISS BEATRICE AND I PERFORMED IN CLEVELAND.

Carl: You sat in a cage and let judges look at your butthole at your cat shows.

Donut: NOT AT THE BAR AFTERWARD. HONESTLY, CARL. IT'S LIKE YOU KNOW NOTHING ABOUT MY LIFE. WAIT, I'M COMING OUT.

Up on the stage, the final entrant was making their appearance. It was Garret the tummy acher with Tserendolgor. It'd taken five minutes for all the smoke to clear. Louis couldn't figure out how to turn the trap module music off, and I'd had to give him instructions over chat.

Ren was awkwardly explaining how the large meatball could tank attacks and attract incoming missiles.

Garret made a giggling noise that sounded like something out of a horror movie. They were off the stage, and it was done. The winner wouldn't be announced until after the talent show.

"Donut, how in God's name did you train Mongo to moonwalk?" Elle demanded the moment Donut appeared from backstage, tail swishing triumphantly.

"Oh, it was nothing," Donut said. "Wait until you see our real dance number later."

"Yeah, I heard about it," Elle said. "But now people aren't going to be surprised."

"Oh, don't worry about that," Donut said. "The next performance is going to be amazing."

As they talked, I moved to my chat. Normally-calm Imani was on the verge of a nervous breakdown over everything having gone wrong so far, and I was spending a lot of effort on keeping her sane.

I'd had a few reports of the outside crawlers fighting mobs as everyone moved into elf territory, but the elves themselves still hadn't moved to attack anyone.

Carl: Bomo, Sledge check in.

Bomo: Lots of stuff left behind.

Mordecai: He ain't lying. He keeps bringing armfuls of armor and swords back. He also has some guns and power armor, but they're race restricted. We should've made him a cart.

Carl: Excellent.

When the brambles attacked, a small but determined party of experienced hunters decided to remain in Zockau. Since Bomo could freely enter the saferoom, we'd sent him in regularly to get updates on the group. The brambles didn't breach the saferoom walls. Instead of fleeing, the remaining hunters who hadn't been teleported away decided to carve out a safe space for themselves.

The act of fighting the never-ending onslaught of thorns didn't give any experience, but it filled one's bloodbar, which allowed them the relative safety of the saferoom in exchange for fifteen minutes of garden duty once every ten hours. Once the Butcher's Masquerade started, however, the remaining hunters all teleported away, which effectively turned Zockau into a ghost town, save a few surviving NPCs.

I sent Bomo in to collect all the excess gear. Piles of the equipment had been abandoned in the saferoom, sorted into little mounds. Because of their limited inventory, the hunters who'd collected the stuff were only taking the most valuable items they could carry. The thing was, you weren't allowed to steal in saferooms. It was just as bad as killing someone. That went out the window once the person left the room, however. All the stuff became fair game.

Some of the hunters had personal spaces and kept their excess in there, but not all of them. Most of it was worthless junk, the same stuff I would normally toss to Donut to sell. I didn't care. I wanted it all.

The Sledge, who'd so far spent the entire floor playing video games in the saferoom, was already engaged with his much more dangerous mission. He was currently approaching the tunnel that led to the caves where they'd move into the castle's from below. The were-castors and Areson and the rest of Signet's crew would be there to help them make their way through the lower tunnels and into the secret, dungeon-level entrance.

Sledge: Mantises.

Carl: What?

I exchanged a worried look with Imani and Louis, who were both in all the chats regarding the changeling evacuation.

Sledge: Lots of mantises. Everywhere. We gotta fight them. They keep coming, flying in.

Imani: I'm starting to get reports of other crawlers fighting mantises, too. They're hitting the stairwell locations. They're all level-20 nymphs, but there's a lot of them, and they're fast.

Carl: Sledge, get in those tunnels. Try not to fight. You need to get the changelings in through that door. Let me know as soon as they're in.

Sledge: Too many. We getting picked up by airship. We go in from above instead.

Carl: Okay. Be careful of the sentinel towers. They'll still be armed. Use the bombs on them if you have to. Just don't

drop any on the main part of the castle. Let me know when you're in.

Louis: Make sure you tell that Skarn kid to moor the ship to the tower. It's really important!

"Fuck," I said out loud. "So much for subtle."

"What's going on?" Katia asked.

As Imani explained what was happening out there via chat, I looked across the room at Vrah, who stood there holding a plate of food in a claw, looking directly at the now-drained warning light Britney had disabled.

Uh-oh.

"Wait," Louis asked. "Where are all the mantis babies coming from?"

"Diwata is still here somehow," I said. "It's like Samantha warned. She turned into a boy mantis, cured Vrah, then turned into a girl and is out there somewhere, shooting babies into the world."

"I called it!" Donut said. "And all those babies are both Vrah's kids *and* siblings! That's like really gross!" She looked across the room and pointed at Vrah. "Disgusting! You should be ashamed!" she shouted.

"Don't praying mantises lay eggs in weird sacs?" Louis asked.

"Apparently not this kind," I said.

Carl: Samantha. How many babies will Diwata have once she starts giving birth?

Samantha: WHEN AM I GOING? I AM GETTING BORED. I COULD'VE SNEAKED AWAY FIVE TIMES NOW.

Carl: Not yet. Any minute now. Answer the question.

Samantha: SHE'LL HAVE AS MANY BABIES AS SHE WANTS. HER BABY SPRINKLER WILL SHOOT THEM OUT UNTIL THE VERY END OF TIME IF SHE WANTS.

Carl: Shit. Okay. You still have that potion ball shoved up you?

Samantha: I HAVE IT. IT'S VERY UNCOMFORTABLE, BUT I HAVE IT.

"This is fucked up on so many levels," Elle was saying. "I mean, think about it. Those are her children. Sort of. And she's birthing

them here. Remember that dude who blew up when Diwata was born? I was talking to that hunter guy over there with no eyebrows, and did you know, Vrah's people tricked his brother into going into that temple and being used as the birthing vessel for Diwata? They plain murdered another hunter just to cure Vrah of a venereal disease. Vrah messaged him and said he'd be safe if he went in there, and they somehow tricked him into submitting to the ritual. The brother is pissed about it. And now this Circe bug lady is having actual, flesh-and-blood babies and just sending them out into the world. What's going to happen when the floor collapses? Are they just going to go away? They're her kids!"

"They're probably all deformed and stuff, too," Donut said. "Do you think any have flippers? Can you imagine that? A bug with flippers!"

I was about to make a quip about Donut's own lineage, but thought better of it. "Donut, get to Chaco's counter and get those upgrades we talked about."

Mordecai: I've figured out the a loophole they're using to keep the goddess active on this floor. If she's already cast a spell, she won't leave until the spell finishes. She had a five-minute limit, but she got to Vrah in time, did a quick pump and dump and then turned to a female mantis and immediately started giving birth. That's the spell. She'll stay as long as she's still giving birth. The plus side is she'll be in the form of a gonorrhea-infected female mantis and won't be able to cast any other spells. She'll still be immortal, but she'll be giving birth, in pain, and without her god strength. I hope.

Donut: IT IS ABSOLUTELY REVOLTING. MONGO IS APPALLED.

"Hey," Firas said. "Weren't we supposed to keep Florin away from Lucia?"

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We all turned to see the crocodilian standing over the sobbing form of Lucia. He had both hands on her shoulders, like he was about to choke her.

I cursed as Imani, Katia, Elle, and I all moved to intercept.

"Florin," I shouted as we all pulled up.

Then, to my utter astonishment, the Lajabless threw herself into Florin's embrace, and she wrapped her arms around him. He hugged her back. "It's okay," he said, stroking her hair. "It's okay. We'll sort it out."

The crocodilian turned to look at us. "We need to keep her safe at all costs."

"What?" I asked. I looked at the others, bewildered. "What?"

"They're in there with her," he said.

"Who?" I asked. "Where?"

"I want my mom," Lucia said.

Her accent is different. What the hell?

They both stopped suddenly and looked at each other. Lucia pushed Florin away. The change had been instantaneous. I saw it happen. Her swagger returned. I'd seen this before, this rapid personality change, on the recap from her fight with Donut. It was like a switch had been flipped. Everything about her other than her actual appearance changed, all at once. Her face scrunched up in anger. Her shoulders hunched. Her voice transformed to the way it'd been before.

"Get off me you ugly fuck, or I'll put a hole in your head like I did to your whore."

Florin put his hands up and backed off. "All right, kid. Just take it easy, okay? Don't do anything stupid. Remember we're all on the same boat."

Donut was suddenly on my shoulder. "Carl, what's happening?"

Lucia pointed at Donut and hissed. "She's still dead. No matter what happens. Blood for blood. She killed Cici. I kill her." She turned back to the buffet, walking with a slight limp because of her mismatched legs. She yelled for tequila.

Florin waved us back. "Leave her be!"

"That's right. Leave me be!" Lucia shouted without turning. She cackled with laughter. Eva remained at the bar between the buffets. I cringed at the thought of those two together.

"I know I've been saying this a lot lately," Elle said, "but what the hell is going on?"

Florin reached up and put his finger to his temple, which had become our universal gesture to move it to chat.

Florin: I don't understand it all. There are multiple people in there. Real people, mostly kids. The girl I was talking to is named Jill. She's ten years old, and she's Dutch. I thought she was trying to pull something, but she's telling the truth. She knew the prime minister of the Netherlands. That is no street kid from Ecuador running an op.

Carl: Dude. What?

Florin: I don't know, mate. Something to do with the dog and a guy named Alexandro. But there are kids in there. In her head. Multiple kids. We have to get that dog. Not her. The dog. It can still control her from afar, but only in short bursts. Once we get it, it's gone.

I just sat there for several moments, trying to make sense of what he said. I pulled up a new chat window.

Carl: Zev, what is this bullshit? You guys said there were no children crawlers allowed.

Zev: It's complicated, Carl. You don't have to be involved in everything. We're not going to discuss it. Especially not

now. Heads up.

"You're red as a tomato," Florin said. "You feeling okay, mate?"

A heavy weight landed on my shoulder, opposite of the one Donut stood upon.

"Yeah, mate? You feeling okay?"

Ferdinand. He'd come out of nowhere. He said it with a condescending, mocking tone.

Carl: Samantha. He's distracted. Go, go, go.

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<Note added by Crawler Carl, 25th edition>
From page ten of our planning notes:

Louis here. I took Carl's advice and started studying the castle map. There are multiple small tunnels leading everywhere. At first I thought they were HVAC ducts. I was gonna do that for a while. My cousin Scrapple was gonna help me get into the school, but they tested for weed. At a school. Isn't that dumb? Anyway, I got to looking at these ducts on the map, and I realized that's not what they are. Their placement doesn't make sense. There's that elf spa on the sixth floor, right? The one with the baths, and the tunnels go all around it and into the dressing room next door. As soon as I saw that, I knew. I got this friend back home. His name was Jojo, and he lived with his crazy-ass grandma until she died. She was one of those cat ladies. You could smell the place from down the street. Had like 20 of them. When she died, they found a dead cat in her freezer. Can you believe that shit? Anyway, Jojo's grandma once paid a dude to build a bunch of tunnels around her house, and I realized they were just like these. This queen lady has a pet cat, right? I think these tunnels are how he gets around the castle. Donut said he's a pervert. He uses the tunnels to spy and to get places. There's lots of short cuts, and when it goes up a floor, it goes back and forth like Super Mario platforms, making it easier for the cat to jump up quickly and quietly. One of those tunnels goes to the third floor, right

into the security room. It makes sense if he's all up in the castle's business all the time. If we can get Donut into the tunnel or maybe Katia can turn into a slug or something, they can sneak into the tunnel and get to the security room.

~Louis.

That's a great idea. Good eye. But we'll be watched like hawks, and there's no easy access from the ballroom. The timing is really important. Also, I'm not turning into a slug. There's a few paths in and out of the attendant ballrooms. What do you think about using Samantha?

~ Katia.

She's not reliable enough. Our entire escape plan fails if she's not successful.

~ Imani.

I'm mapping out a path right now to see if it's feasible. She'll be downstairs, so she'll have to start booking it as soon as the talent show portion starts, or hopefully earlier once we get eyeballs on Ferdinand to know they won't run into each other in the tunnel. We'll also have to devise a method so she can quickly and quietly deal with the elves in the security room without raising the alarm. She talks a big game, but she can't actually do anything.

~ Carl.

I'LL DO IT! AND I CAN FIGHT JUST FINE. I WILL KILL YOU ALL. AND ALL THE ELVES. AND THEIR MOTHERS.

~ Psamathe

What the hell? Samantha, how'd you find this?

NOBODY GOES TO THE BATHROOM THIS MUCH, CARL. I'M NOT AN IDIOT. ALSO YOU'RE USING THE WRONG TYPE

OF INK FOR THIS. REMIND ME, AND I WILL SHOW YOU SOMETHING REALLY AWESOME

~ Psamathe.

Donut hissed and poofed all the way out. Imani swooped in and peeled Donut off my shoulder, cradling her in her arms and wings before the cat had the chance to swipe and attack. Donut issued a deep growl.

I could feel the weight of Ferdinand on my shoulder. I reached up and touched his tail, and I felt my hand reach easily through him after a slight push. He could touch me, but I couldn't touch him. I had no idea how that worked. He was in the queen's ballroom. Not really here. The intricacies of the ballroom system were still a little confusing to me, but all that was important was that he could rip my throat out right now, and there would be nothing I could do about it.

Elle was the first to start laughing, followed by Louis. Even Bautista and the Popovs both started to chuckle. I looked up, and finally saw what was so funny.

"Dude," I said to Ferdinand. "What are you wearing?"

"What am I wearing? What do you mean?" the cat asked, surprised. He looked about the room. All around, crawlers looked at him with amusement.

"On your head," I said.

He sported an enormous, poofy turban. The thing was made from gold fabric, and a white feather rose up into the air, curling in itself. The feather was probably four feet long. It looked like a racist, costume-shop caricature, blown up to absurd proportions.

"This is my royal hat! Do not mock my royal hat! It makes me the most handsome boy in the castle!"

I examined him.

Sir Ferdinand. Cat.

Familiar of Queen Imogen of the High Elves.

Level 100 Province Boss.

It's not easy to live amongst the high elves, especially when you're not a high elf yourself. Over the centuries, countless adorable creatures have found themselves upon the laps of high elf royalty. It is a dangerous place to sit.

Eventually, the elven kings and queens have tired of their pets. Or discovered them to be too intelligent. Too cunning. Too eager. And eventually, the kings and queens would order not just the execution of the pet, but of the entire species. It is the way of the high elves.

Ferdinand owes his life to the fact that Queen Imogen is rather fond of him. She's fond of him in the same way a surgeon is fond of their favorite scalpel or a mass murderer is fond of their favorite chainsaw.

Like all cats, Ferdinand's biggest weakness is the fact he is utterly convinced that whatever thought enters his chicken nugget-sized brain is not just the truth, but it is the obvious, unalienable truth and anyone who thinks anything otherwise is not just a fool, but an imbecile deserving of nothing less than utter contempt and mockery. He is prone to self-aggrandizing behavior. He doesn't understand the concept of being told no. He doesn't understand the concept of not being worshipped.

It's rumored he's somehow even managed to sneak a small amount of magical control over the castle itself, slipping a few cat-sized hallways here and there where nobody else would notice. He never even thought to ask permission. The idea of asking for permission to do anything is antithetical to his very nature.

And it's not just Ferdinand. This is typical of the entire species. Cats don't ask for permission. They never apologize.

They're soulless murderers. All of them.

From Imani's grip, Donut scoffed in outrage at the description.

"You look like you have a fat, egg-laying goose parked on your head," Louis continued.

"No, not a goose. It's like one of those weird mushroom penises," Elle said, laughing. "It's like they made a hat designed to look like Horton the mushroom guy over there." She turned. "Hey, Horton! Come here! You have merch!"

From across the room, the mushroom guy lifted a middle finger at Elle.

Elle continued to laugh. "I love that guy. Seriously, cat. How do you even walk around in that thing? Are you here to tell us our fortunes? Should we call you Cat-nac the Magnificent?"

"How dare you!" Ferdinand sputtered, anger rising. He spit twice. His tail swished back and forth in a very familiar motion. "You fools! Simpletons! I will rip you to shreds for this! I will spill your entrails upon the ground and squeal with delight as I bathe in your offal. Do you not know who I am?"

Elle: Donut, your ex-boyfriend has anger issues.

Donut: I'VE ALWAYS BEEN ATTRACTED TO THE BAD BOYS.

Elle: You and me both, sister.

Carl: Don't scare him away. Katia?

Katia: Almost there… okay. Got it. He's level 100. Province boss. Listed as a minion. Stats are 100 down the line except dexterity which is 125 and charisma which is 75. That means his constitution plus charisma equals 175, so we're good there. That stupid hat is magical, too, but it doesn't affect his stats. It gives him a level 10 lightning spell. He can go invisible, so we gotta be careful. He has the ability to phase jump, and his claw attack looks pretty brutal.

We'd smuggled a pair of those *Size-Up* potions I'd gotten from Miriam Dom in here specifically for this. I'd originally thought they were to make me physically larger. In fact, the expensive and rare potions were made to give specific facts about mobs. It took just over 30 seconds for the information to seep in, so they weren't suited for fast-moving combat situations, but it was how Miriam Dom and Prepotente would know exactly how to slowly kill the giant boss monsters.

Carl: Everybody get that? Donut, you're up.

Donut, still in Imani's grip suddenly went rigid.

Donut: Carl, I don't think I can do this. It only worked a little on the elves.

Carl: He's not an elf. Eye on the prize. Remember how he tried to kill Mongo. If we do this right, he'll never hurt Mongo again. We need to do this so you don't have to fight him.

Donut composed herself and returned to my shoulder. Donut's unenhanced, base charisma currently sat at 138. Upon her head sat her new benefactor-box tiara, which temporarily doubled her charisma. Once placed upon her head, it only lasted for 30 hours before it would dissolve, which was unfortunate. But for the moment, her charisma was now a god-like 276. That was before all the buffs from the saferoom. According to Elle's manager, Mistress Tiatha, a regular NPC's constitution plus charisma had to be lower than a crawler's charisma in order for the crawler to able to successfully get the NPC to fawn over them. Mordecai thought it was impossible to charm a boss, but Mistress Tiatha insisted she'd done it before. When a white-tagged NPC was a boss, that still worked, but it had to be 100 points over to work for a province boss, which is what we'd correctly assumed Ferdinand would be.

It was, indeed, impossible to charm country and floor bosses as far as she was aware.

Donut's charisma of 276 was 101 points over Ferdinand's constitution plus charisma. Her effective charm with all her buffs, plus the bonus from the Seize the Day Toothpaste was well over 300. Despite her insistence it wasn't working, we'd already been seeing the effects. She'd talked the final set of guards into not searching her closely. She'd managed to get the backstage manager to allow her to put on that ridiculous pet show entry.

It wouldn't work on us or the hunters, but that was okay for now.

Somewhere deep in the castle, an alarm went off, but it was silenced almost as quickly as it started. Ferdinand turned his head toward the sound.

Carl: Samantha, you good?

Samantha: THAT WASN'T ME. I HAVEN'T LEFT YET! WE'RE WAITING FOR THE ELVES TO LOOK IN ANOTHER DIRECTION. LOTS OF ELF SOLDIERS ARE MOVING THROUGH, GOING OUTSIDE. WAITING FOR THEM TO PASS.

"Everyone stop making fun of his hat," Donut announced. "I like it. I think it looks quite smart."

"Yes. Yes it does," Ferdinand said indignantly, turning his attention back on Donut. "I'm a handsome boy."

"Oh, I wouldn't say handsome," Donut said seductively, leaving the meaning unclear. "Why are you here anyway? I heard the queen wouldn't be joining us until after the talent competition. You wanted to see my performance, didn't you? It's okay. You can admit it."

It was subtle, but I saw the effect take hold on Ferdinand. His demeanor changed. He was suddenly more casual with his speech. It was working.

As they talked, my eyes caught Eva and Vrah talking with one another. A group of hunters surrounded the pair, listening to the conversation. That couldn't be good. I saw Eva thumb over at Signet and then at Lucia, who was now leaning over Chaco's prize counter while holding a bottle of tequila. Several hunters were suddenly taking interest in Lucia. Li Jun, Li Na, and Gwen were moving toward them to create a barrier. I saw Katia and Imani's eyes were both glossy, meaning they were furiously talking to one another, trying to head off whatever this was.

The ground rumbled. It was subtle and distant, but I felt it. That was one of my bombs being dropped from the *Twister*.

Gideon, who was hidden near the castle with a few dozen other crawlers sent a message.

Gideon: About 200 mounted elves just exited the castle. The airship was creeping in nice and slow, and suddenly there was a spotlight on it. It tried to drop a bomb on the elves, but it missed. Now the elves are running all over the place.

Carl: What about mantises?

Gideon: They're mostly concentrated a little further north near those stairwells where everybody is gathering. We've

only seen a few here and… uh, never mind. Holy shit. Gotta go.

"The queen wants me to keep an eye on her sister," Ferdinand was saying. He was still on my shoulder. His more imperious way of speaking had completely eroded away. "She's gonna kill her good once the party is over. I'm supposed to stay away from her though. The bitch has a charm ability." He looked over at the half-naiad, who remained enraptured by Empress D'Nadia.

"Also," Ferdinand continued, "I heard your filthy dinosaur was still alive, and I had to see it for myself. I guess I accidentally hit you with my lightning bolt instead. I don't know what to say, babe. If you wanna take a ride on my lightning, you gotta prepare yourself for the tingle." He stood on two paws, putting his forward paws on my head and made two thrusting motions with his cat hips while he air-humped the side of my head while making grunting noises.

I watched Donut physically compose herself.

Watching a complete narcissist get charmed was fascinating. I could tell Donut had his full attention, but he still insisted on making it look like he was the one in charge.

"It was nothing. If you stick around, you can see my next performance." Donut waved her tail seductively. "I'm going to premiere a new song."

He hopped all the way to the top of my head. "That's why I'm here, babe. You're welcome."

Samantha: I TRICKED THEM GOOD. I'M IN THE TUNNEL. NOW WHERE DO I GO?

Carl: Where do you go? You were supposed to memorize the map!

Samantha: DID YOU SEE THAT THING? HOW WAS I SUPPOSED TO MEMORIZE THAT? *YOU* MEMORIZE THE MAP!

Damnit.

The route she needed to take wasn't direct. She was on the first floor. She had to go all the way up to the fifth floor and travel over to the main thoroughfare and go down again to the third. Driving her over chat was going to be a pain.

Imani, who was also in on that chat, turned and gave me an *I fucking told you* look.

Carl: Louis and Firas, go sit down and talk Samantha through the map to the security room. She's forgotten the path.

Louis: I can't! I'm busy helping Sledge with the controls of the *Twister*. The changelings are fighting in the air! Skarn and Bonnie are using Bonnie's ballista system to fight!

Carl: Firas, you're up.

Firas: On it.

"You know what," Ferdinand was saying from my head while I dove through my chats. "I don't like this. What do you say to me coming over to your ballroom so we can get a little more physical, if you know what I'm saying?"

Across the room, Li Na and Vrah were suddenly face to face. Louis was pacing back and forth, his hands in his hair as he directed the Sledge. *The sink is running*. It was happening too fast. A defeatist wave washed over me. *This isn't going to work*. And then what Ferdinand said hit me, and I was shocked back into action.

Carl: Donut. Don't let him come here. We want him to stay in the Queen's ballroom.

But it was too late.

"I'll be right back," Ferdinand said. He turned and bounded from the room. He was leaving the queen's ballroom and coming directly here. He'd be using the tunnels.

Carl: Samantha! Watch out! Ferdinand is going into the tunnels!

Samantha: I'LL KILL HIM.

Carl: No, you'll hide!

Theobald the elf suddenly appeared on stage. He had dirt on his tuxedo, and he looked out of sorts, but not panicked. "Ladies and Gentlemen. We will be doing the presentation of talents now. Everybody in the talent portion, backstage please. Thank you so very much."

"No!" Louis suddenly shouted. He came running up, breathless. "The mantises have taken the *Twister*! They're all onboard. The

changelings all turned to birds and left! The Sledge had to jump!"

"Jump?" I asked, alarmed.

Carl: Sledge. Are you okay?

Sledge: I have controller. I am okay. Bonnie is okay. Bear cubs are okay. Prudence is okay.

I took a deep breath. We'd never agreed to save Prudence and the bear cubs. They were supposed to stay in the saferoom until the collapse, where they'd simply disappear. Taking care of Bonnie the gnome was difficult enough.

Gideon: Holy crap. There are mantises and elves everywhere. It all happened really fast. They're fighting each other.

Carl: What about you guys?

Gideon: We're still hidden. The airship has been taken. It's covered with the bugs and is just spinning in the air. The bugs are on it like moths on a lightbulb. Those towers are like machine gun nests, but they're shooting magic missiles. Your changelings are fast, but they're getting torn up. They're trying to get in through the tops of towers.

Carl: Stay down. Don't attack until I say so.

I moved to another chat window.

Carl: Sledge, where are you?

Sledge: On roof of the castle. It very flat. No entrance.

Carl: Keep me updated.

Louis was also in the chat, and he continued to pace back and forth, randomly shouting things until I hissed at him to shut up. Several crawlers were shuffling toward backstage, but everyone stopped to look at him.

Sledge gave us updates in short, staccato bursts.

Sledge: Changelings flying to the tower… Elves are shooting at them… Changelings are fighting mantises and turning into mantises… Confusing… Elves shooting at mantises, too… Elves shooting at everything…. I have controller… Mantises or maybe changelings take one tower, going in… Changelings take another tower, going in… Elf dead on roof. Splat… Mantises dead on the roof…

Changeling dead on the roof… Two turrets still have shooting elves. Two turrets see us on roof. Shooting at us… Running.

Carl: Protect Bonnie and the bears if you can.

I paused. *Damnit.*

Carl: But don't sacrifice yourself for any of them. You're more important than they are.

Sledge: I have controller… I can crash *Twister* into other turrets… Bombs still dangle… Like helicopter in game GTA…. I think I can get both.

Louis: THE HELL YOU ARE.

Sledge: I crash like in GTA.

Louis: DON'T CRASH THE *TWISTER*!

I reached up and put my hand on Louis's shoulder and gave it a sympathetic squeeze.

Carl: Do it. Get someplace safe. Try to get Bonnie into the castle, but your safety is the priority.

I turned to talk to Donut, but she was already gone, heading backstage with Britney. Elle and Imani were also back there along with Li Na and her team. Prepotente sat with Ren, Florin, Chris, and the Popovs. Katia, Bautista, Gwen, and Tran were in the back, flanking Lucia Mar, trying to keep the hunters away. Lucia was amicably chatting with her fellow crawlers as if they were all best friends, waving her tequila bottle about. Offering drinks to everyone.

I watched as several hunters, including Vrah, Zabit, and multiple draconians moved in, creating an additional semi-circle around the group at the prize counter. Chaco backed himself up all the way against the wall, like a bartender in one of my Louis L'Amour books, ready for the inevitable shootout.

They're gonna try to get Lucia to break the seal.

Carl: Guys, watch out for those hunters.

Katia: We're on it. Don't micromanage, Carl.

"Look at the guards. They're all so calm," Firas said, coming to stand next to me and Louis. He patted his friend on the back, who continued to hold back tears over the impending loss of the *Twister*.

"There's fighting inside and outside of the castle, and they're acting like nothing has happened."

"That's because the ones in here are probably in the safest place," I said with a calm I did not feel. "The party itself is a spell, and there are several parts that need to be completed for it to successfully cast. Everything may be kicking off outside, but once the queen gets in here, I'm pretty sure all the rooms get sealed. The whole building could blow up, and we'd still be safe. I think."

"I hope so," Firas said as the floor shook again.

Empress D'Nadia and the other two judges remained planted at the table in front of the stage and had been getting progressively more sloshed as the evening progressed. They were off someplace safe, likely watching this all go down in several different ways. Signet remained at the table with them, deep in conversation. The three judges occasionally laughed. Signet did not. I watched her get up and move off by herself. She was deep in thought.

Up on stage, a human crawler stumbled into the spotlight while Theobald, who was now offstage, announced, "First act is named Cleiton. He will be presenting humor from his homeland."

Donut: THEY'RE SAYING I GET TO GO ON LAST. ISN'T THAT GREAT? I'M THE HEADLINER!

"Uh," Cleiton said, clearly nervous and unprepared. His voice was amplified. He wore sapphire armor. I'd seen him before on the recap, but I couldn't remember what his main attack was. He was on the same team as the crawler with the pet hawk. "Knock knock."

Carl: Okay. Good. Samantha is on her way to the security room. Just sing your song, have Britney play her guitar, and have Tina dance. Don't do the velociraptor hop. It's too dangerous.

"Who's there!" a lone person called from the audience.

Donut: HOW AM I GOING TO BRING THE RAZZLE DAZZLE WITHOUT THE GRAND FINALE?

Carl: We survive. That's the finale, Donut. They're trying to kill us all, and I don't see a clean way out. Something is going to happen soon. Keep watch, especially during your performance. Don't wait for us. Get out the moment the seal

is broken. We'll try to jump on stage and follow. If that doesn't work, we'll go with escape plan D if we can. I bought *Feather Fall* potions, and I'll hand them out.

"Uh, I am poor knee. No, wait. I said it wrong. Poor knee."

Donut: I'M NOT GOING TO ABANDON YOU, CARL. AND YOU DON'T HAVE THE POTIONS. THEY'RE IN A PRIZE BOX. YOU WON'T HAVE TIME FOR ANY OF THAT. YOU DON'T NEED THE POTION ANYWAY.

Carl: I don't. Others do. We'll have time if the queen's not in here yet. It won't be a lot of time, but it will be enough. I'll hand the potions out as soon as Samantha turns off the inventory and magic block.

Ferdinand rushed into the room, skidding to a stop in front of me. "You! Donut's manservant! Did I miss her act?"

Jesus, I thought. *Why'd we even bother with the potion*?

"Not yet," I said. "She's going on last. You have plenty of time."

"Good. Now get me refreshment! Vodka! In a bowl!" He ran to the center table and leaped upon it, interrupting the three drunk judges. "You three! Move this instant! This is the queen's table! Wait, where did Signet go?"

"Jump into a singularity, Gravy Boat," Empress D'Nadia said. The jello-mold alien started grunt laughing, and little bubbles gurgled out the top like a homemade volcano.

I ended up missing the punchline to the knock-knock joke.

Carl: Samantha. You good?

Samantha: HE RAN RIGHT PAST AND DIDN'T EVEN SEE ME. HE HAS TO TAKE HIS HAT OFF WHEN HE'S IN THE TUNNEL, AND HE CARRIES IT IN HIS MOUTH SO HE CAN'T SEE ANYTHING. WHAT A DWEEB. I'M ABOVE THE SECURITY ROOM NOW, BUT THERE ARE FIVE ELVES IN IT. I WILL KILL THEM ALL.

Carl: Use the potion ball. That's why we gave it to you. Drop it right into the middle of the room. They'll be asleep for thirty minutes.

Samantha: I DIDN'T BRING IT. I GAVE IT TO CLAY-TON. IT MADE ME CLINK WHEN I ROLLED. I WOULDN'T BE ABLE

TO SNEAK AWAY. AND QUITE FRANKLY IT WAS VERY RUDE FOR YOU TO SHOVE THAT UP THERE IN THE FIRST PLACE.

My heart stopped. Holy shit. That was it. We were done.

Carl: God fucking damnit, Samantha. You're gonna have to go back and get it. Hurry.

Samantha: NAH. WATCH THIS. HEY! NOT FAIR!

Carl: What! What!

Samantha: YOU TOLD ME I COULD DO THIS! THE GUARDS ARE ALREADY DEAD!

Oh fuck, I thought.

"Ferdinand!" a voice snapped. The queen. She'd just appeared right in the middle of the room with no warning.

Warning: This room is now sealed. Nobody will be allowed to enter or leave until the conclusion of the party. You are protected from outside influence or spells.

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<Note added by Crawler Carl, 25th Edition>
From page four of our planning notes:

There's a big difference between Donut enchanting someone, like she used to do to the Bopcas in the saferooms, and her actually *magically charming* them like she's done to Kiwi the velociraptor. They're two different things. For the first one, Ferdinand will want to do what she says and will fall over himself to please her, but he won't actually be under her magical control. He can still object, and we wouldn't be able to get him to attack Queen Imogen or toss himself off a cliff or anything like that.

If we manage to magically charm him, that's a whole new ballgame. He will not only be Donut's official minion, he will do what she says almost without question. We can use *Clockwork Triplicate* on him. He'll be listed as a minion. We can talk to him via chat. He'll have automatic saferoom access, etc. We have a way to do that. Mordecai can make a charm animal potion. All we need is a liter of cat blood. Good thing we have a ready source.

Most charm spells are line of sight, including this one. That means it will work even if he's in the queen's ballroom, and Donut is on stage. If he's in the audience, she can down the potion right when she goes on, and he'll be hers.

They brought him in to fight Donut. We're going to make them eat that decision.

Once Ferdinand is under control, we can use him for lots of different things. He'll fight for us. We can use him to attack the queen and distract her if we have to. We can use him to unlock the door to the queen's chamber from the inside. He probably has some powerful spells.

After we get confirmation that Ferdinand is indeed just a cat, we'll implement the plan. We'll have Donut take the potion while she's on stage at the start of her act.

~ Carl

NOBODY IS STABBING ME, CARL. I DON'T HAVE A LITER OF BLOOD IN ME. I AM VERY PETITE.

Is it still going to work if he's a higher level than Donut? We're assuming he'll be a province boss.

~ Katia.

We're not stabbing you, Donut. We're draining blood. But yeah, we'll have to do it a few times to get enough. According to Elle's manager, it'll work as long as Donut's charisma is high enough. The level is irrelevant. It's the actual stat numbers that are important. She warns that Donut will have to keep constant tabs on him, though. He'll be like Kiwi, who tends to go a little crazy when she's not being watched. He'll be double charmed at this point and probably in love with her and will put himself in extreme danger to protect her. That's good to a point. We just don't need him attacking prematurely and blowing the whole operation. We don't want Queen Imogen to know he's been charmed if we want her to leave and fight Signet. It'll probably be obvious once it happens, so we should wait until Donut hits the stage but just before Imogen leaves to fight Signet.

~ Carl

Everything in the room stopped.

An elf's panicked and surprised voice squeaked, "I present to you, Queen of All That Is and the Queen of All That Will Be, the One and Only True Blood, Immortal-in-Waiting, Chosen Daughter of Apito, Her Majesty on High, Queen Imogen of the High Elves!"

The queen, who'd just suddenly appeared in the middle of the ballroom pointed at her cat. She had a streak of blood down the center of her chest, ruining her glittering, color-changing ballgown. She ignored everyone else. "Ferdinand, get here this instant!"

Holy shit, I thought*. She was out there fighting.*

Several of the crawlers started murmuring, reacting to the sight of the queen, thinking they'd resurrected a dead crawler.

The cat bounded across the room and jumped to the queen's shoulder. He landed upon it, but then started to sink through. He yowled and hit the floor.

"Ferdinand," Queen Imogen growled at her cat. "Pray tell me, where are you?"

"What? I'm hanging with my bird."

"Get out of that room and get back up here this instant."

"Well," Ferdinand said. "That's a problem, now isn't it? Now that you're at the party, I'm locked in here along with the rest of the castle's staff."

Her eyes smoldered. She held up her hand as if to backhand the cat, who cringed. She paused, remembering the rules of her own spell.

"Stay out of the way. We will discuss this after." She looked sharply around the room, focusing on Signet.

"There you are, my long-lost, half-breed sister," she said, her voice full of venom. "I see you secured a last-minute invitation."

"Hello, Imogen," Signet said. She took a threatening step toward the queen. "I did. Apito herself hand delivered it to me."

Imogen held up a hand, stopping her. “Stay back. The goodwill ballroom does not protect me from your mongrel stink. Even with the anti-water curse, I can still smell it from here. The fish stench. Pitiful. We have nothing to say to one another. Enjoy the party while you can.”

Signet took several more strides toward her sister. Imogen laughed and spread her arms. “What are you going to do? Assault me? You can’t cast magic. Your strikes will not land, so they won’t count. If you truly wish to break the seal, you’ll find yourself in the realm of mumbled screams before you take a second breath. But first you’ll have to attack one of your friends here, and you’ll end up damning them all. Who will it be? Perhaps Carl, your lover? Do you hate me enough to kill him and damn yourself to eternal torture for your revenge?”

Katia: Her stats are 201 down the board except intelligence, which is 300. It says her mana is temporarily unlimited. That can’t be good. She’s immune to poison and curses and has an ability to return magical fire. Nobody hit her with fireballs or magic missiles or magic bolts. Susceptible to blunt-force attacks. Her spell list is several pages long.

Imani: We’re going on stage next. List off the protection spells she has while we get ready.

“Dude, are you banging that Signet chick?” Louis asked.

“No,” I said. “I don’t know why she thinks I...” I let out a strangled yelp as I felt myself get dragged across the room toward Imogen’s open hand. My bare feet skipped across the floor, toes bouncing and skittering. I hit a table, and it went flying. I stopped before the queen. I felt myself get picked up off the floor. It didn’t hurt, so maybe it wasn’t constituted as an attack, but it was damn close.

The queen angrily pointed a finger at me as I floated before her. “My castle is besieged. You’re trying to ruin my spell, Carl.”

“That’s not me,” I gurgled. “The mantises are coming from Vrah and her mother.”

"So those aren't your changelings swarming my towers right now? That's not your mongrel lover standing behind me? Those weren't your friends hiding in the trees just outside?"

Carl: Gideon. Run.

Warning: This crawler is deceased. They have been removed from your address book.

No, I thought, looking back at the blood running down her dress. *No, no, no*.

"The sink is running," I said. "We're not supposed to let it run."

"What?" Imogen barked.

I took a deep breath, trying to compose myself.

You will not break me. You will not fucking break me.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said. "Nobody I know is..."

Bam! The entire palace shook. A terrible rumbling filled the chamber. Above, the inverted tree hanging from the ceiling dropped multiple acorns to the floor. They hit the ground like hail, rolling like spilled dice. A moment later, a second explosion came, this one louder.

The queen went fuzzy for a moment, and I dropped from her grip.

Sledge: Guard turrets get good. *Twister* house blow up. Got both.

Louis: Noooooooo!

Sledge: Surviving is winning, Louis. Everything else is bullshit.

I hit the floor like a sack of dirty laundry. Imogen turned as if to leave the room, but paused and then growled.

She can't leave, I thought. *Now that she's at the party, she can't leave unless someone breaks the seal just like the rest of us. That's why she came now. The castle is being attacked from all corners, but they can't get in here. She just needs to keep us from breaking the seal.*

Imogen turned to the stage where Imani and Elle were slowly setting up a group of chairs. The queen strode forward, picked up a chair from where it had fallen, and placed herself into it.

"Proceed," she shouted up to the stage.

"So much for being peaceful, right mate?" Florin asked, reaching a scaly hand to pick me up. He wouldn't take his eyes off Queen Imogen.

"You okay?" I asked. I was still reeling over the loss of Gideon and his team. That had been almost thirty crawlers. They'd stayed back to help sow chaos. I'd asked them to help. They'd died because I'd asked them.

The river screamed.

"I'm okay," Florin said. "Katia was right. It looks like her, but it ain't. It's her twin. I can tell. It's not really her either. Iffy was worried about what had happened to her. Her sister. It's not right they're using her body like that. We gotta do something about it."

"Working on it," I growled.

Florin was a lot more fucked up about this than he was letting on. It was obvious, but he was doing his best not to let it show. *Good for you*, I thought.

Onstage, Imani and Elle were going back and forth about something nonsensical and laughing hysterically. It was actually the first time I'd seen Imani laugh in a very long time. She didn't yet know about Gideon and his team.

"What are they doing?" I asked.

Florin waved a hand. "It's some skit they did together at the old folk's home talent show a while back."

Carl: Samantha. Are you going to answer me? I know you're not dead because you can't die.

Samantha: I'M NOT TALKING TO YOU FOR THREE MORE MINUTES AND SEVEN SECONDS. YOU'RE IN A TIMEOUT. YOU TOLD ME I COULD DO IT, AND YOU DIDN'T TRUST ME. YOU'RE IN A TIMEOUT, AND THEN I'M GOING TO KILL YOU.

Carl: If the guards are already dead, it wasn't me. We don't have time for your bullshit. Get in there and pull the two soul crystals. Just the ones on the right side. Then tell me how they died.

Up on stage, Elle and Imani finished up.

You are no longer muted. You may now cast spells.

You are no longer peace-bonded. You may now access your inventory.

All around the room, the crawlers looked about. The warning light which would let the guards and Imogen know about the change did not flash. My people spread forth, telling the crawlers to keep their mouths shut.

Samantha: OKAY. I PULLED OUT THE SOUL CRYSTALS BUT THERE IS A PROBLEM.

Carl: Tell me.

Samantha: THE OTHER TWO SOUL CRYSTALS ON THE LEFT SIDE ARE ALREADY PULLED OUT. THEY'RE STILL HERE ON THE FLOOR. THE PERSON WHO KILLED THE GUARDS TOOK THEM OUT AND TURNED OFF THE PROTECTIONS OF BALLROOM B ALREADY.

"Oh, shit," I muttered.

I looked sharply over at the group of hunters. The vast majority of them were putting a wide amount of space between themselves and that other group, who remained in a semi-circle around Katia and Lucia. Katia was saying something to Vrah, who hissed back at her.

Vrah had a plan. A plan I didn't know, and that was goddamned terrifying. Someone working for her was inside the castle. Whatever this was, it was going down, and it was going down now. They had to attempt it before Donut hit the stage.

I looked around wildly, trying to see their plan.

SAMANTHA: ALSO, THE SOUL CRYSTAL FOR THE GOODWILL INTERFACE HAS ALREADY BEEN TAKEN AWAY. IT'S STILL WORKING BECAUSE OF THE CAPACITOR LIKE YOU SAID. BUT WHOEVER WAS HERE TRIED IT ANYWAY.

Carl: How did the guards die?

Samantha: MANTISES. THEY'RE ALL STILL SITTING AT THEIR CHAIRS, BUT THEIR HEADS ARE SEVERED SITTING ON THEIR BODIES. THERE'S A WHOLE LOT OF BLOOD IN HERE AND A LOT OF OTHER GROSS LIQUID. IT SMELLS LIKE OBIZUTH'S MENSES RAG IN HERE.

I felt cold. *Of course*. I felt like an idiot for not expecting this the moment we heard about the mantises. The floor shook again.

<u>Carl</u>: Samantha, take those two crystals from the left side and put them back into place. Do it fast, and do it now. Then get ready. Seal the room if you can. She's going to come for you. It's Diwata. She's here.

The enemy's plan came to me all at once.

Diwata/Circe was in the castle. She'd blended in with the rest of the mantises and had come to assist her daughter.

I had seen that the goodwill ballrooms were protected by a capacitor on Edgar's map, making it impossible to simply turn them off, which is why it hadn't been a part of our plan. Circe had wrongly thought she could break the connection between the ballrooms, which would effectively end the party. She then would've personally dealt with the queen while her daughter moved in on me, likely rushing up the stairs and storming our ballroom. The castle would be filled with mantis nymphs. There would be no escape for us. It was the best possible outcome for her and her daughter.

But since they couldn't do it that way, Vrah and her mother had an alternate plan. They were still filling the castle with the nymphs. Diwata/Circe gave the hunters back their magic ability and was waiting for her daughter to get someone to break the seal. With us and Signet in the room, they were gambling Imogen would attack us first, giving Vrah time to escape the ballroom. She'd easily be able to escape in the chaos.

If Samantha shoved the soul crystals back into the slot and effectively blocked the hunters from using their magic and inventory again, it wouldn't stop them. But it would be all the more difficult for them to prepare for the inevitable breaking of the seal. Or to cause it. It would also lure Diwata back to the third floor and attempt to fix it.

<u>Samantha</u>: OHH THAT SOUNDS LIKE A FUN FIGHT. I WILL FUCK HER UP.

I looked about, trying to see the position of all the players in the room.

Eva hovered in the corner by the stage, near the now-locked exit door. She knew something was going down. We were stuck in the room, but we could leave once the seal was broken. She was planning to bolt. She had an escape device. A ring, supposedly. It'd kept her alive until this point.

Lucia, Katia, Bautista, Gwen, and Tran remained at Chaco's counter. The group of hunters led by Vrah were moving in. I didn't know what their plan was, but they moved with sudden, terrifying coordination.

This whole thing was like a reverse game of chicken. Nobody could make the first move. We all had to be cautious to the extreme.

Nobody was currently on stage, and the musicians weren't playing. I heard a distant crash. There was fighting in the castle. In the halls. There was another explosion followed by the sound of something crumbling. I wondered how the changelings were faring in all of this. Signet's squad had likely entered, too, looking for her.

Carl: Sledge? Are you in?

Sledge: Not yet. Rubble in the way. Trying to get into tower. Bears and gnome hiding in rubble. Mantises everywhere. More by minute. Coming out of tower to fight outside. Elves everywhere still. Elves coming out of woods. Brambles chasing elves, moving faster than usual.

Imani: Most of the crawlers outside are getting forced down the stairs. The brambles weren't supposed to get this far into the elf territory for hours yet, but I think they're reacting to the elves trying to beat them back. The elves at the border who were fighting them have retreated to defend the castle, and now the brambles are chasing them.

I felt my heart sink even further. With every minute that passed, our chances at surviving this were slipping further and further away.

Louis: How are we going to get down the stairs now?

Carl: There's one in the basement of this building. It'll remain even after the castle is gone.

I didn't add what we all knew. That stairwell was locked, and it would remain locked until Imogen was dead.

If I hadn't just learned that Lucia's head was possibly housing other children, I would've been happy to let the hunters use her to break the seal. But we couldn't let them do that. We needed to keep them from launching their assault. We wanted this on our terms, not theirs.

The problem was, we didn't have an alternate plan. What else could we do? Just wait and let Imogen win? That wouldn't work. She'd still attack us after, and she'd possibly be immortal. We'd still have a castle filled with pissed-off mantises all around us, plus the hunters, plus the goddess Diwata.

We were fucked. Everything that could've gone wrong, had.

We only had one last hope. If that fell through, one of us would have to force open the protection seal.

It was either that, or go with the nuclear option. Carl's Doomsday Scenario. Would I be willing to kill all my fellow crawlers just to make certain the hunters also died? Would I be willing to kill Donut, Katia, Imani, Elle, and all the rest of my friends?

Would I?

Up on stage, Li Jun and Na and Zhang were juggling knives in a circle. They did one quick circuit, and then they turned and bowed to the audience and rushed backstage.

"Next act!" Imogen shouted from her chair. She pretended to sit casually, but I saw the tension in her. Her hair had become disrupted and was falling to the left. She looked about the room, eyes meeting mine. "Only two more acts. Then we must dance for five minutes. Carl. You're dancing with me."

One of the draconians had a spell suddenly appear in his hand. It was a fulminating, gray ball of something. I had no idea what it was, but he looked like he was about to roll the spell like a bowling ball right at the feet of Lucia and the others.

Carl: Samantha! Put the gems back! Fast!

Samantha: PUT YOUR BOXERS BACK ON. I JUST DID.

The spell whiffed out. The draconian looked at his hand stupidly. Vrah turned her head in my direction, and I gave her a middle finger.

Carl: Good job. She'll be coming for you now. She's in the form of a flaming mantis giving birth. She's immortal, but she won't have any powers beyond that. I think. Do everything you can to keep her away from the control panel. If you can stop her from giving birth, she'll go away. I believe in you.

Samantha: YOU DO?

Carl: You can do it.

Samantha: OKAY I GOT THIS.

Across the way, Lucia laughed at the semi-circle of hunters and pushed her way through, coming back to our side. She strolled casually in our direction, holding her half-empty bottle of tequila. Katia and the others pushed through and retreated with her, following her at a safe distance like a group of celebrity handlers.

The second-to-last act appeared on stage. It was the mushroom guy. Horton. He had an acoustic guitar that was missing a string. It was the same guitar that Britney was going to use for the final act.

Sledge: Prudence dead. Died protecting two babies. They're crying. Hugging Bonnie. Too many mantises. Still fighting.

That was it. Sledge didn't need to get into the castle, but it took several minutes for him to cast his spell. He needed to be protected when he cast, and we were running out of time. With all the mantises? No way.

We were done.

I suddenly felt very, very tired.

Our only, meager chance of survival was if someone broke the seal at the correct moment.

I looked down at my hands, and then I looked over at Eva.

The others would have a chance. Donut would have a chance.

I opened the chat window.

I closed my eyes for a second, just a second, and I pretended like everything was all right. The world had never ended. My mother and I had never left Texas. I was outside right now, sitting in the shade of a tree I'd planted years before. Everyone here, all my friends, never met each other under these horrific circumstances.

Donut was fat and happy, sitting in her cat tree somewhere warm, growling at a cocker spaniel.

I'd never heard the water running through the pipes. Or gone down into the basement to investigate the noise. I'd never found the note followed by my mother a minute later.

I let the dream live within me. Just for a second, and I returned to the chat window.

Carl: Donut. Plan A is a go. Repeat. Plan A is a go. Do the whole performance, start to finish. Don't forget Ferdinand. He's still sitting front and center.

Donut: REALLY? YAY! HOW ARE WE GOING TO BREAK THE SEAL?

Carl: Just deal with your performance. I have a plan.

Signet was suddenly beside me, her entire form shaking. She paused as if she was carefully thinking of what to say.

"You told me, Carl. You told me, but I didn't understand. That Empress D'Nadia ... *creature* said many things to me, Carl. She claims the whole universe has been looking forward to watching this party and seeing what was going to happen. That you've been forced to cancel your attack because of Diwata and the peace seal. She tells me the deity is actually under control of that bug thing's mother, who had to sell half of all her possessions just to get here and try to help her child. She says more people than there are stars in the sky are watching this very conversation unfold right now."

A strange, oddly satisfying sense of calm washed over me. It was strangely comforting. Like coming into port after a long time at sea, knowing very soon you'd finally be able to rest in a real bed and sleep for a long, peaceful time.

"Welcome to the shitshow, Signet. D'Nadia is correct. Everyone is watching. We weren't expecting it to have gone down like this. We didn't know about the anti-violence seal. We weren't expecting all the mantises. My changelings have made it into the castle, I think, but I don't even know if they're okay or not. The mantises are everywhere. My guy with the big spell is in trouble. I keep thinking of things I could've done differently. Everything is fucked. Everything has gone wrong, and it's my fault."

"If all she says it's true, how is any of this possibly your fault, Carl? It sounds like you're dancing at the end of the same strings as the rest of us."

Samantha: HERE SHE COMES! I LOCKED THE DOOR AND SHE CAN'T GET IN. HA! SUCK IT, BITCH!

I chuckled. "Samantha is down there, about to fight Diwata herself. Right under our feet. I told her that I believed in her. It won't be long."

Imani: Carl, what's happening? You're not planning on doing what I think you're going to do, are you?

Carl: I am. Don't tell Donut because she'll freak out. Take care of her for me.

Elle: Go fuck yourself, Carl. We need you. We all need you.

Carl: So you'll let us all die, then? This is our only chance.

Imani: I'll do it.

Elle: The hell you are.

Carl: Oh, for fuck's sake. We're not getting into a pissing match over who the biggest hero is. I already have a plan set in motion. If any of you do something, you're just going to screw it up. I'm going to kill Eva and break the seal.

Elle: Goddamnit, Carl. Donut is never going to forgive you.

Carl: As long as she's still alive, I don't care.

"Tell me, Carl. Why did you bring that poor girl here?" Signet asked.

I grunted. "Which one? There's a few."

"Tina."

Samantha: THAT'S RIGHT, DAUGHTERFUCKER! SHE CAN'T GET IN. THE HALLWAY IS SMALL. HER BABY BUGS ARE GETTING SQUISHED. OOZE IS COMING UNDER THE DOOR. SHE IS A REALLY BAD MOTHER.

I gestured at the stage, where Horton continued to tune his guitar. Imogen was getting impatient.

"Tina? We have a quest involving her. She's going to dance."

"Quest?" Signet asked. "What does that mean?"

"It's not important. We need to give her what she wants. We're having her finish her dance recital. It combines well with everything else that's about to happen. "

"Carl," Signet said. "That's not what Tina wants."

"What?" I asked. "What do you mean?"

Sledge: Mantises everywhere. In front of and behind. We are surrounded. I will protect little ones best I can, but it won't be long. I am sorry.

Samantha: CARL THE DOOR BROKE OPEN. I DON'T THINK I CAN DO IT.

Carl: Both of you, if you gotta lose. Lose big. Samantha, you have to keep her from turning the magic protection back on. If you don't, Donut and the others will be in big trouble in a few minutes. Do whatever you can.

Signet lifted her arm and pointed to a small tattoo there against her pale skin. It was a puddle of water. Within it, a little fish stuck its head up out of it and looked at me sadly. "I met Edgar the tortoise the night my mother died. I think I told you this story already. Do you know what the first thing I said to him was? It was, 'can you bring her back?' He said no, but he could help me with the memory of her the best he could. She'd been too long dead to do it properly, but he gave this to me that first night. She's not complete, but I've grown to realize that's okay. What's left still lives within me. Everyone who lives on the hunting grounds and who knows Tina's story knows what she wants. It's not to dance in a recital, Carl. Young Tina wants the same thing I do. She wants what I suspect you do, too. She wants her mother back."

I felt as if I'd been slapped. *How the hell did she know that*?

"Her mother is Kiwi," I said. "The mongoliensis."

Signet nodded. "Tina's mind is gone, and she doesn't realize that other dinosaur has been there the whole time. She already has what she wants, yes. She just needs to see it. I think what you're planning on doing for her tonight is close, but it's not quite right."

"It's okay," I said absently. "If we have time, Donut will make sure she's reunited properly with her mother."

"This is 'Wonderwall,'" Horton said, and he started to play the song.

Donut: OMG.

I laughed. I laughed at the absurdity of it all. Here I was, about to get sucked into a literal hell, sitting down at a party, talking to a tattooed, topless fish woman while listening to a mushroom dude named Horton play a poorly-tuned guitar, singing my cat's favorite song. All while the entire universe watched.

Ka-Blam!

The entire building shook again. This was a big one. Everything not in the room flickered but came back. Tables fell over. The buffet collapsed, spilling food everywhere, scattering hunters. We all stopped and looked around. Horton paused his song.

I looked down at the floor, shocked. The floor tiles under our feet had shattered like windshield glass. Toward the far side of the room with the exit doors, the floor tiles were just gone in several places. Burning, jagged holes remained. A few crawlers stood on the empty spaces, but they didn't fall through. It was just like the quadrant seals from the previous floor.

A terrible stench filled the room.

The missing floor tiles were replaced with... something else. Turning and mixing and spinning colors pressed against the invisible shield of the floor. It was white gore and green bug parts, I realized. It moved and undulated under us like the innards of a blender trying to mix coconut and cherries and avocado.

The hunters, I realized, were all looking upward while we were looking down. Their attention was focused on the back, left corner of the room, but to me, the ceiling there looked intact. The hunter ballroom was on the second floor, and we were on the fourth. The explosion had occurred between us on the third floor. That had been a soul crystal going off, I realized. It must've been a small one. It had blown apart the floor under us and the ceiling above the hunter ballroom, exposing the illusion.

Yet, the goodwill ballrooms still worked.

Samantha: OKAY. THAT WAS MY BAD.

Carl: What the hell happened?

Samantha: I WAS TRYING TO LOSE BIG, LIKE YOU SAID. BUT I THINK I LOST TOO BIG. I HAD TO USE THE SOUL CRYSTALS. THEY BLEW UP. ALL OF THEM. DIWATA IS STILL HERE, BUT SHE'S KNOCKED OUT. I DIDN'T KNOW I COULD DO THAT. THEM BABIES ARE STILL COMING OUT. REALLY FAST, BUT THERE'S NO ROOM FOR THEM, SO IT'S LIKE WE'RE IN A SAUSAGE PRESS. I NEED A CIGARETTE. AND MAYBE A BATH.

Carl: That was more than one crystal? Christ, I'm surprised you didn't blow up the whole castle!

Samantha: YOU SAID IF SHE STOPPED GIVING BIRTH SHE WOULD GO AWAY, SO I STUCK THE CRYSTALS IN MY MOUTH, AND I WENT UP THERE AND CHOMPED DOWN ON THEM.

Carl: Wait. You went up where?

"Uh, I guess I'm done," Horton said and went offstage.

"Carl," Signet said. She stood to her full height and brushed herself off. She had a white acorn in her hand. It'd fallen from the inverted oak tree earlier. *Huh*, I thought. *I guess that tree really is in here*.

She popped the acorn in her mouth and crunched down. **Magical Fervor** appeared over her head.

Her hands gave off an inconspicuous glow. The tattoos all around her started to swirl. "There will be no arguing with me. I know you well enough to know what you're planning, and it will not work. My idea is better. Just tell me when."

"Signet, what are you doing?" I asked, alarmed. "Who is your sacrifice?"

"That D'Nadia woman said my mother was never real, Carl. She said all my friends, all my fallen brothers and sisters whose memories adorn my body are not real. That they never were."

"You don't need to do this," I said.

"Your companion, Princess Donut has a very powerful *Torch* spell," Signet said. "I can do this without her help, but if you could ask her to cast it using moon rays as the source, it will make this much more worthwhile for you and my family. Much more."

Imani, Elle, and Katia rushed up. They had come in an attempt to talk me out of it, but they stopped at the sight of a glowing Signet.

"Carl, that tentacle-faced buffoon of a woman said something else to me," Signet said. "She told me she was sad that you weren't going to survive this evening, because she'd been looking forward to meeting you on the battlefield outside of Larracos. I want a favor from you, Carl. I want you to show her exactly how real my family is. I want them all to see."

In order to cast her *Ink Marauder* spell, Signet needed three people. Herself to cast the spell, a sacrifice to be the source of the blood, and a third party to kill the sacrifice.

But the spell didn't have to go that way. There was a method to cast her spell with only a single person. One who was all three.

"Signet? Are you sure?"

"Just tell me when. It'll happen fast."

Sledge: Mantises in front were changelings. We are free. Bonnie safe. Cubs safe. For now. Castle very damaged. Real mantises still everywhere. Elves too.

I met the eyes of my friends standing around me. "We're back in business."

Carl: Everyone. Get ready. Stage plan A. Escape plan D. I repeat, Escape plan D. If you don't have a feather fall ability or potion, come to me. Prepotente, come here. Fast. I need you.

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Up on stage, the curtains pulled, and Donut stood there alone. She once again wore the little, fake headset microphone. Ferdinand sat upon the center table in the midst of the three judges with his ridiculous hat, eyes affixed on her, his tail wagging back and forth. I handed a *Feather Fall* potion out to a crawler.

Donut: I TOOK THE CHARM POTION. IT WORKED!

"Come on, baby! You can do it!" Ferdinand called from the table. He looked over at Empress D'Nadia and said, "That's my bird up there."

My interface blinked.

Sir Ferdinand, minion of Princess Donut, has joined the party.

Donut cleared her throat. The stage went dark, and then a spotlight appeared above her, focused narrowly on her tiny form. Her tiara glittered.

"My name is Princess Donut," she said, her voice amplified, yet small at the same time. She didn't take out the sheet music. She didn't need it. "I am singing a song. My mother used to sing this to me. It's called 'All Eyes on Me.'"

Backstage, a guitar strummed. It was Britney, who turned out to be a damn virtuoso with the thing. The Popovs had the guitar in their inventory, having found it in a boss room long ago. The song played, a sad, minor strum. It sounded full and lush, despite the missing string.

Donut took a breath and started to sing:

"Good girl, good girl, you're a good girl, my princess.
"You're like a root beer float. Oh yes, oh yes.
"I'd take it all back and never let you win. I wouldn't do it all over again.
"I love you. I love you. I'm sorry, my princess.
"All eyes on me.
"All eyes on me."

As she sang the nonsensical song, repeating the whole set of lyrics a few times, the exact same goddamn song a drunken Bea used to sing to her, she slowly moved to the right side of the stage.

Her voice soared. It was one of the most beautiful things I had ever heard.

The lyrics didn't make any damn sense, but she sang them with such sad longing, it felt as if a hand had reached into my chest and wrenched at my heart. The spotlight faded.

"Hot damn," Elle said. "She's getting good."

The spell did exactly what the title implied. Everyone in the room, without even realizing, was now affected by a minor charm. Even the hunters and the crawlers and the damn queen. The charm wasn't all that useful, honestly, but it was perfect for this occasion. It focused everyone's attention on a subject of the caster's choice.

Britney stopped the song, letting the last chord hang. Then, she started playing a new song. It was faster, more intricate, baroque style music.

The spotlight reformed on stage, focusing on Big Tina, who stood at the center. The crowd gasped at the sudden appearance of the giant dinosaur. The spell was now fully cast, and everyone in the room stood or sat in place, transfixed. Despite the horror show of churning bug flesh under our feet and over the heads of the hunters, all eyes were on the stage.

The spotlight had a blue tint to it, washing the room in warm moonlight. The glowing of Signet's skin tripled in intensity.

With Donut's insane charisma, *everyone* had been affected by the spell. Everyone, including Imogen and myself. Only Signet seemed unaffected. She stood next to me, growing brighter by the moment. Nobody noticed the spell being cast.

They kept their eyes on the stage.

We were originally going to use this moment to all get into various positions depending on the escape plan. Escape plan D was more of a... haphazard... escape.

The massive dinosaur took a hesitant step forward. Her bright, pink, newly-washed boa hung from her neck. Her inert wand remained in her hand. As we watched, the wand glowed. Donut had just cast the recharge scroll on it.

The dinosaur looked at the wand with wonder, then waved it. Sparkles danced through the air. Tina made a little, excited hop, one that shook the stage, and then twirled.

The wand, it turned out, did a little more than just shoot sparkles. It did that, too, but it was another charm spell. A performer's trick. It was very similar to Donut's spell, but it had a little more kick to it. The audience, already heavily focused on the dinosaur, were now enraptured by her. They weren't forced to stare like zombies, but the wand cast a spell called *The Recital,* which had the effect of making everyone happy. It made them feel as if they wanted to be there. That they wanted to watch the stage. That this was something they'd been looking forward to.

It filled me with warmth. With hope. I felt tears form in the corners of my eyes.

The two cretins, Clay-ton and Very Sullen appeared on both edges of the stage, each holding a stick that rose all the way to the ceiling. Pulled taut between the sticks was a massive piece of fabric —a ship's mainsail Elle had in her inventory—with waves painted on it. It rose all the way to the ceiling, obscuring the back of the stage. According to Prudence—poor, dead Prudence—Tina was supposed to do a dance called the "Water Ballad," which was about a mer-bear or some shit. Tina twirled again, casting more sparkles. She skipped across the stage.

"When you see my family," Signet said, gritting her teeth through the spell. "You tell them I did this out of my own free will."

It was Vrah who realized what was happening. She either had immunity to this sort of charm, or she finally noticed the glowing naiad standing off at the edge of the room. She shouted and started pushing her way toward the stage, pointing at Signet.

Carl: Sledge. Do it.

Sledge: Casting now. One minute to chant spell. Five minutes to cast.

Carl: Sledge, you're inside the castle. That's okay, but it means you'll be transferred to the ninth floor with everyone else. Ferdinand the cat will go, too, and he might be a problem, so watch him. When you get there, there might be some zombie things attacking you. The good news is, none of the faction wars guys will be allowed to touch you, so hopefully you'll all be safe. You're going to feel really sick for a full day. But you're going to have a lot of people around you who'll protect you. Thank you for doing this, and thank you for taking care of Donut. I'll never forget what you've done for us tonight.

Sledge: No let Bomo beat my *Frogger* score.

Carl: I'll unplug the machine the moment we get back.

Sledge: Good.

The two cretins holding the backdrop approached the forward part of the stage, pushing Tina up to the very edge, where she twirled again, sparkles spinning around her. They dropped the fabric, revealing a line of 30 velociraptors plus Mongo and Kiwi. They were all wearing ridiculous, hand-sewn costumes around their heads, depicting sea creatures and sea anemones and starfish and whatnot. One was supposed to be a shrimp, I was pretty sure, but it had the antennae in its mouth and was chewing on them. Another, a clam, had her mask completely over her eyes, and she was twirling in circles, unsure of what to do. Her tail slammed against her neighbor, who squawked loudly.

Mongo had a crab costume that had fallen around his neck. Kiwi was covered in white, paper mâché bubbles, ringed around her neck

like an oversized, pearl necklace.

One of the costumes, a piece of seaweed, fell lazily from the ceiling where it'd just been accidentally cut in half.

The inconsistent line of velociraptors danced back and forth to the guitar music.

Carl: Britney. You need to get away from the backstage area. Come out.

The guitar faded, and the dinosaurs continued to sway back and forth.

Donut: READY WHENEVER YOU ARE.

Imani: Everybody who's on the right side of the room, move left. Look at the floor tiles. Move to a place where the floor is solid.

Signet reached forward and squeezed my hand.

"Carl," she said. She could no longer move her neck as the tattoos spun faster and faster. "Do you happen to have a knife?"

"I do," I said. I pulled one from my inventory. It was the same knife someone had once used in an attempt to assassinate Donut. I handed it over to her, handle first. At the same time, I slipped on my wrist bracer. All around, crawlers slowly pulled out their weapons and armed themselves.

"Thank you," Signet said. She raised a glowing hand and put it on my cheek. "Protect your family, and watch over mine."

The hunters, not knowing what was going on, all started to shout. The effect of the charm spells had finally faded.

Imogen looked about, surprised as Signet came and rigidly sat next to her sister.

"I only have two regrets," Signet said. "One is that I never got the chance to say goodbye to my Grimaldi. Maybe one day. The second is that I won't be the one to kill you today."

"What're you doing?" Imogen asked, alarmed.

"You know, we were going to leave. My mother and I. We were going to go to an island and leave all this behind. I think about it all the time."

She looked her sister in the eye, she pulled the knife, and she tore it across her own throat.

From the ceiling, every acorn on the upside-down tree fell at once. There was no warning or reason to it. They all hit the ground like little gunshots.

The floor rent open, and Signet plummeted from sight, getting pulled into the Nothing as Imogen grabbed at her, as if to stop her.

Ethereal shrieks rose from the tear in the ground. Black wisps and tendrils lashed upward. The stench of sulfur filled the room.

"So much for season three," Elle muttered

"*Psamathe*," a faint voice shrieked from the dark, sounding distant and hollow. "*Psamathe, we are coming.*"

The hole in the floor snapped shut.

Signet was gone, but an outline of her body remained, black shadows spinning. It was her tattoos, twisting and turning and undulating. Signet's blood also remained in this world, yanked from her flesh as she was torn away, temporarily creating an ethereal form that rose into the air and started to swirl and swirl upon itself, turning into a tornado, growing bigger by the moment.

Warning: Apito has turned her back. The seal has been broken. The Butcher's Masquerade has failed to cast. The protection of this chamber has stopped.

This party is over.

The three judges at the table disappeared with a crack of lightning. Chaco, at the far end of the room, also disappeared.

I pulled out the ring of divine suffering, I placed it on my finger, and I marked Vrah.

I then pulled two smoke curtains. I held them in my hands like twin grenades, and I tossed them both into the room.

Carl: Now!

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MANY, MANY THINGS HAPPENED AT ONCE.

"Sic 'em," Donut cried.

The velociraptors shrieked as one and leaped off the stage and landed amongst the surprised hunters. A raptor dressed as a pufferfish sailed across the room, landing atop a draconian and savagely ripped at his neck, decapitating him. At the same moment, Mongo and Kiwi fell upon Vrah, who screamed in rage as hunters fled and died.

"Surprise, motherfuckers!" Samantha yelled as she fell from the corner of the ceiling. She surfed into the room in a tidal wave of bug gore that slopped down like oatmeal through the hole in the ceiling. A hole I couldn't see. She hit the ground and rolled, pushing straight through my legs. She launched herself into the air and landed amongst Kiwi and Mongo, biting onto the dying form of Vrah.

"Remember me, bitch!" She chomped down on the bug.

At the same time, geysers of bug gore erupted up through the floor into our own ballroom. Mixed in with it were some actual, living and intact mantis nymphs, who squealed and moved to attack. These things were about 2/3's the size of the real deal and a third the strength, but there were a lot of them.

Tina roared and also leaped off the front of the stage, but the moment she did, she vanished. She was now the sole occupant of Attendant Ballroom B, not including the surprised workers and animal handlers, which we couldn't see. Sure enough, an elf

suddenly appeared, landing on the stage, only for Tina to reappear for a moment to chomp him in half. She roared again as blood sprayed across the stage.

The disembodied tattoos swirled around Imogen, who screamed in outrage as the tornado encased her like a cocoon.

"I'll protect you, my bride!" Ferdinand shouted up at Donut. He blinked and disappeared.

All around us, the hunters died. But not all of them. Many were escaping from the now-open doors, scattering like cockroaches. I looked to our own doorway, and mantises surged in, blocking the exit. I growled.

Chaos reigned as the gore continued to ooze into the room from above and below. The Popovs swung their meteor hammer through the room, twisting and shouting as they destroyed the nymphs. Prepotente had potion bottles in his hands and tossed them. Li Na rushed through the room, tossing chains as her brother danced atop them, ripping the bugs to pieces. A pair of summoned monsters with chainsaw arms flanked Bautista as he cut his way across the room. Florin had taken up a position in the corner, his shotgun raised to his shoulder as he blasted one after another. The blasts had become like a beat.

Lucia cowered behind the crocodilian, hands on her ears. She cried in terror.

Imani: We need to get out of this room.

Carl: two minutes. Donut's *Hole* spell won't work. The floor below us is literally filled with nymphs. The exit halls are blocked.

Imani: Where's Diwata?

Donut: I SEE HER ON THE MAP. SHE'S RIGHT BELOW US. SHE'S NOT MOVING.

The tattoos harassing Imogen weren't growing to the enormous, building-sized proportions they usually did. But they weren't turning into 2D tattoos, either. A fully-realized, three-headed nodling ogre formed and hit the ground and roared. The name **Di-Wi. Memory Golem** formed over the nodling's head. It swung and missed at the incorporeal form of Imogen. A massive, Tina-sized hammerhead

shark slammed into the ground, no longer floating like it usually did. It flopped angrily about, rolling over—and through—hunters and dinosaurs as it started to angrily chomp at nymphs, only some of whom were actually in the same room as it. Yet another tattoo, a normally-gigantic, snake-like dragon—also appeared, but it was only the size of my arm. It stuck its head straight up at the ceiling and fired a beam of light directly into the air. It hit the edge of the Scolopendra mosaic, which shattered and stopped twisting. The dragon roared and flew upward, disappearing.

We only had a minute before Queen Imogen would regain control of the situation. Smoke still filled the room. Signet's reanimated tattoos couldn't harm her directly.

Crack! Red lightning filled the room, coming from Imogen. It spread in every direction at once. A bolt struck me in the neck.

"Gah!" I cried as my health ticked down. Every creature in the room staggered.

The attack hadn't been too powerful, but it had hit everyone at once.

I jumped over to where Vrah lay on the floor, bleeding out. Mongo and Kiwi had ripped all of her limbs off. Both dinosaurs also bled from multiple wounds. One of Vrah's compound eyes had been punctured and shattered like a bee's honeycomb. White ooze seeped from the wound, pooling around her.

"How," Vrah gurgled.

"Kiwi," I said. "Back onto the stage. Quick. Mongo. Finish her off for me. Make it hurt."

Kiwi pressed her head against Mongo's for just a moment. She knew. She knew this was goodbye. She turned and returned to the stage as Mongo roared gleefully and dove back into Vrah.

My interface chimed, letting me know I'd successfully finished off the mark. Her highest stat had been dexterity. I looked about for another target, but none had full health. Multiple hunters worshiped Emberus. Only Imogen had full health. I pulled my ring off. For now.

"Samantha," I yelled. "If I don't see you again, thank you!"

"Where am I going?" she asked. She had managed to pull a chunk of Vrah chitin off her body, and she spit it out. Her hair had all

burned off, and she looked like a Barbie head pulled from a house fire. “Are you breaking up with me? Is it because of Louis?”

“What? No!” I said as I ducked a friendly-fire magic missile. A nymph flew at me, and I punched it in the head. It exploded, but not before it raked its arms across me. I cried out in pain. I swung at another, but my hand flew right through it. It wasn’t in this room. “You’re in the castle. You’ll teleport away. Ninety seconds!”

“Where’s Signet?” Samantha shouted. “She needs to give me my body!”

“She’s gone,” I said. “She killed herself to save us.”

“What?” Samantha demanded. “I’m going to...” She paused, seeing something. She rolled off toward the stage.

The sound of a crying child caught my attention.

I ducked a flying nymph attack and then kicked another as it lurched at the three newcomers cowering on the ground.

Not all of Signet’s tattoos were warriors.

The young, hairy form of Clint cried as he clutched onto the apron of the equally terrified Miss Nadine. The dwarf-like chee woman had once upon a time been a caterpillar, and before that a teacher of young children. She cowered with the boy, unsure what to do. They’d both been hit by the lightning attack. Clint’s health was almost gone. I instinctively pulled a health potion and shoved it at him. He grabbed it in two hands and sucked it down. To my surprise, it worked.

There was another person there, too. A naiad, prone on the ground. The harsh eyes of the creature were closed, as if she was sleeping. Signet’s mother. The memory of her, at least, given flesh. The label over her read:

Princess Lunette. Incomplete Flesh Golem.

“Cousin,” Samantha said. She poked the golem with her burned head. “Cousin, wake up!”

“Nadine,” I said. “How long will you guys last?”

“Forever,” she said, panting the words. “She gave us... She gave us life.”

“You’ll transfer, then. It might get bumpy for you guys.” It was going to happen at any second.

The breathless Nadine pointed to the prone form of Princess Lunette. "Signet. Wants you. Take the golem. She took memory with her. Just left body. Help Samantha. Find a Pulpmancer."

"Take it! Take it, Carl!" Samantha shrieked, bouncing up and down like a basketball. I kicked another nymph.

I picked up the form of Signet's mother. It weighed nothing. It wasn't alive. It had no dot on my map. I pulled it into my inventory.

I grinned down at Samantha. "We'll figure this out when I meet up with you on the ninth..."

"Fuck that!" Samantha said. She rose up off the ground, floating magically, and she shot off like a rocket, blasting down through a hole in the floor.

What the hell?

Nadine picked up Clint and clutched him in her arms. We all ducked as Florin's shotgun blast hit a pillar, sending wood chunks everywhere. Katia had formed into her sentinel gun and was blasting away. The nymphs just kept coming and coming.

"You fools!" Imogen shouted, waving her arms and pushing her way out of the mess of tattoo warriors. A squid had formed, and it was pulling itself upward through the ceiling. Her hands glowed. She swiped her hand to the left, and my arm snapped. Just like that. I cried out in pain as I was pulled through the air toward her, bones in my body cracking and breaking.

"Gah!" Imogen cried as the orange form of Sir Ferdinand appeared and slammed into her head. She staggered, and I crashed into the floor. My shattered arm bone ripped through my skin.

Ferdinand went flying, blood spewing as Imogen savagely backhanded him. He flew in one direction, his hat in the other. He hit the ground and yowled and then disappeared.

I cast *Heal* and pulled myself to my feet as my bones knit, like broken glass forming in reverse. I staggered as I fell unsteady. *Come on. Come on.* Imogen would recover at any moment.

"Kiwi," Donut called, still upon the stage. "Come here! Lower your head!"

Kiwi moved to Donut, who reached up and grasped one of the bubbles around the back of Kiwi's neck with two paws. She

squeezed, and the potion ball hidden within the bubble exploded.

Big Tina reappeared on stage just as the *I Take It All Back* potion spread over the velociraptor. The effect was instantaneous. Kiwi staggered and then stood to her feet, having been transformed from a dinosaur to an ursine. It happened even faster than I thought it would.

The bear stood to her height, naked except the remaining paper bubbles. She looked at her paws in surprise. The other raptors all roared as one. Their white dots all turned red.

Tina, upon seeing the transformation of her mother, roared. Then roared again. Then a third time, only this time the roar sounded almost like words. Then a fourth time. "Mom? Mommy? Where are we? Mommy? *Mommy*?"

She remained in the form of an allosaurus.

Quest Complete. The Recital.

Sledge: Five seconds. Good-bye.

I met Donut's eyes. All around us was blood and carnage and death.

"Potions!" I shouted. I had my nipple ring fall ability, but I didn't trust it. I drank a *Feather Fall* potion. I'd gotten the potions out of the box, along with a bunch of other things, when I stood upon Prepotente's personal saferoom cube. He had one zap left on his wand, and he'd let me use it. All in exchange for letting him take over the party for a day or so.

Vroom.

Everything froze.

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We all hung, frozen in midair.

Not this shit again.

The elf castle was gone. All of Signet's tattoo warriors were gone. The changelings were gone. Kiwi, who'd turned into a bear—a very pregnant bear—was gone. Tina, who'd remained a dinosaur, was also gone.

They'd all traveled away with the half-destroyed castle, which had just landed somewhere on the ninth floor.

None of the crawlers, hunters, pets, mobs, remaining dinosaurs, dead bodies, or elves had transferred with the castle. We remained frozen in the air in a rough, stacked cube formation.

The vast, vast majority of everything was mantis nymphs.

The brambles had completely filled the world, stopping about 100 feet from the outskirts of the now-gone castle. Mounted elves remained on the ground, mostly on the edge of the brambles, all turned, looking up at the floating, frozen mess, still hovering in midair.

Out of nowhere, AC/DC's "Thunderstruck" started playing. It wasn't coming from a trap module. The damn AI was using it as boss music.

That's new, I thought.

B... B... B... Boss Battle!

Cage fight Extreme!

Four teams enter! One team leaves! Four teams enter! One team leaves!

The AI's voice shrieked the words, absolutely giddy with excitement.

"Oh, fuck," I said.

In corner one!

It's the dungeon's top crawlers! Plus some other guys! These plucky adventurers have beaten all the odds to get this far! But will their luck hold out tonight?

A whole line of player portraits slammed into the air, one by one, starting with a crawler I didn't know and moving down the line and ending, not with Prepotente, who was the current number one, but Donut. I was third from last. *Bam, bam, bam*. Each new portrait was accompanied by an explosion. It didn't group us by team, but individually.

In corner two!

Starting with over a thousand, and now down to just 75, it's the last remaining hunters on this floor! Most of these guys have been acting like little bitches the whole time, so they're probably all dead. But, hey. They're here and they have a chance.

Well, not really. But they're here!

Several hunter portraits slammed onto the screen, roughly the same number as us. Vrah was gone and dead, but the ones who'd managed to escape the dinosaurs had only done so temporarily.

This part took a little longer. With each name, it listed off their home planet. Almost half of them were listed as homeless or living in some sort of refugee camp.

The song finished, and a new song started. This was heavy, frenetic music that started to pulse with a heavy, sub-bass beat. It was the same damn song the elf musicians had been playing at the start of the party, but turned to a thick, techno beat.

In corner three!

Queen Imogen! High Elf, Fallen Cleric Sorcerer!

Level 145 Country Boss!

The current favorite. Her forces have been whittled down to almost nothing, but her elite fighting squad is still in good shape. She may be down and shunned by her goddess because she just threw the worst party since Alexander the Great took Persepolis, but she is still strong, powerful, and really, really pissed off!

Above, the glowing form of the falling queen burst into light. She had a new symbol over her head. It was the same Marked for Death symbol I still had floating over me, but it was an X with acorns dangling from it. A group of black-clad elves fell with her.

And finally, in corner four!

About twenty feet below me and to the left, a new form burst into light. It was the angry, flaming, and very conscious form of Diwata the god. She didn't look like a goddess. She looked exactly like her true identity, Circe Took. A baby mantis was halfway out of her body, screaming and waving its arms as it was cooked alive by the flames from her blazing genitals.

Diwata! Level 250 Immortal!

It's not only a deity, it's also the winner of the dungeon's worst mother *and* father of the year award! She can't be killed, but if you can manage to talk her into some sort of birth control, she'll be knocked out of the ring!

Donut: CARL, CARL, DID YOU SEE! I GOT TOP BILLING! AGAIN!

Carl: Everybody spread out. Hit Imogen with blunt force attacks. Not magical bolts. Use the beat of the music to coordinate your strikes. Follow Florin's lead. Katia, Imani, Donut, on me. We take care of Diwata, and then we assist with Imogen.

Donut: I'LL HAVE TO USE YOUR *PAWNA'S TEARS* POTION. I JUST TOOK A *FEATHER FALL*, SO I HAVE TO WAIT FOR MY POTION COOLDOWN! I TOLD YOU I SHOULD'VE DONE THIS EARLIER, CARL.

Carl: I know. It's okay. We'll protect you.

The portraits didn't disappear, but turned into tiny, barely distinct icons and moved into my interface, taking up the bottom of the

screen. I could now see who was still alive, but the portraits were so small, I'd have to hover over it and see who each represented.

The brambles started to rise up into the air, and they formed a dome over the whole area, plunging us all into darkness. A sickly, yellow glow filled the world, coming from little flower buds on the brambles. The lights pulsed on and off with the beat, creating a dizzying strobe effect.

And here!

We!

Go!

The world unfroze. Gore plummeted along with an outrageous amount of acorns. The mantises took to the air, turning to a buzzing swam as the hunters fell like rocks. Most of us slowly started to float downward, falling in a mist of thrashing, angry bugs.

It was like we were paratroopers jumping straight into hell.

I slammed onto my magic protection spell. Lights swirled around me.

Imogen fell like an asteroid, rushing past all of us. She'd had the furthest to fall, and she hit the ground with the force of a bomb. Ferdinand wasn't with her, having been transferred with the castle.

I grasped a mantis by the neck as I reformed my gauntlet, and its head popped off. Despite being decapitated, it savagely tore at my chest. Another was at my own neck. Then another. One dropped, hit by a Donut *magic missile*. Another fell from a shot by Katia.

Plink, plink, plink. The icons of hunters started to get X'd out as they splattered against the ground.

When the castle had teleported away, it'd taken the subbasements with it, so we had further to fall than I'd originally thought. I savagely ripped at another mantis as a lightning bolt, thick as a tree ripped through the air, possibly aimed at me, but it dissipated before hitting home, instead crisping dozens of mantises, who all exploded into mist.

Smoke started to fill the air. This was a smoke bomb from a hunter, designed to obscure our vision. I answered in kind by dropping my custom-made, Smoke Daddy bomb, which would fill the whole goddamned area. At the same time, Donut, falling just to my

right and slightly above, dropped her *Fear* smoke bomb, which corkscrewed away into the flashing chaos. With her charisma, the effect would sow absolute terror in everyone.

Dozens of debuffs stacked and then disappeared. This was Imani, working furiously. She was a thing of beauty, a beacon of light, her butterfly wings fully spread as she fell, counterspells and buffs flying out of her at a ridiculous pace.

The form of Bianca shot through the air, reminding me of a shark passing through the deep ocean. The demonic goat-dragon thing cut through the nymphs like a snowplow. Prepotente rode upon her back, screaming, multiple shields glowing around him as he tossed potion bottles in the fray.

"Ground coming up!" someone shouted. Through the smoke and flashing lights and mist, I sensed more than saw that we were falling below the ground level, falling into the basement. The area was huge, just as wide as the castle had been. The shadows of mounted elves dived into the deep pit as the brambles pushed further in, entombing us all. The elves fell, tumbling as their mounts screamed and crashed.

Plink, plink, plink, plink. The hunters were half gone already, but crawlers were starting to disappear, too.

My feet hit the ground, landing amongst a knee-deep pile of dead bugs. I couldn't see a goddamned thing. A velociraptor with the bloody remnants of a lobster costume dangling from her neck sailed over me, pouncing on something I couldn't see. With Kiwi gone, they'd all reverted to red-tagged mobs, loyal to nobody except themselves.

"Oh fuck," I shouted, ducking as a literal wave of thrashing bugs fell at me.

I slammed down onto *Protective Shell*. Bugs, elves, dinosaurs, and a few hunters rocketed away as the shield formed, blasting them into the air in all directions. The shield was huge now, and it created a crater, leaving only crawlers and corpses in the center. Nearby, at the edge of the spell, Donut whimpered as she healed Mongo, who'd been injured in the fall. Imani used the short respite to move to several crawlers and heal them. We regrouped and

readied ourselves to move toward the god, who was a mere 100 feet away, shoved against the wall. Another group turned and prepared to face Imogen.

A similar shield to mine popped up fifty feet away. It glowed like a beacon in the mist. This was smaller, and it had been cast by a hunter. I watched as a crawler flew up and away, screaming as she was launched by the spell. She disappeared into the dark, falling amongst the brambles.

Plink.

"There!" Imani said, pointing. We pushed our way out of the still-formed spell, leaving a wall at our back as we kicked and fought and waded toward the star on the map, which had settled in the far corner.

Blood misted in the air. I could barely breathe, and I coughed as I trudged forward, tasting copper and fire. Someone had cast a poison cloud, and crawlers all around choked as those without immunity were forced to constantly heal themselves. I couldn't hear the music any more. Only the terrified screams of elves and hunters and crawlers and bugs and raptors as we all collectively fought and died. Spells whipped around in every direction, ricocheting, exploding, and killing.

A velociraptor lay on the ground, injured in the fall. *Sorry*, I thought as Elle iced it. *I'm so sorry we couldn't save all of you.*

An arrow suddenly burst through my left forearm, burying itself into my chest. I gasped and hit the ground. A half-dead mantis, also on the ground, struck at me as I spit up blood. A black-clad elf emerged from the darkness, curved blade in his hands. The elf rocketed away as a meteor hammer swung through the air, braining him. The round weapon cleared my head by inches.

I head-butted the mantis, caving its head in. *Huh*, I thought as I started to lose consciousness. *I didn't know I could do that*. Just before the sleep took me, I was violently ripped awake by a mass heal. It was Donut. She rode upon the back of Mongo as she shriek-sang the song. I looked up at the Popovs, who stood over me, protecting me as I recovered. I pulled the arrow from my body, screaming as it ripped flesh anew.

"Watch out!" I tried to cry, but I couldn't get the breath. A flaming form barreled through the darkness. It was a sambhur, one of the elf mounts, but it had somehow caught on fire, and it was covered with nymphs, cutting and screaming. The elk wasn't running, but it had somehow been magically flung, and it spun like a wheel ejected from a wagon. This was a spell, something from Imogen.

The thing barreled right into Dmitri and Maxim Popov, the mount's antlers ripping right through the two-headed ogre like they were made of paper. It happened so fast. Blood showered over me. The double crawler slammed into the ground next to me as the flaming mount spun away, spinning blood and fire and screams as it wobbled and disappeared.

"I miss my cat," Dmitri said just before he closed his eyes.

A notification appeared. I waved it away.

More crawler dots blinked out. Only five hunters remained. I could hear the roar of Florin's shotgun. It sounded so far away. Ren's flamethrower shot out, a beacon in the dark, cutting through the mist like a flaming gash into reality. Garret, her tummy acher, was at her side. I could only see them in shadow. A pair of elf or hunter legs dangled from its massive mouth. Mantises and elves all around them went up like kindling. A flaming velociraptor leaped at Imogen, and the dinosaur exploded in midair, showering flaming gore everywhere.

"Carl," Katia said, suddenly at my side, helping me to my feet. "I need to go back and help with the Imogen fight. Daniel and Tran are in trouble. They're getting hammered."

"I had to use my protective shell already," I said, gasping. A fifteen-foot mountain of bugs, alive and dead, stood between us and the deity, who was hiding in the corner. "I don't know if I can get in."

"Here." She pulled the beanie off her head. The one the Apothecary had just given her in a benefactor box, and she placed it on my own. It equipped itself with a little *beep*. "Use the spell to clear through the nymphs. Get Donut close enough."

I nodded and called for Donut. She was suddenly beside me, atop Mongo. She was matted down with gore. She had multiple

debuffs over her, but they blinked and disappeared as Imani rushed past, back toward the fight against Imogen.

A magic missile slammed into her, and she staggered, but her health didn't go down.

"Carl, I was wrong about my charisma not working! My love vampire skill works really good when it's this high!" she shouted, giddy with excitement. The skill had never really worked properly until now. Behind us, multiple elves waded through the fray with little heart icons over them. "A bunch of elves are in love with me! It doesn't work on the bugs."

Christ. We need to get her charisma that high permanently. "How's your potion countdown?"

"I'm ready!" she shouted.

"Take it now!"

Red lightning zapped the entire area, shocking us all. This was stronger than before. More crawlers blinked and disappeared. All the remaining elves under Donut's control dropped dead, leaving her defenseless.

Donut: IT WENT UP TO THE VERY END OF 15. I GOT A BUNCH OF ACHIEVEMENTS!

Carl: Okay, here we go.

The dot of Diwata was just over the pile. We had to get closer. We needed line of sight.

"Wait five seconds, then jump in," I said to Donut. "Cast the moment you see her."

I rushed up the hill of dead and dying bugs, scrambling in the smoky dark. The whole area was getting hotter by the moment. Everything was on fire. An errant arrow slammed into the back of my leg and buried itself. I cried. I crested the top of the hill just as a group of bugs lunged at me. I cast the spell from Katia's beanie, *I Need My Personal Space*. It pushed them all in different directions, working like a miniature version of *Protective Shell.*

Mongo and Donut jumped in, and we all tumbled forward, landing before the god.

"Fuck you!" Circe Took cried from her position in the corner. The god stopped giving birth, and she started to change, turning into

something monstrous.

She was running. But she wasn't running fast enough.

Donut cast *Laundry Day.*

At my direction, Donut had been relentlessly training her armor-removing *Laundry Day* spell every day for weeks now. She'd managed to get the spell up to nine on her own. Just before we went to the party, I'd finally made her take the recently-acquired Pawna's Cries potion, which she secretly used to raise the spell three more levels to 12.

She needed it at 15.

The note from my sponsor had stated we should use boosts from Prepotente, Imani, and Samantha to temporarily raise her spell level the last three levels. Prepotente was back there somewhere, and despite *a lot* of prodding, we weren't able to coax any sort of spells or buffs out of Samantha. She was gone anyway to god knew where. That was okay. We had a backup.

It was a bit of a waste using my more-powerful Pawna's Tears potion, which raised the skill by five additional points, but my sponsor claimed he would replace it. I really hoped so. I'd wanted to save it and wait until it was absolutely necessary.

The *Laundry Day* spell couldn't hurt the god. The only way it would actually remove the armor off a god was if she trained it up to 20, which she wouldn't ever be able to do as she was maxed out at 15.

But that was okay. She didn't need to remove the armor off a god. She just needed to remove it from a person. The god *was* the armor, and it would remain intact. She just needed to remove it off the person underneath. And all we needed for that was the spell to be at level 15.

I'd been worried we'd first have to remove the god's invulnerability. Tin, who'd written the 21st edition of the cookbook, seemed to think that was the case. But after further research, it appeared that spells designed to target the drivers of soul armor and not the gods themselves would still work.

I'd been planning on using this on Grull the next time he showed himself, but we couldn't always choose our battles.

The spell cast, the deity screamed, and little white, soapy bubbles appeared everywhere.

Diwata transformed into an antlered bear. It screamed at me and lunged before it dissipated into nothing.

Diwata has returned to the Halls of Ascendency.

The form of Circe Took, stripped of her protection, sopping wet and covered with bubbles, stood to her full height. The giant mantis woman chittered in rage.

"I don't need the protection of the god to..."

She never finished. Before I could strike, a dozen of her own children fell upon her. The wave of bugs rushed her, slicing and cutting and ripping. They screamed as one, piling onto her, as if enraged.

Circe Took died shrieking my name.

We didn't have time to celebrate. Yet another area attack swept through the pit, this one even stronger than before. Donut cried out and fell from Mongo, her health zeroed out. Her cockroach skill activated, saving her.

"Donut!" I cried.

She wouldn't survive another one of those. The spell did more damage each time. As it was, that last attack had killed all the remaining bugs.

Team four, eliminated!

A single hunter remained. Forty-something crawlers remained.

The elves were mostly dead. I didn't see any raptors. Imogen remained in the far corner of the pit, two hundred feet away, screaming as we poured arrows and rocks and shotgun blasts into her.

I saw the hunter's dot on my map, and I moved in. It was Zabit. He pointed at me and shouted something I couldn't hear. He blinked and disappeared, using an invisibility potion or skill. I moved to chase him, but I stopped dead, remembering his armor. The belt. *Nice try, asshole*, I thought.

I cast *Tripper*.

Bam! Multiple landmine traps went off. Zabit instantly reappeared, his body having been torn in half by his own trap, which he'd set seconds before.

Team two, eliminated!

During the explosion, the light flashed off the ceiling, revealing the twisting and turning brambles, growing absurdly fast, closing in from above. We were boxed in.

I hesitantly moved to the hunter corpse, and I quickly looted him. I didn't get the drop shield or case of invisibility potions. I assumed they were still in a prize box. But I received multiple trap items, too many to sort through now.

"Carl!" Donut cried. "There aren't any elves left. Just Imogen!"

We turned to help, but I skidded to a stop.

Oh no.

"No," I said, seeing the body on the ground. It was Gwendolyn Duet. Gwen. The tattooed, first nation's woman who'd been instrumental in our survival on the previous floor. She lay dead, surrounded by elves and bugs. At her side was the body of Cleiton, the knock-knock joke guy. Tran was there, still alive, dragging himself away, screaming. His legs were gone. I read a scroll, healing him. His legs did not grow back.

"Heave!" Florin cried, firing his gun. Imogen, atop a pile of corpses, lit up as she was pelted with arrows and projectiles.

They were coordinating their attacks, half of them firing on the two and four of the beat, the other half on the one and three. Arrows, rocks, and other non-magical bolts slammed into the insanely-powerful boss. Her health was in the red, almost gone. She had a stuttering shield spell, like a strobe light, like she kept casting it over and over again, but it kept getting overwhelmed by the sheer amount of crap getting thrown at her.

Imogen stopped casting her shield as she fell to a knee. A black, sizzling nimbus shone around her, similar to Bianca's aura. Her hands crackled red.

"Lightning attack," someone shouted.

I spied Britney on the ground, screaming. Louis and Firas lay side by side. Both were unconscious but alive. I hadn't had time to

reinstall my xistera, but I pulled a hobgoblin disco ball.

"Your jacket!" I shouted at Britney as I tossed the ball. It arced and landed against the side of Imogen's head, splattering multi-colored goo everywhere. She barely noticed. She was screaming something incomprehensible. Her health was almost gone.

Too slow, I thought. *Too slow*.

The lightning spell cast, but it came out as a single bolt, attracted to the clump of spreading butterflies. The bolt slammed into the summoned creatures.

That's not what I'd intended to happen. I'd meant for the butterflies to seek out the disco ball and overwhelm Imogen, but this worked, too.

The mess of butterflies exploded over our heads, barely ten feet away. Donut, Mongo, Britney, and I went flying in different directions. My eardrums shattered, and everything plunged into silence. I slammed into a large, heavy corpse. A hunter. A dreadnought missing half his face. Flaming bits of stuffing were everywhere, falling like embers. This time the unconsciousness took hold, and I felt myself slipping away, as if I were falling into a tunnel. As if I was getting pulled into a rushing river.

As I passed out, I watched the shadow of Bianca the goat dragon fly right over me, Prepotente on her back, screaming silently. He jumped off the mount, a bubbling potion in each of his hands. The terrible stench of burning flesh overwhelmed the room as I finally slipped away.

...

Winner!

...

Quest Complete. The Vengeance of the Daughter.

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[75]

Multiple pages of achievements filled the darkness. I coughed. Everything hurt.

Fucking hell, I thought. *I'm still alive.*

A terrible buzzing filled my head. My hearing was coming back. But it was something else, too.

It was always something else.

Donut: CARL, CARL GET UP! THE CEILING IS STILL COMING DOWN, AND THEY'RE ALL STILL FIGHTING. BIANCA ATE GIMLI! I HAD TO PUT MONGO AWAY!

She was on my chest, bouncing up and down.

I blinked and opened my eyes. *Five more minutes*, I thought as my hearing continued to return. *It was peaceful there in the river. It was silent.*

"We're on the same team," someone shrieked.

My hearing fully returned, all at once. All I heard was shouting. Prepotente screamed. Another voice shouted back.

"It's mine," the voice shouted, a voice filled with anger and tears. "Murderer. You murdered my pet. I got it, and if you want it, you're gonna have to loot it from my dead body."

"That can be arranged!" Prepotente shouted. "I struck 22% of all the damage against the boss, I struck the killing blow, and I received first looting choice on her, and it is mine!"

"It was on her body, not her inventory," the voice shouted back. "It was on the treasure map that we all got, and I was the first to

get it."

"What's happening," I asked, whispering the words.

"We won, but a lot of people are dead or hurt," Donut said. Her voice was strange. A mix of adrenaline and something else. Shock, maybe. "Firas is dead. Gwen is dead. So is Horton, the *Wonderwall* guy. And the Popovs. Tran lost his legs, and Britney's face is burned really bad, and when we healed it, it stayed all gross. A lot of my raptors are dead, and Mongo is really sad, but a bunch of them jumped up and ran right into the brambles. I don't know where they went. It still says Ferdinand is in the party, and that means he's alive. It won't let me message him. Mordecai says he'll automatically leave the party when we go down the next floor. No, don't move just yet, Carl. It says you have a bunch of debuffs still. Imani is healing people in order."

"Firas?" I asked. He'd been alive. Unconscious, but alive. "Oh. Oh no. What about Louis?"

"He's still knocked out."

I swallowed. I felt numb. Something was nagging at me in the back of my mind, screaming, but I could barely hear it.

"What's happening with Pony and the other guy," I said. I felt my own words slurring. I was tired. So damn tired. I had a dead Dreadnought on my legs. I instinctively tried to loot him, but someone already had.

"The guy with Gimli the hawk stole something off Imogen's body after she died, and Prepotente is really mad about it. They all got into a fight. There was a third person who tried to take it, too. The badger lady, I think. But she got hurt and went down the stairs. Prepotente says he needs the thing to defeat Scolopendra. He says it protects you from the boss's attacks. Everyone is getting this treasure map thing that shows a lot of loot all over the place, but it's useless because it's all covered with brambles now. These two guys cast a spell and went through the brambles anyway looking for stuff, which is really dumb."

I blinked. Everything hurt. I hadn't processed anything. I still had an arrow in my leg. I could feel it. Up above, the brambles had slowed their descent. Despite Donut's panic, we had maybe twenty

minutes before we'd be crushed. And even then, the brambles would form a dome over the stairwell, leaving a wide area around it. I tried to sit up, but it was painful to move.

I saw the stairwell now, thirty feet away. We still had over 20 hours until the collapse. Elle, Chris, and Bautista were there, dragging the unconscious crawlers toward the glowing entrance. Imani was over one of them, casting a spell. A crawler I didn't know was helping Tran, who sobbed.

"Where's Lucia? Eva?"

"Florin says Lucia is gone! She teleported away using her escape thing the moment before the boss fight started. He says she always sets teleports at stairwell locations, and she didn't even do the boss fight. Katia says Eva got bitten by a dinosaur and is buried over there, and she's looking for her right now. She's not dead yet. Eva stole all those dinosaur repellant potions, and she didn't even take one! Li Na and her brother are helping to look for her. Zhang is knocked out with Louis. Louis also got burned, but it's not as bad. He's going to be really sad about Firas."

I groaned in pain. My health was slowly seeping away. I clicked over to my health tab, and I had thirty different debuff items listed, including a nasty bleed effect. Imani would be here soon. Did we have any other healers in the group? I thought of Miriam Dom, who'd died to protect Prepotente.

So much death.

I needed to stay distracted.

"That guy who looted Imogen. What's his name?"

"It's Osvaldo. He looks like a person, but it says his race is a Curupira. I don't know what that means. He's a ranger. He's level 60 now. You're 63! Katia is 60, and I went up to 55! Prepotente went to 71!"

Since nobody had purchased the memorial crystal, it had returned to Imogen. This Osvaldo had taken it.

At that moment, I didn't care. I wanted it. So did Prepotente, apparently. But that was a problem for tomorrow.

"Did you see what Prepotente did?" Donut said. "The Queen lady was pretty much dead already, but he jumped right on her and

smashed the potion into her face. She didn't see him coming because you'd hit her with the disco ball goop. When she died, Florin started sobbing like when Ifechi really died. He already went down the stairs."

Donut wouldn't stop talking, like she was racing to get the words out. Behind us, the shouting stopped.

"Poor Gwen," Donut continued. "She was mean, but I liked her. Poor Horton, too. It's always sad when we lose a fellow musician. Elle is really upset about it. I think she feels bad about making fun of him all the time. Firas is the hardest. I didn't know the other guys very well. Do you think Britney's face is going to stay that way because she's not going to like that. And she'll probably be really upset about Firas. When she did the butterfly thing with her coat, it attracted the lightning, and that's why she's burned, and that's why Firas died, but it saved everybody. I think that attack was getting stronger the less health Imogen had. But did you see it? Did you? We won both the dinosaur quest and the Vengeance of the Daughter one."

She stayed on top of me, breathing heavily. I wanted to just close my eyes and go back to sleep. The weight of her on my chest was comforting. Familiar.

System Message: A champion has fallen. A bounty has been claimed.

A moment later, Katia marched by, her face dark. She looked down at me and nodded. She now sported a second, golden player killer skull. She looked nothing like the scared woman I'd met on the third floor.

"It's done," she said after a moment, and she moved on to help the others. Li Na and Jun followed her. Li Jun appeared absolutely shell shocked. He paused, as if he wanted to say something, but his sister called him away.

"Carl?" Donut asked after they left.

"Yeah?"

"That fight was terrible, wasn't it? Worse than usual. It went quick, but it was still really bad."

"It was pretty awful, Donut. If I'd known it was going to happen like this, I would've made you go down the stairs."

She was silent for a moment, and then she asked the question I'd been dreading for a long time now.

"Carl? Why doesn't it hurt as much as it should?"

I felt the words deep in my chest.

She took a shallow breath. "Firas. Gwen. The Popov brothers. Gideon. Even Signet and all those stupid dinosaurs who didn't know how to dance. They were my friends, and now they're dead, and I think I should be crying, but I'm not. Even Florin cried. And Chris cried. And Elle cried."

I closed my eyes.

"Donut..." I began.

She cut me off, desperation in her voice. "Why? Firas was going to be Louis's best man at his wedding to Juice Box, and he asked Katia to secretly make them tuxedoes. It was going to be a big surprise, and now it's never going to happen. Why am I not as upset as I should be? It doesn't feel right. I think I'm doing something wrong. I think something inside of me has broken."

I reached up, and I put my hand on her. She was sticky with blood. So much blood.

"It's okay," I said.

"No, Carl," she said. "I don't think it is."

"Donut," I said, reaching up with my other hand. "Come here."

She circled once and then settled into the crook of my arm, like we used to do so long ago. I ran my hand across the top of her bloody, matted head. Her temporary, charisma-gaining crown was gone, I realized, lost in the battle. She'd removed her sunglasses, too.

"This is important, and I want you to listen to me very carefully, okay?"

"Okay."

I stroked her head softly as I talked. "The name of that spell and party has been bothering me for a while now. The way it's written, it means there's only one butcher. I don't think it was possible for Imogen to 'win' that boon. When I was talking to her earlier, she told

me the story of the Butcher's Masquerade. She said at the party, we wore masks so we could pretend for a little bit that we weren't monsters. But she was wrong about that. She had it backwards. You're wearing a mask right now, Donut, and you don't know how to remove it. That's okay. You don't need to. Not yet. That mask is protecting you."

"I don't like it," she said.

"I know. What we went through just now was only a taste of what's coming, especially on the ninth floor. It's going to get worse before it gets better. We're going to lose more friends. We're going to have to do some pretty horrible things just to survive. So I need you to keep that mask on. But one day... One day you'll find yourself someplace safe and without worries and without everyone watching, and it'll just fall right off. And it will hurt. You will cry for Firas and Gwen and Yolanda and Brandon and everybody else we've lost along the way, and you'll be glad you had it on the whole time."

She didn't say anything for several moments.

"Carl?" she finally asked.

"Yeah?"

"You were right. That was way more like *Rambo* than *Footloose*."

And then, she finally did start to cry. They were little, soft murmurs right into my neck, and I'd never felt so relieved in my life to feel someone else's pain.

I suddenly realized what had been bothering me. I sat straight up, Donut still clutched in my arms. "Katia," I called, my voice hoarse. "Katia!"

"There!" Katia said, pointing at the pile of gore. A dead raptor lay amongst a pile of bugs. With the smoke gone and the *Torch* spells illuminating the area, the sight of all this death was even more shocking. Other crawlers had gone through and looted everything while I was out, but nobody had bothered digging. We only had a

few minutes. Katia had her *Find Crawler* skill and led us to the right place. "There's two of them! I can't believe I didn't see it."

"Hurry," I said, as I dug through the bodies, tossing bug pieces left and right.

And then, there they were. Two fat, naked, baby ogres, each about a year old. Imani rushed over and picked them both up, one in each arm like she was holding a pair of turkeys. Maxim and Dmitri Popov. Both were unconscious. Both were listed as **Level X. Nodling Yearling.**

When a nodling dies, he splits into a new creature depending on how many heads the original had.

All the crawlers stopped bickering and looting to come surround the pair.

"What are we going to do with them?" I asked.

Zev: You don't need to do anything, Carl. Watch.

A moment passed, and they both started to wake. The label over their heads flashed, and then the word **Ineligible** appeared over them both. They blinked and disappeared.

Carl: Zev, so help me god…

Zev: Relax. Children and pregnant crawlers aren't allowed. They've escaped. Their game guide made them pick that race because he knew this would happen. They've been transferred to the kinder facility on the surface. They're free. We'll talk more soon, but while I have you, you'll be going on Odette's show right after the next floor starts. Not between the floors. All crawlers start this next one at the same time.

I relayed what Zev said.

A stunned silence followed.

"They did it," Elle finally said. "Those crazy bastards escaped."

Everyone broke out into conversation. There was no more fighting. Someone laughed. Imani came to stand next to me, and she wrapped me in her wings, healing me and hugging me all at the same time.

It felt as if a dark cloud had been removed from me. Despite the horror all around us, despite the death of several of our friends, we

were alive. We had survived. We had won, and the hunters had not.

We were goddamned alive.

A notification appeared. Donut and I looked at each other. She'd just received the same one as me. A little mark appeared over her head. A spinning star. **Co-Warlord, The Princess Posse.**

"They made it," I said.

A new tab is available in your interface.

Congratulations! You have successfully fielded your first troops. You have been assigned spot three and have inherited all (zero) mercenaries left behind by the Burrowers.

Welcome, Sponsor, to Faction Wars.

Your team's official name is The Princess Posse, sponsored by The Society for the Eradication of Cocker Spaniels (TSECS), NFC, DBA as Princess Posse Enterprises, NFC.

You are not currently in position. Please proceed to the *Dungeon Crawler World: Earth* visitor center to onboard onto the playing field.

Not all warlord options are available until you reach position.

The games will begin when the Crawlers reach the ninth floor. See the Faction Wars Warlord tab in your interface for more details.

Note! This team currently has two active Warlords (Carl and Princess Donut). Both have full administrative and voting access.

Note! Co-Warlord Princess Donut is a member of the royal line of succession of another team (Team #4, the Blood Sultanate.) See the succession rules on how this will affect gameplay.

Important! You have 15 action items that require votes.

Per your contract, a new action item has been added on your behalf:

<u>Action Item</u>: Remove Safety Protections For Faction Sponsors.

"You see that?" I said, looking straight up into the air. I held my arms out. "The hunters are dead. Our troops have arrived. We're still here. We have two floors to get through, and then we're coming for you."

"Carl, Carl," Donut said. "Tell them about the election!"

"Oh, yeah," I said up to the ceiling. The brambles swirled above me. We only had a few minutes left. I pulled a photo of a surprisingly-thin and elderly female Dreadnought out of my inventory and held it up. "So you've probably heard by now that the Dreadnoughts dropped out of faction wars. There's no refunds, so they lost out on a lot of money." I dropped the photo on the ground and stepped on it.

"And then the Burrowers dropped out, too, at the last minute, leaving two spots."

"Carl," Donut said, raising her voice. "Aren't the Burrowers baby-killing mantises like Vrah and what's-her-face?"

"Why, yes, Donut," I said, hamming it up. We hadn't practiced or planned on this little show, but that was okay. I was getting pretty good at improvising. I pulled a photograph of an angry-looking mantis queen from my inventory and held it up. "They're a different type of mantis than poor, dead Circe, but they dropped out. They're smart. They're cowards, but they're smart cowards." I ripped the photo up and tossed it over my shoulders.

I'd received word that the Mantis government had unexpectedly abandoned their stake when I last spoke with Quasar, which ended up being a good thing as there was another entity bidding for the open spot in faction wars: Princess D'Nadia of the Prism.

Zev: Carl… They're going to turn the feed off.

Carl: Is that any way to address a sponsor? Aren't we allowed to trash talk the competition?

I looked around, and we were scattered across the battlefield. Louis and Britney were both awake and were hugging each other at the top of the stairs. Osvaldo, the Brazilian guy who'd taken the memorial crystal was gone, down the stairs with a few surviving members of his team.

"Everybody," I said to the remaining crawlers. "Come here and gather around."

Prepotente was suddenly beside me. Elle and Imani and Bautista and the others, too. Katia held back. She was sitting near the stairs, her face in her hands. Li-Na was with her, talking quietly with her. That was okay. We'd all fought multiple battles today. Tserendolgor came to stand next to me, and in an astonishing show of solidarity, Donut jumped to the dog soldier's shoulder. Behind her, Garrett the tummy acher giggled menacingly.

I smiled up into the air.

"You guys sitting at home have also probably heard that those two faction wars spots have been claimed. One by Princess D'Nadia's Prism Kingdom—I don't have a picture of her. Sorry—and the second by a new non-profit corporation called The Princess Posse."

I thumbed over at Donut, who stood proudly. Her sunglasses were suddenly back on her face.

"Here's the thing," I said. "These hunter assholes on this floor have all died, but at least they had the balls to risk their own lives to face us. When it comes to faction wars, we're not just observers anymore. We're going to the ninth floor and we're going to be one of the teams fighting for survival. But of the nine teams, we're the only ones who can really die. How is that fair? Do you guys think that's fair?"

"It kinda sucks, really," Elle said.

I held up my finger. "What you guys at home probably *don't* know is that we can change the rules. All nine teams get an equal vote."

Zev: Carl. What are you doing?

"Right now the vote is two to seven against turning the safety protocols off."

I pulled out the picture of the now-dead Queen Consort Ugloo of the Skull Empire, mother of the Maestro and Prince Stalwart. She'd died when the orcs had accidentally killed Manasa the singer, and the Valtay had responded by blowing up her yacht.

"It's us and the Skull Empire voting yes to turn the protocols off. The orcs are crazy, and they're all going to die, but they're not

chickens. I'll give them that."

I put the photo away and took out the rest. I held them up in the air like a hand of playing cards. I was missing a naga photo and one from a group called the Operatic Collective because they hadn't filed a lawsuit against me on the previous floor. That was okay. My point was clear.

"The rest of these teams are all cowards. I'm not surprised. It's supposed to be a friendly game, after all. Nobody wants to fight to the death just for fun. Right?"

"I don't want to fight to the death," Donut said. "I tried it, and it is most unpleasant."

"Yet, how is it fair these rich assholes can just sit back and send other people to die? They sent hunters onto this floor knowing they were walking into a grinder. A lot of these guys were people just like you, struggling to survive. Do you know how much it costs to field a team on faction wars? It is a ridiculous amount of money, and my team, the Princess Posse, only had to pay a portion of that fee because eligibility requires a company or government to be either a significant participant or sponsor in order to be authorized just to buy a spot. So just becoming eligible requires more money than god. This is money wasted. It only benefits themselves. It's vanity, and where does that money come from?"

I paused. I was keeping my eyes on the view counter. We were pretty much the only crawlers left on the floor. It was either watch us or go black.

"I'm not naïve. I know these rich cowards aren't going to change their votes. Mister Gonorrhea arrow from the Dream is certainly too much of a walking abscess to change his vote, despite sending members of his own family to die on this floor just because someone said his mom is bangin'."

"She is quite attractive for a bald woman," Donut said. "Not many people could rock that look, but she does it quite well." She looked at Ren. "It's all about the bone structure."

I continued. "But here's something interesting. Three of the teams, namely the Operatic Collective, the Lemig Sortition, and the Viceroys all have local populations that are allowed to vote on all

governmental expenditures. For citizens of those three teams, you have the ability to change the vote here in the game. The rich...”

Zev: You’ve been muted, Carl. Congratulations. Everyone in the universe is now watching two crawlers fight their way through a group of brambles, and that’s it.

Carl: That’s okay, Zev. I got the important part out.

Zev: You’re crazy, Carl. Absolutely crazy.

Carl: And you’re still in a job. Don’t forget what risks were taken to get you there.

Ren was looking at me. “Did you really buy a faction wars spot? How? How is that even possible? First you pull the Houdini act with those dinosaurs, which I still don’t understand, and now this?”

“It’s called crowd-funding, honey. Look it up,” Donut said to the dog woman. “And the trick with my Mongo and his girls was nothing, really. The attendant ballroom B was directly below the main ballroom B where the hunters were. All I did was cast a deep *Hole* in the ceiling when they were behind the curtain. In our room, it didn’t go anywhere because the protection locking us all in, but the hole cast on *all* the stages at the same time. On the attendant stage, the two rooms were pretty much attached, so...” Donut trailed off, and she completely poofed out. She hissed twice as she returned to my shoulder. “What? What? Where did that notification over your head come from... What? What is this? You’re a cheater! An experience hog and a cheater! Carl, do you see this? This is an outrage!” She hissed again.

Surprised, I focused on Ren and the little trophy mark above her head.

Pet Show Champion. Best in Show. Garret the Tummy Acher.

I laughed. I couldn’t help it. I started to laugh so hard that I cried.

I asked our new party leader Prepotente if we should wait for the timer to reach six hours before descending. We could huddle up by the stairs and be safe, but he insisted on descending now. He claimed it wouldn't matter, especially not for us since he'd purchased that Pole Position upgrade.

"Do you really think they're going to vote to put themselves in danger?" Donut asked as we walked toward the stairs. "I don't see how that'll happen."

"Most certainly not," Prepotente agreed. "It's a pointless endeavor."

"I think the Dream will vote yes," I said. "They can change their vote right up until it's time to start. That means we just need two more votes. Quasar says he's certain the Operatic Collective will be forced to vote yes. The people hate the family."

"But then they'll just run away," Donut said. "I'd run away if some crazy guy showed up at game night and pulled out a gun and said, 'Let's play Russian Roulette instead of spin the bottle.'"

"Probably," I said. "It'll be one less obstacle in our way. Either way, it gives us something important. Leverage. We want to get as many people to the tenth floor as possible. The Popovs were just the first. We're going to save as many people as we can."

"Yeah," Donut said. She didn't say the next part out loud. She was still a royal member of the Blood Sultanate. That was a complication. A big one.

"Why do you want that memorial crystal so badly?" I asked Prepotente, changing the subject.

"Do you know what that item does?" He asked. "It's a memorial crystal for the goddess Apito, which is impossible. As far as anyone is aware, the goddess isn't dead. How could she be dead when she ran that party? It's very interesting, and I want it. I have a quest regarding it."

Quest Update. Find Out Who Killed My Son.

Obtain the item: Memorial Crystal: Apito. See if this has any bearing on Geyrun's murder. You still need to speak with the high cleric at the Emberus Shrine in Club Vanquisher.

"I do too," I said after a moment, my mind reeling. The quest update had come in the voice of Emberus, startling me. "How do you know what's going to happen on the next floor?"

"I have a brain, Carl. One that works much better than that blob of simian meat you use." He raised his voice to the small crowd. There were only about 15 of us left huddled in the field of death.

"We need to go," he called. "Everyone, before we go to the next floor. Be sure to stow away your pets. It will be dangerous for them."

"Wait," Katia said. She still looked dazed. "When did you guys form a party?"

Up ahead, a line of my friends entered the stairs. A surge of pride filled my chest. We'd all been bloodied today, but we were still standing tall. Unbroken.

"Rest assured it's just for a little bit," Prepotente said. "It's simply because I need Donut's assistance. Carl is not necessary, but she insists on keeping him with her. Apparently he's been with her family for a long time."

"Eat a bag of dicks, Pony," I said.

He screamed in my face.

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EPILOGUE

Welcome, Crawler to the Seventh floor. "The Great Race."
Time to Level Collapse: 20 Days.

Leaderboard rank: 3
Bounty: 1,600,000 gold
Congrats, Crawler. You have received a Platinum Venison Box.

Entering Pole Position Chamber.

The race will commence shortly. Stay tuned for the rules announcement in ten minutes.

"Carl! We're in a fish tank!" Donut exclaimed.
You have been Peace-Bonded!
***Peace Bonding* has been negated by AI resolution.**
You have been frozen!
***Freeze* has been negated by AI resolution.**
You have been paralyzed!

***Paralysis* has been negated by AI resolution.**

You have been slowed!

***Slow* has been negated by AI resolution.**

This went on for a good fifteen seconds. It was a whole line of debuffs, one after another, all followed by the debuffs getting immediately negated by the AI.

"What the hell?" I muttered. A moment passed, and a few additional debuffs appeared, including a teleport and something called an **Administrative Hold**. All of them were pushed back. There was a flash of light, and four figures with guns—Gnolls—appeared, but they disappeared in a crackle of smoke just as quickly as they'd come.

We looked at each other in confusion. Prepotente screamed. It echoed loudly.

None of us moved for several seconds. Nothing else happened.

Like Donut said, we were in a featureless room made of clear glass. It was no bigger than my living room from my old apartment. It was just the three of us: me, Donut, and Prepotente.

Three of the walls were solid, and the fourth was made of thick, glass bars, standing vertical like a jail cell. Just beyond the bars was a round tunnel curving downward and leading off into the dark, like a waterslide. Over the jail bars was a timer counting down. It was at eight minutes.

"Oh my god, Carl!" Donut suddenly said. She was still completely covered in gore and bug parts. "I'm ranked number one! I'm ranked number one! Just wait until I tell that cheater lady. Hey! Do you feel that tug?"

I did feel it. There was a gentle pulling against my chest, pulling me toward the bars. It wasn't too strong, but I had the sense if I went slack, I'd start sliding across the slippery floor.

Donut jumped from my shoulder and landed upon the glass floor. She did, indeed, start to slide, almost like the floor was actually ice. She returned to my shoulder and dug in her claws.

"I need to pick a new class!"

"Do it quick. Have Mordecai help you."

"The chat's not working! We can't cast magic, either! It says it'll come back when the race starts."

"Okay, look through the choices and give me the top ones."

She gasped. And then glowed. "I picked one!"

"Goddamnit, Donut. Did you read it at least? What was it?"

"Viper Queen! Doesn't that sound delicious? I can shoot poison blobs! Hey, why is my health lower?"

"It's of no consequence," Prepotente said. He'd moved to the back of the chamber, opposite the wall with the bars. He had his hand on the glass. The yellow light of the room was coming from that direction. The world that way glowed, and when I looked directly at it, it hurt my eyes, as if I was staring directly at the sun.

My portal sense chimed while I was looking at the light.

"Carl, look!" Donut said, grabbing my attention. "Everybody else is in fish tanks, too! Look, there's people over there. And above us!"

I looked about, and sure enough there were multiple nearby crawlers, all in similar glass rooms. To our right stood another room, curving away and maybe four feet higher than us. There was nothing below us or directly to our left, but multiple rooms appeared above us, disappearing into the dark.

The rooms were situated in a corkscrew pattern, with us at the very bottom, like we were the first step of a spiral staircase. The wide, glowing space in the middle with the portal—portals, actually—went up and down like a tube or a pole. It followed the spiral of rooms upward, and it disappeared downward into the unknown.

A quick glance at my map confirmed what I suspected.

These weren't just any portals, but stairwells to the eighth floor. One after another, stacked vertically in a line like a string of beads. These were not like normal stairwells. There were no actual stairs. Or doors. They were just round, glowing portals one could enter from any direction. They were right there on the other side of the back wall.

This was the first time we'd seen floor stairwell exits like this, but I knew from the cookbook they were common.

"Hey, lookie up there," Donut said, pointing at a glass room at the very edge of our vision. "Is that Agatha?"

"Holy shit," I said, covering my eyes from the glow. "I can't tell for sure, but that does look like a shopping cart."

"Carl," Prepotente said. He didn't look up from whatever he was doing. He tapped on the glass. "Were you the one who purchased the eighth floor boon?"

"Yes," I said. "It's a book, but I haven't had the chance to look through it yet."

"What was the title? It said it was called *Book of Lore* – Something. Do you know what's inside the book yet?"

"Like I said, Pony, I haven't had the chance to examine it yet. But I do know the full title."

"Don't call me by my special name," Prepotente said. "What's the title?"

"Why don't you tell us what you're doing first?"

He turned his attention back to the wall. He knocked on it like he was searching for a wall stud. "The Borant Corporation is attempting to stop me, but as I suspected, the AI is forcing them to follow their own rules, and they won't be able to. This level is constructed in such a way that it acts like something called a Prince Rupert's drop, but on a massive scale. It's based on a fairytale."

"A prince what?" I asked. "How do you know all this?"

"This level is called the Great Race which also happens to be the name of a well-known fairytale popular in the universe. Based on some additional clues, I determined the seventh floor is indeed based on this tale. I was recently interviewed on a program where they briefly discussed this floor. I was muted from hearing the level's description, but from the subsequent discussion between the host and Cascadia, who was the other guest, I received enough information to form my hypothesis."

"Cascadia?" I asked.

"That woman who gives the daily updates," Prepotente said. "She's a nasty little woman who thinks she's smarter than everyone." He touched something on the wall and screamed. The timer was at five minutes.

"What's the fairy tale?" I asked.

"It's a tale of a boy stuck in a maze where every time he takes a tunnel, it becomes sealed off behind him," Prepotente said. "He's presented with thousands of paths, and he keeps taking the incorrect one, which leads to danger, and he is killed. He's resurrected by a god and forced to start over. Donut, if you would be so kind, could I have the hammer and magical stick?"

She looked at me, and I nodded. Prepotente took them and placed the ball peen hammer and stick on the ground by the back wall and went to a knee. He pulled something from his inventory. A potion.

"I still don't understand why they gave these items to you and not me," Prepotente muttered. He pulled something else from his inventory. It looked like a thermometer. He held it against the wall. "I'm guessing finances."

"Probably the same reason they gave you the potion to give to me," Donut said. "Our sponsors want us to work together."

"Oh, yes," Prepotente said. "Thank you for reminding me."

Crawler Prepotente has left the party.

Princess Donut has been designated party leader.

"What happens in this fairytale?" I asked. "And you didn't answer my question. How do you really know this? You didn't figure this out from an interview."

"My mother's boots," Prepotente said, half-distracted. "Boots of Kiznet's Final Flight. She'd received them from a minor boss just before you allowed her to kill herself. Their description tells the full story. It's an odd tale that combines several different earth folklores like the stories of Achilles and Sisyphus and Wu Gang. The item description was 503% longer than the average item description, making it a curious outlier. So it was obvious it was something we needed to pay attention to. Soon after mother received the item, they started discussing this next floor, and I knew how to proceed."

As he talked, he uncorked the potion and splashed the clear liquid on the glass. Nothing happened. He put the thermometer back against the glass. "Yes. Yes," he said. "Carl. Please. Tell me the name of the book."

I paused, and then I pulled the thin, hardback book from my inventory to show it to him. It was called *Book of Lore – Commonwealth of the Bahamas*. It had the aquamarine and gold stripes with the black triangle of the flag of the Bahamas on the cover, and that was it. I flipped it open, and the pages contained descriptions and stats of a variety of monsters. The page I flipped it to was an owl creature called the Chickcharney. Following each photo was several pages of text.

"Interesting," Prepotente said. "Country names. Hmm. I wonder what that means. You should stow that back into your inventory. I may ask you for your help later." He returned his attention back to his thermometer.

"The Bahamas?" Donut said. "That's where Miss Beatrice went for her vacation!"

Up above the jail bars, the timer, which was at two minutes, flickered and went straight to zero.

Hello, Crawlers!

Welcome to the seventh floor! The countdown is on!

She was talking much more quickly than usual, going so fast it was difficult to understand her, like she was trying to get through it.

Rules. The moment this message ends, each crawler pod will slide to the starting chute and open. This will happen in order. Once opened, you will be pulled through the tunnel and into the maze. All paths lead to the exit. There are no dead ends. The exit portals you see behind you are physically pulling you in, but in order to get to them, you must first negotiate the maze paths, which constitute several hundred kilometers of twisting and turning tubes. Each path leads to a node which in turn leads to multiple branches. In some cases, there are literally hundreds of possible paths. Pitstop saferooms exist in these nodes. You cannot backtrack. Some paths are more dangerous than others. Some require the solving of math equations or puzzles to proceed. All tunnels are passable. The danger level of each branch is marked, oftentimes describing what you'll find along the way and the distance to the next node.

Most major nodes contain a zero tube, or a path with no danger. You must choose your path. Once a path has been passed through by 10 crawlers or a single party, it closes for an amount of time based on difficulty. All zero tubes may only be passed once. So those of you in the back might want…

She trailed off. Behind me, Prepotente picked up the little baton. The one called **The Enchanted Stick of Cascadia's Screams**. He started to push it into the wet spot on the glass. The stick pushed through like magic.

Godsdamnit, Prepotente. Don't do it. Please. I worked so hard to make this floor happen.

The stick stopped about halfway through the wall. Prepotente screamed.

The goat looked up at the ceiling and said, "My mother would've been quite proud of this, I think. She would've called me her very smart boy. I want you to know that she played the piano. She used to let me into the house. Only me, and she would play the piano for me and sing. She was going to do it again at the talent competition. I am never going to get that back."

He picked up the hammer, and he whispered, "You're a good boy, my sweet little Pony. You're a good, smart boy." He gave the stick a very tiny little tap.

Crack.

A lightning pattern of fissures appeared on the wall of glass.

I reached up to my shoulder and pulled Donut into my grip.

Holy shit, I thought. *No way. No goddamned way.*

"Interesting," Prepotente said, looking at the pattern on the glass wall. His voice had become distant. "I thought it would be instantaneous. According to the legend, the Kiznet boy spent years attempting to crack the walls of the impossible maze. He finally created a crack in the resurrection chamber, and it was there at the very entrance where he finally realized..."

Smash!

The wall shattered. But it wasn't just the wall. It was all the walls. The entire level exploded into a fine dust. All around me,

crawlers appeared, all getting sucked into the portals at the same time. I held tightly onto Donut as we flipped, head over toes through the air as we were sucked right into the stairwell.

The last thing I heard before the light enveloped us was Cascadia screaming over the dungeon's announcement system.

Donut and I slammed into a round, dark chamber made of marble. We both hit the ground and slid. I coughed and sat up. Donut shook her head miserably. She proceeded to hack up a hairball onto the floor, which was a mix of blood and bug pieces and glass shards.

We'd stopped at the base of a small stairwell, which led up about ten steps to a platform, and atop the platform floated a glowing, car-sized, holographic globe of the Earth.

Our interface was switched off.

We'd been in a room just like this before. It was between the fourth and fifth floors when we'd picked the air quadrant for the bubble level.

"Did that just happen?" I asked, wiping glass dust off me.

"Carl, he broke the whole level! That lady was really mad at him."

"They tried to stop him," I said. "All of our sponsors came together to make sure he pulled it off. They wanted you there, too. They're trying to get us to work together."

"He's going to be in big trouble," Donut said.

I continued to try to clean myself, but it was pointless. I pulled something from my hair. It was a mantis nymph antenna. It'd been glued there by gore. "I hope everybody got through that okay."

Before you enter the eighth floor, you must secure your starting location.

Warning: all parties consisting of more than five members will be automatically split into squads of five or less. You will remain partied with the other members of your team, but some challenges on this level may require you to interact only with your squad.

Your party consists of two members. It has not been split.

Your squad consists of:

Crawler Donut (Squad Leader)

Crawler Carl

Six spots remain.

You may not break squads on this floor. Boy, I hope you get along.

Squad Leader Donut, please proceed to the platform and choose your starting location. You have ninety seconds to choose, or a random location will be chosen for you.

Donut hopped up onto the platform, skipping the stairs. She put her paw up, and the massive globe spun freely under her control. I tried to follow her up onto the platform, but it wouldn't let me pass.

Squad leader? I didn't like the sound of that.

"Carl, where should I pick?" Donut called.

Damnit, I thought. With everything going on at the end of the sixth floor, I hadn't told anyone the title of that book. Only Prepotente.

This was just like the fifth floor. We were going to be scattered to the wind.

I looked up at the spinning globe. It was covered with green, selectable locations. It didn't appear we could choose the water or Antarctica or any other location that wasn't normally populated. Nothing was labeled, but the shapes were obvious. The blinking outlines were all the countries of the world. Some of the larger countries like Russia, Canada, China, and the United States were broken up into regions, but the map lines were clear.

"I have that book I bought," I said. "It's for the Bahamas, and it contains a bunch of information about the lore and the monsters there including their stats. If that pole position boon was any indication, then that book was designed to be really helpful. Still, I kinda want to pick the western United States because we're familiar

with the geography. And maybe team Meadowlark will pick it. Katia will probably pick Iceland."

Donut continued to spin the globe. She somehow figured out how to make areas zoom in and out. "Do you think we're going back up to the surface? Or is it going to be something weird?"

"I doubt we're going back to the surface."

"We should go with Ibiza. I've always wanted to go there." She spun the globe to the Mediterranean and zoomed in on the small island. "Lots of influencers like going there. As the dungeon's number one crawler, I have a reputation to uphold. I heard the nightclubs there are just divine."

"Is it selectable by itself? Isn't that a part of Spain? And how do you even know where that is?"

"I'm quite versed in geography, Carl. Miss Beatrice spent a lot of time looking at vacation locations, and I know the world map very well. Hmm. It looks like it's Ibiza and the rest of the Balearic Islands all lumped together. Spain is by itself, but there's a little chunk that's separated out that's normally part of the country."

We only had twenty seconds to choose.

"Damnit. Let's just go with the Bahamas. We have the book. It seems like the best choice."

Donut sighed. "Okay," she finally said. "But I'm telling you right now. We are absolutely not going into the water this time."

She spun to the Caribbean. She reached up and clicked.

Your team's starting location has been chosen.

"Goddamnit, Donut," I cried. "That wasn't the Bahamas!"

Katia was a woman possessed. She pulled up her *Find Crawler* skill, found Eva, and noted her location. She was buried over in the corner. The bitch was alive.

You're not getting away this time.

"I'll come with you," Daniel said.

"No," Katia replied. "Help with the rescues and the healing. Li Na will be with me."

She didn't add the unspoken truth.

I don't want you to see this. I don't want you to see me like this.

He paused. Uncertain, but he relented. She could tell that he knew this was necessary. Li Na was a good bodyguard. He knew how dangerous she was. Probably the second most dangerous crawler in the dungeon, only behind the woman they were about to kill.

"Be careful. Do it quick."

"I will," Katia said. "I love you, Daniel."

"I love you, too."

They'd made love before the party, both certain that they were going to die. She'd encompassed him completely, building a cocoon, keeping the eyes of the universe off them both. She'd squeezed too tight.

He'd told her that she was hurting him.

"I do that sometimes," she had said, devastated. She dropped all her mass and curled into a ball, leaving herself raw and naked and exposed. Almost human. All original parts but the missing fingers and the hair and the nose. The hair and the nose were the first things she'd changed, and she'd be damned before she went back.

After his comment, she'd pulled a blitz stick and lit it. Only Daniel knew. She had two big secrets in this dungeon, and this was one of them. She'd found the blitz sticks on one of Eva's victims. Her name had been Sally. She'd worked at the airport. She was a healer, like half of them were, and she'd turned to Eva despite everything. She'd died, just like the rest of them. The only thing left in her inventory were the drugs.

Eva had left them there. A present for Katia. A trap.

Show me Annie, she'd think, and the blitz stick would oblige. Every time. Nine months old. Standing in the crib. Her real mother had gone to jail. Katia had picked the baby up, held her in her arms. The little girl grabbed onto her dark hair, like it was meant to be.

I do that sometimes. I hurt those around me.

"It's okay," Daniel had said. "You're stronger than you think. That's all."

Eva was likely unconscious. Half the people here were. Britney had saved everyone at the last minute thanks to her quick thinking with the jacket, but it had come at a terrible price. Firas was dead. Poor, sweet Firas. He'd asked her to sew a pair of matching tuxedoes.

Fifty-one player killer skulls. Eva had 51 player killer skulls over her head.

If I had killed her instead of Hekla, she wouldn't have had the chance.

Why do you do this, Fannar used to say. *You're dumb. Dumber than you look. Do you really think I'd start a family with you? You're a joke*. *Do you really think you could be a mother? Do you really think I'd let you do more damage to this world?*

"She's under here," Katia said to Li Na, who nodded. Together, they pulled the dead bugs away, revealing the unconscious form of Eva. Katia was careful not to touch Li Na's skin. She'd done that once, and it had almost killed her.

Eva would wake up in ten seconds. Her health was almost gone.

That snake-like face. Katia couldn't remember her any other way.

Li Na cast a spell. *Preserve Injury*. It'd prevent her from healing herself. She pointed at Eva's top, right hand. There was a ring there. One that would let her disappear and escape. Katia pulled Eva's old sword, the Left Fang of the Green Sultan, the one she'd dropped on the train all those floors ago, and used it cut the hand free from her body. Then she cut the poisonous rapier from her top, left stub, leaving Eva with only two remaining hands, both on the bottom.

Eva's eyes fluttered open. She gasped in pain.

"It ends today," Katia said, lifting the sword.

"You won't keep winning. Fuck you. Fuck all of you."

"This isn't winning, Eva," Katia said, pausing in her attack. "What happened to you?"

"Heal me," she said.

Katia laughed. Li Jun looked nervously between Katia and his sister.

"Kill her," Li Na said, emotionless.

"Please," Eva said. "Katia, I'm sorry."

"That's all I wanted," Katia heard herself say. "I just wanted to hear you afraid for once."

She took the sword, and she plunged it into Eva's chest. She pierced the metal of Eva's magical breastplate, punching right through it with the blade.

You're stronger than you think. That's all.

Katia leaned in. "Die, Eva."

In the coming days, Katia would play this next instant over and over in her mind. She'd smoke one of those blitz sticks and say, *show me stopping her*. Or *show me killing her before she woke up*.

Each time, the blitz stick would oblige. It'd show her a reality that wasn't so.

Mordecai had warned against these things. He'd said they were addictive. She hadn't listened. She was glad for those moments, despite the fact they were shorter each time.

In those false, drug-induced dreams, Katia would catch Eva's hand. She'd smash her head in with a fist formed out of her own chest. She would replay the moment over and over in her imagination. Each time, she'd stop Eva's final, cruelest act, and when Katia would wake up from that dream, she would wish more than anything in this world that it was true. That she'd been fast enough.

But that's not what occurred.

Her sponsor, the Apothecary, knew this was going to happen. She'd given Katia a hat to wear. It would've stopped this. She'd given the hat to Carl, leaving her head bare.

Using her left, lower hand, Eva pulled something as she died. Not from her inventory, but from the back shoulder of her own armor. It'd been there the whole time, attached to her purple, glittering breastplate. Katia had noticed it earlier, but she'd assumed it was part of the armor's decoration.

The Crown of the Sepsis Whore.

That damn crown. A tiara, really. The first loot item Donut had received. It was a unique item that disappeared if you took it off.

Donut had lost it at the end of the third floor. Katia had been there when it happened.

It had found its way to Eva. And from Eva's hand, it found its way to Katia's head.

Eva was dead before the crown even equipped itself. But it didn't matter. The damage was done.

"Shit," Katia said, reaching up to touch her head. She caught eyes with Li Jun and Li Na. It melded into her form, disappearing from sight. "Shit, shit, shit."

With the crown on Katia's head, it meant one thing. Only one of them, Donut or Katia, would be allowed to take the stairs from the ninth to the tenth floor.

I do that sometimes. I hurt those around me.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

(This is where we switch to third person and pretend like Matt isn't writing this himself.)

Matt Dinniman is a writer and artist from Gig Harbor, WA. When he isn't attending cat shows, wrangling dogs, feeding turtles, playing bass in a punk/metal band, or writing books that make guys named Kyle threaten to kill his family because he called a goblin an incel, he designs cat-themed greeting cards and decorations. If you've ever walked into a Target or an IKEA or a Home Goods, looked at the weird wall art they have for sale there, and thought to yourself, *who buys this crap?* The answer is, "Not nearly as many people as Matt would like." So please buy all his books. (Or his art!)



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www.patreon.com/dinniman

Follow me Twitter!

Also, if you're on Reddit, there's a subreddit about all things Dungeon Crawler Carl.

And finally, I have a Spotify playlist where all the songs mentioned in the series can be found in one place. You may find that here.

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ALSO BY MATT DINNIMAN

Kaiju: Battlefield Surgeon (Horror LitRPG!)

Dominion of Blades Series (LitRPG!)

The Shivered Sky Series (Angels vs demons!)

The Grinding (A horror novel!)

Trailer Park Fairy Tales (Short stories! One of them even won a fancy award!)

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THE PAGE WHERE WE TOUT FACEBOOK GROUPS SO THEY LET US SPAM THEM ABOUT THIS BOOK

Over on Facebook, if you want to talk about Gamelit. I mean if you really want to talk about Gamelit, check out the Gamelit Society!

Wait, there's more! There's the super-awesome extreme LitRPG Books Group!

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ONE MORE!

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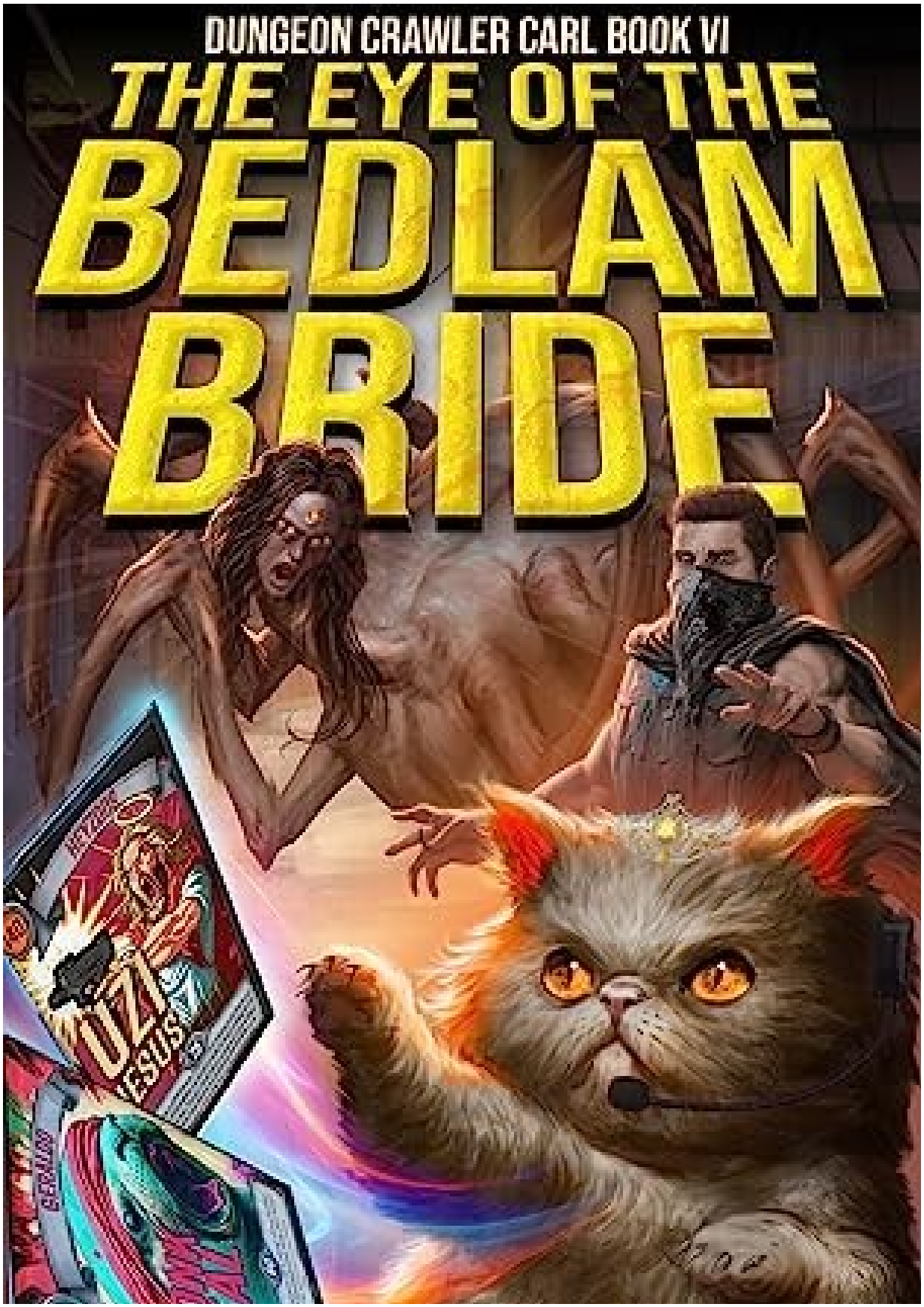
DUNGEON CRAWLER CARL BOOK VI
THE EYE OF THE BEDLAM BRIDE
UZI
JESUS



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DUNGEON CRAWLER CARL BOOK VI

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As always, this book couldn't exist without all the fans out there giving me support and kudos and love and weird, 3 A.M. messages that may or may not be threats. I love you all. That said, love = respect. You don't send butthole pics to people you respect. Please stop sending them. Especially you, Dwight. Holy shit. You need to see a goddamned doctor. Rebecca, on the other hand, …we good.

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One More!

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"The moral of the story is: **I chose a half-measure when I should have gone all the way. I'll never make that mistake again.**" **- Mike Ehrmantraut, *Breaking Bad*.**

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OMG. WHAT A FLOOR!

Hi, everyone!

Thank you so much for signing up for the Princess Posse fanclub newsletter! This is the only OFFICIAL fanclub. I heard rumors of another group called the Donut Holes, and while I appreciate their enthusiasm, this is the ONLY place to get THIS newsletter. I absolutely DO NOT approve of the name Donut Holes.

Anyway!

My name is GC, BWR, NW Princess Donut the Queen Anne Chonk, and I am here to give you a quick recap of what happened on the last few floors. I know we should have been doing this the whole time, and perhaps I will talk Carl into going back and helping me write proper recaps of what happened in the past, but you're here now, and we're about to start the eighth floor. Here's what happened on the sixth and seventh.

The sixth floor started with Carl temporarily giving up the Gate of the Feral Gods to Orren the Liaison because he was afraid Carl would get all Carl-y and use it to ruin the floor. I didn't see this happen, but I imagine Carl was all grumpy about it. It ended up being a good thing because we got Sledgie and three other cretin rock bodyguards to escort us for the next three floors in exchange! Isn't that great?

I got the most exquisite temporary class. I was a Legendary Diva! I could cast spells when I sing!

(I hear my album will soon be available on tunneling platforms, so be sure to upgrade to Ultimate Supreme Fan Tier Three or above to get a free ten-second preview of each song before they're released!)

This was the floor where the stupid hunters were trying to kill us. That didn't work out too well for them, now did it? There was this one bug lady, and her name was Vrah. We killed her annoying little sister right in the beginning, and that made Vrah really mad. When Carl went to that lame CrawlCon later on, he met Vrah's mom and made *her* really mad, too. So mad she flew all the way to Earth just to participate as a god named Diwata.

Katia left the party so she could hunt down Eva, her player killer ex-best friend, and that was really sad because I liked being in a party with Katia. She managed to get Eva in the end, though, and I really hope she'll come back to the party. I love Carl, of course, but it would be nice to have her back. I miss having her with us. I suppose now that she's in love with Daniel Bautista he'd have to come with her. That would be okay, too, even if he looks like a generic brand Tony the Tiger.

We learned at the end of the floor there would be a party with a talent contest and pet show for the hunters and the top 50 crawlers. It would be at the high elf castle, led by the mean Queen Imogen. The party was called the Butcher's Masquerade.

My Mongo met a few fellow dinosaurs, including a female mongoliensis named Kiwi. Honestly, I don't want to talk about how that started because it was highly traumatic for my brave, sweet boy, whose innocence was savagely ripped away from him. He's still healing.

Also, way back on the third floor, we met a bra-deficient Elite named Signet covered in gross tattoos. You may have seen her show, as Carl and I were both guest stars. It was called *Vengeance of the Daughter*. Carl was contractually bound to continue with that story, which was to help her reclaim her crown and defeat queen Imogen of the high elves, who helped kill Signet's mother a long time ago.

My friend Prepotente and his former person Miriam Dom got in a bit of trouble, and, unfortunately, Miriam Dom passed away. But Prepotente was a very brave goat about it. Miriam used to have another goat, too, one named Bianca who is quite friendly when you get to know her. She's a demon goat dragon thing, and she and Prepotente are off on their own now.

I got into a little tussle with a crawler named Lucia Mar, and I killed one of her disgusting dogs, who absolutely deserved it. We later found out that there's something weird going on with Lucia Mar that I honestly just don't understand, but Florin, our crocodilian friend who says he's from France but was in Africa and has an Australian accent, is determined to find out that full story. He used to hate her because Lucia killed his girlfriend, but now they're friends. I think. I'm not sure, honestly.

We had a quest to find and help a giant allosaurus ballerina named Big Tina. It turns out Kiwi is Big Tina's mom, and they both used to be bears. They were changed when Scolopendra, the final boss of the whole dungeon, attacked a long time ago.

And then my ex-boyfriend Ferdinand just randomly showed up, thinking he could just waltz right back into my life and I would swoon over him. As if. He was now the pet of Queen Imogen of the high elves.

All of this time, we were preparing for the Butcher's Masquerade. Mongo prepared for the pet show, training tirelessly, and I coordinated for the talent show. Carl figured out that Queen Imogen would be a country boss, and we had to be ready for it.

When the party came, all of this stuff happened at once. Signet finally got her revenge against Imogen, though it was really sad because she had to kill herself to do it. My Mongo and Kiwi killed Vrah, and I helped kill her mom with my *Laundry Day* spell. Carl killed the last hunter, meaning we got all of them. At the same time, YOU GUYS really pulled through! We used the funds from the fan club, and OMG WE DID IT. We bought a spot on Faction Wars!

Thanks to Carl and Sledgie, we got all of Signet's former tattoos and helpers, Kiwi and Tina, and all of the changelings into the elf castle, and we teleported the whole castle to the ninth floor,

meaning we now have an official army. Ferdinand, too, though we don't know if he's going to help us when we get there. Carl and I are now ninth floor warlords! Isn't that great? There's not much we can do about that on this new eighth floor, but because we're warlords, we can vote for stuff that happens on Faction Wars. Carl is trying to make it so we can all really kill each other. Nobody thinks that's going to happen. We'll see. Carl is good at making impossible things possible.

It wasn't all good. Lots of sad things happened. My friend Firas died. He was really nice. Another guy named Gideon died. I didn't know him very well except in the chat, but Carl was sad because he'd talked Gideon into helping us. Gwendolyn Duet died. This mushroom guy who was a really good singer died. The Popov brothers died, too, but then something amazing happened. They turned into babies and were kicked out of the game. Zev said they were okay! That made everyone happy.

Also, the crime of the century was committed during the Butcher's Masquerade.

An evil, vile, experience hog crawler named Tserendolgor somehow managed to get her hands on the voting ballot box for the pet show and changed the votes, stealing Mongo's crown from him and handing it off to her disgusting meatball pet, Garret. I want you guys to continue to pore over the footage and find the smoking gun. I've seen some of your investigative efforts so far, and I'm looking forward to more. We need definitive proof! We *will* stop this injustice! #JusticeForMongo.

I, of course, found myself at the top of the crawler list after my performance at the talent show.

And then, right when we thought we were going to the seventh floor, Prepotente broke the whole thing! We pretty much went straight from the sixth to the eighth, but not before I briefly chose a new class. I was a Viper Queen for a few minutes.

And that's it. I know, I know. I'm missing so much. I didn't talk about Samantha and the body Signet gave her to use, or how Britney got burned, or how Tran lost his legs, or about how Zev got a promotion because the Borant government lost control of the crawl

to the Valtay brain worms. Or that weird ring Carl got that I think is giving him headaches.

Nor have I talked about Miss Beatrice's return and appearance on Odette's program. It's not worth examining, and I haven't thought about it once since it happened and there's nothing more to discuss.

Anyway, thank you again for subscribing. Remember to pay your dues! If you forget, you stop getting the newsletter and all the other great benefits, and we don't want that. For an extra twenty credits a week, you get access to the super exclusive Team Mongo Mommies, which grants entrance to the platinum private Mongo Mommies chat room, officially licensed Mongo merch along with access to a very special song I wrote all about him! I love you all!

XOXO

Best in Dungeon, Current Reigning Champion, GC, BWR, NW Princess Donut the Queen Anne Chonk.

Co-Warlord of the Princess Posse Faction Wars Team.

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PROLOGUE

Warning: Level Collapse is Imminent.

"It's two gods," Odette cried. "Get ready!"

The twin monstrosities appeared, towering out of the mist like a pair of uneven mountains. One was almost three times the size of the other. Odette hadn't been expecting there to be two gods, but she wasn't surprised. The summoning box did that sometimes, especially this deep.

"Two gods?" Chaco shouted from his spot near the stairwell. "Is it still going to work?"

"Gods, I hope so," Odette muttered.

Her non-corporeal avatar floated between her crawlers and the two storm deities. She zoomed with her helmet, trying to see what gods they were. Relief flooded her when she focused on the smaller of the two. Dodola, which was who Mordecai had been attempting to summon. The other, larger deity was Adad.

Odette: You need to get back here.

Mordecai: I'm trying. I don't think I can fly in this downpour. Are they storm gods? Did it work?

Odette: It worked. Now hurry. Don't let them see you. Try your slake raven form.

Sizzling acid rain poured from the heavens, melting everything it touched. Odette zoomed in further, watching the aura of both the gods. The hulking form of Adad was AI controlled. The smaller, female Dodola was sponsored. The name **Huanxin** blazed there

with a little, green dot, meaning the grixist sponsor was present and driving the storm goddess.

She opened a new chat window.

Odette: Infusing the summoning box with a chain-lightning potion worked. It's Huanxin like you said it would be.

The floor was almost done. The nine puzzle pieces had all been collected. They just needed one more activation, and the four crawlers could leave and enter the stairwell down to the eleventh floor. She looked nervously at the clock. It would be close.

Armita: I'm not certain about this.

Odette: This was your godsdamned idea. We don't have time. Tell her we're in place and that we have a deal.

Armita: I already did. She just wrote back. She wants a bigger cut. She says 10% is too little. She wants 33.

Odette: Godsdamnit. You tell that rich cunt we don't need her, then. She can just fuck off. We summoned two gods. We'll use the other one.

The bonus Odette received if Mordecai reached the eleventh floor would be just enough money that she could buy a residency berth in the inner system. She wouldn't be considered wealthy by any means, not like she would if Mordecai reached the 12th, but she would have just enough to get herself settled. She would be a citizen, guaranteed shelter and oxygen and food, which would allow her to finally be safe. She'd have access to free body regeneration, allowing her to regrow her legs. She'd finally be able to put this nightmare behind her.

She still had five seasons left on her indentureship, but per her contract, they'd knock nine seasons off if one of her crawlers reached the eleventh floor. If they opened that stairwell and Mordecai made it down, Odette would be free. Finally.

But if she paid 33% of her bonus to that raging bitch, she wouldn't have enough money. She'd have to settle somewhere as a non-citizen, always scrambling. It'd take another 100 cycles to earn enough, and only if she was lucky enough to get a job. It would

never end. Even that 10% she'd already promised was cutting it close.

She thought of Huanxin Jinx, the grixist heiress who sponsored Dodola every season. Odette pictured herself strangling the thin-necked, hairy bitch until all six eyes popped out of her head.

They could quadruple that bonus, and it would be nothing but a day's allowance to Huanxin. She wasn't doing this for the money. This was how she entertained herself. The Ascendency battles didn't start until the crawlers reached the twelfth floor or they were zeroed out, and the heiress was bored. Nothing more.

Armita, Odette's friend and former party member, had secured herself a gig as a demigod attendant for the Celestial Ascendency, and this whole scheme had been her idea. The AI subroutines didn't regularly monitor communications between NPCs, and they were legally forbidden from monitoring Ascendency sponsor communications. She was working as the go-between.

When it became clear that Mordecai's team was going to need the intervention of a storm god to survive, it'd been Armita who suggested talking to Huanxin. They'd ask the rich heiress if she'd be willing to drive Dodola to the door location and hit the puzzle with a spell. She'd agreed, for a price.

Without the bribe, the legality of having Armita break character and ask a sponsor for their assistance was sketchy at best. Once money became involved, it clearly became cheating, especially since Odette would be reaping actual credits as a result of the help. It was cheating, and it was fraud.

But what choice did she have? This whole tenth floor had been a disaster. From the start, the crawlers were given a choice of four tracks. Uzzi had blindly chosen the most difficult path. The location of the exit was revealed, but multiple steps had to be completed in order to open the door.

Less than 200 crawlers had survived the Faction Wars chaos, which was usual. The skyfowl seasons typically ended with a ninth-floor slaughter. The idiots always wanted to participate in the fighting. Half of the survivors had taken deals right at the beginning of the tenth. And then half of the rest had died making their way

through the floor. Odette only knew of five others who'd made it to the eleventh so far.

Mordecai still hadn't returned. His ability to change forms had made him the best candidate to place the summoning box and activate it. He'd had to place it far enough away where they had time to prime the puzzle, but not too far so the god wouldn't notice them.

Behind her, Chaco, Hold Steady, and Uzzi worked furiously to prepare the final ritual. Chaco was a wolf-headed pterolykos. The other two had chosen to remain skyfowl, like 91% of their kind. Hold Steady worked his magic, keeping the puzzle pieces primed. Chaco plucked at the strings of his tar, attracting the attention of the gods with his bard magic. Uzzi guarded them both. The skyfowl warrior had limited magic, despite his Storm Commander class, but he had a party protection spell that kept the caustic rain from burning them all.

The nine pieces pulsed red a few times before turning blue. It was ready. Only one last step remained. The puzzle needed to physically touch a storm god *or* be hit with god-tier storm magic. If either of those happened, the key would form and the door would open.

But it wasn't as simple as dropping the completed puzzle disk on the head of a god from afar. The puzzle needed to *stay* primed, constantly infused with magic, which required Hold Steady to remain nearby. And the puzzle had to remain within the circle of the stairwell.

This last part was next to impossible, and they'd all wanted to take a deal rather than risk not making it.

Odette had already earned her tenth floor bonus no matter what happened. She'd convinced them to go for it, despite the difficulty. It wasn't all greed. She liked all the party members, especially Mordecai. It was never worth it to take a deal on the tenth floor. Never. They were better off dead.

They were close. So damn close.

Armita: I'm not telling her that, Odette. You know how petty she is.

If they could get either storm god to hit the puzzle with a spell—any spell—they'd be good to go. If Chaco's *Lightning Rod* song worked properly, any spells thrown in their general direction would hit the target. The problem was, the crawlers needed to remain nearby. The whole level was about to collapse.

It was always a bad idea to stay in the vicinity of a god. Always.

Huanxin had the ability to enchant the rain. She could make it healing rain or turn each drop into a mob or a thousand other things. It was already raining. All she needed to do was cast the spell, the magic rain would hit the puzzle, and that would be enough. All four party members would make it to the eleventh floor, and then they could reevaluate their survival chances.

If Huanxin refused to help, they still had Adad. He was likely to summon a cloud of lightning-shooting bugs at any moment. With Chaco's spell, the bugs would still target the puzzle. It wasn't ideal, but it would work.

Warning: Level collapse will commence in minus three.

The number 99 appeared flashing in her interface. The units started to count down.

Odette cursed herself for getting involved in this. They could've done it without cheating. She hadn't trusted the team. This would've worked without the bribe.

Odette: What is taking you so long?

Mordecai: I'm grounded, in a bipedal form. I didn't have enough power to choose anything else. I'm too far from Uzzi's protection, and I have to use my *Climate Refuge* spell.

Odette: Hurry your feathered ass!

Mordecai: I think the two gods are about to fight!

Odette: Probably not this time. Dodola…

Odette didn't finish. She watched in horror as Dodola suddenly turned and stabbed something into the leg of the much-larger Adad. The god disappeared. She'd teleported him away. She turned toward the three crawlers and started casually marching in their direction.

Armita: She says she's changed her mind again. Now she wants 50%, and if you don't agree, she's going to zero out the party. I'm sorry, Odette. This is all my fault.

Godsdamnit.

She had to agree. What else could she do? She looked back at the three crawlers huddled by the exit. The round puzzle floated in midair with Uzzi and Hold Steady right behind it. Chaco stood to the side, still plucking at his instrument.

But then, a wave of anger washed over Odette. She thought of the dungeon AI, forcing her to choose between saving Armita and Pieter. She'd only had seconds. Her best friend versus her cousin. She'd picked her friend. For Odette's entire life, people were taking advantage of her. Forcing her to submit, to choose. Telling her what to do. They'd taken her entire planet. Her people. Her family. Pieter was a good, sweet boy. But he wasn't as strong as Armita. They'd forced Odette to fight. Forced her to work in this dungeon for so, so long. Every step forward she'd made was only because she'd first had to ask someone else's permission to do so. She was tired of always being bullied. She was tired of being forced to choose between two, equally terrible results.

She looked up at the approaching deity. Huanxin Jinx. Fuck that bitch.

Odette: Armita, tell her we don't have a deal.

Armita: Are you sure?

Odette: Yes.

She then moved to a new chat, but before she could type out the message, she was interrupted by Mordecai.

Mordecai: Dodola is a sponsored god. She's not going to help us. I'm sorry my friends. I have a plan, but it's going to kill me. Uzzi, see you on the other side, brother.

Uzzi: Do not even dare.

Odette waved away her first message and moved to her private chat with Mordecai.

Odette: What the hells are you doing?

Mordecai: My *Final Blow* skill. It lets me target the puzzle. It's at the top of the list. Odette, I think this is what I'm supposed to do with it. It's why the AI gave it to me.

If Mordecai targeted the puzzle and then got himself hit with a spell from the god, the puzzle would also get hit by the spell. Up

until now, the skill only allowed him to target individuals. He'd been using it to great effect, allowing him to find invisible and hidden mobs.

It was a desperate, last act. He wouldn't be protected from the spell.

If Mordecai died, Odette's season would be done. She'd be stuck here for five more crawls at least.

The timer was down to 65 units.

Odette: Wait thirty units. Keep moving toward us. Let me try something first.

Before he could answer, she pulled that second chat back up.

Odette: Chaco. Do you have the dart?

Chaco: Yes! But how can that help now?

They'd spent half of their time on this floor hunting down the priceless artifact only for it to be useless. When they'd learned that it had to be a specific type of god to unlock the puzzle, it'd ruined all of their plans since none of them had seen a storm god before this. This whole floor had been them choosing between four paths, and each time, they'd ended up picking the worst possible choice. They'd instead had to find the summoning cube, which wasn't much better.

If only it had been a holy grenade. They'd been everywhere on the previous floor.

Odette: There's only one way to survive. Worship Dodola and then use the dart.

Chaco: What? No. Who would I even use it on? Would that even work? She's already summoned.

Odette: It'll work. We can't use it on Hold Steady because he's keeping the puzzle primed. The dart doesn't let you use it on yourself. You'll have to use it on Uzzi and then contain him with the cube.

Chaco: Have you lost your faculties? You want me to kill Uzzi? It's not going to happen.

Odette: You have to do it quickly.

Chaco: I don't think you heard me, Odette. Mordecai has a plan. He is doing it of his own free will. It's an honorable death.

Odette: If Mordecai dies, I go away.

Chaco: I don't care.

Odette: Godsdamnit, Chaco. Do you think you'll survive six units on the next floor without me? You don't just show up in the Outreach Guild like you did on this floor. You have to find one.

Chaco: Mordecai will kill me. And he'll leave the party anyway.

Odette: I have you in my chat. If you do this, I promise I'll help you no matter what. Without me, you will die. All of you will die. Uzzi will be useless without his brother. I'll talk to Mordecai. I'll convince him this was the best path. Dodola is a sponsored god. She knows what's happening. Mordecai's plan isn't going to work. This is the only way.

Dodola roared. She'd paused, not getting any closer.

Armita: She wants to know if you're sure. She sounds angry.

Chaco: Godsdamn you, Odette.

Odette: Do it now, Chaco.

This whole time, Uzzi and Mordecai were going back and forth in the group chat. The timer ticked down, slowly but inevitably plummeting toward zero. Odette knew if she actually told Uzzi what the plan was, he'd be on board. Skyfowl were like that. Proud to a fault. But they didn't have time.

Odette: Mordecai! Abort! We have a plan that'll work. Get here now!

At the same moment, Chaco worshipped Dodola. He was the first in the party to worship a deity. She'd told them from the start how dumb it was to tie yourself to one.

"What are you doing?" she heard Hold Steady cry.

"I'm sorry, my friend," Chaco said to Uzzi, who'd turned to regard the large bard.

The skyfowl looked down at the dart in Chaco's wolf-like hand, surprised. The Dart of Ophiotaurus. Uzzi lifted his head to the raining sky and cawed. A war cry. He took a step closer to the puzzle and spread his wings in supplication.

He understood.

Chaco threw the dart right into Uzzi's breast. Behind them, Dodola roared in indignation and became unglued. She rushed forward, attempting to cast a spell. She vanished before she could.

"Steady, step back!" Chaco cried as he cast his level-15 *Circle of Containment*, locking the puzzle in with Uzzi, who'd fallen onto his back. His body pulsated and crackled.

"No," Mordecai cried, rushing up. He was in the form of a Ratkin Brute, the first form he'd learned how to make. He stopped before the semicircle shell, falling to his knees. He placed his hands against the containment. "Uzzi! Uzzi!"

The skyfowl continued to convulse. Hold Steady cawed angrily as he concentrated on the puzzle, just on the other side of the containment.

One could cast spells on the things inside of the shell but not vice-versa.

Uzzi's chest ripped open as the involuntary summoning completed.

Crawler Uzzi has fallen.

"No!" Mordecai cried.

Fifteen units before the collapse. The shell would end on its own in ten.

Dodola formed, hunched over in the shell, forced into the smaller size by the containment. The puzzle, trapped with her, shattered. A round, glowing mote of light appeared. The key. It moved toward the stairwell portal, but it, too, was contained by the spell.

Armita: Odette, what did you do? She just messaged that she's going to kill the both of us, starting with me.

Dodola raged. She fired lightning, but it just pinged about within the circle, spinning and circling, getting faster and faster. It passed harmlessly through the key mote, which was also made of lightning.

"Oh, Huanxin," Odette muttered. "You poor, dumb fool. That wasn't very intelligent, was it?"

Odette: She can't kill you if she's not in the game anymore.

The dart worked much like the holy grenade, but with two differences. The holy grenade made it so no vessel was required to make the summoning happen. With the dart, they'd been forced to pick someone. There were no living mobs left on the floor. It had to be Uzzi.

The second big difference was that the god's immunity wouldn't commence until five units after they fully formed.

Dodola was immune to the lightning bolt itself, but not the area attack it inflicted at the end of its run.

"Cover your eyes," Odette called.

The spinning, level-20 lightning spell exploded within the shield. The light was that of a supernova.

The god died. Not even sound escaped the containment. Just the light.

A deity has fallen. The heavens tremble with rage.

Behind her, Chaco gasped. A glowing laurel leaf appeared over his head. He'd jumped ten levels. They'd given him credit for the kill.

"No," Mordecai continued to say, over and over.

"What did you do?" Hold Steady asked, looking at Chaco. "You murdered Uzzi."

"I... No!" Chaco said, looking at his claws.

"Wait, what? What is this?" Mordecai said, looking up, confusion on his rat face. "Did you use the dart? On my *brother*?"

The containment spell whiffed out.

Dodola's dead form slumped over and then dissipated into ash. The key, unaffected by all of this, moved to the stairwell, opening it up.

Armita: I have three seasons left, Odette. She's here every year. Killing me would be nothing to her. You're getting out. But I'm not. What did you do?

Odette: I'm sorry, friend.

"You, motherfucker!" Mordecai cried, crashing into Chaco. He tackled him, both of them tumbling into the stairwell. They both disappeared. Hold Steady called out and flew after them both, also disappearing, leaving Odette alone.

Silence followed.

Chaco would be fine. With the godkiller achievement, he'd be able to make a good deal. She'd lied to him. The Outreach Guilds were always right there on the eleventh level. He'd generate right inside the guild. It would be just like the tenth floor. He wouldn't have to ever see Mordecai again.

I made it, she thought as the level started to collapse. *I'm free of this nightmare. Finally free*.

Mordecai: I am going to kill you, Odette. I am going to get free of this place, I am going to find where you are, and I am going to kill you.

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[PART 1]

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HAVANA

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[1]

Welcome, Crawler to the eighth floor. "The Ghosts of Earth."
Time to Level Collapse: 21 Days.

Views: 13 septillion
Followers: 331 Quadrillion
Favorites: 41 Quadrillion

Leaderboard rank: 3
Bounty: 2,000,000 gold

Congrats, Crawler. You have received a Platinum Venison Box.

Remaining Crawlers: 38,532

It is December 10th.
Your squad has six open slots.

Entering El Capitolio Nacional de Cuba.

Donut and I stepped through the door of the globe chamber into the rotunda of a large, empty room made of marble and tile. I was instantly reminded of the US Capitol building, which I'd visited once long ago.

Blue and magenta floor tiles spread in both directions. Enormous arched windows dotted the walls at regular intervals. The curved, half-pipe ceiling was also tiled with bronze squares in relief. In the center was a round divot, leading to an enormous cupola. It was pitch black outside, and the room was lit by what looked like street lamps placed at intervals, giving the room a warm, yellow light.

This wasn't the US Capitol building. It was similar in architecture, but not quite. This was El Capitol. The historic capitol building in downtown Havana.

Cuba.

We were the only ones here.

"Listen," Donut was saying as we explored the empty hall. Her voice echoed. "As the party leader and dungeon's number one crawler, I just felt that throwing ourselves right into the Bahamas was a bad idea, so I picked someplace close. Do you really think it was a coincidence that they gave you a book about the Bahamas when that's where Miss Beatrice was? It was quite obviously a trap..." She suddenly gasped. "Hey! I went down to number two! Carl, I lost my top spot!"

"I'm not surprised," I said, taking another step into the large room. I focused on the windows. My map showed nothing outside. I focused on one of the brass lamps and the red and green ribbon hanging from it. It was a Christmas decoration. "Did you see that notification when we got here? It said it was December 10th."

"Carl, I need to pick a new class! Hey, I have more time to pick now. I now have ten minutes to choose!"

"Good," I said.

Carl: Mordecai, are you there? Donut needs help with her new class.

Mordecai: Holy shit, I'm here. It just blinked, and now we've skipped a floor. I heard what the announcement said. By his left tit, what did you guys do?

Carl: I had nothing to do with it. That was all Prepotente. Talk to Donut. She picked something on her own last floor, but she only had it for a minute.

Donut: VIPER QUEEN WAS A GREAT CLASS, AND I'LL HAVE YOU KNOW I KEPT MY ABILITY TO SPIT POISON EVEN THOUGH I NEVER USED IT. I DON'T KNOW WHY EVERYBODY ALWAYS GETS GRUMPY WHEN I MAKE MY OWN DECISIONS. CARL IS ALWAYS MAKING DECISIONS WITHOUT ASKING ME. I STILL HAVE ALL MY BARD ABILITIES, TOO, THOUGH I FORGOT A COUPLE SONGS.

Mordecai: Donut, hit me with your choices.

Donut jumped to my shoulder as I explored. As they went back and forth, I continued to examine the room. There were multiple doors, but they were all locked. At the end of the hall was a door, and there was a level stairwell behind it. I walked to the door and tried to open it.

You need a key to open this door.

Damnit.

I moved to one of the tall windows and put my hand against it.

This area has not yet been unlocked.

I put my face against the glass to look outside, but I couldn't see anything. It was just swirling, black smoke.

Imani: Everybody check in. Where are you? We picked western United States, and it looks like we're in some indoor water park in the middle of nowhere. Some place called the Great Wolf Lodge. We can't go outside yet. Elle and I have been placed in different squads, and they made us pick the starting location separately, but we both picked the same place.

Katia: We're in Iceland. We can't go out, either. There's a stairwell here, but we need a key.

Carl: Same. We're in Cuba. Havana.

Elle: Cuba? Prepotente picked Cuba? Why would he do that?

Carl: He dumped us before this level started. I don't know where he is. He never answers my chats, but I suspect he might be in the Bahamas.

Elle: So Donut picked Cuba? Or was that you? Are you looking for cigars or something?

Li Na: We are in the Galaxy Soho building in Beijing. There are hundreds of crawlers here with us.

Imani: Is Chris still in your party? He never went back to mine.

Li Na: He is with us.

Katia: Florin, where are you?

Imani: I thought Florin was in your party.

Katia: He left just before Carl and Prepotente broke the last level.

Elle: Yeah, that was really fucked up, Carl. You need to warn us next time. I don't know if skipping levels is good for our health. Not all of us are as trained up as you.

Carl: I love how you guys just assume I had something to do with it. That was 100% Pony. I had no idea that was going to happen.

Florin: I am in Ecuador.

I continued to explore the floor, but there didn't appear to be a way out.

Donut: I AM ABSOLUTELY NOT PICKING SOMETHING CALLED AN AGONY URCHIN, MORDECAI. THAT SOUNDS DISGUSTING. IT CHANGES THE WAY I LOOK, AND I WILL NEVER PICK A CLASS THAT CHANGES THE WAY I LOOK. I HAVE AN IMPORTANT IMAGE TO MAINTAIN.

Mordecai: It's a great class. It's either that or Master Telephone Psychic. That one is pretty good, too, especially with your charisma, but you didn't do so well with psionic attacks on the previous floor.

Donut: THAT SONG WAS VERY HARD TO SING.

Mordecai: Well, those are your two best choices by far. Urchin will help keep you safe and Psychic will make your mapping ability better and give you some offensive charm spells.

Donut: I'M PICKING PSYCHIC.

Donut glowed.

Donut: HEY! I GOT EVERYTHING LISTED AND A FEW ADDITIONAL SPELLS! THIS IS GREAT!

Mordecai: Your character actor skill is powerful now. What spells did you get?

Donut: SO, I STILL HAVE THE VENOM SPITTER SKILL FROM THE LAST FLOOR, BUT IT'S ONLY LEVEL 3. MY MAP CAN SEE A LOT BIGGER AND MORE STUFF. I CAN SEE THE WHOLE BUILDING. IT'S ALMOST LIKE WE ALREADY HAVE THE MAP FROM A NEIGHBORHOOD BOSS, BUT I DON'T SEE ANY MOBS AT ALL. IT'S EVEN BETTER THAN THAT PATHFINDER SKILL. I GOT A SPELL CALLED *BRAIN FREEZE* AND ONE CALLED *BAD ATTITUDE* AND ANOTHER CALLED *WHY ARE YOU HITTING YOURSELF?* THAT ONE IS GREAT! IT MAKES PEOPLE STAB THEMSELVES IN THE FACE! MY INTELLIGENCE WENT UP FIVE POINTS, TOO!

I relaxed. That was pretty good.

Mordecai: *Bad Attitude* is similar to Carl's *Fear* spell, but it'll be a lot more potent in your hands. If you work it together, it'll be a great combo. *Fear* tends to affect dexterity while *Bad Attitude* drains intelligence and lowers resistances. *Brain Freeze* does the same thing, but it targets only one mob and drains health. It also makes them temporarily blind if you can get it up to 10.

Donut: IT STARTED AT LEVEL 8.

Mordecai: Good. You'll want to train that one.

Carl: Can you see anything? We're locked in a large room.

Mordecai: No. I tried to open the door, but it says exit isn't yet available. Wait for the level announcement.

We didn't have to wait long.

A new timer appeared in my vision.

Time until Phase Two: 14 Days.

It started to count down.

Cascadia started the announcement. I immediately noted she wasn't nearly as chipper as she usually was. She pushed her way through the announcement with the enthusiasm of a kid being forced to mow their own lawn.

Hello, crawlers.

Welcome to the eighth floor. The Ghosts of Earth.

This is going to be a long message. This floor is simple, but the environment requires a small amount of explanation. Not that you twits are going to understand either way.

You have all picked one of 293 different regions. We have just over 38,000 crawlers joining us, and of the groups, you are occupying 205 of the regions. Unlike the bubbles of the fifth floor, you are *not* distributed evenly. But just because you don't see anybody else, it doesn't mean you're alone. Each region contains two stairwells, and you have been generated near one of the two.

The theme of this floor is broken up into three parts. Phase two starts in 14 Earth days. You will not be able to obtain an exit key until then. Thank the gods. For the next two weeks, you will be stuck within your starting area.

All crawlers have been placed in squads of no more than five. If your party is six or more, the party members have been split into equal-number squads of less than five. These squads are not able to be broken. If you leave your party, you will *not* leave the squad. You have to work together to survive.

You'll notice your squad has six more spots than the number of crawlers. So if you're by yourself, it'll have seven spots total, and if your squad consists of five crawlers, it'll have eleven spots total. Your job for the next fourteen days is to fill your squad. You will be required to fill your squad before you will be allowed to proceed to phase two. If you do not fill your squad before the timer runs out, it will be

filled randomly. Trust me. You don't want that. We'll get to that in a moment.

In fourteen days, you will be given at least two options on where to send your squad for the second phase. It will be a different geographic location than where you've started. You, along with your full squad, will be required to fight your way to an exit key. This will not be easy, so it is in your best interest to make certain your squad is as powerful as you can handle. More details on the assault phase of this floor will be forthcoming.

This is how phase one works.

All of you are inside a large structure within your starting area. As soon as this message ends, the doors will open, and you will be allowed to proceed outside.

Each region is limited, but you will have plenty of area to investigate. In most cases, you will be allowed to explore in a circle of about 99 kilometers from your starting location in any direction. If this causes an overlap with another region, this distance will be shortened. If you are on an island, you will not be able to venture more than six kilometers off shore.

You will *not* be able to enter any other regions during phase one.

Your starting area is an exact replica of Earth's surface area as captured on the indicated date. This includes all the geographic features, buildings, vehicles, and yes, the people.

That's correct. You will be fighting and exploring in a precise facsimile of Earth in the weeks before the collapse.

There are a few important caveats. You're living inside of a memory. In most cases, you will not be able to interact with mobile biological entities within the replay. They will not appear on your map. Think of them like intangible ghosts. They can't see you, and if you touch them, you will go right through them. They will be going about their lives just as they did on the day of the recording.

However, and this is very important so pay attention, all non-biological, non-attached items will be tangibly present and *will* maintain their mass and momentum until physically interacted with by a crawler or a mob or an unexpected environmental factor.

You can enter buildings. You can use non-automatic doors in most cases. You can break windows. You can get hit and killed by a vehicle. You can go to a grocery store and take all the onions. You can allow a person to walk through you, which will likely rip the clothes from their bodies. The visible portions of their bodies will continue on their way. The people and animals are ghosts. Everything else is not. Complex machines may or may not work depending on what they are. You can pick an onion or piece of tofu out of a ghost's hand and throw it at a mob. The ghost will continue to eat, but the onion will now be on the ground. You can place a barrier in a street, and a car will crash into it, but the ghostly avatars of the drivers will continue on their way, floating toward their destination as if the accident never happened.

"Onions and tofu?" Donut asked. "Is that what she thinks we eat?"

I waved for her to be quiet. My mind was swirling with the possibilities.

In other words, you can destroy the environment as much as you like. You can move mountains if you have the power. The physical items will only move as they did on that date if they are in the exact place and condition they were at the time of recording. The world is your literal playground.

Note. Anything you loot on this level that comes from the earth memory will turn to dust upon the collapse of this level. You will *not* be arming yourselves with the content of your local military base for use on the ninth floor.

I groaned. That was exactly what I'd been thinking.

That's the environment. Now let us get to the squads.

Your area is seeded with mobs and bosses and legendary creatures that are exclusive to the folklore of the region in which you inhabit. For example, those of you in Romania will be dealing with vampires and werewolves. Those of you in Ireland will have leprechauns and banshees. Those of you in Japan are just plain fucked.

The further out from your starting area, the more difficult the monsters and bosses you will face. These monsters will also be interacting with the environment, so it's likely their locations will be obvious, especially if the mobs are unintelligent as they will be attempting to attack the noncorporeal locals.

At the end of this message, your squad leader will receive a set of twenty flags containing your squad's logo, which has been automatically created by the system.

If you plant the flag within the body of a living entity while they are at less than 5% health, they will be transformed into something called a T'Ghee totem, which will be added to the squad leader's inventory.

My breath caught in my throat. I tried not to outwardly react. I knew exactly what that was thanks to the cookbook.

If it is a noncorporeal monster, the flags will still work. Flagged monsters will automatically join your squad and will automatically be minions of whomever summons them. They will follow the summoner's orders.

That is, they will follow orders to a certain extent, depending on the level difference and nature of the monster. While you need a squad that's as powerful as possible, it might not be in your best interests to build a team that's a little *too* strong. You may dismiss mob squad members if they don't work out by ripping the T'Ghee totem in two.

If you run out of or lose your twenty flags before your squad is filled, they will not be replaced, so be careful with them. You may collect more totems than squad spaces. You

may trade totems with fellow crawlers. You may steal totems from fellow crawlers.

Upon the start of phase two, all non-placed totems will dissipate. All surviving squads may choose a single T'Ghee card to keep upon the collapse of this floor.

That's it for now. More details on phase two and phase three will become available in a few days. Furthermore, fighting with T'Ghee totems comes with a few additional rules, which will be explained after the next recap episode. I'm supposed to explain that part now, but honestly, you monkeys think you're so smart and clever, I'm certain you can figure it out on your own.

Now get out there and kill, kill, you know.

I took a deep breath. I had so many questions about how this worked. Especially the environment.

Mordecai: Do either of you chuckleheads know anything about Cuban mythology? Or have someone on your chat who does?

Donut: I KNOW THEY HAVE FLAT SANDWICHES HERE. AND ISN'T THIS WHERE THAT GUY FROM *I LOVE LUCY* WAS FROM? OH, AND THAT TRE GUY FROM *BOYZ N THE HOOD* IS FROM HERE TOO, I THINK.

I was about to bitch, again, about Donut choosing Cuba, but there was nothing we could do about it now. The usefulness of the book of lore was painfully obvious. I understood Donut's logic, but she'd been wrong. If we were starting this on December 10th, that meant we'd be moving away from this location on the 24th. Bea and her friends had flown there on the 26th, which meant there was no chance we'd have seen their ghosts if we'd chosen the Bahamas as our phase one location.

But now, because we were going to be moving to a second location for phase two, they'd have plenty of time to engineer a scene where Donut and I were forced to watch Bea get railed by some other dude. I had no doubts that they'd be angling to get us over there for phase two.

They couldn't physically use Bea, but this was still a way to fuck with us. They were likely going to try this with multiple squads, sending us all to places where we could watch loved ones like we were in a fucked-up version of a *Christmas Carol*.

That was something I'd have to worry about in a few weeks. For now, we needed to focus on squad building.

"Carl, did you understand anything that lady was talking about?"

"I think so," I said. "Do you remember when I used to play that Pokémon game on the Nintendo? I think it might be a little like that."

Carl: Mordecai, do you know what a T'Ghee totem is?

I wanted to hear what he had to say about this. I already knew quite a bit because of Allister, who'd written the 13th edition of the cookbook. For him, T'Ghee was a religion, and it had nothing to do with capturing and summoning monsters, but I could already see how this was going to work.

Mordecai: I do. They're similar to Bautista's stuffed animals, but they're in the form of large playing cards. They're kinda like your tarot cards, actually. They're reusable, even if the summoned monsters die. I've seen them used in a few different ways over the seasons, so we'll have to wait until the next announcement.

"Carl, I just talked to Prepotente, and he *is* in the Bahamas!" Donut said. "He wants you to read the lore book to him!"

"I'm shocked," I said drily.

"He says there's probably some crossover with Cuba, so the book won't be completely useless to us."

The entire room blinked, and a new door appeared where there'd been none before. New light filtered through the windows. The new door was an entrance to our personal space.

"Tell him I'll read him whatever he wants in exchange for half of those *Size-Up* potions he has. He can sell them to us using the store interface, or he can join the guild and do it face to face. Come on, Donut," I said, heading toward the door to the saferoom.

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"Oh, man," I said to Mordecai as we entered the saferoom. He sat at the counter with Bomo, the sole remaining member of our four bodyguards. The other three cretins had gone down with the high elf castle to the ninth floor.

Mordecai had been a tiny, cute creature the previous floor. Something called a Pocket Kuma. He was now the same size as the rock bodyguard. He was large, pink, bald, and he had a single, blinking eye in the center of his cone-shaped head.

"A cyclops?" Donut asked, looking him up and down. "You turned into a cyclops? And why are you so chunky? You look like a knock-off version of that starfish guy from that Krusty Krab cartoon, but with only one eye. Great, now I'm going to get the theme song stuck in my head. Do you have any depth perception?"

"Not really," he said, standing to his full height. He even sounded like Patrick from *Spongebob Squarepants* when he talked, which made him come across as stupid. He was just as tall as he'd been when he was an incubus, but like Donut said, he now had a wide belly, stretching his white shirt to its limits. His skin was a bright pink, and his bald, cone-shaped, furrowed forehead glinted dully in the light. His single, brown eye was the size of an ostrich egg. A caterpillar-like eyebrow stretched across his head. His fingers looked like wrinkly sausages.

I'd only seen one other cyclops creature before, and that had been a bartender somewhere. Mordecai was a different kind. I

examined him.

Mordecai. Hills Cyclops. Level 50.

Manager of Princess Donut.

This is a non-combatant NPC.

Of all the cyclops-style monsters populating the dungeon, the Hills Cyclops are both the weakest and the dumbest of the lot. These shambling pinheads tend to spend their days working as shepherds, herding their sheep and goats. They're always disheveled because they can't see their own reflections in mirrors. At night, they can be found at the local drinking establishments, getting into fist fights and drinking contests with their imbecile friends. They're mostly harmless as long as you don't mess with their flock and/or their girlfriends. I was going to add a joke about those two being the same thing, but I'm trying to be more mature.

Just kidding. These dudes definitely fuck their sheep.

"It's better than the form I'd taken for the ten minutes the seventh floor was open," he said. "I was a slime. I had no goddamned arms."

"Oh, shit," I said. "I didn't know they could do that to you."

He grunted. "I was a kua-tin once, and I had to spend the floor in a glass pitcher. Another time I was a skreich ghast, and I kept teleporting away against my will."

"Hey!" Donut shouted from across the room. She'd jumped to the top of the mailbox that sat in the corner. "There's only one spellbook in here! I didn't get my book-of-the-floor delivery from the seventh floor!"

"Nope," Mordecai said. "You snooze you lose."

"This is an outrage! Carl, you need to send a message to your lawyer this instant!"

"What did you get?" I asked as I sat down at the table. Holy cow was I tired. I needed to go into my room and reset my exhaustion level, which would only take a minute thanks to the Instacot 60 bed upgrade from the guild.

"It's a spellbook for something called *Mute*. That sounds boring."

"Good," Mordecai said. "That's on our list. You can stop monsters from casting spells. Learn it and practice it. Didn't you get another, random spellbook at the prize counter?"

"I did, but it's in a box I haven't opened yet." She glowed as she read the new spellbook.

Donut let Mongo out of his box, and he screeched, running about the room. He looked out the door into the main guildhall area. He screeched again.

"Mongo, who are you looking for?" Donut asked. "Mommy is right here!"

Mongo made a sad, little squawk.

"Carl," a voice called, rolling in from the training room. "What has taken you so long? We need to go back out there and find a pulpmancer!"

"Samantha!" I said. "You took off! I didn't know where you went."

The last time I'd seen her, she'd been blown up and burned to hell multiple times. She appeared to have gone back to normal. Her hair had returned, and her scorched, latex skin appeared clean and shiny.

"She came back to the saferoom," Mordecai said. "She *flew* here. Pushed her way through the brambles to get to the door."

Mordecai: We need to have a talk about her. Something is obviously happening.

Carl: Yeah, no shit. You said she'd never be able to do any of this stuff.

Mordecai: I don't understand it, which makes it extra dangerous. Withering spirits shouldn't be able to do this. She won't shut up about that flesh golem you have in your inventory. Don't give it to her until we figure out why and how she's gaining this power.

"My cousin gave you her mother, and we need to find a mage to animate her! I need my body back! Come on. Let's go right now, Carl!"

"Samantha, we just landed on a new floor. Don't worry. We'll figure something out. Let's get our bearings first."

"I'm going to kill your mother."

"And I'm not going to help you if you keep threatening me."

She started growling. She rolled off to chase Mongo.

Elle: Holy shitballs, guys. Have you opened your boxes and achievements yet?

Donut: NOT YET. THEY DIDN'T GIVE ME MY SPELLBOOK OF THE FLOOR PRIZE, AND I'M QUITE UPSET ABOUT IT.

Elle: That's some bullshit right there. You should make Carl's lawyer sue them over it.

Donut: I KNOW, RIGHT?

"Do you think anything is going to happen to Prepotente?" Donut asked as she watched Mongo rush after the doll head. "They got mad at Carl for having the Gate of the Feral Gods because they thought he might break a level, but Prepotente actually did break one."

"I think he'll be okay," Mordecai said. "I was just talking to Mistress Tiatha, and she filled me in on what that crazy goat did. This one is on the engineers. They fashioned that level so it was just like the fairytale. The kid in the story did the exact same thing the goat did, but it took him thousands of years to figure it out. They should never have built it that way. This isn't the first time a level was doomed from the start. I think I told you about the bacterial infection incident from the previous Borant season. There was another one where the crawlers had to hand-build bridges, but the provided materials made it impossible, and the council had to step in. This was the first time that it failed so quickly, I think. The Valtay are likely irritated with the Borant engineers who designed the level, but it sounds like there's plenty of blame to go around. The Apothecary and the Plenty are probably on their shit list for providing the means, not that the showrunners can do anything about that. The whole thing was a political maneuver to make a lot of money for those two sponsors, all at the cost of the Valtay and the Syndicate as a whole. It's all a game to them, and it's nothing new."

"What do you mean?" I asked. "I thought the Apothecary and the Plenty were losing ungodly amounts on benefactor benefits?"

"I'm not even going to pretend to understand most of it, but the sheer amount of money the Syndicate pays just to use the tunnel system to livestream all of this is enormous and paid in advance. If an entire floor is skipped, it's not refunded. Plus..."

He trailed off. He looked back and forth between me and Donut. He was looking up at the spinning star over Donut's head.

"You did it?" he asked.

"Oh, yeah," I said, grinning sheepishly. He'd known that we were talking to my attorney, and he'd known what we were planning. But everything had happened so fast at the end of the last floor, we hadn't had the chance to tell him it had worked. And this was the first time we were able to talk about it out loud.

"We kickstarted a war!" Donut announced. "Isn't that great?"

"Who's your warlord adjutant?" he asked. "Have they assigned him or her yet?"

"Uh," I said. "I don't know what that is."

He grunted and shook his head. "By his left tit. You two... you know what, we'll talk about it later. Open your damn boxes."

During the Butcher's Masquerade, I'd stood upon Prepotente's personal space cube for a minute and opened a few boxes, but I'd deliberately not checked my achievements which would've added several boxes to the pile, and I wouldn't have had time to open them all. We hadn't been in an actual saferoom since before the party. I had literally dozens of achievements and boxes, including a Legendary boss box and two different quest boxes for the Vengeance of the Daughter and the Recital quest. The vast majority of the achievements were for stupid things, like riding in a elven carriage and using a goodwill ballroom. The notable ones were:

New Achievement! Oh shit! A country boss!

You ever have one of those jobs where there's a big boss somewhere in the building, but you've never actually seen them? There's rumors that he's a complete douche with an

epic temper, but you're so far down the totem pole, the very idea of having anything to do with the guy is just ridiculous. People speak about him with frightened whispers, and it's almost like he's some invisible, terrifying urban legend. Then, *BAM!* One day you're coming out of the bathroom, wrestling with a stuck zipper, and he's right there looking at you like you should be ashamed of yourself just for existing. How dare you throw yourself in his line of sight, you worthless piece of shit?

That's the position you're in right now.

Second only to the infamous floor boss—which doesn't show up until the tenth floor—this is the biggest, baddest bitch one can come across in *Dungeon Crawler World*.

***Reward:* You know how this goes, you worthless piece of shit.**

I'd received that one when Imogen had suddenly appeared in the convoy to the castle.

New Achievement. The Scourge.

The Butcher's Masquerade has started. You have collected the most hands. You have caused more mothers to cry, more children to hate than any other crawler before you. You are the champion murderer supreme. You are number one. If only your own mother wasn't already dead so she could see you now.

***Reward*: You have received a Legendary Hunter Champion Box.**

A legendary box!

New Achievement. Marked for Life.

You were marked for death by a god. That god entered your realm, yet you somehow survived. That's quite the achievement right there. Too bad the god will probably try to kill you even harder next time. You are so fucked.

***Reward*: You have received a Platinum Apostate Box.**

That was great, but my breath caught in my throat the moment I saw the next one.

Finally, I thought. *Fucking finally.*

New Achievement. Apex Predator.

Holy shit.

They're dead.

All of them.

Every. Last. One.

Not only did you kill more hunters than everyone else, but you killed the very last one. One could fill a very stinky swimming pool with the blood you spilled on the Hunting Grounds.

You have become a very scary dude. Maybe I should be calling *you* daddy instead of the other way around.

***Reward*: Nothing!**

...

Just kidding. You have received a Celestial Predator Box.

My hands shook. I could barely pay attention to the next group of achievements.

New Achievement! Ménage à Quatro!

You survived a four-way boss battle! Wow! In addition to the boss box you got from this, not to mention that Apex Predator box you're still probably freaking out about, you've gotten another prize. It's like Christmas!

Reward: You've received a Platinum Orgy Guy Box.

New Achievement! Fuck This Floor.

You went down the stairs less than an hour after you arrived upon the level. Who needs to grind and grow in strength? Let's see how that works out for you.

***Reward*: You've received a Platinum Here's-Some-Good-Shit-Because-You're-Gonna-Need-It-Box**

New Achievement! Pacifist!

You survived an entire floor without hurting a single, poor mob.

That's not how this works. Nobody likes you.
***Reward*: You've received a Gold Pacifist's Box.**

New Achievement! Collective Bargaining!
More than 1,000 crawlers have received the exact same box at the exact same time.
Working together, huh? We don't know if we like that. Better toughen up the rules a little. Better break a few extra kneecaps. Better bury a few more bodies.
***Reward*: You've received a Gold Scab Box.**

"Carl, Carl, I got legendary boxes! I got a legendary Beguiler's Box for charming Ferdinand and a legendary De-Sleeving Box for what we did to Diwata! And that's on top of the legendary boss box. I also got a bunch of boxes for singing! And an orgy box! And a fan box I can open tomorrow! Mongo! Mommy got a bunch of great boxes!"

Mongo made an excited squeak.

"Carl?" Mordecai asked, looking at me.

"I got a celestial," I said.

Donut stopped dead.

"What?" she asked. "And I didn't get one? I helped kill a god!"

I reached over and gave her a pat. "It wasn't for that. It was for killing the last hunter. I got a fan box, too, but it was for getting a bunch of viewers when Britney and I met Queen Imogen. We'll open them up later together."

She harrumphed.

"Well, don't just sit there," Mordecai said, his voice soft. "Let's see your prizes."

And so we did.

Donut went first.

The boxes appeared, a line of them that stretched all the way across the room. The first dozen were bronze and gold adventurer

boxes, filled with good healing and mana potions along with a few potions of *Phase Through Wall*, which Mordecai was pretty excited about, along with dozens of junk clothing items and weapons.

Donut hadn't received a quest box for the Vengeance of the Daughter storyline. It was one of the few quests that had only gone to me. But for the Tina quest, she received a coupon for a free Town Upgrade. That was something we'd be saving for the next floor. I knew I'd be receiving the same thing for that quest.

She received a skill potion from the gold pacifist's box which was for upgrading her *Love Vampire* skill. In the Scab box, she received an upgrade to her brush, **the Enchanted Fur Brush of the Ecclesiastic**, which added an additional ten percent to her constitution on top of the measly two points it normally gave for getting brushed each morning.

The Masquerade prize counter box she'd bought from Chaco opened, revealing a few items and a spellbook. The Platinum good-shit box contained a potion that was pink and frothy. Mordecai whooped.

"Cosmic buff potion!" he said. "Raises a random stat by 10 points."

He'd mentioned these before. These were a different kind of potion than the standard buff potions that one could only take a limited amount of.

Mordecai: If you get one of these, too, you should allow me to examine it for a bit at my table before you drink it. We'll want Donut to drink hers straight away.

Carl: Okay.

The Platinum orgy box contained a coupon for a free mercenary purchase. The Legendary boss box contained gold, healing scrolls, and something called a Flawless Jeweler's Gem.

"Hmm, yellow," Donut said, examining the large jewel. She did not sound impressed. "Yellow orange, really. I think it's a citrine. Not exactly my color. It clashes with my fur."

"Oh, wow. That's for upgrading your tiara," Mordecai said. "We can't just apply it, though. We'll have to go to a jeweler. They have one in the Desperado."

I laughed when the Beguiler's box opened, revealing a single, shining nipple ring. It glowed red.

"This is not funny, Carl," Donut said, spitting with disgust. It disappeared before I could examine it.

The De-Sleeving box contained 100,000 gold—which was a lot for a box—and a strange type of spellbook I'd never seen before. The book was thick, like a dictionary, with a bumpy, leather cover. It was chained shut with a lock, and it bounced around on its own. Purple wisps of smoke came off it. I was immediately reminded of the book from the *Evil Dead* movies.

Next to me, Mordecai let out a gasp.

Donut took all the gear out and lined it up on the table. She immediately pushed all the lower tier stuff away. We'd add it to the equipment pile for the next floor. She let me examine a *Phase Through Wall* potion, which would allow us to pass through wood, stone, or metal walls, but Mordecai warned that we should only use them in extreme emergencies. They were very dangerous to use, especially if we were fighting someone with any sort of counter to it.

Her *Love Vampire* skill, which she'd received for reaching 100 in charisma, had never worked really well until she'd used the temporary tiara on the previous floor that had effectively doubled her charisma. It normally allowed her to charm one intelligent opponent, and all damage upon her would be reflected to that opponent. The problem was, the opponent could easily break away. However, when she'd increased her charisma to an epic level, it not only worked much better, it ended up working without her even having to think about it. It just happened automatically, plus it charmed up to five mobs at a time.

We probably weren't going to get it to that level again any time soon, but the skill potion added three levels to the skill, bringing it up from three to six, which would make it more powerful than it had been. But most importantly, it made it so it would cast automatically in certain situations.

The first spellbook, which we'd also gotten from Chaco's prize booth, was a strange spell. It was a team buff called *Rigorous*. It was basically a damage reflect spell, but only for debuffs and

afflictions. Similar to my *Super Spreader*, but it didn't actively give the target the ailment, just the effect. Mordecai said that was an important distinction. Donut was not impressed, but she read it anyway on the guide's insistence.

The mercenary coupon was interesting. It was just a piece of paper with a buff, flexed arm on it. I picked it up.

Mercenary coupon! The bearer of this instrument is entitled to 100,000 gold worth of mercenary services at any participating Meat Shields location.

"Meat Shields?" I asked.

Mordecai shrugged. "Probably the name of the mercenary markets on this floor. There's one in both the Desperado and Club Vanquisher. And there probably was one in Larracos, too. Speaking of, you need to purchase a mercenary training arcade for the guildhall. I'll talk to Imani about it."

Donut downed the Cosmic Buff potion. Her entire body sparkled with glitter. Then she harrumphed. "Dexterity? I was hoping it'd be charisma! Lame."

"Not bad," Mordecai said. "I was hoping for Constitution."

She pulled out the glowing, red nipple ring. She made a little, disgusted sound while Mordecai whistled. "Now that's an... interesting prize."

"This is the most sexist description I've ever read, Mordecai."

He grunted. "Just ignore it and look at the stats."

Donut slid it across the table. I picked it up to examine it.

Enchanted Nipple Ring of the Superior Fire Demon's Hand Maiden.

This may only be equipped on a quadruped.

This may only be equipped on a female.

Warning: Unless you're planning on getting a lot of weird and unnecessary surgery, you ain't equipping this.

All nipple rings must be manually affixed the first time they are equipped.

Oh boy. Let me tell you about Superior fire demons. These bitches are crazy. Worse than the minor demons. I know, I know. That sounds chauvinistic and rude. You can't

get away with saying shit like that anymore. Here's the thing. These bitches *are* godsdamned crazy. Full stop. You look that shit up in Wikipedia, and it'll be the first line. It'll say, "These bitches are three pugs short of a grumble." It's not an opinion, but an absolute fact.

We have a whole matriarchal hierarchy of demons who exist and fight and vie for control on the fifteenth level, all trying to catch the eye of one of the four brothers, and these Superior Demon nutjobs are always causing the most chaos, which is saying *a lot*.

You got the lesser demons, who are generally normal, though I wouldn't break up with one over text or call her fat or anything like that. Then you got the more powerful minor demons. Those bitches are something else, but they're nothing compared to Superior fire demons. These ladies are so batshit, the demon lords and queens require all of them to be "chaperoned" by hellspawn familiars everywhere they go, whose job it is to protect them from each other and themselves. It's Sheol's version of a Xanax.

These familiars need to be protected from the superior demons. This nipple ring is one of the items they utilize.

Wearing this nipple ring offers the following benefits:

Allows the removal of cursed items.

User is impervious to natural fire.

User is impervious to lava attacks.

User is resistant to fire-based spells.

User will not lose health while inside Sheol.

All spells with a fire attack now deal (Intelligence)% more damage.

User may cast *Bitch, What*? Once a day.

We'd met two demons so far. Fire Brandy, who'd been giving birth inside the *Nightmare Express* train on the fourth floor, had been a lesser demon. Slit, the makeup-encrusted kaiju-sized demon who wanted to kill Samantha had been a feral minor demon. I could only begin to imagine what a superior demon looked like.

"Wow," I said. "We're putting this on you right away."

"Errr," Mordecai said. "It's great, and I agree she needs to wear it. But we need to talk about that spell it comes with."

I looked up the *Bitch, What?* spell.

Bitch, What?

Type: Berserking Spell + partial invulnerability.

Target: Self only

Cost: Item based.

Duration: twenty seconds.

Cooldown: Once every 30 hours.

Effect: You ever seen an angry, on-fire weasel tossed into a room full of chickens?

You catch on fire. You are invulnerable to blunt damage. Then you get really angry and kill every goddamn thing in the room. This is a berserking spell. Don't cast this inside of a Denny's. Or anywhere near people you like.

"Wow," I said again, suddenly feeling uneasy. "Mordecai, have you ever seen that spell in action?"

"I have, and so have you. Remember that rage elemental? They're perpetually in that state. It's actually called *Fire Berserker*. They've been changing the names a lot more than usual. Donut, only cast it when you're by yourself. You have three fire spells now. *Fireball, Magic Missile,* and *Wall of Fire*. All three of them are going to be much more intense. So, be very careful. It's good, but it's still not as good as your spellbook."

The chained spellbook did a little hop on the table, as if it knew Mordecai was talking about it.

Donut raised her paw and did an uncertain slap onto the book. It was a very cat-like move. "Why is it quivering?" she asked. "You know how I feel about things that quiver."

"That happens sometimes with the more powerful tomes," Mordecai said. "Especially summoning ones."

I picked it up. The book was squishy and warm. It wriggled in my hands, like I was holding a puppy.

Tome of *Legionnaires of the Damned*.

Type: Summoning Spell.

Cost: 25 mana

Duration: (spell level*2 + intelligence level) seconds.

Cooldown: One minute. May only have one active instance of this spell at a time.

Target: May only be cast on recently-unequipped armor or weapons. Total targets allowed varies based on multiple factors.

Effect: There are a lot of angry souls out there. Like, a lot. It's said if one has the ability to actually see all the wailing souls that filter through the edges of our world, one would go quite insane.

The AI gave an unsettling giggle.

Quite, quite insane, actually. All that death, spiraling down, down, down into the drain. Where do they go? Why are they always screaming?

Uh, anyway. This spell reanimates physical weapons or armor pieces for a period of time with an undead, wailing spirit plucked straight from the river of falling souls. These will be temporary minions of the caster. Strength of the summoned symbiotes varies, depending on multiple factors.

Warning: In most cases, armor and weapons utilized with this spell will disintegrate upon the completion of this spell. Certain cursed and enchanted items may react in an unpredictable manner upon the completion of the spell.

"Remember the swordsmen guards on the third level?" Mordecai asked. "This is kinda like that, but scarier. Wailing spirits are creepy. Now that Donut has level 15 in that *Laundry Day* spell, she can sow a lot of chaos with just those two spells. If she trains this one up, she can remove all the armor off a group of mobs and then reanimate their own armor with the spirits, and they will tear through the unarmored monsters like wildfire."

"Holy crap," I said. I slid the still-wriggling book back to Donut. "You just got a lot more badass."

She glowed as she applied the book. It let out a little scream as it disappeared in a puff of purple smoke.

"I've always been badass, Carl."

Mordecai nodded in agreement. “All of these loot items are really good. Like, really good.”

“Yeah,” I said. “My whole feed is filled with people who are getting some really good shit. Elle got an ice staff she won’t stop talking about. Bautista got a shape-changing ring.”

“Bautista can change shape now, too? I bet he and Katia will be having some really weird sex,” Donut said.

“Part of it is the AI compensating for the skipped floor,” Mordecai said, ignoring Donut’s quip. “But you got some of these boxes before that even happened, so it’s likely in response to the Valtay ramping up the difficulty.”

“My stuff is good, but I didn’t get anything for Mongo,” Donut said. “And I didn’t get a celestial box, either.”

Mongo peeped in sad agreement.

“That nipple ring is practically a celestial. Same with the spell,” Mordecai said. He turned to me. “But now it’s Carl’s turn.”

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[3]

I TOOK A DEEP BREATH, AND THE LINE OF BOXES APPEARED IN FRONT OF ME, moving all the way to the back of the room. The celestial box sat at the end, physically huge. It was in the form of a giant, rotating skull with glowing eyes. My view counter was completely spiked, which was unusual for being in a saferoom.

The line of adventurer boxes started opening, giving me several good healing and mana potions, a bunch of those *Phase Through Wall* potions, *Invisibility* potions, and tons of junk items.

The quest box from the Tina quest was the same item Donut received, which was a coupon for a free Town Upgrade. That wasn't something we'd be able to use right now.

The *Vengeance of the Daughter* quest had said the reward would be the ability to loot the High Elf castle, but we'd zapped the place down to the ninth floor, and it had likely landed someplace inconvenient. I'd also received a Gold Quest Box for it as well.

The box opened, and a group of items came out. I recognized what they were immediately.

"Carl, is that what I think it is?" Donut asked with disgust.

"I believe so," I said as the stick and poke tattoo kit entered my inventory. These were the same items Edgar the tortoise used to place the magical tattoos onto Tsarina Signet.

"Disgusting," Donut said.

"I agree," Samantha said. She'd suddenly appeared on the table, watching the boxes open. She had a Mongo feather in her hair.

The gold pacifist's box contained a small upgrade patch for my jacket. It was a round peace symbol. Donut made a scoffing comment about the quality.

The gold scab box contained a skill potion that disappeared before I could examine it.

The orgy box gave me another one of the mercenary coupons.

The platinum Here's-Some-Good-Shit-Because-You're-Gonna-Need-It-Box also contained the same thing Donut had received. A Cosmic Buff potion. I nodded to Mordecai, who could barely contain his excitement. He wanted to examine it at his table before I used it.

The platinum apostate box, which I'd received for not getting killed by Diwata, contained a ring. A nipple ring.

"Ha!" Donut said triumphantly. "That's what you get!" She looked up at the ceiling. "Now that his nipples are full, there are other places he's not pierced yet."

"Yeah," I said. "Wait until I receive a legendary spay-your-cat-at-home kit."

"That's not funny, Carl. Don't even make jokes like that."

I had three boxes left. *Here we go*.

The legendary boss box for killing Imogen moved before me. Little metal bands around the box slipped and moved, opening with a ridiculous amount of fanfare.

The glowing, leather wrist band fell onto the table with a heavy thump. It disappeared into my inventory.

The legendary Scourge box opened with the same, gaudy fanfare. This one I'd received for killing the most hunters on the previous floor. It contained 20,000 gold, two crafting table upgrade coupons, and a steampunk-style chest that hissed with clockwork gears.

"Weird," I said. "A box inside a box."

"It's a crafting table kit," Mordecai said. "It'll contain a bunch of rare supplies for one of your tables."

"Huh," I said. That didn't seem legendary quality to me, especially compared to what Donut had received.

The celestial predator box appeared in front of me. It was in the form of a glowing and sparkling demon skull the size of a barrel. It

spun in circles, twisting faster and faster as the top rose off of it. Lights shone out of it. Donut and Samantha oohed and ahhed at the light show. Mongo made a terrified peep and ran to the back of the room.

The skull on the box opened its mouth and made a hissing noise as the whole box exploded into a display of fireflies, which rushed away and disappeared.

All that was left was a patch.

A full-sized back patch, designed to be placed on the back of my jacket. That was it.

I grabbed it before it could disappear. Donut stepped forward and sniffed at it. She made a face.

"The stitch quality is just divine," she said. "But the image itself is quite disgusting. Are you really going to put that on your back? And there's some odd stitching on there that's transparent. I can't tell what it shows. You're going to look like one of those punk rock people. You're not a punk rock person, Carl. You don't have the right skull shape for a mohawk."

"Interesting," was all Mordecai said.

My sleeveless jacket was called the Enchanted Anarchist's Battle Rattle. Before I even examined the patch itself, I knew this was a good prize, no matter what it was. I received +1 to all my stat points for each patch I affixed to my jacket. I had five total: the earth symbol, the arrows, the bomb symbol, the anti-vampire Midnight Epicure patch, and the new peace symbol one. Affixing a full-sized back patch to the jacket would double the stat point boost benefit.

The celestial patch was a thick, black piece of fabric embroidered with a white pile of skulls from various creatures, rising up into a pyramid. I rubbed my hand across it, and the entire fabric was covered in clear stitching, almost like it was sewn with fiberoptic wire.

The Scavenger's Daughter.
Upgrade Patch. Back Patch.
This is a divine item.
This is a unique item.
This is a fleeting item.

You may only affix one back patch at a time.

This patch depicts a pile of scary skulls, all stacked up nice and neat. I wonder if there's a story there?

If this upgrade patch is affixed to an eligible garment, it will imbue the following upgrades:

(Hidden until it is affixed and then worn.)

Warning: Upgrade patches are fleeting items. You may remove them, but they will be destroyed in the process.

Warning #2! This is a divine item. This means it gains differing abilities, buffs, and possibly debuffs depending on your proximity to certain deities and demons. It makes for new and exciting combinations!

"What the hell, man?" I muttered.

I'd have to install it to figure out what it actually did. As I slid the patch over to Mordecai, along with the cosmic buff potion, I received a new achievement.

New Achievement! Fashion of the Gods!

You've received a divine item! This is an item that might've once been worn by a god. Or sneezed on by a god. Or used to wipe a god's booty, etc. You get the point.

Divine items behave differently than normal ones. They usually hide what they do until you equip it. The good news is, these upgrades are usually great and plentiful. They also gain new and exciting powers when one is in the presence of divinity and certain demons, too.

The bad news is, certain deities may inflict nasty debuffs on you instead. And there's no rhyme or reason to it. Don't worry, we programmed out the head exploding debuff this season. That one was caused by Yarilo. At least I think we programmed it out. Actually, I don't remember.

***Reward*: You now have something new to be anxious about.**

"Shit," I muttered.

"Divine items are the best items," Mordecai said. "Don't worry about the potential debuffs. In my experience, they're almost always

a good news/bad news thing. Like they'll temporarily debuff you but will give it all back and then some at the end."

"It really is ghastly," Donut said.

"I like it," Samantha said. "It's something Louis would wear on a date."

"What?" I asked as I pulled out my new items.

The upgrade potion was for plus three to my Find Traps skill, which moved it to 13. I would see pretty much any trap in the dungeon unless it was placed and deliberately hidden by a trapmaster. That was good.

I pulled out the group of items for the tattoo kit. It was a long, sharp needle. Some ink. A few stick things. A thing that looked like a piece of sandpaper. I had no idea how any of this worked.

Enchanted Prison Tattoo Kit.

So, you're doing time. Hey, I'm not one to judge.

You wonder, how did I get here? How did I mess my life up so much? You figure, now is the day I'm going to turn everything around. Now is the day I'm going to make certain I get on the right path. I'm gonna get out of here and get a job and make my family proud. Let me commemorate this important occasion by letting SkullFuck from the next cell come over and etch a poorly-drawn dragon on the side of my face.

This kit allows an artist to create a tattoo of their choosing upon the skin of a willing or unwilling target. Tattoo artistry is a skill that can imbue all sorts of magical buffs and upgrades. Or it can just make certain that your next mugshot goes viral. It all comes down to the talent of the artist.

"What the hell am I supposed to do with this?" I asked.

"Well, I certainly hope it's not give yourself another disgusting tattoo," Donut said. She paused. "Hey, the dungeon stole my joke! I said the viral thing when you got one of your other tattoos!"

I grunted. "They say the sincerest form of flattery is when someone copies you."

Donut scoffed. "No, Carl. That's just something thieves say to make themselves feel better about stealing other people's stuff. The sincerest form of flattery is when people cry when they meet you."

I put it away for now.

I picked up the peace symbol patch. It was small and round, almost identical in size to my earth patch. It was just black with a white, screen-printed peace symbol on it.

Upgrade Patch. Small.

This patch depicts a peace symbol. Ahh, isn't that cute?

Buzz off, dirty hippie. Go be smelly somewhere else. The Grateful Dead sucked. And so does Phish.

If this upgrade patch is affixed to an eligible garment, it will imbue the following upgrades:

Neutral mobs are less likely to fall into aggro.

+10% to Dexterity.

+10% skill in playing the bongos.

Warning: Upgrade patches are fleeting items. You may remove them, but they will be destroyed in the process.

"That was unnecessarily rude," I said.

"I don't like Phish, either," Donut said. "Angel the cocker spaniel's owner was always listening to them and smoking weed. It made Angel even more paranoid, and let me tell you, that was the last thing that dog needed."

Donut continued to talk about the dog as I picked up the large, steampunk chest. The thing was ridiculously heavy. I hesitantly lifted the lid and peered inside. The description came in a different voice, like a television commercial.

Doctor Ratchet's Automaton Build-It Kit!

This kit contains enough items to create over fifteen automatons! Fun for the whole family! From personal servants to flame-throwing sentinel droids, this kit has a little of everything. The only limit is your imagination. And your insurance policy.

It then listed off dozens of parts. I recognized several of them as things I needed for some of the recipes in that instructional book I'd stolen from the production facility.

"Excellent," I said.

The next item was a forearm bracer. This one was black and short and covered with little buckles. I already had two. The one that formed my Grull gauntlet, and the one on my left arm formed a buckler shield that supposedly disarmed opponents 1.5% of the time, but I'd never gotten it to work. I'd gotten that one from Katia. If I wanted to equip this new one, I'd have to ditch one of those two.

Enchanted Right Back Atcha Personal Shield.

You ever meet one of those dudes who is always super quick to take offense to everything? You gotta walk on eggshells around him. Has some job where he wears a shirt and tie even though he looks like he just woke up in an alley somewhere.

He's always saying, "What the hell is that supposed to mean?" He hits on anything with a pulse. He wants people to call him T-Bone or Bulldog or something. He dies of a heart attack in his mid-forties.

You get my drift.

Well, this little auto buckler is the armor version of that. This auto-deploying, overly-enthusiastic, small-sized buckler has a chance to catch both physical and magic bolt attacks and toss them right back at the caster.

It's not perfect, but who the hell are you to judge?

Equipping this small buckler imbues the following effects:

Catch physical attacks (Success percentage based off user's dexterity)

Catch magical bolt attacks (Success percentage based off user's intelligence.)

All stopped attacks have a 75% chance to reflect back to attacker.

All successfully reflected attacks have a 25% chance to double in power.

Attacks must be caught with the buckler in order to work.

"That's much better than your existing shield, and the bracer matches your other one better," Mordecai said.

"Agreed," I said as I pulled the Enchanted Auto Buckler of the Peach Pit off my left arm. I'd toss it onto our growing pile of weapons and armor for our Faction Wars team.

I picked up the small nipple ring. It was a silver ring with an eyeball hanging from it. I tried not to sigh out loud. Donut was correct. It served me right for making fun of her own ring. I'd gotten this one from the platinum apostate box.

Enchanted Nipple Ring of the Defiler

This may only be equipped on a crawler who has been Marked for Death by a god.

Hey, that's you!

All nipple rings must be manually affixed the first time they are equipped.

Wearing this ring imbues the following effects:

Instantly know the religious affiliation of all nearby mobs and crawlers.

Allows the destruction of church shrines without further ill effects from deities.

+25% damage against all clerics.

The ability to cast *Black Nimbus* once an hour.

Li Na could do all of these things already. I already knew what this spell was going to say when I pulled it up.

Black Nimbus.

Type: Involuntary Abjuration

Cost: Item Based

Duration: Instantaneous casting. Affected target will suffer the effects of this spell for (30 + [Caster's Intelligence+Constitution] – [Target's Intelligence/2]) Seconds.

Cooldown: Once Every Hour

Target: Single target.

Effect: Has the same effect as wearing a shirt for the band Cattle Decapitation to church. Instantly removes target from the blessing of their deity and all associated

buffs and effects. Will make it so target is unable to physically enter church or temple while the spell is in effect. Higher levels of this spell increase the possibility of forcing a smite upon the target.

Warning! You probably don't want to cast this on members of the same religion more than two or three times in a row.

"Hmm," Mordecai said. "Lots of divinity-themed items. That's never good. But you all got good stuff. Carl, get that patch on the jacket and see what it does."

"I'm already on it," I said as I pulled off my jacket.

"Really, Carl," Donut said as I leaned over the table. She sat on my shoulder and made little noises of disapproval each time I stuck the needle into the jacket. "You might as well have Bomo or Samantha sew this on. Or maybe we can blindfold Mordecai and get him drunk and have him do it. It's not that difficult. Your stitching is just abysmal! No, no, no! The angle of entry is crucial!"

"You know what," I said through gritted teeth, "Why don't you go check on your social media board while I do this? See what the Princess Posse is saying about our Faction Wars team."

She gasped and bounded off. Samantha and Mongo both rushed after her. I watched their dots move off on my map. As I did, I realized there was the white dot with a green cross of a hired mercenary on the local map. An extra dot.

"Mordecai," I asked. "Who the hell is in your room?"

"Oh, yeah," he said sheepishly. "I was gonna tell you about that. With my upgraded quarters, I was able to hire a room attendant. She has her own space off to the side of my quarters. It's not important."

"Who is it? Did you like hire a hooker or something?"

"No," he said, sounding offended. "Don't even say that. Of course not. It's nothing like that. Concentrate on your sewing. It is possible

to ruin the item, so you do need to be careful."

I grunted. I'd placed the peace symbol on the bottom of the jacket next to the bomb symbol. I was pretty sure it didn't matter what order these were affixed, but I wanted to be double certain that the back patch effect caught all regular patches, so I did the small one first.

I flipped over the jacket and smoothed out the divine patch. It hummed with potential energy. I waded through my messages as I sewed. Donut was already in the message groups, live narrating some of the posts she'd received on the intergalactic internet. She was in the middle of telling everyone that there was a new fan group dedicated to Elle, which was comprised of mostly males. Apparently the whole old-lady-turned-into-a-dominatrix-fairy trope was a thing. Elle was not impressed.

Florin received another shotgun upgrade. I wasn't clear exactly what it was, but he was pretty stoked about it. He wouldn't answer any other questions about his situation. Just that he was in Ecuador, and that he was in contact with Lucia Mar.

Katia had received an item that allowed her to move really fast. Neither Louis nor Britney—who were both on Katia's team—had opened their boxes yet. Both were still broken up about the death of Firas.

Katia: I'm worried about Britney. The burn on her face still hasn't healed, and she hasn't stopped crying. She's just sitting there, clutching onto Louis.

Carl: Maybe have Imani talk to her. She's pretty good with that stuff.

Katia: Yeah, I already asked her to come over. We'll see if it helps.

Donut: WE BETTER KEEP AN EYE ON HER. I KNOW A VILLAIN ORIGIN STORY WHEN I SEE ONE.

Li Na had received some robe upgrade that increased her chain-throwing ability.

Tran, who was also on Katia's team, was in a terrible state. He had lost his legs in the final moments of the last floor. Daniel Bautista was with him, helping him deal with it. Katia said Tran was

more upset about the loss of his friend Gwendolyn Duet, whom he'd been with since early on. I sent him a note asking if he was okay, but he didn't respond. Katia said he'd opened his boxes and had received a floating wheelchair in his pacifist box. It was the same sort of thing Odette used to zip around when she was in her human form.

I was starting to get a little worried about all this great gear. Mordecai thought it was in response to the rising difficulty. But just how more difficult was it going to get? We needed to get out there and find out. So far, not too many people had started venturing out.

"Hey, Mordecai," I said as I rounded the last corner on the patch. I was using a thick, white thread and spacing the stitches the best I could. "Do you think Samantha's presence will have an effect on my jacket?"

"Doubtful," he said. "She's only half formed, and she's not a true deity anyway. I could be wrong, but I doubt it."

"We'll see," I said as I affixed the last stitch. The Scavenger's Daughter patch glowed for a moment, indicating it had been properly installed. I released a breath. I pulled the jacket on. I immediately felt my strength increase. A new bar appeared in my interface, directly below my mana. It was in the same place the blood bar had been on the previous floor, and it looked similar. The bar was empty, and it was labeled **Soul Essence**.

You have equipped a divine item.

There are no deities in the area.

The Scavenger's Daughter Patch has gained the following upgrades:

All patch stat point benefits are now doubled.

In addition:

Plus 25 points to Dexterity.

Plus 25 points to Strength.

You will receive a notification every time a deity enters the area.

The *Climb* benefit.

The *Soul Reaper* benefit.

The *Mysterious Bone Key* benefit.

This patch will imbue additional, varying benefits when it is in the presence of divine entities.

"Huh," I said as I explored the three benefits.

"So, what'd you get?" Mordecai asked.

"Climb, Soul Reaper, and Mysterious Bone Key."

Mordecai blinked at me with his single eye.

"Oh, shit. Soul Reaper?" he asked, his voice full of wonder.

"That's what it says. Is that good?"

He nodded. "Oh, it's good all right. But you gotta be careful with it. It can be more dangerous than that berserking spell Donut got. Read the description for yourself. I dunno what that last one does."

I only knew what the first one did.

Climb.

You can climb stuff better. Ya-hoo. What an *exciting* benefit. I guess that makes you a monkey.

I grunted and clicked the next one.

Soul Reaper.

Yeah, baby. Now we're talking.

For every creature you kill with a melee attack, the Scavenger's Daughter patch is charged with the essence of the fallen. Once fully charged, you may transfer this energy to a single melee attack, which will completely drain all the essence. This attack will have varying effects depending on the nature of the essence stored.

The associated essence bar is now visible in your interface. The total amount of soul essence you may store increases each time your essence bar is topped off and then drained. In other words, the more stuff you kill, the stronger you get.

Warning: you know how asbestos is really bad for you? Like, it doesn't hurt you immediately, but it builds up in your lungs and eventually screws you over? Actually, you know what? Just ignore this warning. Forget I said anything. Carrying corrupted essence around on your back builds character. You already have a ring that's doing much worse to you anyway.

"Just make sure you drain the essence bar each time it fills up, and you'll be fine," Mordecai said. "That skill is ridiculously powerful. Just don't store the stuff for too long. I once saw a crawler kill a group of gorgons and fill her essence reserve with their souls, and then she turned around and killed a country boss with a single attack. It turned the whole thing to stone and then shattered. Now read me that last benefit. I don't know what it is."

Mysterious Bone Key

This benefit may only be used once for obvious reasons.

Creates a one-time-use key to open a lock. Any lock. Any lock in the dungeon.

WARNING!: (Notice how I used ALL CAPS for the warning?) Using this benefit will destroy both the patch *and* the item it is attached to. That means the jacket and all those ugly little patches inexpertly sewn to it.

Uh, it also uses a bone from the user's body to create the key. The more difficult the lock, the bigger the bone it uses. It might just be a finger. Or your clavicle. Or your femur. No biggie.

This bone will not grow back. So make sure it's a lock you really, really want to open.

"Uh," I said after reading it to Mordecai. "We're gonna mark that as a last resort item."

There actually was a note about a similar item in the cookbook, I remembered, but I couldn't remember the circumstances. I'd have to go looking for it.

"That back patch is really, really good," Mordecai said. "But it's going to be hard to use. It's not as straightforward as Quan's celestial robe. That happens. This has the potential to be much better. It just won't be easy."

"It never is."

Donut: THIS IS AN OUTRAGE.

I sighed.

Carl: What is it this time?

"This is an outrage!" Donut repeated as she burst from her room. She jumped onto the table. "Carl, do something."

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

“Our flag! They were talking about it online, and I forgot that each squad gets a bunch of flags to stick into the bad guys on this floor. We don’t get to design the flag. They do it for us! Look at this!”

The small flag appeared and landed on the counter.

I started to laugh.

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[4]

Monsters Collected. 0 of 6.

The "flag" was a little bigger than my hand, like one of those flags you give to kids to wave at a parade. It was a miniature pair of heart-covered boxers. Not a flag with an image of boxers on it, but an actual pair of heart boxers flying sideways, like they were dangling off a clothesline. Embroidered onto the flag on the top and bottom was a motorcycle club-style patch that read, "The Royal Court of Princess Donut." Centered on the boxers over the crotch area was an embroidered bomb patch, identical to the one on my jacket.

It really was tacky.

"Elle says her squad's flag has a bag of adult diapers on it. Imani's squad flag has a butterfly, and it sounds just lovely. Why couldn't we get something like that? Have you seen the stitching on this? It looks like *you* sewed it. This is outrageous."

"It is pretty stupid," I agreed, laughing again. It was so dumb I couldn't help but find it funny. "What did Katia get?"

"She didn't answer. She says it was something dumb, too. Carl, we need to tell them to change it. Something with Mongo would be much better than this."

"It doesn't matter," I said, picking the flag up. The flagpole, stick, whatever was a glowing metal spike, maybe about a foot long. It

was enchanted, and it would stick into any sort of creature, even ghosts, as long as the health was below 5%. I wrapped my hand around it and made a jabbing motion. It would be difficult to use these things. The metal would be slippery if there was a lot of blood. And there always was a lot of blood.

I stood and wiped myself off. I looked over at Bomo, who had an oddly depressed look on his rocky face. He almost looked... lonely. Like he missed the Sledge already.

"Hey buddy," I said. "There should be another stairwell location here in the city. Can you see where it is?"

He grunted as his eyes went glossy. He had a spell that could teleport us to any stairwell location on the entire floor. The spell still hadn't reset from the last time he used it, but he could still load it up, and it showed him all the stairwells. It was a ridiculously powerful spell I was hoping to get my hands on somehow since we'd lose him the moment this floor ended.

"I only see two," he grunted.

"That's because we're not really sitting in Cuba right now," Mordecai said. "Each little area is its own location. Kinda like the bubbles on the fifth floor. When part two of this thing opens up, he'll probably be able to see everything."

"Why are we looking for stairwells now?" Donut asked. "There's one right outside, and we can't get to it anyway."

"Because if there's anybody else here, they're gonna be at the second stairwell. After we nap and reset our buffs, our first step is to find out if we're alone or not. Step two will be to map out the area and figure out where the best monsters are."

"Stairs not too far," Bomo said, tracing a rocky finger along the counter. "Still in big city near coast."

I'd never been to Cuba, or even looked at a map of Havana, and I had no idea how big this city really was. I had a general idea of the location of the city on a map of the small island country, but I knew nothing about the city itself. "Okay. Do me a favor and sit down with Mordecai and try to map it out a bit on a piece of paper. We're gonna keep you in the saferoom for now, but we might have you come out with us later."

Bomo made a sad rumble, and I patted him on the arm. "I still have an old GameCube from that house I haven't hooked up yet. I'll make a compatible controller for you. We have a few cool games for it."

He made a noncommittal grunt.

"See if you can find a real saferoom with a bopca, too," Mordecai said. "I'm gonna try to get my eyes on the dungeon newsletter and see what's happening."

"Eye," Donut corrected. "You only have one eye now."

He snorted. "Things are looking a little different in my menus, and I'm not certain what's changed. There's likely been some fallout from skipping that floor, and we want to know what that is."

"What about me? What about me?" Samantha called, hopping up and down.

I grinned. "You want us to find a mage for that body of yours, right?"

"Yes! Right away!"

I nodded. "We need a monster map of the whole area. The fastest way to do that will be to find a borough boss and get the field guide map. Once we do that, we'll see if we can find anybody that'll help you. You're going to be our recon specialist."

Less than an hour later, we were ready to go.

I wanted to get into the craft room and play with my new automaton pieces, plus my bomber's studio had just been upgraded, and I wanted to go into there. Mordecai was already making noises about my crafting table upgrade coupons, but I told him we wanted to get our bearings first.

The first thing I did was go back into the capitol building, and I surrounded the exit stairwell with traps, including alarm traps and a few teleports. I set the activation condition as **Crawler not a member of the guild Safehome Yolanda**. Just in case. I returned to the saferoom to gather Donut.

"Come on, Samantha. Donut, we're keeping Mongo locked up," I said. "Let's figure out how this world works before we unleash him."

Donut started to protest, but I held up my hand. "This is a city, and there are going to be cars everywhere. They won't stop, and if he gets hit, he'll get squished like your cousin Baron Bear Claw or whatever his name was."

Donut harumphed as we moved to the heavy, double doors. Samantha rolled underfoot, weaving back and forth excitedly. I pulled the doors open, revealing early morning on a warm, humid day. We stood at the top of a long, stone stairwell. The world outside bustled with activity.

Entering Old Havana.

"*Her* name was Baroness Éclair Exquisite, and she got smushed by a tractor because she ran into a field. She never was the brightest cat. Miss Beatrice was most upset when she heard the news, as was I. I never liked the baroness much, but it's always distressing when royalty dies in farm accidents. It's embarrassing to the whole family."

"Yeah," I said. "Bad things happen to cats who jump out windows."

"I saved your life when I went out that window, Carl, and I have yet to be thanked for it." Donut looked about at the scene spread before us. "Carl, none of these people are on my map. And isn't it supposed to be December? It's quite warm!"

I barely heard her. The scene hit me like a sledgehammer.

This is what we lost, I thought, taking it all in. *This is our world.*

The river, which I had thought I'd left behind on the previous floor, made itself known. *Stay down*, I thought. *Stay back. Not until I need you*.

I took a deep breath. The air was humid and smelled of flowers and ocean and the usual smoke of a city. The buzz of insects and cars and life filled my senses.

It appeared to be about eight in the morning. At the bottom of the stairs was a wide sidewalk, a busy, two-lane road, and then a wall of brick and stone buildings. Beyond that, the densely-packed city spread before us. Multi-story and multi-colored Spanish colonial-

style buildings spread out in every direction, most of them made of brick and multi-colored, aging stucco.

Various cars and scooters and buses zipped up and down the roadway. It was a mix of cheap Chinese and Russian vehicles with several classic American cars. A bright yellow, 1950-something Ford Fairlane with the top down rumbled by. The shining car looked brand new. A moment later, a 1950's Chevy Bel-Air passed. I realized the car was a taxi.

"Okay, Samantha," I said. "Try to stay out of traffic. We don't want you crashing any cars or scooters, okay? Especially not near here. Head south and just keep going. Every time you see a monster, let us and Mordecai know what it is. We're building a monster map."

I originally wanted to toss her the distance using the xistera extension, but she returned back to me the moment I removed it off my hand, and I didn't want to walk around with the thing all day, so we decided to let her roam freely. I was hoping for her to get as far from the saferoom as possible and gauge the strength of the monsters at the far edge of the area.

"Okay, I will fuck up any monsters," she said.

"No, you'll observe and report. You're recon, and that's it. Got it?"

She growled. "And we need to find a mage."

"That's right," I said. "Now get going. You can float now. I saw you do it, so stay above the traffic and people. Try not to touch anything."

"Okay. I got this. I will fly." She bounced a few times and then bounced down the stairs like a basketball. She did not fly.

"Fly," I yelled.

She ignored me. "Hey," she shouted as she rolled away, narrowly avoiding a strolling couple. She stopped to look at them. "Yoohoo! Are you a mage?"

"Samantha," I yelled. "They can't hear you. Remember? They're not really there. Just their clothes. And stay off the goddamned ground."

She growled and rolled away.

I cringed as she crossed the busy road, picking up speed. Luckily, nothing hit her. She turned and then zipped down an alley, disappearing. I could still hear her shouting, looking for a mage.

I sighed with relief when she disappeared. That would keep her busy for a day or two. I just hoped she didn't cause any major issues.

"Carl, she's not very good at following directions," Donut said. "It's a wonder she..."

"Whoa," I said, stepping out of the way as a group of people suddenly appeared, also coming out of the building. They materialized out of nowhere. It was a group of five people. Tourists by the look of them. From Asia. They'd been in the same building, but for whatever reason, our starting area wasn't a part of the replay. They just appeared at the top of the stairs and walked right through us.

"Help! Carl, help!" Donut shouted, suddenly rolling away. One of the ghosts had kicked her as he strode by. The shoe, sock, and pants just ripped right off the body as the man continued on his way. Donut rolled up in the trousers and fell down the stairs, screeching bloody murder. She *thump, thump, thumped* down the stairs and hit the ground and stopped just before she rolled into the street. I rushed toward her.

The man, now pantsless, underwearless and with only a single shoe and sock, continued on his way, oblivious. The parts that had been covered with clothes now appeared as a wavy, translucent outline, not fully realized like the rest of him. The illusion was strange, but I was grateful that we wouldn't be treated to a bunch of naked people walking around.

"Are you okay?" I asked, coming up to her. She pulled herself away and shook herself off. She hadn't really been hurt, despite falling down the stone stairs. Just surprised.

"Why I never," she said, glaring off at the man who stopped with his friends. He was now holding his hand up, like he was looking at a phone, but there was no phone in his hand. "You should be ashamed!"

"He can't..." I began, trailing off. She knew perfectly well he couldn't hear her.

"Carl, I think he dropped his wallet! And his cellphone!"

I picked up the brown pants, which had wrapped around Donut. I shook them so the whitey-tightie undies fell to the ground. Sure enough, there was a wallet and an iPhone in his pocket. I picked up the phone, and it was working, but I couldn't get into it. It said No Service in Spanish. It had a sticker on the back, indicating it was a rental. I looked back over at the guy, and he was pointing at something on his non-existent phone while his companions looked over his shoulder. They turned and walked off south along the sidewalk toward a palm tree-lined park.

"Weird." I stuck the phone into my inventory. It seemed wrong that the phone was actually turned on and working. It would turn to dust the moment we left this floor.

His wallet contained a few credit cards and several Euro banknotes along with a few American five dollar bills. There wasn't any Cuban money. I pulled one of the credit cards. Thanks to the system, I could read the Chinese characters. The man's name was Bingwen Zou. I took it all, along with the sock and shoe.

I hesitated, then I took the underwear, too. I didn't want to leave anything behind. We needed to leave as small a footprint as possible, especially near the saferoom.

"Gross, Carl," Donut said.

"Do you see any mobs or NPCs?" I asked. "Come on. Let's get out of the way."

Donut jumped to my shoulder, and we stepped out of the way of a strolling couple. A scooter thing that looked like a driving lemon zipped by on the street. Music blared as it passed.

"No," she said. "And it's going to be hard to get through that without touching anybody. There are people everywhere. It smells really good here. I thought it was going to smell disgusting. I don't smell a single cigar."

"What about saferooms?"

"Nothing," she said. "But there are bathrooms."

"Okay, hang on." I cast *Ping*.

The sonar sound spread out, moving out into the city. The spell was supposed to have a range of a little more than three kilometers, but I knew it would be less in the city, especially with such tall buildings. It wouldn't show mobs or other crawlers, but it would show me all the white-tagged NPCs. Several dots appeared on my map, including Samantha, who'd already gone a good distance, plus some white dots in the ocean north of us. It was showing non-hostile animals, I realized, and I adjusted it. Only a handful of actual NPCs appeared, and none of them were close. If they were in saferooms or even regular buildings, I knew *Ping* wouldn't work very well.

I had no idea how it worked with NPCs when they were mixed in with all this chaos.

We needed to go about six miles east. The walk would take us maybe an hour and half or two hours under normal circumstances, but if we were going to be dodging everyone, it would be impossible to do it quickly. We started moving north along the wide sidewalk, evading tourists and vendors. There were people everywhere.

We passed a pair of men, one holding open a paper map, examining it. I reached over and plucked the map out of his hands. His wedding ring went flying off his hand, plinked twice, and fell into the gutter.

"This would be much easier at night," I said. I decided to leave the ring there, and we continued on our way. I examined the map as we walked. It was in English, and it showed the whole downtown area along with transit instructions to outer neighborhoods. As I suspected, we were walking in the correct direction. We were headed toward a different neighborhood outside of Old Havana called Miramar.

"I don't see why we have to dodge people," Donut grumbled as we walked. There was a highway that traced the northern coast. We were going to get there and skirt the highway east toward the other stairwell. It looked like there was a sidewalk. If there was, this trip wouldn't be as bad as I originally thought. "The clothes don't hurt us when they hit us. As long as we're not hit by a car, I don't see what

the problem is. And frankly, I don't think getting hit by a car would be that bad with our Constitution."

"We already have reports of people getting injured by moving objects. They're cheating, giving things more force than they're supposed to have. If we were really on the surface, and I got hit by a car with my stats, I'd barely move. The car would get obliterated, but that's not how it works here. I'm worried about chain reactions." I paused to watch an honest-to-goodness, 1920's Model T Ford rumble by. "Remember the Iron Tangle? Crashing one little train screwed everything up."

"Yes, Carl, but that was different. These people aren't really here. Just their clothes. I say we throw a big rock in the road and get it all over with. We wait for a car to crash into it, which will cause all the other cars to crash, and in a little bit, the road will be free because they'll all be crashed at that one spot. It'll just be weird, glowing ghosts floating around the place. And once they move through the crash, they won't have anything on themselves to hurt us. You still have the royal chariot in your inventory. We'd have an empty road!"

"We'd end up paste if we tried to use the chariot. Do you see those buses? They're everywhere. A roadblock won't get everything right away."

Donut sighed dramatically. "All this walking is very bad for my fur."

She was sitting on my shoulder and had been since we left the saferoom.

She continued. "I do like it here, though. It's very pretty, and I like the smell of all the street food vendors. I didn't know there'd be so many people selling things. Or so many tourists. I thought the country was closed off."

"This place is a huge tourist destination," I said. "Or it was. It was hard to get here directly from the US, but people from all over used to come here all the time. Supposedly the beaches are great."

"Well, I thought this was a communist country and such things as street vendors and beaches weren't allowed. I thought there'd be tanks on every corner and men in olive uniforms shooting guns into the sky and parades where everyone is smoking cigars while children

wait in line for a single piece of bread. And what about those boat people going to Florida? I feel as if the *A-Team* lied to me."

"We're not going to be talking about politics," I said. "That's not why we're here. Nothing ever good comes from talking politics, especially when neither of us know what the hell we're talking about it."

Donut scoffed. "Carl, have you been sniffing glue? You are boxers deep in politics! We are sponsors now, and as the former number one crawler, it's my duty to..."

She suddenly hissed and poofed out. A pack of three or four street dogs strolled by and ran into the street, crossing it, moving toward a street vendor selling fried egg sandwiches of all things. The dogs were part of the illusion.

"Anyway," I said, changing the subject, "I think you might be right about blocking the road. But if we do it, we need to be really careful about the location. One little crash will cause every car that moves through there to start piling up, and soon it'll be like that pit of trains. It'll have a cascade effect, and the crash site will get bigger and bigger."

"It's going to happen whether you like it or not. Especially with Samantha out there. Carl, look!" Donut said, pointing.

A man floated by on the road, wearing only sunglasses. He came from the north, the direction we were walking. Only his head and his arms looked fully corporeal. The man just floated down the road. He'd been riding a scooter, but something had happened to it. He'd lost the scooter and all of his clothes. Whatever it was, it had occurred off the main roadway.

"Well, shit," I said, watching him go. I wondered if Samantha caused it.

Carl: You doing okay, Samantha?

Samantha: NOBODY IS TALKING TO ME, CARL. I DON'T LIKE BEING IGNORED. IT HURTS MY FEELINGS. I AM VERY SENSITIVE.

I grumbled under my breath.

Carl: Again, Samantha. The people aren't really here. It's an illusion. We're inside of a dream, and they do not see

you. And why aren't you flying?

Samantha: I AM GOING TO KILL THEM. AND IT TAKES A LONG TIME FOR MY MAGIC TO BUILD UP. I HAD A LOT OF MAGIC WHEN WE WERE FIGHTING ON THAT LAST FLOOR, BUT I DON'T HAVE MUCH NOW. WAIT, I SEE A RAT MONSTER! IT'S WEARING A HAT.

Donut: WHAT KIND OF HAT?

Samantha: OH, YOU WOULD LOVE IT. IT'S VERY BIG. WELL, IT'S SMALL. IT'S A NORMAL SIZED RAT, BUT THE HAT IS BIG FOR HIM. MUCH TOO BIG FOR ITS LITTLE HEAD. HE'S VERY CUTE. OH NO, HE'S RUNNING AWAY! HE'S REALLY FAST!

I sighed and opened a new chat window.

Carl: Hey, Katia, Imani. Are you guys seeing any chain reactions yet?

Imani: We're in a rural area, but I-5 is nearby, and only a handful of actual cars have gone by from the south toward Portland. Lots of floating heads and arms. I think something is blocking the freeway down there. Cars are still coming from the north.

Elle: It's really weird. I just saw a goddamned bigfoot cross the road. He almost got splattered. The thing was wearing Bermuda shorts.

Donut: WHAT ARE BERMUDA SHORTS? THAT SOUNDS LIKE AN OLD PERSON THING.

Elle: Well, it ain't a sasquatch thing, that's for sure.

Katia: It's the same here. The moment we walked out of the saferoom, I saw a Nykur. It's a type of horse, and it's supposed to be gray. It was pink for no apparent reason. It *did* get splattered by a car, and now there's a growing pile of car crashes. Everything is icy, which doesn't help. The cars are already blocking the front entrance to our safe area. We're closing off the area around it so it doesn't get worse, and then we gotta clear it away. Louis and Britney are trapped inside for now.

Imani: I'm seeing a lot of chatter about this sort of stuff everywhere. I don't know if they thought this through or if this is exactly what they wanted to happen.

Elle: I think we should make roadblocks away from the saferooms so it doesn't happen close to the stairwell.

Donut: THAT'S WHAT I'VE BEEN TELLING CARL, BUT HE'S BEING GRUMPY ABOUT IT.

Carl: Make sure it's *really* far from the stairwells if you can. Those piles of cars are going to get pretty big and long. Longer than you think. I think in a few hours all the roadways are going to be just stopped.

A man walked out of a doorway, surprising me. He walked right through me, and his clothes went flying. Donut sputtered from my shoulder and spit out an ear bud. The man continued on his way, nothing but a floating head and arms with a wavy, translucent outline for the rest of him. I left the clothes on the sidewalk.

"Shit," I said again, watching the man go. "You're right. This is impossible."

To accentuate the point, a loud crash echoed from somewhere deep in the city. Followed by another crash, then another. I cursed.

Samantha: THAT WASN'T MY FAULT.

Everything was already out of whack.

"Come on, Donut," I said, starting to jog along the sidewalk. "Let's get to that other stairwell." I still avoided people, but not as carefully. Clothes and cellphones went flying the moment I brushed past someone. I kicked a baby stroller, and it spun sideways. As we ran, another crash echoed, this time from a different direction. Smoke filled the air as something burned.

It didn't take long to come across our first mob. We reached the northern coast of the island, and sure enough there was a wide, multi-lane highway here that ran east-west. We hit the concrete sidewalk and started to jog west. I didn't dare use the royal chariot,

but I contemplated snagging a bicycle or one of the hundreds of scooters zipping around.

Donut remained on my shoulder as I ran, wind whipping by my face. She made comment after comment on the colorful architecture and clothing and vehicles, plus she was constantly hissing and complaining about the multiple street dogs who skulked around every corner.

The ocean spread out on our right, the blue waves crashing calmly against the beach. The air smelled wrong here. Like Donut said, it wasn't unpleasant, but it was like they got the ocean scent just a little off. Apartments and other buildings of all sizes and conditions dotted the city to our left, punctuated by an occasional palm tree-filled park. Along the highway, cars still came from the west, but the eastern lanes were mostly stopped. Like with Imani and Elle's area, it was just groups of people floating on the road, which was really weird.

Samantha was also giving random updates. The further away she moved, the bigger the monsters. Her description skills weren't very great. The last thing she described was just a crying lady with a basket, throwing eggs at her.

I was commenting on the strangeness of it all when Donut hissed at me to stop. A red dot appeared on the map, appearing atop a hill in a park adjacent to the road. It screamed, loud and high-pitched. There were no words, but the sound was very human-like. I turned in time to see the creature galloping toward us. It started barking.

Only the barks weren't... barks. It was like a person was imitating the bark of a dog.

"What the hell, man," I muttered as I formed a fist.

Combat Started.

The message came out of nowhere and was in a voice I'd never heard before. What was that?

The brown and white, four-legged creature was about the size and shape of an extra-large wolf, but its long, straight, forward legs did not bend at the knees, and it loped toward us with an odd, splayed gait, bouncing wildly up and down.

But the strangest part of the creature was the head. It was that of a human, but maybe one and half times the size of a regular person, making it comically large on the strange monster. It was an angry-looking, bearded guy wearing a red beret. The beret glowed, indicating it was magical.

The head on the thing looked suspiciously like Che Guevara.

He continued to bark furiously at us as he charged. It literally sounded like a dude using a megaphone to make barking noises.

"What in god's name is that?" Donut cried as she pumped a magic missile at the creature. "It's like the dog from that alien movie with President Snow in it!" The missile hit the mob, who howled in outrage. Its health went down about ten percent. She followed it up with a fireball, which slammed into the monster, throwing it onto its back. It caught on fire and started squealing in pain.

I examined the pitiful creature.

The Experience – Level 55

One of the most feared creatures from pre-Colombian Taino folklore, the Experience is said to be the guardian of the world of the dead. Who knows why dead people need to be guarded because, well, they're dead already. You humans have a lot of weird traditions that make no sense whatsoever. Anyway, this vicious and powerful monstrosity rarely shows itself in the world of the living, but when it does, you best watch out. It's strong, magical, and quite feisty.

"This is something from their mythology? Really?" Donut asked. "Why is it called that? It sounds like a rejected character from either *the Jersey Shore* or one of those jerks from the Skull Empire."

"Uh," I said, watching the creature pull itself up. It was still on fire. "I think maybe they took something from local legend and Saturday morning cartooned it."

"I don't know what that means, Carl, but it sounds offensive." She shot another magic missile, knocking it back. Its health was down a little more than half. It started to turn in circles, trying to get the fire on its own ass out. It whimpered and howled. It paused to

look in our direction and suddenly started scream-insulting us in Spanish.

"You better hit it with your new *Mute* spell before we figure out his magical ability," I said.

She cast, and the yellow bolt shot out, moving painfully slow. The creature whimpered and tried to move out of the way, but the yellow blob curved in the air and slapped itself onto the creature. A one-minute timer appeared over it along with a little speaker with a cross through it icon, indicating it couldn't cast spells.

The monster continued to spin in circles, whimpering

"Do you remember the show we had to go on?" I asked. "The voiceover one. *Earth Beautiful*?"

"Where I introduced the universe to the truth about cocker spaniels?" Donut asked. "Of course I remember it." She suddenly gasped and then cast a new spell. A new debuff appeared over the creature. The icon for this one was a head with little wavy lines over it.

The monster howled and then started viciously biting at its own leg. Donut laughed. "Look Carl, it works! Look! That's my *Why are you Hitting Yourself?* spell!"

I grunted. The monster's health started to go down faster and faster. It simultaneously rumbled and cried as it savagely bit at itself. Its rump continued to smolder.

"We'll have to see what else is out there, but I think their interpretation of 'legendary creatures' might be a little off. Just like on that *Earth Beautiful* show. The producer guy for that show told me they got all their info off an incomplete copy of the internet. Their research was a mix of real facts and made-up bullshit. Like they did five minutes of research and filled in the blanks. I think this is the same thing."

The monster collapsed onto its side. The beret on its head plopped off. The monster was scorched and bleeding. *Christ*, I thought. *Donut did that, and she barely had to lift a paw*.

Donut scoffed. "How is it they have a perfect recording of all the people and cars and the things they're carrying and how they moved

around, but they don't have accurate facts about mythology? The posse members aren't going to like things to be inaccurate."

"In this case, it's working in our favor. There are some pretty messed up myths and legends," I said.

"Do you think we should stick it with one of the flags?" Donut asked. "We don't have to keep him, but we have twenty of the flag things, and we should see how they work. But if we do add him to the squad, I'm going to have to insist he shaves. And I get to keep his hat."

"Too late," I said as the monster groaned and died.

Combat Complete. Deck has been reset.

"Dibs on the hat!" Donut called as she bounded up the park.

Donut looted the monster, which stank like dead, wet dog. She also took the red beret, and she gasped when she read the stats.

While she went through everything, I took in our surroundings. We were in a small park that overlooked the ocean. An old, stone trench cut through the grass. A historical marker sat at the far end. My eyes caught movement in the distant water. Something appeared above the surface and then disappeared again. It was gone as quickly as it came. It was a sea serpent of some kind. How far did they say the area extended into the ocean? I couldn't remember, but it was a few kilometers at least. Then I noticed a few additional red dots along the shoreline. These were something smaller. One slid into the water and disappeared. Seals. We'd have to be careful.

I was also starting to catch up on the group chats that were coming in, getting a handle of this new combat system. So far, it seemed like nothing had changed other than the weird notifications. Nobody knew anything solid yet.

"Carl, look, there's a card thing," Donut said. "It was in its inventory. I thought we only got cards when we stuck the monsters with flags."

"Let's see it," I said.

I held out my hand, and the item appeared. It was a large, rectangular card, just about the size of a postcard. It was rigid, but it still felt like it was made of paper, like I could rip it easily if I wanted. The back was decorated with the now-familiar logo of the Syndicate government. The 3D image moved and undulated on its own.

The other side was nothing but a red, stylized plus symbol floating in a field of stars.

T'Ghee Card. Very Rare.

Utility Card.

Combo.

Consumable.

You ever mix two completely incompatible foods together to see how they taste? Sometimes it's great. Like chicken and waffles! Sometimes it's... a bad idea.

Like tuna and haggis.

Temporarily combines two monster cards into a single creature. Summoning length is equal to the shorter of the two summoning phases. Post summoning, both monsters are tagged out for the remainder of combat, even if they still have health.

Warning: This is a consumable card. It will be destroyed upon use.

"I wonder how rare these things really are," I asked, turning the card over. I wouldn't know how valuable this thing really was until we added some monsters to the squad.

I tried to stick the card into my inventory when I received an error.

Warning: Cards may only be held by the Squad Leader.

"That's just great," I muttered.

"So, what do you think?" Donut asked. The red beret appeared on her head. I hadn't had the chance to examine it yet. "Does it look good? I do prefer my white tiara, but I'm thinking maybe I should embrace the revolutionary look just when we're..." She paused, turning her head. "There are crawlers here. Over there."

I turned to see the three crawlers walking toward us from the direction we'd been headed.

"Carl, do you see that?" Donut asked, jumping back to my shoulder. She hissed as the three crawlers continued to approach. One of them lifted a hand in greeting.

I grinned and held up my hand to wave. I tried not to laugh. They were still far off, but I didn't recognize any of them. Two were guys. The third was a woman. The men were both human.

The woman was a cat girl.

Donut hiss-whispered in my ear. "That is the most disgusting thing I've ever seen in my life, Carl. It's an abomination. It's worse than that dog-headed cheater lady."

I laughed. "It's like we used that utility card on you and Katia."

"Don't even joke about that, Carl."

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The three newcomers stopped dead when they finally realized who we were. They paused at the edge of the park. They started whispering amongst themselves. I sighed and moved toward them.

"Be nice," I whispered.

The two guys were both in their mid-thirties, and I couldn't tell the age of the cat woman. In fact, I wasn't positive it even *was* a woman, but she did have the curve of human-like breasts under her fur, almost like she was wearing a bodysuit. Both men were Hispanic. The woman looked like a bipedal, humanoid, shorthaired cat with glowing, green eyes. Her face had the long, thin features of a Siamese cat, but her fur was coffee-colored, almost black, and her vertical ears were much more rounded than a typical Siamese. Her fur rustled in the wind, and it looked soft to the touch. She carried a glowing trident over her shoulder, and her only clothes were a flowing cloak and arm bracers.

Donut hissed again. "That's a Havana brown, Carl. A Havana! We need to stay away from her."

"That's a little premature, don't you think?"

She scoffed. "There's no getting along with Havana browns, Carl."

I had no idea why the idea of a cat woman bothered Donut so much. She didn't seem to care about Bautista, who was more of a tiger thing. She never really liked other cats, even before we'd come into the dungeon. Zev had once mentioned that there were a few

cat girls out there, and Donut had been absolutely scandalized about the idea. I didn't really get it.

I examined all three as we got closer. Based on their crawler numbers, it was clear they'd all come into the dungeon together.

The first man wore glowing, silver plate armor. At first I thought the guy was a little taller than me, but the metallic boots on the armor looked to be platforms, giving him an extra seven or eight inches of height. I'd only seen a handful of crawlers decked out in traditional, head-to-toe, medieval-style armor. It looked heavy and uncomfortable as shit. The only exposed skin was his head, which stuck out of the breast plate like a dude poking his head out of a tank. He wore a backwards baseball cap on his head, and he had a wide-eyed, scared look about him.

He had a glowing symbol over his head, indicating he worshipped a deity. The symbol was a palm frond.

Crawler #8,199,454. "Paz Lo."
Level 45.
Race: Human
Class: Santero
This crawler worships the God Ogun.

The second guy was a well-muscled, bald man in a leather jacket with knee-high boots and a black cape. He carried a crossbow that looked similar to Katia's, though the front depicted an open-mouthed creature. Maybe a monkey. This man also worshipped the same god. His dark eyes bored into us suspiciously as we approached. Donut gasped in despair as we got closer. This guy was completely covered in old tattoos, even on his face. Prison tattoos. Real ones.

He also had a pair of player killer skulls over his head. He was the only player killer in the group. All three of them had a mess of boss kills, including a pair of city bosses. This guy also had a single dagger icon, indicating he'd killed a hunter on the previous floor.

Crawler #8,199,451. "Anton Lopez."
Level 47.
Race: Human
Class: Fugitive.
This crawler worships the God Ogun.

The cat was indeed a woman. She did not worship a god.

Crawler #8,199,462. "Sister Ines Quiteria"

Level 47.

Race: Cat Girl

Class: Poet Laureate.

I pulled up chat.

Carl: Mordecai, who is the god Ogun?

Mordecai: For fuck's sake, did you already summon another god?

Carl: No. Just met a group of crawlers who worship him.

Mordecai: Thank the gods. He's a big one. A common god to worship. God of blacksmiths and protection. They can't be charmed, and their weapons will pack an extra punch. The god itself is pretty grumpy.

Carl: They all are. Thanks.

"Sister," Donut said. "Carl, is she a nun? A ...cat girl... nun?" She spit the words "cat girl" angrily.

"Let's find out."

"Hey guys," I said, approaching close enough to talk. "I'm Carl, and this is Donut."

"We know who you are," prison-tattoo Anton said, practically growling the words.

I was taken aback. I was anticipating them being suspicious or cautious, but the vehemence of his anger surprised me. Donut was about to spit something back at them, and I held up my hand.

Easy. Easy. "Uh, were you the only three in your group? We were the only two at the other stairwell."

"Oh yeah?" Anton asked. He twitched a little, holding his crossbow at the half ready position. "Word is you were with that goat guy. The one who murdered Gimli."

Gimli was a pet hawk that had gotten eaten by Bianca, Prepotente's hellspawn familiar. That had happened at the end of the Masquerade, and I'd been knocked out at the time. Gimli's owner was a guy I didn't know named Osvaldo, and he was Brazilian. He was the one who'd looted the memorial crystal off Queen Imogen's

body. I had a quest to get it from him. I was pretty sure Prepotente had a similar quest.

"Word travels fast," I said cautiously.

"We know what happened at the end of the sixth floor, and what happened at the beginning of the next. You ain't the only ones who got friends. We hear things."

"Wow," Donut said. "I don't think he likes you very much, Carl."

"Stay back, cat!" Anton said. "Stay the fuck away from us!"

"Me?" Donut asked, incredulous. "What did I do!"

I took a deep breath. The guy in the armor and the cat woman both took a step back and away from Anton, who stood in the middle of their unit. It was subtle, but I recognized it for what it was. They were getting ready to fight. It was an interesting formation considering he was the one with the ranged weapon.

This was ridiculous. Fighting with the only other people in here was more than pointless. It played right into the showrunner's hands. It had come out of nowhere.

I held out my hands as I took a step back. "Look, we didn't have anything to do with Pony fighting that Osvaldo guy. And he left the party before we went down to this floor. He's over in the Bahamas."

"Bullshit," Anton said. He cracked his neck. His attention, I realized, was laser focused on Donut. Behind him, Paz gave Sister Ines a nervous look. The cat woman's whiskers twitched.

"Why would I lie about that?" I asked. "He's not the easiest person to hide. Look, I don't know why you guys are so jumpy, but if that's how you feel, we have a big, wide area to explore here." I pointed south into the city. "We'll go that way, and you three can go fuck yourselves off wherever you want."

Anton didn't respond. He just glared at Donut angrily. I watched a single bead of sweat start to trace its way down the side of his bald, tattooed head. *He's scared. He's scared of Donut*. All three of their eyes were flashing, and I knew they were rapidly talking with one another in chat.

I was missing something.

Carl: Donut. Do you know why they don't like you?

<u>Donut</u>: IT'S THE OTHER CAT. HAVANA BROWNS ARE UNTRUSTWORTHY MONGRELS. ALMOST AS BAD AS SPHYNXES AND SCOTTISH FOLDS.

<u>Carl</u>: Yeah, I don't think that's it.

"Why are you this cat thing?" Donut suddenly demanded of Sister Ines, breaking the silence. "A cat I can understand. Carl would've picked cat had the system allowed it. But why ...*this*? And are you really a nun?"

The woman exchanged a look with the others. They were still talking privately. The terrified-looking, armored man appeared as if he was about to burst into tears.

The cat woman took a step forward and put a paw on Anton's shoulder. She whispered something to him. He lowered his crossbow. The tattooed man remained anxious, but it seemed like the strange tenseness of the situation was finally starting to ease, as quickly as it came.

I found myself staring at the cat woman's large paw. Unlike Bautista and Prepotente, who both had human-like hands, she had an actual paw, though she did have an opposable thumb, making her paws work almost like mittens. Her feet were the same, and she wore no shoes. Grabbing things had to be difficult for her. I wondered how she fought with that trident over her shoulder.

"Hello, Donut," the woman finally said. "We have seen you both many times on the program. I am a Discalced Carmelite." Like Anton, she had a Latina accent. Her voice was a little rough, like Elle's. I had the sense maybe she was older.

"I don't know what that means," Donut said.

The cat woman chuckled softly. "It means I am a nun, yes."

"Yes, but why are you a half cat?"

She shrugged. "It seemed like the best option at the time. When we had the choices presented to us, it was the only race that gave me a charisma boost for my *Word Weaver* spell, amongst others, and our game guide insisted it would allow me to choose the Poet Laureate class, which it did. Plus, I always liked cats. We had several at the prison."

Prison.

The word landed heavy in the silence between us.

I reexamined the other two men. I could see it, now. The two men were cons. She was a nun, who'd possibly worked at the prison. I once again focused on Anton with his fugitive class, and his two player killer skulls.

At this point, several crawlers had skulls, and the sight of one or two wasn't as terrifying as it once was. Donut had one. Katia had two. Imani had 12. That alone didn't mean anything. The real player killers had dozens. Still...

Goddamnit, I thought. I hated this. I hated not trusting fellow humans.

"Then why did you choose a Havana brown?" Donut insisted. "It's hardly a proper breed for a nun. *Maybe* a Ragamuffin. Or an Abyssinian. Certainly not a Persian, of course. But a Havana? That's like an accountant choosing to be in the body of an English mastiff. Or a professional bodybuilder picking a Yorkshire Terrier. Unless you're trying to be edgy and ironic."

Sister Ines looked at her own arm curiously. "I didn't get to choose. Is that what this breed is called? Havana brown? It's just what happened. Maybe it's because I'm Cuban."

"Lies!" Donut suddenly shouted. All of us jumped. Even me. "The Havana brown breed originated in England! It has no association with Cuba at all! Come on, Carl. Let's get out of here before they ply us with more filthy lies."

I put my hand on Donut's chest to calm her just as Anton panic-jerked his crossbow back up. His tough exterior was starting to crack. Sister Ines deftly caught the top of the crossbow as he yanked it up, keeping the bolt angled away.

It was then, at that moment, that I finally understood who was really in charge of this group.

"Like I said, Donut. I did not choose what I looked like."

Carl: Holy shit, Donut, chill. There's no way they let her choose what goddamned breed of cat she was. And nobody except you would know that a Havana whatever doesn't come from Cuba.

Donut: EVERYBODY KNOWS THAT, CARL.

<u>Carl</u>: Just be calm, okay? We need to figure out why they're scared of us.

She patted Anton again on the shoulder. "Now, we are all calm, yes?"

He grunted something inaudible.

"Look," I said. "I don't know why you're afraid of us, but the last thing either of us need is to be looking over our shoulders the whole time. I was hoping to find you guys so we could work together. We are always stronger together. But if you're not interested, we'll separate here." I held up a fist. "We should at least get into each other's chat so we can talk in case of an emergency."

"Your cat said she was going to kill us all when she met us," Paz said, speaking for the first time. The armored man lifted a metal arm and pointed at Donut. "She said she was going to rip out our throats and feed us to danger dingoes and laugh while we drowned to death in our own blood."

"What?" I asked, looking over at Donut. "No she didn't."

"It wasn't danger dingoes," Donut said indignantly. "It was brindle grubs. And I said that in confidence to Anaconda and Sledgie. I mean, really. So now you're eavesdropping on my conversations? Carl, I told you Havanas are no good."

"I... What?" I repeated.

"We went on a program at the beginning of the sixth floor," Sister Ines said. "They showed us the clip."

"Who the hell is Anaconda?" I asked.

"You know who Anaconda is, Carl. He's one of the lead dancers at the Penis Parade in the Desperado Club. Anaconda told me he'd never met a cat before, only cat girls, and I told him what I'd do if I ever met one."

"See!" Paz said, his voice squeaking.

"I said that ages ago," Donut said. "I mean, really. I can't be held accountable for everything I've ever said to a stripper. I also told Damascus Steel he was Mongo's new daddy the last time I was there. Are you going to hold that against me, too?"

"Goddamnit, Donut," I said. "Were you drunk?"

"No, Carl."

"Okay," I said. "Everyone needs to chill. Donut is not going to attack anyone. She said that because she always says stupid shit, but she didn't mean it, did you Donut?"

"I just don't understand why it was even allowed to be a race." She sighed dramatically. "I suppose I must get over it. It's not like I have a choice."

The three newcomers talked some more amongst themselves via chat. While they did, I delved back into my own messages. I'd been asking around if anybody knew these guys and if they could vouch for them. Katia revealed she'd been compiling a list of crawler names that weren't to be trusted, and they weren't on it. That didn't mean anything in itself, but it was a good sign.

The only person who knew them directly was Tserendolgor.

Ren: I don't know them well. I have Paz in my chat. Him and the other guy are cousins, and they're really protective of the third one. The nun woman. Their party was bigger, but they had a rough time on the sixth floor. They're good friends with Osvaldo's group, but I don't think they share a guild with him. They're mostly loners. I know that Anton guy with the fugitive class is really good with the crossbow, and that he'd had to kill two guys from his own group on the first or second floor after they'd tried to kill the nun for some reason. Don't know the story. Paz also has a self-destruct spell. One that kills himself if he casts it, kinda like that bomb everybody knows you have. But it's a directional blast. So you probably shouldn't fight them.

Directional blasts were insanely powerful, and rare. I'd been chasing the ability to magically direct blasts for a while now, but I still hadn't been able to find something to mimic the ability.

Carl: Okay, thanks.

Donut: OF COURSE THE CHEATER LADY KNOWS THEM.

Imani: I have someone on my list who says they were in the same bubble as Quan Ch on the fifth floor, and that they didn't get along. So maybe you guys can bond over that.

"If you really want to work together, you can help us capture our first squad member," Sister Ines said. "There's a lot of them on the

beach. We tried to fight one, and it almost took Paz out. We'd had to kill it. If you help us capture one, we'll help you get one, too."

"What are they?" I asked.

"Seals," she said. "Monk seals."

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[6]

"I've never been a fan of pun-based naming conventions, Carl," Donut said as the five of us trekked across the road toward the rocky, northern beach. Another distant crash echoed from the city. Cars no longer came from either direction on the freeway, but people still walked up and down the sidewalks. Nobody was on the rocky beach here, instead opting for the beaches much further to the east and west. "It's cheap, and it lessens the danger of everything around us."

"You were literally just talking about a stripper named Damascus Steel."

"I love that guy! Strippers are supposed to have names like that. There's Anaconda. Damascus Steel. Dong Quixote. The Author Steve Rowland. Gluteus Maxx. And a bunch of others. Have you ever gone into the Bitches room? I bet they also have names like that. And don't forget Juice Box. But that's different, and you know it. That's their names, not the name of their species. Quite frankly, it's embarrassing. Actually, that reminds me. Last time we were there, Damascus said he wanted to meet you."

Anton kept a wary eye on us as we walked, but everything had relaxed. The more Donut yammered on, the more clear it was that she was mostly harmless. The sense of distrust was still there, and it would be for a while, but it appeared both sides had spent some time talking to others and getting an idea of the people we really were.

Despite them being former prisoners, my gut told me these guys were all right. I didn't necessarily trust them, but they didn't appear to wish us harm. Not as long as they had Sister Ines keeping them in line. Them being convicts by itself didn't mean much to me. Half the dudes I worked with before the collapse were ex-cons.

Because there were no cars, Donut released Mongo, who jumped upon the newcomers with typical gusto. The three crawlers were all terrified at first, but they quickly warmed to the dinosaur when they saw he was like a giant dog. Mongo was fascinated not with the cat woman, but Paz, the armored Santero, which I gathered was some type of warrior cleric. Mongo pushed his face right up against the shining breastplate and looked at himself in the reflection, which pushed the large man over onto his ass with a ridiculously loud crash. The man fell like an upset turtle. I was afraid they'd be angry, but Paz howled with laughter.

Anton and I each grabbed an arm to pull him up.

Donut, seeing that Mongo "approved" of them, had also eased her suspicions. Of the two men at least. She continued to make comment after incredulous comment in chat about various parts of Sister Ines's anatomy.

"Monk seals," Donut muttered again. "I mean, really."

"I don't care if it's a play on words," I said. "They sound pretty awesome if we can catch one. We just need to be careful."

"They're a lot faster than they look," Sister Ines said as we crossed over a small fence, leading to the rocky beach. We'd walked a quarter mile east toward a larger section of beach where the seals were more spread out. I could hear their loud shouting and fighting and barking as we approached.

Again, this was less mythological creature and more something stupid, but according to Sister Ines, these guys were tough. And intelligent. And great tanks.

"Real Caribbean monk seals are extinct," Paz said as we approached. "They used to be everywhere, but we hunted them out. My papa told me that."

"Was he a scientist?" Donut asked. She now sat upon Mongo's back, who'd in turn attached himself to the side of Paz.

"No. He worked on a sugar plantation," Paz said.

Anton, who'd done the most talking when we met, was mostly silent. The man was always watching, always looking around, always alert.

"So, what were you in for?" Donut asked Paz. The armored man clanged his way over the fence. He sounded liked a bag of pots and pans being shaken up and down as he moved. It would be impossible for him to sneak up on anybody.

He grinned at Donut, revealing a missing tooth. "Sister Ines, what's rule number one?"

"Today is a new day," Sister Ines said. "We don't worry about yesterday because we can't change the past."

"So, a weird sex crime then?"

Paz laughed. Anton did not.

"It is considered rude to ask about one's past," Sister Ines said, speaking gently but firmly.

She suddenly reminded me of Miriam Dom, and an unexpected wave of sadness washed over me.

Donut was about to say something snarky to the nun, and I interrupted. "Have you guys gotten any cards yet?" I explained the utility card we'd received.

"No," Sister Ines said. "We've only killed two things since we've gotten here, and neither had anything like that."

I nodded. That was too bad. I was hoping the utility cards would drop with every kill.

"What do each of your classes do?" I asked.

Ahead, a single seal sat by itself on a rock near the water. It appeared to be asleep. We cautiously approached.

"I am a poet laureate," Sister Ines said.

Donut made a dismissive grunt. "I had the option for that once. It's a bard class. Mordecai said I shouldn't pick it because it required I pick a patron, and I did not want to do that. I prefer to offer my talents to everyone. Not just an elite few. Though I was a bard on the last floor. A legendary diva. That meant I was so good I didn't need a patron. I'm a master telephone psychic now."

"Yes, I am a bard healer," she agreed. "Wait, you're a what?"

"Do you even sing?" Donut asked, ignoring the question. "I sing. *I* had a concert recently."

"No. I recite poems. And prayers."

Donut: NO WONDER THESE GUYS WEREN'T IN THE TOP FIFTY. WHO WANTS TO LISTEN TO A FAKE CAT RECITE STUPID CHURCH POETRY ALL DAY?

Carl: Yeah, it'd be almost as bad as listening to a real cat sing.

Donut: THAT WAS REALLY MEAN, CARL.

"Paz is a Santero. That's a necromancer cleric. He also has a lot of healing and protection spells."

"Mostly I just curl up on the ground and let the bad guys hit me," Paz said.

I looked at Anton.

Sister Ines patted the tattooed man on the shoulder affectionately. "A fugitive is a rogue class, I am told. He's good at finding traps and escaping tough situations."

I suspected there was much more to it than that.

"And what about that deity you guys worship? Ogun?"

Paz opened his mouth to respond, but Sister Ines interrupted him. "Only Anton and Paz worship him. I cannot bring myself to worship a false god. He has many silly rules, but he allows each of them several protection spells. He would keep the three of us safe if the princess really wanted to rip our throats out. And what about your god? This Emberus."

Donut grunted. "He takes all of our money, but sometimes people catch on fire when Carl punches them. It doesn't happen very often though. I have many more fire spells."

The fact Sister Ines even knew I worshipped a god told me she had a similar ability to my own.

We crouched down and slowly approached the lone seal.

"They don't seem to have ranged attacks that we've seen," Sister Ines whispered. "But they are fast and fight dirty. We have to get close to stick the flag in. We tried affixing the flag to a crossbow bolt, but it didn't work. You have to be physically touching it when it's shoved into the monster. We lost the flag."

"Hang on a second," I said, and I pulled the Bahamas book from my inventory and started to flip through it.

I hadn't really looked at it yet. Prepotente seemed to think there would be some overlap. I moved to the index in the back. There were a lot of ridiculous monsters listed mixed in with some that sounded terrifying. The book separated them as Common, Uncommon, Rare, Very Rare, Legendary, Mythic, and Unique. There were lots of birds and bats and fish. I didn't see a monk seal listed. I sighed and put the book away. I'd examine it more closely later.

Sister Ines pulled a small flag from her inventory and handed it to me.

I blinked a few times, trying to figure out the image on the flag. It said **Team Sister Ines** on it, and it was a blue field with a black and white, embroidered blob on it. Donut audibly scoffed at the quality. It looked like the image was maybe one of those ball and chain shackles. But the metal ball had something on it. Like maybe a nun's habit. I shook my head. The design was almost as dumb as our own flag.

"I should warn you," Sister Ines said. "You might get a quest when you examine the seal."

I grunted as I turned my attention to the gray, slick monster. It looked like a regular seal. We had all sorts of similar animals in the Puget Sound, from the common harbor seal to the much-larger elephant seal and the loud-ass California sea lion. This guy was pretty big, but he was nowhere near the size of a sea lion and not even close to the size of an elephant seal. He was maybe six or seven feet long and probably weighed about 400 pounds. He just sat there, passed out on the rock.

Yago. Monk Seal Picket Sentry. Level 70.

Ahh, the monk seal. They're seals. And they're monks. Get it? Get it?

Yeah, anyway. These guys are more enthusiastic about their jobs than a dentist with glossaphilia. In case you don't know what that means, what I'm saying is these guys *really* love fighting stuff. It's their religion.

Trained in the deadly art of Caribbean Kung Fu, the monk seal sentry's sacred duty is to protect the coast and hunting grounds from the impending invasion of their dread enemy, the Red *Maníseros* Land Crabs, masters of *Juego de maní*.

Be careful. You don't want to get involved in *that* impossible conflict.

Crabs. Scratching, pinching crabs. The rats of the sea. I *hated* crabs.

A moment of silence passed, but I could sense the electricity in the air.

New Quest. The Chowder War.

Oh, you're getting involved whether you like it or not.

The Monk Seals. The Red *Maníseros* Land Crabs.

War is brewing, as it often does in these parts. Every season, the land crabs emerge from their forests to attend their sex parties in the oceans surrounding these lands. The Monk Seals hold the ocean sacred, and the very act of spilling so much crab chowder into their holy waters is considered a sacrilege most foul. This is no minor inconvenience. And it's not just a few little clouds of the batter, either. There are a lot of these crabs. Like, a lot. And when they let go… man. It's like a category 5 jizz storm down there. Fish die. The food becomes scarce. The baby monk seals and their food supplies are literally getting bukkaked to death with gallons of weird, chunky crab splooge.

And no, that's not a sentence even I thought I'd ever utter.

Would you want that for your own children? Nope. I didn't think so. It's disgusting, and it must be stopped at all costs.

For the Red *Maníseros* Land Crabs, it's a matter of survival. It's not their fault they can only have babies in the ocean. It's not their fault they've had to wait a whole year to let go. They don't want to do it there. They can barely swim. Water is a terrible lubricant. And to make matters

worse, these psychotic seals are always losing their minds every time they get anywhere near the coastline. So as a method of self-defense, they've learned the deadly art of *Juego de maní.*

Choose a side. Put an end to this conflict, one way or another.

***Reward*: You will receive a Platinum Quest Box.**

"Are you kidding me?" I asked. "Caribbean kung fu? Is that even a real thing?"

"I don't know about that, but *Juego de maní* is a Cuban fighting style," Paz said. "It is very real."

Donut did a little karate kick on my shoulder and made her *wachow!* noise. "Carl, this is like one of those kung fu theater movies you used to watch. Sort of. I don't know if any of them involve crabs jerking off all over baby seals. But it's like one of those movies where two schools are fighting each other! But what does that have to do with Cuban culture?"

"Nothing," I said. "Absolutely nothing. It's complete bullshit."

She gasped. "Aren't baby seals all white and fluffy? Oh my god, they're so cute! We should see if we can find one!"

"That's a different type of seal," I said. "I'm more curious about these crabs."

"The land crabs migrate every year," Paz said. "It's a tourist attraction. But it's not here. It's on the other side of the island into the Bay of Pigs. They live in the forest and move to the water to lay their eggs after getting inseminated the normal way. It's millions of them, and I'm pretty sure only the females go into the water. It also happens in the spring, not Christmastime. All of this with clouds of crab spooge is just made up."

"The dungeon is making crap up? I'm shocked," I said. "Baby seals live on the beach, too, not the ocean. How big are these crab things?"

Paz shrugged. His armor clanged. "The real ones are small. Maybe the size of my hand, but I haven't seen this world's version yet."

"Wait," Donut said. "Crabs live in the forest? That's a real thing? That sounds made up. Everyone knows crabs live underwater."

"Yeah, it's real," Paz said. "Though I think they spend their days in the wetlands. That whole area is a little swampy. They're everywhere on the roads during the migration. You should see it. They get squished by the cars. It ruins people's tires. It stinks, and then the birds come in and eat them all."

"You can eat them?" Donut asked.

"They are dangerous for people to eat," Paz said. "At least the real ones. Some people eat them anyway, especially the crab eggs, but for medicine, not food."

"We can worry about the crab spooge quest later," I said, refocusing my attention on Yago, the oblivious seal, who remained passed out. "Let's get this card."

The plan was straightforward. Sister Ines, Donut, and Anton would attack the monster from afar while Paz and I approached from the sides. Paz would draw the seal's aggro and tank the attacks while I stuck it with the flag. I didn't like the idea of separating from Donut, but we had multiple contingencies in place if things went south. And I made sure Donut had some space between her and the other two. I made Mongo stay back with her.

Sister Ines's main melee attack was with her trident, but she mostly fought like Imani did. She buffed everyone around her and hit the mobs with afflictions. Paz was also a healer, and a necromancer, too, but the armored cleric was able to absorb a lot of damage. He had a Turtle ability, which gave him a temporary, powerful shield while he drew the monster's aggro. I'd seen the ability in action before, and I knew it also rooted him in place and made him unable to attack or move. It was a dangerous ability because once cast, it couldn't be stopped until the timer ran out. If the shield was breached before that, the caster was free, but he'd

still suffer the excess damage of the attack that broke through the shield.

The plan was for him to walk up on the seal, draw its attention and get attacked while the others poured fire into it. I'd also approach, invisible. Once the health reached the five percent threshold, I'd swoop in with the flag.

The last time they'd tried this, the seal had overwhelmed Paz's defenses too quickly, making it so Anton had to take it out with a "one-shot." I wasn't certain what that was, but I assumed it was a powerful, magic-enhanced bolt.

As we prepared, I could sense how fluid of a team the other three were. I wondered how it was I'd never seen them before on the recap. I felt a little jealous, honestly, of their relative anonymity. Sister Ines said they'd gone on programs before, so they weren't completely under the radar. I wondered if that route, just quietly making one's way through the dungeon, was actually better than the path we'd found ourselves upon, not that I could change that now.

Our fame, I realized, was contagious. Whether these three liked it or not, they now had a lot of eyes on them. They weren't dumb. They had to know it, too. That was probably a bigger concern than that obvious bullshit with what Donut had said.

Paz clanged loudly as he walked. Yago the seal woke up while we were about thirty feet away. I downed the invisibility potion and dashed off to the side.

"Hey! Hey!" Yago the seal yelled at Paz, turning to face him. "What the fuck you think you doing? You challenging me?" He had a thick, Cuban accent. Paz said nothing as he got closer. "Oh, oh, you wanna fight? Is that it? I'll fuck you up!"

The seal then started making some weird, Bruce Lee noises. "Weeeeyaaaaw! Keeechaaaa!"

Combat Started.

The seal suddenly reared up, balancing on its tail, its little flippers waving back and forth while he made more kung fu sounds.

I watched, fascinated. I'd seen elephant seals smash into each other before, and they would beat the shit out of each other, but this was something completely different. This dude reared up much

higher than it should, going completely upright, balancing solely on its back, Y-shaped flipper.

The thing did not have the anatomy for this type of fighting. The trained ones you would see doing tricks at amusement parks were usually sea lions, which had much longer flippers.

Nevertheless, this thing reared up like a giant slug and screamed. A constant stream of nonsensical kung-fu-esque noises emanated from it. It flipped to the side. It did a complete circle in the air, landing back on its flippers with a wet *splotch*. The movement was quick, and smooth. *Oh shit*, I thought.

"Eeeeyahh!" It flipped through the air just as Paz fell forward, transforming into a giant, metal shell. The seal slammed down onto the shell, hitting so hard the entire beach rocked.

An **Unsteady** debuff flashed and was negated as the ground rocked. *Holy hell*, I thought. He'd slammed down on him with enough force to crush a goddamned car. The seal flipped back, just as quickly, screaming at the round, metal form of Paz.

"Coward," he shouted. "Fight me you metal bitch! Eiiiyaaaahhhh!"

A shield health bar had formed, and it was almost halfway down. The seal flipped sideways, pinwheeling in a circle around Paz. With each flip, the seal shrieked his own sound effects.

Donut: CARL, I'M PRETTY SURE THIS IS REALLY RACIST.

But just as Yago the seal moved to attack again, he was hit with three bolts at the same time. A full-powered magic missile, a crackling crossbow bolt, and a yellow bolt of magic. The debuff **Disoriented** appeared over him as he tumbled back, rolling toward me. He sat up, swaying and swearing. His health had barely gone down. He shook his head and swore again.

I, still invisible, took the opportunity to activate Talon Strike and kicked him several times in the side. *Thwap, thwap, thwap*. He grunted in pain. Another magic missile hit him as two more crossbow bolts stuck into his neck. Another magical bolt hit, this one a poison debuff.

His attention remained focused on Paz. His health was down to about thirty percent.

I moved to kick him again.

Oof. I was hit in the chin with his hind flippers as he flipped forward in the air, lighting quick.

"Yip! Yip! Yip!" he shouted as he flipped.

His blow on my chin had been glancing, but it had rattled my teeth. I stumbled back.

The monk seal slammed once again into Paz's shell. The rocks all around him shattered into dust. Paz's shield held only the smallest sliver of health.

Paz: Uh, guys?

Yago rolled to the side and started yelling some more. The seal suddenly started to glow, just as more bolts tried to slam into him. They didn't hit. Donut cast another magic missile, and it sizzled against the new shield. It was a protection spell of some sort. The debuffs over him all went away.

Anton: My bolts aren't getting through! This is something new. The last seal didn't cast this spell!

Sister Ines: He's protected himself from ranged attacks. I can't get in, either!

Paz: I can't move for another ten seconds!

Damnit, I thought. I shoved the flag in my mouth, and I rushed forward, forming a fist. The seal moved to slam down on Paz one last time. This would probably kill the guy. I rushed up, my gauntlet forming just as my invisibility faded.

I punched the seal right in the side of the head. He roared indignantly as he rolled away.

"Oh! Oh! Another little bitch. You gonna punch me in the face?" the seal shouted, finally moving his attention onto me. He hopped up and down a few times. He did a backflip then danced to the side. He made more kung fu noises. "Watch this!"

Fuck. I dove to the right just as he slammed down upon where I'd been standing. The damn thing was fast. Paz jumped to his feet the moment the *Turtle* ran out. A ridiculously huge mace formed in his hands. The thing was twice as long as he was with a diamond-shaped head the size of a beer keg.

"Watch out," he cried. He swung, and I hit the ground as the giant mace swung from behind. It slammed into the head of the

recovering seal, who grunted and then fell, landing atop me.

Oof. I wheezed as the heavy, wet form slammed into me.

The seal's health suddenly started to blink. It took me a second to realize what that meant.

"Flag," someone shouted. It was Sister Ines. All of them, Donut included, were running up on us. Mongo's cry screeched in the air.

I struggled to free my arm. I took the flag from my mouth, and I stabbed it right into the side of the head of the seal.

Pling! The digital noise echoed loudly through the beach.

The seal disappeared in a puff of blue smoke.

Combat Complete. Deck has been reset.

Shit, I thought. *And that wasn't even a boss battle.*

I still held something in my hand.

A card.

I examined it as the others ran up.

Warning: this card is owned by Team Sister Ines. It has not yet been activated. You may not collect or trade totem cards until they have been activated. This card may only be activated by that team's Squad Leader.

The back was the same as the utility card we'd collected earlier. The front featured a stylized, screaming version of Yago drawn in a comic book style. The seal now had a blue headband. Several symbols dotted the card, including a green 70 in the top corner, which I knew was the mob's level. There was also a clock with a 60 and a heart with a 125. A little symbol featuring a wave of water was emblazoned on the side with a fist under it and a shield under that. A whole row of other symbols ran across the bottom of the rigid card.

T'Ghee Card. Uncommon.

Totem Card.

Yago. Monk Seal Picket Sentry.

"You wanna fight me? You sure about that?"

Level: 70.

Origin: Cuba

Summoning duration: 60 seconds.

Constitution: 125.

This is an aquatic mob.
This is a melee mob.
This is a tank mob.
Notable attacks:
Kung Fu Master.
Body slam.
Earthquake.
Deflector.
+5 additional skills and spells.
Examine in the squad details tab of your interface for full stats and skills and spells.
Warning: You have empty slots in your squad. Collecting this card will automatically activate and place this totem into your squad. You may not remove or trade squad members until your squad is full. If you wish to remove a card before your squad is full, you will have to tear the card.

We definitely wanted to get one of these guys.

"Carl, there's another seal coming," Donut said as I handed the card off to Sister Ines. This new seal moved rapidly across the beach, headed straight for us, shouting. As it got closer, I noted this guy was the exact same level, but this one's name was Geraldo.

"So, you want to do it again?" I asked.

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After we collected that second card, adding Geraldo the monk seal as our first squad member, we abandoned the coast and started to move into the city in hopes of finding a saferoom. It didn't take long. Donut spotted one a few blocks deeper into the city. This was a less touristy area, filled with homes and small shops. We all traveled together. After that last fight, everyone was more comfortable with each other. Donut even seemed to have eased off on her distaste for Sister Ines.

We passed through an intersection filled with a pile of crashed cars and bicycles and mopeds, but the circle of cars wasn't very big. No cars came from any direction, but there were still people out and about with clothing on. A few bicycles still appeared. We squeezed between a wrecked, classic Chevrolet and the wall of a building as Zev messaged.

Zev: Hi guys.

Donut: HI ZEV! HOW ARE YOU?

Zev: So, I have some news. You were scheduled to go on Odette's show tonight, but she has decided to take several days off.

Donut: OH NO. IS SHE OKAY?

Zev: She's fine. She usually moves to the system's orbit for Faction Wars, and Prepotente's little stunt accelerated everyone's schedule, so she's traveling. We moved your scheduled interview to later. *Plenty of Plenty* also wanted

you on, but I turned them down on your behalf. We have multiple offers on the table, but we wanted to get you on something quickly since it's been a while. I have you two scheduled on a program called *Shadow Boxer*. It's an interview about your lives before the crawl. You'll be going on tomorrow after the recap.

Carl: Yeah, I'm not interested in rehashing all that bullshit with Bea again. Nobody wants that.

Zev: I'll tell them Beatrice is off-limits. That won't be the subject anyway. This is more like that *Earth Beautiful* program you went on a few weeks back, but this one is exploring the tale of Earth through storytelling and vignettes about the lives of some of the contestants. It won't be live, and it'll be a documentary-style interview. They want to focus on your life, Carl, when you were 15 to 18 years old. So, the time when you were left without a guardian until your age of majority when you joined the Navy.

Donut: WHAT ABOUT ME?

Zev: They want to talk to you about how certain television programs shaped your perceptions. You two will go up to the show together, but your interviews will be split into two different programs. You'll be together the whole time.

Carl: I was in the Coast Guard. Not Navy. And, no. All that crap is nobody's goddamned business. Pick something else. We can just do the Donut interview, but that's it.

Zev: They want to interview both of you. I should note that this program is also listed as an NFC non-profit, and it is owned by one of your sponsors. The Open Intellect Pacifist Network. I'll be required to be there, and because it's a program owned by a sponsor, a liaison will also be present to make certain the sponsor doesn't give you an unfair advantage. They *really* want you on that program. The both of you.

Goddamnit. I considered this for a few moments. A liaison? I remembered what Orren the liaison had said to us near the end of the previous floor. He'd been trying to warn us about something, but I still didn't understand what it was. Still... if this program was put together by the Open Intellect Pacifist Network... There had to be something to it.

Carl: Okay.

Donut: YAY! I CAN TALK ABOUT *GOSSIP GIRL* AND *RIVERDALE* AND *THE VAMPIRE DIARIES*.

She audibly gasped on my shoulder as she realized something.

Donut: ZEV, THEY SHOULD INTERVIEW YOU, TOO!

Zev: Sorry, Donut. I'm not allowed to make media appearances. But that reminds me. You two also have a preproduction meeting in a few days. I'm not certain of the exact time yet.

Carl: What does that mean?

Zev: It's for the ninth floor. A team of reps from all nine Faction Wars participants will attend. Usually the meeting is relegated to lower-tier executives from each team, but your army currently consists of you two, your lawyer, a bunch of NPCs, and Donut's fan club. Since policy items for the game will be discussed, I took the liberty of assuming you'll want to be there. You'll be getting a glimpse of something very few people ever will. And yes, Donut, before you ask, these events are usually catered.

Carl: Wait, will this be in-person?

Zev: Don't get too excited, Carl. They're insisting your presence be virtual. You'll be at the production facility.

Donut: BUT IT WILL STILL BE CATERED, RIGHT?

Zev: Yes, Donut.

"Is everything all right?" Sister Ines asked as I stepped to avoid a man riding a bicycle rickshaw. The bike slammed right into a crashed car, and the ghost of the rider disappeared into the mess. I moved to grab the bike, but the front tire had bent in the crash. I left it.

"Yeah," I said. "We're dealing with our interview schedule."

"It must be a lot of work," she said with a hint of sarcasm. I held up my hand as another message came in, this one from Bautista giving an update on Tran. The man, who'd lost both his legs and his good friend Gwen at the end of the previous floor, was finally out and about, learning how to use his new floating wheelchair. Anton let out an exasperated breath.

As we made our way to the saferoom, both Donut and Sister Ines sensed a group of small monsters a few streets over, pinging about. We went to investigate and found a mass of hairy, gnome-like creatures crawling over a pile of wrecked cars. These were common, level-20 monsters called duendes. They were all over the place. There had to be at least a hundred of them, and those were only the ones we could see.

I quickly pulled out the *Book of Lore*. I remembered seeing these guys in the first section under common monsters. Each one was about a foot tall and dressed in rags. They all looked like tiny, angry, homeless men.

I didn't have time to read the entire entry, but it said they didn't have any special or magical attacks. The portrait in the book depicted one of them holding what appeared to be a giant pair of nail clippers. None of the ones here were armed with anything at all except their sharp teeth.

They were small, but they were big enough that if they got hit by a bike or a moped, it would knock the bike over. Which meant these little assholes were likely the cause of most of the car crashes in the area.

As we approached, I watched a pair launch themselves at a ghost riding a bike. They tackled through his clothes, causing the bike, his pants, and his shoes to go flying off his body. The oblivious ghost continued on his way. The little monsters emerged from the wreckage, each holding onto one of the man's shoes. They both ripped the shoes up, growling like dogs with a chew toy. I saw

another duende had amassed a whole pile of shoes and was upside down in a boot, legs dangling in the air, like he was dumpster diving for something. He emerged, angrily chittering.

The AI's description on the mobs was strange. It was unusually short. I examined the one in the boot.

Mordecai. Duende. Level 20.

Screw these guys. Kill them.

"Carl, look, he has the same name as Mordecai!" Donut said. "We should put him in our squad!"

I laughed. "I don't think these guys are squad worthy."

A moment later, one of them spied us, and combat initiated. Screams rose up and down the street. The monsters growled and charged, but they were physically weak and didn't coordinate with one another, some of them even fighting each other for the chance to get to us first.

We moved into three separate groups. Sister Ines's squad moved across the street, Donut and I posted up near the line of buildings, and Mongo rushed out, gleefully ripping them to pieces.

He ate Mordecai the duende first.

Killing them was not difficult.

As we fought, my new essence bar quickly filled. It only took about ten kills to fill it all the way to the top. The bar itself took on a sickly, brown hue that swirled oddly with yellow and green flecks, reminding me of sewage with oil spilled in it. Just looking at the bar made me feel a little ill.

Once the essence bar became fully charged, I received a notification. It was in a new voice, deep and ominous.

The Scavenger's Daughter has been fed. Unleash her wrath.

A new skill appeared in my interface. **The Daughter's Kiss**. Once activated, it would completely drain my essence bar and make my next melee attack extra powerful. I needed to use it as soon as possible because it was apparently dangerous to walk around with a full essence bar. I still wasn't clear on *how* it was unsafe, but I wasn't about to wait around to find out. Each time I filled and then

drained the bar, the bar itself grew, requiring more souls to fill for the next attack, which would also be more powerful.

Donut spit a glob of poison at a screaming duende. The green, sticky poison blob stuck to the monster's face, causing him to fall over. The consistency of the stuff reminded me of the slime from the *Ghostbusters* movies. The mob's skin started to bubble, and he quickly died. It was a skill, not a spell, and it was currently at level five, but with low-level monsters, it was especially effective. She had a short cooldown for it, too. Like fifteen seconds.

"Carl, that awful back patch on your jacket is glowing. What did you do? Mongo, no! You're going to ruin your dinner!"

Mongo flew through the air and landed atop a bus, metal screeching against his claws. He had a squealing duende in his mouth. He crunched down and swallowed.

"It's probably because my new essence bar thing is full. What does it look like?"

"Hang on. It's hard to see because of your cape thing." She jumped to my shoulder and pushed it aside. She made a disgusted noise and jumped back down. "Those weird stitches all around the pile of skulls are glowing, but they're glowing brown, and I can't tell what it's supposed to be. Not all of them are lit up. Maybe an aardvark. It looks just dreadful."

"It's not an aardvark" I said. I zeroed in on a single duende. It was rushing down the street away from Mongo. He was looking over his shoulder at the dino atop the bus, screaming. The creature dragged a shoe with him as he fled. I activated the Daughter's Kiss skill. I jumped toward the fleeing monster, and I crushed down with my foot. I was expecting to knock him over with the attack, as he was just a little too big to simply smush.

The creature exploded into nothing. There was no resistance at all. The concrete sidewalk under my foot shattered into dust and rocks. A small shockwave burst forth, throwing all the remaining duendes to their backs. Mongo screeched in outrage as the crashed bus he stood upon rocked. A window in a nearby building shattered.

Across the street, the three other crawlers stopped fighting to look at me.

I just stood there for a moment. A bolt of something whipped through me, like an aftershock of the souls leaving my body. That ill feeling I'd momentarily felt was gone. Mostly.

"Wow," Donut said, jumping up to my shoulder. "Now *that* was impressive. And the aardvark image on your back went away when you did it."

"It's going to get stronger each time I do it, too," I said. I lifted my foot, and it wasn't even gory. I'd vaporized the damn thing. There wasn't anything left to even loot. The shoe it had been dragging was scorched and flattened, like it'd been crushed with an industrial press.

"Carl, are you okay? You have a weird look on your face."

"I... I think so. I just wasn't expecting it to feel like that. Come on, let's mop the rest up."

After it was done, Donut and I collected a total of three common utility cards. Two of them were **Time Extend** cards, which doubled the amount of time a summoned totem would last, and the third was a **Stout** card, which added 25% to a mob's health for the duration of combat. The cards were not one-time consumables like our combo card.

Team Sister Ines also received three cards. Two were the same Time Extend cards. They also received an uncommon "special" card titled **Flee**. That one could only be used once, and it teleported the whole squad away from combat. It didn't say how far or where it teleported them to.

We still weren't sure how deck combat worked. Donut said she'd tried to summon the monk seal when we were fighting the duendes, and she got an error message. I knew we'd receive an explanation soon during the next announcement.

We made our way to the saferoom, which was a small coffee shop name "Cuba Libro." A street over was a park with dozens of

more mobs within. Donut said these were more human-sized. We'd check it out later.

"So, are you guys in a guild?" I asked Sister Ines as we entered the shop.

"No," the nun said. "Team Flamenco wants us to join up, but we've decided to stay alone."

"You should definitely join with us," Donut said. "We share in all of the upgrades, including this really nice shower. And beds that make it so you hardly have to sleep at all. You get the training room upgrade, and there's a really nice bopca in the common area. Also, you can meet Katia and Bomo and Mordecai! The real Mordecai, not the duende that Mongo just ate."

"We like it the way it is," Ines said. "We have the upgraded bed already."

"What about the upgraded litterbox? I bet you don't have the upgraded litterbox."

"I don't use a litterbox, Donut."

Donut made an outraged noise and mumbled something under her breath.

We moved into the situationally-generated hall leading to our personal space doorways. We agreed to meet up again after the recap. We'd clear out the park and start moving out of the city and into the rural areas in search of more powerful mobs to hunt and capture.

We watched the three enter their personal space. As they opened and went inside, I could see they had one of the smaller-sized ones where everyone slept in the same room.

Donut: I LIKE PAZ, AND I THINK ANTON IS OKAY EVEN IF HE'S GRUMPY AND IS COMPLETELY UNEMPLOYABLE WITH THOSE TATTOOS, BUT I DON'T TRUST THE WOMAN. AND IT'S NOT JUST BECAUSE SHE'S A CAT GIRL. THERE'S SOMETHING WEIRD ABOUT HER.

Carl: I'm still on the fence. I think they're okay, but they're scared of us. It doesn't help that they'd been told you were going to kill them. Every new person we meet will

have gone through some serious shit to get to this point, and we have to keep that in mind.

Donut: SHE DOESN'T EVEN USE A LITTERBOX, CARL. IT'S HIGHLY SUSPICIOUS.

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Almost the entirety of the recap episode was redacted. We watched a group of crawlers get attacked and gored by the goddamned Easter Bunny. The rabbit appeared to be some sort of undead creature, and he ripped the limbs off the poor crawlers and stuffed their pieces into large, plastic eggs afterwards. We watched another group in Tokyo running while getting chased by what looked like a sentient umbrella, only to get wiped out by a bus. Then we watched Elle beat the living shit out of the same sasquatch she was talking about earlier and then stick it with her flag. Prepotente single-handedly flagged and captured a giant bat. After that, it flashed to a studio setting with several faces in little boxes before it all went blank. It remained that way for almost a full hour.

"Did you see that gleener next to Kevin the announcer?" Mordecai asked. "That's Prime Minister Glory. The boss of the entire Syndicate. It's very unusual for him to appear on the show. I'm going to get that bopca in the coffee shop drunk and steal his newsletter. Also, see if you can find a Desperado Club. We need supplies."

Once the show finally ended, the top ten list repopulated. It remained nearly the same with Prepotente at the top, Donut at number two, and me at number three. Lucia Mar was number four. The next were Elle, Katia, and Florin. Osvaldo was number eight, making his first appearance on the list. He was a level 60 **Curupira**

ranger. I had no idea what the race "Curupira" meant, and neither did Mordecai. He looked human.

Number nine was Li-Na, and number ten was a woman named Burcu, also a newcomer to the list. I'd met her briefly during the Butcher's Masquerade, and I had her in my chat. She was a level-59, badger-headed **Porsuk**, which was the same race as all the bartenders at the Desperado Club. Her class was a **Swashbuckler**, the same as Tran and Bautista.

Burcu, Osvaldo, and Prepotente had all gotten into a fight after we'd killed Imogen at the end of the previous floor. I'd been knocked out during it.

A moment later, Cascadia started her announcement. She was back to her annoying, condescending self.

Hello, Crawlers!

This is going to be a long message, so sit down, shut up, and listen. Here's the card system. Most of you aren't ready to use this yet. These instructions and rules also appear in your deck tab on your interface. Make sure you familiarize yourself with these rules. Your life depends on it.

You will not encounter mobs that utilize a card system in your current location. However, as a squad leader, you will still have the option to summon your deck to use during battle. This functionality will become active at the end of this message and can be activated by removing the full and activated deck from your inventory during combat.

Also, if you wish to practice deck-to-deck combat, you should consider attacking another squad. Doing so might give you some much-needed experience with the combat system. Plus, if you kill another squad, you may claim all of their cards. Isn't that great?

"Go fuck yourselves," I muttered up at the screen.

Gameplay is quite simple. Each squad must have six totems active in their deck. You may activate your deck with as little as six cards total. You may have as many utility, mystic, snare, and special cards as you want. However, if

you have too many, you risk pulling a hand with no totem cards at all, which will leave you exposed.

There are five types of cards: Totems, which are the summonable monsters. Utility cards, which can only be played on one or more of your summoned totems. Snare cards, which can only be played on an enemy's totem. Mystic cards, which are similar to regular magic spells, and special cards which are usually one-time use. These have many varying effects.

Combat is engaged when a nearby monster's aggro is activated, and they are actively hunting you. Combat disengages when the mobs are dead, rendered neutral, or one of the parties has fled. If the squad leader dies during deck combat, the deck will transfer to the next in line. Overlapping combat with multiple mobs will count as a single session. Keep this in mind when entering a target-rich environment as most totems cannot be reused once the monster is knocked out.

If an opponent owns enough cards to make a deck, deck-to-deck combat is initiated. Using your deck is no longer optional in this case, so it's in your best interest to keep your active deck in the best shape as possible. Deck-to-deck combat comes with a few additional rules that I'm sure you'll figure out as you go.

Once deck combat is initiated, the Squad Leader loses access to their regular magic abilities and their inventory system. They may still fight using melee attacks. They may use potions, scrolls, wands, etc. as long as the items are physically available to them.

Most summoned totems may NOT directly attack the opponent's squad leader if any enemy totems are present. That doesn't mean the squad leader will be safe. It will be the responsibility of the other squad members to keep the squad leader safe during deck combat. Once all cards in your deck are played or discarded, the Squad Leader regains their ability to use their inventory and spells.

"Goddamnit," I said out loud.

"What? What does that even mean?" Donut asked. "All I hear is blah, blah, blah, nerd squeak, blah, blah, blah."

"I'll explain in a bit," I said, reaching up to scratch her.

The moment combat initiates, four random cards from the deck will be drawn. The squad leader may use any or all of them as they wish. If you pull four totems, you may summon all four totems at once. The monsters will appear, and assuming you have proper control over them, they will attack your opponents.

All totems are summoned for a specific amount of time as indicated on their card. If the totem is killed, they are knocked out for the remainder of combat. If the totem is still alive when they time out, the card will return to your deck in most cases, and not the discard pile. Injured and debuffed totems do *not* heal between summonings in the same combat.

Utility cards may only be played on an actively summoned totem. Most buffs will remain on the monster for the duration of combat, even over multiple summonings.

Snare cards may only be played when an opponent has an actively summoned totem. These debuffs will remain persistent throughout multiple summonings of the same card.

Mystic cards usually have a direct effect on squads, squad leaders, or the squad leader's deck.

Special cards have varying abilities.

When a card is used from your hand, it will be replaced by the next card in the deck at the rate of one card every ten seconds.

You may discard any card in your hand. You start combat with the ability to discard a single card. It will move to the discard pile and will be unusable for the remainder of combat. This ability resets once every thirty seconds.

And that's pretty much it. It's simple enough even you dry monkeys will figure it out. Just a reminder, this is not a

turn-based environment, so speed and squad synergy are important. Don't forget, we're trying to entertain the viewers. Make sure you pick the most powerful, colorful monsters and abilities you can.

You're gonna need it for part two of this floor.

Starting at the end of this message, all saferoom locations will also include a practice arena where you may, for a fee, enter and summon your totem cards in a limited mock battle environment. This is the only place you can do this. The mercenary training arcade some of you may have purchased for your guildhall will not work for this. You do not need a full deck to utilize this service. The opponent monsters summoned by the system will not have their own decks nor can they harm you directly.

Warning. You may use your consumable and other one-time use cards in the practice arena, but they will *not* return. Consumable cards may only be used once, ever. Even in a practice environment. If you have cards with cooldown restrictions, such as the once-a-day Grand Finale card, the cooldown will not reset at the end of the practice session. So, keep that in mind.

There are lots of amazing cards out there. Use these remaining 13 days before the assault to collect as many as you can. If you share an area with another squad, feel free to murder them for their cards. Only the teams with the best decks will survive. Now get out there and kill, kill, kill!

"Carl," Donut said. "This is just like that nerdy Pokémon game you used to play. Or that one with the guy with the spiky hair that didn't make any sense. What was it called? Yugoslavia or something?"

I grunted. "It's not really like either of those. Like she said, most of those games are turn-based. This is going to be more complicated, especially if we don't know what cards our opponents have. You'll be without your magic or inventory until we use all your cards, and we won't know how strong the monsters we face are until combat is engaged. It's going to suck. We need to make sure

we have some of those flee cards that other squad got. And hopefully we can find some good snare cards, too."

Katia was already in the chat organizing a list of all the known card types. The list was painfully thin so far.

"I've seen them use the cards before, but it's never been anything quite like this," Mordecai said. "It sounds like the enemies in part two will all be intelligent mobs carrying decks. You'll likely have to fight your way to a boss who'll have the key to get to the stairwell, and then you gotta somehow get yourselves back here to use it."

"Let's get to the practice room and see how well Geraldo the monk seal can fight," I said. Donut and I still both had fan boxes to open, too, but they weren't quite ready yet. We'd have to wait until later. I moved toward the door, but I was interrupted by a message from Samantha.

Samantha: SO GOOD NEWS AND BAD NEWS.

Carl: What is it?

Samantha: I FOUND A BIG BOSS MONSTER. SHE'S A MAGE. THE RIGHT KIND OF MAGE TO GET ME INTO MY BODY, TOO. I TOLD YOU I'D FIND ONE.

Christ, I thought. She'd found something a lot more quickly than I'd anticipated.

Carl: What's the bad news?

Samantha: SHE ATE ME. YOU HAVE TO COME GET ME. IT'S VERY SQUISHY IN HERE.

"My word," Donut said out loud. "She sure gets herself into a lot of trouble, doesn't she?"

Carl: Goddamnit, Samantha. You were supposed to stay away from the monsters, remember? Observe and report. How do you know she's the right type of mage? She needs to be a pulpmancer. Mordecai says they're pretty rare.

Samantha: SHE'S VERY POWERFUL. SHE CAN DO IT. SHE TOLD ME.

Carl: She *told* you?

Donut: DID SHE TELL YOU BEFORE OR AFTER SHE ATE YOU?

Samantha: IT WAS DURING. SHE IS VERY TALKATIVE. I THINK SHE IS LONELY. YOU NEED TO COME TALK HER INTO HELPING YOU.

Carl: How are we going to do that with you in her stomach? We're gonna have to kill her to get you out.

Samantha: I DON'T KNOW WHY I HAVE TO COME UP WITH ALL THE SOLUTIONS.

Donut: WHAT KIND OF MONSTER IS SHE?

Samantha: SHE WON'T BE A PROBLEM.

Carl: That's not an answer.

Samantha: SO, DO YOU KNOW WHAT A SPIDER IS? SHE'S KINDA LIKE THAT.

An involuntary shiver washed over me.

Carl: How big of a spider? And where are you?

Samantha: I AM ALL THE WAY AT THE SOUTHERN COAST OF THE ISLAND, NEAR THE MOUTH OF THE BIG BAY.

That had to be at the very edge of the zone.

Carl: What the hell? How'd you get there so fast? You said you couldn't fly yet.

Samantha: I HITCHED A RIDE! IT IS NOT IMPORTANT. YOU GOTTA COME GET ME!

Carl: Okay, but it's going to be a few days. And you didn't answer my question.

Samantha: HOW BIG IS SHE? SHE'S NOT TOO BIG. SHE'S A LOT SMALLER THAN MOST MINOR GODDESSES.

I took a deep breath.

Carl: Samantha.

Samantha: WHAT?

Carl: Minor goddess? You're in the stomach of a god?

Samantha: NOT A REAL ONE. WELL, OKAY MAYBE HALF A REAL ONE. THAT'S HOW I FOUND HER. I FELT HER PRESENCE. SHE'S A DEMI-GOD. PROBABLY NEVER EVEN GOT AN INVITE TO A PARTY. NOT A GOOD ONE, AT LEAST. SHE LIVES HERE IN THE SWAMP. YOU CAN'T MISS HER. SHE HAS A WEB OVER THE WHOLE AREA. IT'S DISGUSTING AND STICKY. HER NAME IS MARIA SOMETHING. SHI MARIA, I

THINK. WE HAVE A LOT IN COMMON. SHE SAYS SHE'S LOOKING FOR HER HUSBAND. HER FANGS HAVE A VERY LOVELY SHIMMER TO THEM.

I pulled out the Bahamas book, turned to the index, and I found her listed. "Shi Maria" was listed in a sub-index as one of the monster's alternate names. She was listed in the very last section of the book, under unique monsters.

"Yikes," I said. I turned the book to show Donut and Mordecai.

Donut peered closely at the image of the screaming spider woman. "Goodness. That lady really needs moisturizer."

"So, the plan is to abandon Samantha, right?" Mordecai asked. He shook his pointy head.

"Nope," I said. "Though she might be stuck in the thing's stomach for a while. I'm thinking maybe this is a great candidate for one of our squad member spots."

"Are you crazy?" Mordecai asked.

"Is that really a question?"

"It says one of her special attacks is permanent insanity," Donut said. "And another is permanent blindness."

"Yeah, we're gonna have to plan this one out ahead of time."

Donut continued to peer at the page. "Why does she have so many names? She has like twenty different ones. The Screamer. That sounds like a porn name. The Reviled. Kwaku's Love. The Corrupted Paramour? That one does *not* roll off the tongue. Ooo, I like this one."

She looked up at us, eyes big. "The Bedlam Bride. Now *that's* a proper name."

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DECEMBER 12.

Assault begins December 24.

Totems in deck: One of Six.

Total Cards in current deck: Five.

Entering the Mock Battle Arena.

Warning: You do not have a full deck.

Warning: You have a consumable card in your deck. This card will be lost if used in this arena.

Warning: While generated mobs cannot harm you in this location, the environment still can. Or you can still harm yourself. Try not to die in here because that would be really dumb and anticlimactic.

Choose your difficulty.

“Carl, what should I pick?” Donut asked. “Hey! It’s 1,000 gold if we want to fight an easy opponent, 2,000 for one equal to our deck, and 5,000 if we want a ‘challenge.’ This is an outrage! Wait, it says more options appear if we beat it at challenge difficulty. Let’s do that!”

“No,” I said. “Do the easy one first to see what that really means. Plus we don’t know if this seal guy is going to follow our instructions. He was pretty pissed when I stuck him with that flag.”

We met Sister Ines’s squad just outside, and we went into the mock battle arena together, which was just another door in the situationally-generated hall. We all entered at the same time, but when the door closed, it was just me, Donut, and Mongo standing in the cavernous room.

Mongo screeched, and his voice echoed. The place was huge. The room was like a giant airplane hangar, similar to the room where we’d picked our subclasses at the beginning of the sixth floor. It was featureless with gray, corrugated metal walls and lit with dingy, blue light that didn’t seem to come from anywhere. The floor was made of solid concrete. A cool breeze swept through.

Donut suddenly gasped. “I can choose the environment! There’s lots of options!”

“Be careful,” I said. “Did you read the warning? Don’t choose a place that sounds dangerous.”

The room flashed, I felt a quick bout of nausea, and suddenly the concrete floor turned to dirt. Mongo screeched in surprise. A cheer rose up all around us. My ears popped. I turned in a full circle, looking about with awe. We were in a massive, packed arena, bigger than before. The roof was gone, and a yellow, almost cartoonish sun beat down on us. The shimmer of a bubble spread above it all, like we were under a dome.

The gravity here felt like it was only ¾’s of normal. I did a quick hop, and I jumped much higher than usual.

“Hang on, Carl, I’m going to make it so we weigh normal,” Donut said. She moved her paw like she was adjusting a slider. I felt myself get slightly heavier. “There we go. This is quite customizable.”

A knee-high field of purple flowers suddenly sprouted from the dirt. Mongo sneezed, and Donut swept her paw, taking the flowers away, leaving a field of green grass. She grumbled some more, and a few trees sprouted around the arena.

Each time she changed something, the arena's crowd cheered enthusiastically. All were the same creatures. Thousands and thousands of robe-clad people wearing large hats. I recognized them. We'd faced similarly-dressed hunters on the previous floor. It was a nomadic, religious cult called the Nebulars.

"What the hell did you pick?" I asked.

Battle Begins in Ten Seconds. Deck is locked in place.

"It was called Arena of the Eulogist or something like that. The picture was a colosseum thing with a bunch of cheering fans. I didn't realize it would be these guys," Donut said. "It doesn't let me change the people, which is quite unfortunate, but I can choose how much they like us. I put it all the way to the top." Mongo screeched again, this time fearfully.

"Can you choose what the opponent is?" I asked.

"Sadly, no. It just says we're on easy mode."

Combat Started.

I looked around. I didn't see anything.

"Uh, do you see the monster?" I asked. Donut didn't answer. I looked down at her.

She stood stiffly on the ground next to me. Four cards floated in midair, spaced equally in front of her face like a car windshield. Each card had grown to be about the size of a magazine, and they were completely blocking her view of the arena. It was the two **Time Extend** cards, the **Combo** card, and the **Monk Seal** totem card.

"Carl, Carl, what do I do? Help! I can't see!" She had to shout to be heard over the crowd noise. Everywhere she turned her head, the four cards followed. She jumped to my shoulder, and the cards moved with her. Now they were blocking my view, too.

The crowd started booing and hissing, but I wasn't sure if they were booing us or the monster. Next to me, Mongo squawked angrily, his voice piercing through the arena.

"Go into the card menu and see if you can adjust the card's position," I shouted. "And try discarding the Combo card. We don't want to use it."

"Doesn't that throw it away? I thought we wanted to keep it for later!"

"We do want to keep it. You're just discarding it for this battle. You can discard one card every thirty seconds. A new card will pop up ten seconds after you discard or use one."

Donut was in her menu, waving her paws around frantically. "How do you know all this, Carl?"

Mongo howled and rushed off.

"I was paying attention, and I read the rules."

The cards suddenly got bigger, overlapping each other. The first one, the **Time Extend** utility card, moved right through my face. The thing wasn't really there.

"No, no, that's not it," Donut said. She still had to shout. "Here we go."

The cards shrank to the size of playing cards, moved together, and then lowered, giving us a clear view of the playing field.

...Just in time to see Mongo fly through the air and land a top the purple, squealing monster. It fell onto its back, its little legs waving as Mongo savagely ripped through it. Blood geysered in the air followed by a pop and puff of smoke, like the creature had been part clockwork or robot. A trail of intestines rocketed up in the air, like a line of sausages ascending into heaven. They disappeared into dust. Mongo tried to bite again, but the monster was gone, having dissipated. The raptor screeched in outrage as the crowd roared its approval, shaking the arena.

The only thing that was left was a little, red, blood-spattered purse that also disappeared a moment later.

Combat Complete. Deck has been reset.

Do you wish to go again?

"Well, that was a waste of money," I said.

"Carl, did you see that!" Donut exclaimed. "I think that was a Teletubby!"

We tried again, again on easy difficulty, but this time we put Mongo away. I made Donut change the environment to "Abandoned arena" which was the same place, but without the screaming crowd. The dome over the arena now had a crack in it, and the yellow sun had turned blue. She grumbled but complied.

"I don't understand how you don't know what the Teletubbies are, Carl," Donut was saying as we prepared to go again. "Miss Beatrice used to watch it all the time. She had it recorded on the DVR."

"A little kid's show?" I asked. "And she'd watch it? I don't remember that. That's really weird."

"She would watch it and cry sometimes," Donut said. "Come to think of it, it was quite strange. What kid shows did you watch?"

"I watched all sorts," I said. "But I watched them mostly when I was kid."

"Now, that's not true, and you know it. You watched cartoons all the time. And played kid video games."

"That's different, Donut. Most of those were shows made for adults. Plus, I didn't watch them and cry. That's really bizarre."

"Made for adults? *Dragon Ball Z* is made for adults? Though I suppose that was quite odd of Miss Beatrice. Wherever she is, I hope she still has access to her DVR. She would feed me extra sometimes after she watched it. Anyway, I'm glad Mongo ate Tinky Winky. He acts all innocent, but he's totally the type that'd trip you if you were both being chased by a bear. I've been team Dipsy since day one. He had the most wonderful hat. I wonder if this next monster is going to be another Teletubby."

"Let's find out," I said.

Combat started, and the cards appeared. Donut remained on my shoulder so I could get a look at the hand. We only had five cards in the deck, and the totem wasn't one of the four she pulled. It was the two **Time Extends**, the **Combo** card, and the **Stout** card.

"If you pull a deck without a totem, you're immediately vulnerable, so make sure you either discard or use a card right away," I said. "We don't have any snare or mystic cards yet, so discard the Combo card."

She flicked her paw downward, and the combo card disappeared into a puff of smoke. The empty space remained in her hand, and a 10-second timer appeared in the spot, counting down.

"If I use two cards, do they both have a timer, or is it one at a time?" Donut asked.

"I'm pretty sure it's one at a time, so if you play two at the same time, it'll take twenty seconds to get back to a full hand. We won't be able to test it until we get more cards. Once that one fills, we'll be out. Do you see the monster?"

"I see the dot. He's behind that tree over there, but he's moving slow. It's not Tinky Winky again. It's something smaller."

Ding. The totem card appeared in the empty slot.

Your Deck has been exhausted.

"Okay, summon the totem. If he doesn't attack us, try to use all three of the utility cards on him."

Donut reached toward the **Monk Seal** totem, but paused. She looked back at me.

"You know, I wonder if it'll be something from another kids' show. I'd really like the chance to eviscerate someone from *Blue's Clues*. The only cast member of that show worth anything was Periwinkle, and they never gave him enough screen time. Plus Mrs. Pepper was obviously pulling a Miss Beatrice on Mr. Salt. How do you get paprika and sage from *that* combination?"

"Again, Donut," I said. "I haven't watched the show, so all this babbling is completely pointless. I don't know what the hell you're talking about. That's the problem with all these references. You're going to lose people. Now summon the damn seal."

She grumbled and reached forward to touch the seal card.

Geraldo. Level 70. Monk Seal Picket Sentry is ready for battle!

The card disappeared in a puff of smoke, and Geraldo appeared, flipping through the air. The monk seal landed in the grass in front of

us, squealing with kung fu noises. A boss-battle like explosion appeared in the air as he entered the arena.

"Highhh-ya!" Geraldo shouted. He flipped again and slammed onto the ground, shaking it, then reared up, looking about. He had a 60-second timer over his head along with a health bar even though it was full. Above that was a little symbol that might've been a little totem pole, and planted into the pole was a miniature version of our team flag.

The seal sported a headband, just like in the cartoon image on the card, but it was white with red hearts on it, also mirroring our flag. He hadn't been wearing it when we captured him.

"Oi!" he said, turning toward us. "Where the crabs at?" He waved his flippers, and I realized his body was making noises each time he moved. *Wsshh, Wsshh, Wap*. Kung Fu movie noises. That's what it was. They'd added cheesy, Kung Fu noises to all of his movements.

"What the hell, man," I muttered.

"I like it," Donut said, waving her paws. "I wish they did that for me. Or for you when you punched something. It's a lot better than things simply blowing up and getting all disgusting when you punch them."

I called out to the seal. "Hang out there for a second. The enemy is on its way."

Geraldo the seal grunted and turned back toward the tree.

"At least he's not attacking us," Donut said.

"Try to use the utility cards on him."

Donut put her paw on the **Stout** card and flipped it upward. It spun through the air, spinning like a ninja star, and it slammed into Geraldo with a loud, trumpet fanfare, causing the seal to glow. His health bar grew longer. The word **Buffed** appeared over the seal for a moment in a comic-book-like explosion.

"This is quite festive," Donut said. "Why can't all the fights be like this?"

She activated the first **Time Extend** card, and it landed on the seal with another comic book explosion. Another sixty seconds added to the seal's timer. We only had one card left, which was the

second **Time Extend**. Little Xs appeared in the spaces where the other cards once were, indicating the deck was empty.

She tried to flip the last card, but it wouldn't go.

"Carl, it says uncommon totems can only hold two utility cards!"

"Huh," I said. "Good to know." I knew there were seven levels of rarity for the totem cards: Common, Uncommon, Rare, Very Rare, Legendary, Mythic, and Unique. I wondered if that meant common ones could only hold one utility card, and Unique ones—like the spider that ate Samantha—could hold a whopping seven buffs.

"Hey," Geraldo said. "That ain't no crab."

"No," Donut said, disappointed. "I guess it isn't. It's not that Magenta bitch, either."

"What the hell is that?" I asked, turning my attention to the blob thing that appeared from behind the tree. It started shuffling in our direction.

"Oh my god, Carl," Donut said. "It's disgusting! And I think it's crying! Just like Miss Beatrice!"

The creature snuffled forward. It was a bat-faced, pig thing, but with a lot of extra skin, like one of those wrinkly, Shar-Pei dogs. It stood upon thin, quivering legs. It was about as tall as my knee. The naked, pink skin was bumpy and covered with infected-looking welts and moles. It moved slowly, its skin sloshing up and down.

Squonk – Level 35.

Eastern United States Region Legendary Creature.

The Squonk. The poor, pitiful Squonk.

This damn thing is so ugly, so miserable that it is in a constant state of depression. It can't stop crying. It doesn't fight. It has no attacks. It smells and looks like the distended testicle of an Olympic weightlifter with an untreated hernia. Do everyone a favor and get it out of here.

"Yo, man. I ain't touching that thing," Geraldo said.

As we watched, the creature rolled over onto its side, let out a large fart, and started bawling even more forcefully. Then, with a *pop*, it turned to water and dissipated on its own.

Combat Complete. Deck has been reset.

Do you wish to go again?

"I'm starting to think we'd be better off at medium difficulty," I said.

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[10]

"We did it three times," Paz said as we walked toward the nearby park, which turned out to actually be a cemetery. "The first time, it was this thing called a Carbunclo. Like a little fox with a gem in its head. It pissed itself and teleported away. The second time, we never even saw it. It died on its own or something. So, we went to medium difficulty, and it was some chimpanzee monster called a Qa. It was level 65. It said it was from China. Yago beat its ass. That seal really can fight."

"We never did medium difficulty," Donut said. "Carl thinks we should get more cards first."

"It is pretty expensive," Sister Ines said.

Paz laughed. "I was talking to Osvaldo. He says they went into the room, and their first opponent was the Pillsbury Dough Boy. You know that little thing from the commercials? They have some lizard that breathes fire, and it literally cooked it."

Donut swished her tail. "My friend Katia said her first opponent was an actual teddy bear. And then they moved it to challenge, and they got overwhelmed by a bunch of flying piranhas."

"The monsters aren't like I thought they would be," Paz said. His armor continued to clank loudly as we walked. "It's like it can be anything from TV or videogames. Not just, you know, real mythology like they said."

"Yeah, wait until you hear what this one guy named Florin is hunting," I said.

"What?" Donut asked. "I didn't hear about it."

I gave a sidelong glance to Sister Ines and grunted. "We'll see if he actually catches him before I say anything. It's a little... blasphemous."

"It's all blasphemous," Sister Ines said. There was a strange intensity to her voice, and I finally realized she was angry. Very angry. She'd been just a little off all morning. "It is all a mockery of our faiths and legends. They ignore the meanings behind the myths and stories, and they just see the surface, steal it, and use it to make something shiny and pretty and completely devoid of its meaning. And they mix these beloved traditions with modern fictions, things nobody ever believed to be real. It muddies the water of our stories, our histories. They don't care. These cultures and creatures are holy to people, and they are making jokes of it all."

I gave her a moment to compose herself.

"It's what they do," I finally said. Even the cards themselves—T'Ghee cards—were considered sacred to the aliens they stole the idea from. They were never meant to be used like this.

I thought of Florin and our quick conversation before we headed out. He didn't yet have any totems, but he had a quest to track and kill or capture a powerful Unique that was terrorizing his region in Ecuador. I shook my head, thinking of it. Li Jun and Li Na were hunting an honest-to-goodness dragon, straight from Chinese myth. Katia was seeking some type of Christmas cat, but she asked me not to tell Donut yet. We already knew from Sister Ines she could be oddly sensitive about that sort of thing.

We approached the large cemetery. The cars around here had all stopped coming, all getting congested somewhere else in the city, though the traffic in this area was normally pretty bad, as indicated by the literal hundreds of naked, ethereal ghosts floating along the roadway, all stopped in traffic, all texting on their non-existent phones or bopping to music I couldn't hear.

Mongo snapped at a guy pedaling a no-longer-there bike, and the dino managed to pull a gold chain off the man's neck. We all turned our attention to the large, gothic entrance to the cemetery.

The elaborate, concrete archway guarded the place, which was surrounded by a towering, black and spiked fence that we couldn't see through. The entrance itself showed a thin road that led into ominous, yeah-this-place-is-haunted-as-fuck fog. Smoke drifted up from the fence line. The whole cemetery was several blocks wide. I watched a floating bus full of people enter under the arch, but they disappeared the moment they passed through. It appeared the entire area was like our starting location. Off limits to the memory ghosts.

"This is not right. Not at all. It's the Colón Cemetery," Paz said, looking up at the entrance. "This is one of the largest cemeteries in Latin America. There are streets all through it. The entrance arch is the same, but this fence is not supposed to be here. You can drive through, and you can see it from the street. It's like a park filled with monuments. It needed a lot of renovation, but it was very full of life all the time."

We all continued to stare with awe up at the carved, arched entrance.

"Full of life?" Donut asked. "I'm pretty sure it's full of zombies now."

"My Tito is buried here," Anton said after a moment.

"Based on the number of red dots moving about, I don't think he's buried anymore," Donut said. "The whole area gives me the willies."

"Yikes," I agreed. Inside, peeking over the fence line and out of the fog were several buildings. It was like a small city within the city. "This has boss chamber written all over it. So, you think the mobs are zombies?"

"I'm not sure. There are lots of human-sized ones all over the place," Donut said. "They're moving slow like zombies, thank goodness. I don't think I could handle *Train to Busan* zombies. *Night of the Living Dead* ones aren't so bad as long as you don't get caught in a swarm. But there are bigger and smaller dots, too. There're lots of different kinds. There's a church in the center that doesn't have anything around it. I think there might be a spell keeping me from seeing inside."

"They are all definitely undead," Sister Ines said. She started striding toward the entrance.

"Hey!" I called. "We need to walk around the edge and see if there are more clues about what's inside before we go in! That's a giant boss chamber. We don't know how strong it'll be!"

"We can handle it if you're afraid," Sister Ines called. She didn't stop.

"Uh," Paz said, looking between Sister Ines and me. "Maybe we should listen to Carl. What if we get locked in?"

"Of course we're going to get locked in," Donut said. "That's the whole purpose of the giant gate and fence. You know what this reminds me of? We once had to fight a boss that was a giant ball of pigs all rolled up. Only this place is a lot bigger."

"Come on. Don't be such a woman," Anton said to Paz. He moved to follow the nun. Paz sighed and rushed to follow, clanking like some malfunctioning android.

"That's quite offensive, Anton," Donut called.

"Those idiots are going to get themselves killed," I said.

She looked at me. "So, are we going to get ourselves locked into the death cemetery? If we don't go now, we're going to lose our chance."

"Not if they die," I said. "The gate will open again when they're dead."

We watched as they reached the entrance. Sister Ines peeked inside through the gate, but paused. Paz was talking animatedly, gesturing at us. They didn't enter. After a moment, they turned and waved us forward.

I sighed and approached.

"We do it your way," Sister Ines said. "We circle the outside and then we go in."

"Take that *Skedaddle* sheet music and make sure you have it handy," I said. "*Puddle Jumper*, too."

"I already did, Carl. But it's not going to let me leave if we're locked in."

"This place is big. We can still use both inside to get away from a swarm. With *Skedaddle*, we can jump twice. As long as you sing it in key."

"What is that supposed to mean? You said my performance at the masquerade was flawless."

I reached up and gave her a pat. "Also, we stay near the other guys. Paz is a paladin, and Sister Ines is a cleric. Both will be good against the undead."

I went into my own inventory and readied several of my spider automatons. I also took a few of Mordecai's holy gooper grenades and moved them to the ready position. I only had six of the healing potion and Emberus blessed holy grenades. I had fifteen spider automatons, but ten of those were already "armed" with regular explosives, which meant they'd be useless if the mobs were non-corporeal. The other spiders I could arm with a holy grenade or just a straight up healing potion. I also had several healing potion-infused smoke curtains, which I hadn't yet tested but would supposedly mass-kill undead. I looked at my holy curtain supply worriedly. We really needed to get to a Desperado Club for a shopping trip.

"Let's do this," I said, cracking my neck. "Keep Mongo back until we know what we're facing."

We'd circled the entire park a few times, having to deal with more of those Duende mobs on one side. There were no additional clues as to what was inside. It was a large, rectangular park several blocks wide, and it was absolutely filled with red dots. There was a chapel in the center, and nobody could get a read on anything there. Sister Ines had an ability that let her know if a mob was undead or not, and she said all of them were.

I used one of my dwindling supply of levitate potions to get a better view from above. The entire area was filled with roiling fog, and I couldn't see a damn thing. But I could see the wide expanse of dots from this height.

The mobs appeared to move aimlessly, leading credence to Donut's zombie theory. I was reminded of the trainyards from the fourth floor. Those hadn't been zombies, but ghouls.

I was starting to suspect that the entire area wasn't exactly what we thought it was. The temple in the center of the square was a familiar spire. A Club Vanquisher. And I noticed a bathroom in the area, too. I'd never seen a bathroom in a boss room before.

I tossed a potion ball filled with a fine healing potion into the midst toward a dense of patch of red, and I managed to kill three of the mobs, whatever they were. They died easily and soundlessly, but the amount of experience I received was pretty low, indicating they weren't powerful. Relieved, I lowered myself back down and said we were good to go.

The moment we stepped through the gate, I saw my theory was correct. That didn't mean this wasn't dangerous. In fact, I knew from the cookbook this could be a real pain in the ass.

Entering Medium Ghommid Settlement.

Warning! This town has been corrupted. You may not claim or repopulate the town until the rot has been eradicated.

"It's a town!" Donut said. "A town inside a town! I see a saferoom! It's way over there."

"Is this like a corrupted temple?" Paz asked worriedly, looking about.

"Uh-oh," Anton said.

"It is," I said. A corrupted temple meant there were mobs inside. That was obviously the case with this town as well. I'd read a few depictions of places like this. Both corrupted temples and towns worked the same way.

An unholy screech filled the area, coming from all corners. Howls, trills, and screams filled the massive, fog-filled cemetery.

"Not again," Paz muttered.

"What?" I asked.

Warning: The presence of a Santero has aggravated the already-unsettled dead.

"Some types of undead creatures don't like my class," he said. He banged on his breastplate. "That's why I got this stuff. Holy armor. I draw their aggro, and they will only attack me and nobody else. They'll follow me wherever I go, even if we run."

"Wait," Donut said. "You knew this was going to happen? We really need to work on our communication skills, Paz. Maybe you should've waited outside."

"No," Sister Ines said. A white ball of flame appeared in her hand. "He also gets a temporary strength boost each time an unsettled is killed. I do, too."

Before I could respond, the gate behind us slammed closed. No music started, but a magical glow emanated from the gate, meaning it was magically locked. Over our heads, a half-translucent glow filled the area, indicating we couldn't fly out of here, either.

"Shocking," I said.

Another notification came.

New Quest! Pueblo de los Olvidados.

This is a little obvious since you're locked in here, but this is a compulsory quest. You can take your time with this one, but you ain't getting out until it's done.

Isn't this a cute little town? It's just so quaint! Too bad the entire populace was turned into a gaggle of horrific, undead monsters who now want to devour your delicious souls.

This place used to be populated with a race of creature called a Ghommid.

Have you ever looked through a microscope at a drop of seawater? It's really disturbing. There's all sorts of weird shit in there. Honestly, it gives me nightmares.

Anyway, that's kinda what you get when you look at a Ghommid village. A "Ghommid" is a sort of catch-all term for just your regular, run-of-the-mill other-realm creature. Visitors to this world from the land of the dead. There are all sorts, and many of them are one-of-a-kind. And like all those weird bugs and microbes in that drop of water, they do different things. Most are harmless. Some are cute. Some

are angry. Some will give you explosive diarrhea just for fun. They often settle in areas where the veil is thin. Like cemeteries.

The problem with spirit creatures is that there really are all kinds. A settlement like this is bound to eventually implode. This was inevitable.

In this case, a spirit showed up, and for whatever reason turned everyone in the village into a ravenous, unsettled, I-want-to-turn-your-flesh-inside-out-and-party-with-your-intestines monster.

You must find and eradicate the source of the sickness. Removing it from the area will likely cure the populace. Or, who knows? Maybe they'll all go berserk and try to kill you even harder. I don't really know. I'm not nearly as omnipotent as those sadistic assholes think. Quarantine? They already know it doesn't work. Not when they want to keep their precious enhancement zones humming. They're in for a big surprise one of these days.

***Reward*: Well, you can leave the town. That's a good reward. Plus, the town will revert to a working settlement, and all the shops and structures will become activated again, assuming any of the workers are still alive. And why not? We'll also throw in a Silver Quest Box.**

"Carl," Donut said. "I barely understood half of that. What does it mean by quarantine and enhancement zones?"

"What do you mean?" Paz asked, sounding confused.

I copied and pasted the quest text into my notes like I always did, and sure enough those lines where the AI was talking about itself were gone. It wasn't the first time that had happened.

I rewrote the strange note from memory.

"So, it's going to be like any other town," I said after a moment. "But the NPCs are all monsters, and we need to find and kill the head bad guy. The bad seed. I don't think the monsters are going to be traditional zombies. They're spirit creatures who've gone crazy."

"Undead is undead," Sister Ines said. She sounded angry. Strangely angry.

"Traps," Anton suddenly said. He held his monkey crossbow at the ready.

I went to a knee. "I see 'em. Nobody go forward." Even through the fog, dozens of lights flashed, indicating the area was littered with a bunch of strange traps I didn't recognize. It seemed they were all the same kind. There was a pair of them straight ahead side-by-side. We had red dots around, all drifting slowly toward us thanks to Paz. They'd become visible in seconds. I quickly examined the closest trap.

Spirit Box

Set Trap

Effect: Roots target in place. Lowers spirit resistance, and a random non-corporeal entity from the area is summoned to the location and will attempt to possess you. Or eat you. Or just melt your face off and put the goo on a spirit corndog or something.

Target: Corporeal dumbasses who step on it. That means you.

Duration: You will be rooted in place for sixty seconds. If you end up possessed, that's pretty damn permanent.

"Damn," I said as I quickly disarmed the trap and took it into my inventory. I didn't have time to disarm the second one as three monsters shuffled out of the fog and moved toward us. Mongo screeched as Donut released him from his carrier. She jumped upon his back.

Combat started.

All three creatures were different. All were bipedal and human sized, and all three were level 30, but the similarities ended there. The first was a thin, naked and flesh-colored creature covered with mouths and nothing else. It was just a person made of dozens of mouths. All the teeth were black and rotten. The mouths moaned, zombie-like. I swallowed, transfixed by the horrendous creature.

The second looked like a regular, long-haired high elf, but he had a ridiculously long chin. The tip of it lowered down to his belly button area. The guy wore a green robe that seemed to be sprouting hair.

The third was an anorexic-thin humanoid wearing a loincloth with a distended, roiling belly. The bald, hairless creature wore a headband covering its eyes. Blood seeped from under the headband. It had one long arm, and one short and withered arm, clutched against its own chest.

All three moved slowly, shuffling forward. All three groaned like zombies. They moved straight for Paz, who stood right next to me.

Sister Ines tossed a white bolt, which she threw like a baseball, and the elf-like creature exploded into mist. At the same moment, Anton fired his crossbow at the one covered with mouths. The magical bolt stuck into the creature's chest, but it kept coming.

"Ew, ew, Carl, I don't like this!" Donut cried as she fired a *Magic Missile* at the third creature. It staggered. "These are like the monsters from *The Nightmare Before Christmas*! But way grosser!"

I examined the thin ghommid just as she fired another missile.

Kipper – Unsettled Ghommid – Level 30

This is a non-corporeal monster.

This guy is normally the dishwasher at the Dirt Nap. He really liked that job, too. Now he just wants to eat you.

Kipper the ghommid fell and dissipated into sparkly dust. Paz cast something and killed the one Anton had shot with the crossbow. Dozens and dozens more of these things emerged. I saw all shapes and sizes, from toddler-sized minotaurs to a naked, massively obese man with Dumbo-sized ears walking on his hands. His ears dragged on the ground and were on fire.

I grumbled. Paz's presence had summoned all of them. *All* of them. This was going to suck. We were going to have to run and fight.

"We need to get to the saferoom and formulate a better plan," I called. I cast *Tripper*, causing all the Spirit Box traps to go off. I wanted to farm more of them, but it was too risky to run with these all over the place. Mongo would likely set one off at any moment.

Thousands of horrific wails rose into the night sky. Several of the ghommids disappeared, having been summoned to random traps throughout town. But more and more were coming by the moment. A literal horde of zombie spirits.

A monster that looked like a human-sized owl popped into existence right in front of me, right above the second trap. It faced away. I instinctively punched it in the back of the head, but I hadn't summoned my gauntlet yet, and my fist passed right through the monster.

Crack! A blue sheet of ice covered my arm, all the way up to my shoulder, and I suddenly couldn't move it. It felt as if it had suddenly been placed into a clamp.

You've been frozen!

Warning: Your arm will shatter into itty little bits if it sustains too much damage before you thaw.

"Gah," I cried.

The monster turned its head 180 degrees to face me. The owl had swirling, black eyes, as big as chicken eggs. My frozen arm was suddenly in its mouth, my hand piercing all the way through its head . The creature opened its sharp beak and chomped down. *Crunch!* Flecks of ice shot away. A health bar appeared over my own goddamn arm, and it was already in the red. The flecks turned to blood.

But that wasn't all. A heavy wave of nausea swept over me.

You are being drained!

Mongo reached over and chomped the owl across the midsection, and the creature exploded and disappeared with a puff of electricity, damaged by the dino's magical teeth caps. My arm remained frozen. A twenty second debuff timer appeared, but the debuff disappeared and the ice melted away as Sister Ines cast something on me.

"Thanks. Both of you!" I still felt exhausted. *Christ, that had been close.*

"There's too many!" Anton cried. His crossbow made little monkey noises each time he fired it. Sister Ines lobbed her white balls, one after another. Donut cast *Wall of Fire*, which crackled bigger than ever thanks to her new nipple ring, and a pair of clockwork Mongos appeared. They tore through the mobs. I tossed two of my infused smoke curtains. The mobs groaned and died and moved away from the smoke.

"The saferoom is that way!" Donut cried, pointing toward a mass of creatures. I pulled a holy gooper and tossed it, clearing the way. I tossed another curtain to keep the path open.

"Move!" I yelled.

"Carl! None of my psionic attacks work on these guys!"

Both Paz and Sister Ines glowed with yellow light as they marched forward toward the pub. My own soul bar slowly filled with a swirling black, a different color than the sickly green of the duendes we'd just killed, mixing together. Tombstones rose on either side of the wide street as we pushed forward. I looked for ghommids that were higher than level 30, but I didn't see anything. None of these guys were worth flagging.

None of the ghommids cast any spells, but they were relentless. The moment the smoke dissipated, they were there, filling the gaps. Their slowness didn't matter when there were so many of them. I formed a fist, and thankfully my gauntlet worked. A single punch killed them, but I knew if I touched them at all with my flesh, I'd get frozen again. I suspected my bare foot would also work, especially after I activated *Talon Strike*, but I didn't dare try it. We waded the half block toward the room before we got too bogged down. Donut cast *Fireball*, and it tore through them, cleaving them away like a snowplow. But the moment they fell, more came and filled the gap.

We were soon surrounded, and I was out of my smoke curtains. The saferoom was still 100 meters away.

"Donut," I yelled. "Shortcut!"

"We're going to teleport!" she shouted. "Everybody stay close."

She cast *Puddle Jump*, and we reappeared just outside the saferoom. It wasn't a real building, but a crumbling, marble, gothic-style crypt with a little neon sign hanging on it that read "The Yellow Zone." I had no doubts this hadn't really been there in the real version. The three others moved into the room as I turned to face the crowd of zombies, now fifty feet away. They all slowly turned and shuffled toward us.

But then, I saw him. I paused, my hand on the door as Donut and Mongo rushed inside.

He emerged from the fog, walking casually, not shuffling like the others. The barefoot man walked toward me. He wore some sort of straw headdress that completely obscured his face. It went all the way down to his waist.

The ground around him crackled with odd, black tendrils everywhere he walked. He had some weird stick thing in his hand, like a fat wand, and he pointed it at me. I didn't wait to see what that was about before I dove into the saferoom and slammed the door.

Combat Ended. Your deck has been reset.

"Did you see that guy," I asked, breathless.

"No," Paz said, also breathing heavily. Sister Ines paced back and forth, like she wanted to go back out there right away. Anton was at the counter, which was, thankfully, manned by a bopca. He was ordering a drink. The room was much bigger on the inside than the crypt had appeared. It was a regular, medieval-style pub. Donut was clucking over Mongo who was covered with dust.

"I'm pretty sure that was the boss. I didn't get a chance to read his description, but he was level 130!"

"He's probably still out there," Sister Ines said. "Open the door. He can't hurt us in here."

I remembered the rage elemental we'd had to face on the second floor. She was right. I hesitantly reached forward and pulled the door open.

"Christ," I said, jumping back.

"No," the monster said. "Not quite." He stood right there, blocking the door, as if he'd been about to knock on it. His dot remained red on the map.

He stepped right into the room.

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[11]

New Achievement! Interloper!

You invited a red-tagged NPC boss into a saferoom, and he actually managed to get inside!

Doesn't your culture have a whole set of cautionary tales and movies about inviting mysterious strangers into your home? You know, the whole vampire thing? *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle*? *Single White Female 2: The Psycho*?

It's probably not in your best interests to keep doing such things.

***Reward*: You've received a bronze Stranger Danger box!**

"Hey!" Donut said. "We didn't invite him in! He came in on his own!"

At the far end of the bar, the bopca started shouting for the man to get out.

We just stared at the newcomer. Mongo growled and bristled.

I held out my arms in alarm. "Donut," I said. "Keep him steady!" The last thing we needed was Mongo getting teleported away.

"No, Mongo. No!" Donut shouted as the dinosaur whined like a dog.

Despite his marker on the map, the creature did not seem hostile. The combat notification didn't start. I remembered Mordecai had once told me that mobs could enter saferooms. They only teleported away when they actually attacked. I'd never really thought about how that worked with smart mobs.

The mob was a hair shorter than me, but he had an electric presence that filled the room. I still could not see his face. The well-muscled man looked like someone that had been plucked straight from some sort of tribal ceremony. The only flesh I could see was his arms, legs, and washboard stomach. His skin was bone white, almost translucent, as if it had been drained of all color and life. He wore a straw skirt that went down to his knees, and the headdress completely blocked his features, almost like he was wearing a second grass skirt on his head. Or a lampshade that went halfway down his chest. Little tendrils of fire flecked up off his bare feet and legs. The strange wand thing in his hand was a stick of reeds held together with colorful string and decorated with seashells. The man's stench filled the room, and it was like that of a rotting corpse.

"Oh my god," Donut exclaimed. She made a little hacking noise. "Just because you're undead doesn't mean you shouldn't use deodorant. I mean, really."

I examined the creature.

Asojano – Orisha

Level 130 City Boss.

This is a non-corporeal spirit.

Also known as the Lord of Smallpox, Asojano is one of the most respected and feared of the Orishas, a former god made flesh upon the rise of the Ascendency.

As the worshippers of these gods grew more and more extinct, their temples crumbled, and the power of these former deities waned. Eventually, they faded into nothing, slipping away beyond the veil, becoming nothing more than any other ghommid, only able to visit the physical world on occasion.

One day, not so long ago, Asojano found himself here in this small town, visiting the world he once helped rule. There was no malice to his actions. He came just so he could look upon what he once had and what he had lost.

Still, power lingers, even in the most forgotten of shells.

Asojano is disease incarnate. He kills, and he heals. He is life, and he is death. He also wears a reed hat that makes it

difficult to see where he's going, so he bumps into stuff a lot.

Lord of Smallpox? I thought. *Uh-oh.*

A health bar appeared over the creature all on its own, and it started to very slowly creep downward. None of us were doing anything.

"Santero," the monster rumbled, his voice heavy and odd and ancient. I remembered Ifechi's and Queen Imogen's voice, and it reminded me of a male version of that. He was talking directly to Paz. "You must assist me. These spirits have been plagued by my presence, and I need your help. I am trapped here, and you can help me free them."

"Uh," Paz said.

The door remained open, and a group of ghommids arrived. They all teleported away, one after another as they groaned and shuffled their way into the room. The bopca continued to scream and wave his arms. The gnome guy was wearing a chef's hat. I stepped to the side around the orisha and kicked the door, shutting it.

That ended up being a mistake because the moment the door closed, the stench doubled in intensity. We all started to back up as Donut continued to make hacking noises.

His dot remained red, which was unusual.

The orisha had a barely-visible, moss-colored aura that radiated about twelve inches all around him. I suspected if any of us moved within the aura, we'd get hit with some sort of nasty disease. I didn't know how that would work in a saferoom, and I didn't want to find out.

The man stepped forward toward Paz. The floor sizzled where he stepped, reminding me of Bianca, Prepotente's goat dragon pet thing. His health continued to lower.

"Don't get closer," I said to the man as we all took another step back. "Your name is Asojano, right? If you get closer, you're going to teleport away." I didn't know if that was true or not, but it sounded good. "So, you're the reason all these ghommid guys have gone crazy?"

Asojano turned to face me. He paused for a long moment before speaking. He was trembling, I realized. With anger? With fear? I couldn't tell. "You dare? You dare speak my name? We only speak through the priest, or I will have your crops withering and your skin bubbling and your ancestors cursed through eternity." He waved the wand thing at me. I was expecting it to cast something or for him to teleport away, but neither happened. The man paused and looked down at the wand, as if he, too, was surprised it didn't work.

"Oh, sweetie," Donut said. "You think we care if you can kill our crops? Carl does that all on his own." She looked up to me. "Do you remember the aloe vera plant incident? Miss Beatrice was most displeased with you. She was only gone for two days."

"That was you!" I said. "You knocked it over and pulled it out!"

"Well, you should have watched me better."

I kept looking back and forth between this Asojano guy and Paz. Sister Ines looked as if she was about to attack him. Anton had returned from the bar. He downed a drink, put the glass on the table, and placed a hand on Sister Ines's shoulder, presumably in an attempt to calm her. It was a strange juxtaposition as she was usually the calm one.

Paz remained frozen, his mouth hanging open.

Carl: Paz, you need to say something. Don't just sit there. Try to find out as much as you can.

"Uh," Paz said again. "What exactly do you need me to do?"

"Go to the temple in the center of town and fix my shrine. It will allow me to leave this place."

"That's a Club Vanquisher," I said. "Do you guys have access?"

"Yes," Anton said. "All three of us do, but we don't like going there unless we have to. Sister Ines refuses to go inside. But does it matter? It ain't really open yet."

Quest Update! Pueblo de los Olvidados.

An Orisha is the source of the ghommid infection. He used the last remaining power of his shrine to enter town, and he's unable to leave. The vile power of his presence has altered the minds of the town's residents, turning them mad. Remove him to free the town.

You need to go to the temple in the center of the town, find the correct shrine, and "repair" it. That'll work. Uh, maybe. Or you can kill this guy. He doesn't look too tough. Or you can just kill everybody. That might be fun.

Asojano shook his wand thing again, like he was trying to get a remote control with a dead battery to work. He slapped it against his hand.

Paz: What do I do?

Anton: His health is going down on its own. Wait until it's 5%, and I'll flag him.

Paz: Will that work in here?

Carl: I doubt it. Tell him you'll help. But stall. See what happens.

Paz shifted nervously, his armor clanking. "So, Mr. Asojano? We can help, but we can't get to the temple. There's too many of them. Can you help us get there?"

The creature nodded. "Exit tonight when the sun descends. My power is greater at night. The sickness affects them more, and they'll be stronger as well, but my ability to hold them back will also be increased. I cannot control them at all now. Once you repair my shrine, I will have the power to leave."

"In the dark?" Donut asked, dubious. "You want us to go out there and fight them in the dark?"

The monster's health turned red. Next to me, Anton pulled a flag from his inventory. He had it in his hand. I thought about it for a moment, trying to determine if I wanted to fight them for this guy. He seemed powerful, but if he was a poison-based monster, his abilities probably worked slowly, and these monster totems would only be summoned for a limited amount of time.

"You are a false god," Sister Ines said suddenly. She spit the words. Her hand/paw things were on her head, and she was making a weird kneading motion. Her voice went up in pitch, and she sounded strangely terrified. Her eyes were clenched shut. "This is too much. Our souls... our souls can't handle this. Anton, no. No. I can't take it. Don't do it. Let Carl's team take him."

"He is strong, sister," Anton said. "We've gone over this... It's all make believe. It's not..."

"It's too much," Sister Ines said, interrupting. "Please. No. No more false gods. Not again."

Anton and Paz gave each other a nervous glance. Donut gave me a I-told-you-she-was-crazy look.

In the end, it didn't matter. When the creature's health was about 10%, he turned and opened the door to the outside. A massive horde of monsters remained outside, and they squealed and started throwing themselves at the entrance, zapping away as they did.

He took a step outside, and his health started to rise. "Tonight. Come," he said without turning back to us.

I moved to close the door, leaving us alone in the room. His scent lingered, heavy in the air.

"I know what you're about to say, and we are not flagging that guy, Carl. His presence makes me want to hurl. The princess posse will not like us having a rotting stink factory in the party. I don't care how powerful he is. And I told you that Havana browns are unstable. What did I say?"

We were back in our personal space. We had to go on our program in a little bit anyway, which would give us time to get ready. We would all meet again in a few hours after the sun went down. In the meantime, Mordecai was hard at work making us some anti-undead bombs that would help us clear the way out of the saferoom. Our supplies were dwindling, but thankfully Li Jun's team had found a Desperado Club in their area, and they were getting some supplies for us. They were all marveling at how big the middle floor of the Desperado Club was, something we'd only gotten to see a fraction of on the last floor because of the hunters.

"There's definitely something going on there in her head," I said. "She's really into the idea of killing undead creatures, but she's terrified of the idea of other gods."

"Well, it reminds me of Miss Beatrice's mother, and I don't like that. She's letting her religion make her act stupid. She's crazy. You know how I feel about crazy, Carl."

I reached up to pet the cat. "There's nothing wrong with being religious or spiritual, Donut. Bautista and Imani are both really religious." I didn't add that half the authors of the cookbook were also deeply pious, though their faiths were as varied as the stars in the sky. "But it's like anything. Some people take it too far. Some people get a little carried away, and they get so caught up in the rules that they end up forgetting what their faith teaches. Sister Ines acts strong, but I think she's overwhelmed. The idea of 'worshipping' deities, even in this environment, upsets her. Either way, it's a sensitive subject for some people, and it's not really our business. We don't know what's going on in her head. It's not our place to judge her for it."

"Oh, I'm judging her. If she's going to freak out every time some god or half-god shows up, then I don't want to be anywhere near her. It makes her untrustworthy and dangerous."

I sighed. Donut had a point. It didn't matter now, anyway. We were stuck with them until we could get out of here. I wasn't super worried about being trapped in this town now that we knew how to get out. If it came down to it, I could build an undead-killing bomb that'd wipe out the entire population.

"Either way," I said, "I think we should try to flag one of the regular ghommids before we fix the shrine. I didn't think they were strong enough at first, but that ice attack of theirs is really powerful. I'm resistant to ice attacks, and it still worked on me."

"That's because it's not a regular ice attack when it's from an undead creature," Mordecai said, walking into the room. He had chocolate all over his face. "Now open your boxes and then get ready for your show."

Donut and I both had fan boxes to open. Mine, a gold fan box, had come from near the end of the previous floor when I'd first met Imogen, but I hadn't opened the achievement until yesterday. Donut had received hers—a platinum fan box—when she sang during the Butcher's Masquerade. Both boxes were finally ready.

The main room of our personal space was unusually messy when we entered. The cleaner bot was making angry noises as it swept through, picking up candy wrappers and scrubbing stains off the counter that looked like ice cream.

Mongo sniffed at a half-empty bag of Doritos. He picked up the bag and started shaking it, spreading Dorito bits everywhere, scattering them like confetti. The cleaner bot let out a shrill tone.

"Mongo, no! Bomo, were you and Mordecai having a party in here?" Donut asked as she jumped to the counter. She lifted up her foot, and it came back sticky. She made a face. "If you're going to have guests over, you know the rules. I have to be invited."

Bomo looked back from the television and made a noncommittal grunt. He was playing *Smash* on the newly put-together Gamecube console. I hadn't yet built a controller adapter for him, but apparently Mordecai had beaten me to it.

Mordecai had a strange, sheepish look on his dumb face I couldn't read. Before I could press him on it, Donut opened up the first of her boxes.

She had three boxes. A gold T'Ghee box she'd gotten for using the practice room, her platinum fan box, and the bronze Stranger Danger box.

The bronze box contained an old, expired tube of mace designed to be attached to a keychain. It had no magical properties whatsoever. It was just a joke prize.

The gold box contained a single card. Our first snare card. A "very rare," consumable card called **Hobbled.**

I picked the card up. It featured a pair of legs tied together. The card reduced a totem's summoning time by 90%. If the totem card timed out and returned to the opponent's deck, they could resummon the monster once they pulled it again, but the 90% time reduction would persist through combat. That was a pretty big deal. If a monster was normally summoned for a full minute, it would make it so it'd remain for only six seconds. That would make all but the most powerful monsters useless. Too bad the card was consumable.

Donut gasped as the fan box opened.

I exchanged a look with Mordecai.

"Oh my god. Oh my god! Thank you! Thank you!" she cried, bouncing up and down with excitement. "Carl, look! Look what my Princess Posse voted on for me!"

"Don't you have one of those already?"

"This is a real one! The one I used at the party was a prop!" She gasped again. "Look, there's a purple jewel on it. Do they know me or what? I'm going to look just like Britney! The real Britney, not the crawler."

"Oh, thank the gods," Mordecai said after a moment. He looked at me and nodded. "It's a good one. Sort of. Donut, keep it in your inventory and only equip it when you're singing. Otherwise... yeah."

The item appeared on the table, and I gingerly picked it up as Donut continued to rain enthusiastic praise on her fans.

"It's not considered a hat?" I asked.

"No," Mordecai said. It's a face accessory. Like your bandana."

The AI's voice took on a weird, electronic cadence as it read the description.

The Bard's Golden Throat – Enchanted Headset Microphone.

Nuclear power. The airplane. Transistors. Antibiotics.

Important inventions and discoveries of the 1900's that changed the world.

But those were nothing, absolutely nothing, compared to the greatest invention of the century.

It happened in September of 1997. That was the day it all changed. That was the day a company called Antares Audio Technologies released into the wild a piece of software that finally cured a horrific disability that'd been plaguing young men and women for a millennia.

The disability? Tone deafness.

The cure? It was called AutoTune.

With the advent of the real-time vocal synthesizer, underprivileged youths such as T-Pain, Kayne, and Ke$ha were finally able to crawl out from underneath their ordinary lives and become the shining stars they were

destined to be. At the same time, aging musicians, *cough* like Cher, were able to keep their stars aloft just a little longer, proving once and for all that nothing, not even the lack of natural talent, could stop the upward momentum of technology.

This golden, amethyst-encrusted microphone imbues the following benefits when it is equipped:

The Golden Throat enhancement. Automatically tunes songs within one and a half steps of correct note. Assists in the proper formation of all bard-based songs and spells.

Amplification. While equipped, all spoken words and songs are amplified at twice the normal volume. This can be increased to up to five times of top volume.

Charisma plus 5% when equipped.

"Isn't it fantastic!" Donut said. She took it back, and it poofed onto her head with little, purple sparkles. The moment she equipped it, her voice modulated and increased in volume. "Oh, I just love it." She paused. "Wow... Carl, it sounds like I'm talking through a fan. Oh look, I can make my voice even louder!"

Mongo screeched.

I looked up at the ceiling. "Yeah, thanks," I said. To Donut, I added, "let's keep that as a secret weapon."

"Yes, I suppose you're right," Donut said. The headset, thankfully, disappeared into her inventory. "I'll keep it in my hotlist, and I can add it when I need a little extra oomph. Or when you're not paying attention to me properly. Now open yours, Carl."

I grunted and pulled out my boxes. I had a couple of adventurer boxes for taking damage from undead. I hadn't realized my goat patch I'd gotten just before the vampire quest on the previous floor had actually muted some of the damage from the ghommid's freeze attack. It'd probably saved my arm.

There wasn't anything good in any of the first boxes. I got the same tube of mace. Then came the fan box.

It cracked and whirred with the usual amount of gusto. Sparkles and a puff of smoke appeared.

Pop!

"Uh," I said, looking at the coupon. I picked it up. It was a small clip of paper that looked as if it had been poorly cut out of a newspaper. It featured a cartoon of a topless orc woman on her stomach atop a table. The word "RELAX!" was written on the top.

I examined it.

Massage coupon!

Has work been getting you down? Feeling stressed? Do you and your girlfriends need a break? This coupon entitles you, plus one companion!, a free, relaxing, one-hour massage at either the Penis Parade or the Penis Palace Back Room Relaxation Spa in the Desperado Club. Includes optional aromatherapy and chemical* peel.

"Extras" and tip not included.

"Uh," I said again.

Donut gasped. "It says you can bring a companion! That's me! I'm your companion! The Penis Palace! Carl, we can go to the Penis Palace! We haven't had a chance to go there yet! This is almost as good as my prize!"

The Penis Palace was the male strip club on the middle floor of the Desperado Club, as opposed to the seedier Penis Parade on the first floor where Donut usually went.

"Uh," I said for a third time.

Right at that moment, Katia and Bautista walked into the room.

"Knock, knock," Katia said, peeking her head in through the door to the guild hall.

"Hi, Katia!" Donut said. "No, No. Wait. Let me do that again."

The headset popped onto her head.

"Hi, Katia! Hi, Katia's boyfriend," she repeated. Her voice boomed electronically. "Look at my prize! And I think the Posse voted on Carl's prize, too!"

"I can see that," Katia said, laughing as Mongo danced around them. "There's no possibility of that getting old fast. What did Carl get?"

"You sound like T-Pain," a new voice said before Donut could answer. A third crawler came into the room.

"Louis!" Donut cried. She put her headset away and leaped across the room and landed on his shoulder. "Louis, how are you?"

"Uh, I'm okay. I'm doing better," he said. He reached up and gave her an awkward pat. "We're in Iceland."

"I know. I heard," Donut said. "Is it cold and covered in ice?"

"Yeah, actually it is," he said. "I always heard they named Iceland and Greenland backward to make people want to go to the wrong place, but we're in Reykjavik and it's very snowy and icy. It's pretty, though."

"It is Christmastime," Donut said. "I wanted to go to Ibiza, but Carl insisted on Cuba."

"I did not!" I said, putting my massage coupon away. "You picked the wrong place."

"I bet it's nice outside," Louis said.

He was acting normal, but I could sense it there, hidden in the back of his voice. There was a hollowness that wasn't there before, like just a little bit of life had been drained out of him. Firas had been his best friend.

"Oh, it's okay. There are disgusting street dogs everywhere. But I suppose the weather's not too bad for December." She paused. "How's Britney doing? Is her face still all... you know."

"Her face hasn't healed," Louis said, whispering. "But she's been going out there on her own. She's rising in levels really fast all of a sudden. Last floor she didn't want to fight at all, but now she's working really hard."

Katia was looking down at all the wrappers on the floor. The cleaner bot still zipped around, picking them up.

"Well, I hope she feels better soon," Donut said, "and I hope she's not on the path to being a super villain. Mongo really likes her."

Louis nodded. "Yeah, it's been hard. Langley and all those other car salesmen guys and Gwen and Firas. Almost everyone who was in the bubble with us on the fifth floor, they all died on the sixth."

Donut nodded sadly. "That reminds me, how's Tran doing?"

Bautista answered. "He's much better, too. It's taken him some time to get used to not having legs, but he's like the rest of us. Resilient."

Katia's squad was her, Bautista, Louis, Britney, and Tran. She had a ton of other people in her actual party, but they hadn't chosen Iceland. Apparently there was one other group in the area, comprising of the last remaining daughters from Hekla's team. They were all working together.

"We've been trying to get everyone together at least once a day to all eat together," Katia said.

"You should try the tea Bautista makes," Louis added. "It's really good."

"It is good," Katia said. "Imani and Elle are both addicted to it. He used to own a tea shop with his family."

"I'm not really a tea person," I said, "but I'll be happy to sit down with you guys. It'd be nice."

"He only eats sausage and egg breakfast sandwiches," Donut said. "He ate so many, now the food box thing only has that as an option."

"Yeah, mine did the same thing," Louis said, "but with bowls of Captain Crunch."

"By the way," Katia said, giving a wary, sidelong look to Donut. "Imani and Tserendolgor are talking about her party joining the guild."

"What?" Donut asked. "Is that a joke? Absolutely not. We can't just let any riffraff off the street in. She's a cheater and an experience hog, and that disgusting meatball pet of hers wants to eat Mongo."

Mongo screeched in agreement.

"Dude, did you know Ren was like a supermodel before this all started?" Louis asked.

"I did, actually," I said. I'd heard some others talking about her over chat. She was born in Mongolia, but she'd spent most of her teens and twenties working as a runway model in Paris. She'd been badly injured by a jealous ex-boyfriend and had recently returned to Mongolia before the collapse. Apparently it'd been news in the modeling world. I'd never heard of her, but she was the biggest thing we had to an actual pre-collapse celebrity in the dungeon. A fact, someone made the mistake of pointing out where Donut could

see. I'd had to talk Donut out of angrily listing all of her purple ribbons in chat.

"That's obviously a lie," Donut said, continuing to bristle. "If she was a supermodel, then why did she turn into a dog?"

"I don't know," Louis said. "But she has a necklace with a paw print on it. Maybe she really likes dogs."

"Anyway," Katia said. "It's not set in stone. There's a few other guilds who want her team, so we'll see. But Imani was thinking we should vote from now on if we're going to let other teams in."

"Well Carl, Mongo, Bomo, Mordecai, and I all vote no," Donut said.

I reached up and pet the angry cat. "We'll talk about if she says she wants to join."

"Oh hey," Louis said, changing the subject. "Are you guys planning on rescuing Samantha any time soon? I made the mistake of putting her in my chat, and I don't want to be a dick and block her, but she won't stop messaging me. Earlier, she wrote 'YOOHOO' like fifty times straight in all caps until I answered, and when I did, she asked me what I was wearing."

I laughed. "Just mute her. We'll get to it when we can. She's on the other side of the map."

Katia shook her head. "I told you to be careful, Louis. She has a crush on you."

I grunted. "I'm just glad she has her attention on you and not us. No offense. Just don't let her distract you too much. Too much chatting is dangerous."

"That's actually why we came over," Katia said. "Donut has been talking, but you have been pretty antisocial, only talking business, and we wanted to check up on you."

"I'm doing okay," I said. "Living the dream, you know? How are you doing?"

She smiled sadly. "Just taking it one day at a time. Do you need any utility cards? We have these little trolls everywhere. They're just called the Lads, but they drop a lot of cards. Louis mass killed about two hundred of them with a cloud attack, and we have more of these things than we know what to do with."

She plopped a deck onto the counter, unveiling a ton of **Time Extend** and **Buff** cards and several others I hadn't seen yet.

"Oh, wow," I said, sifting through the pile. "Have you gotten any mystic cards?"

"No," Katia said. "No mystic, no snares, and only a couple specials. We have a lot of cards, but our main deck is still pretty thin. We're going totem hunting in a few hours. Do you know how the mystic cards work? It's kind of a pain because they have to stay in your hand, taking up a slot. Anyway, here. Take two of these. They're consumable, so be careful." She pushed forward a pair of **Flee** Cards. I grabbed another **Stout** card and two additional utility cards I hadn't seen before. One called **Blue Stuff**, which increased the totem's supply of mana points, and another called **Greased Lightning** which increased a mob's speed by 25%. If we added that to Geraldo, he would be ridiculously fast.

"Thanks!" I said.

Katia gathered her cards back up. "Be careful putting too many of these utility cards in your deck until you get more totems. Li Na has a mystic card that decreases draw time from ten seconds down to five. So we should all be on the lookout for that one."

Zev: Sorry to interrupt, but you guys are going on in a few minutes. Louis also has a show he needs to prepare for in an hour.

"Oh, poo," Donut said. "We have to go on a show, and you just got here."

"I'm doing a show, too," Louis said. "It's just me and Britney, but we're going on *Dungeon Sidekicks*."

"Oh, I heard about that one," Donut said. "We're going on a documentary or something equally highbrow, but we'll be talking about television shows!"

"That sounds way better than mine," Louis said. "Katia went on mine once, and they made her sing karaoke. I'm a terrible singer."

"I haven't yet been invited on a program as a musical guest, but I suspect it's only a matter of time. I wonder if the galaxy has something like Eurovision where people from different planets compete and sing. That would be delightful." She turned to regard

Bomo, who continued to play on the Gamecube. “Bomo, be a darling and brush me out. I have a program to go on.”

We said our goodbyes while Bomo brushed her. The cretin did it happily, but he wasn’t nearly as enthusiastic about it as the Sledge had been.

“Carl,” Donut said as we prepared. “What do you think is going to happen this time? Something crazy always happens when we go on shows. The last time, I didn’t even get to go, but you made Vrah’s mother really mad at you.”

“Hopefully nothing too interesting,” I said.

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We, once again, transferred to the space station before being zapped down to the underwater production trailer. The trip into space was especially brief.

The two gnolls were already dropping into the room when we appeared. I had but a moment to gaze out the window. The space station itself rotated, but I realized we were always over the same location on the planet over the Indian ocean. Thick clouds covered most of the area, and I didn't have time to marvel at the view. The guards did a quick, wordless once over on us and disappeared. I grabbed Donut into my arms and turned myself in the air.

We plopped into a familiar room. This was the same room where I'd met the Popov brothers. The place still smelled like rotisserie chicken. A deck of regular playing cards remained sitting on the counter where the Popovs had left it.

There were two others already here.

Zev sat on the couch, looking both tired and worried.

And standing in the corner on two cloven hooves was a massive, hairy goat creature with a line of red, bug-like eyes down its evil face.

A caprid from the Plenty.

This thing was about twice as tall as Prepotente. He was even taller than the only other full-grown caprid I'd seen, the goat from the presentation of my new sponsor. And that dude had been

terrifying. This guy was worse. He went all the way to the ceiling. A creature straight from a nightmare.

Zev had warned us a liaison would be attending the show, and here he was. The tall, shaggy creature turned stiffly to face us the moment we arrived. A pair of horns curled upon its head. The corner of its top left horn, I realized, pushed up through the ceiling. This guy wasn't really here. He was a holo.

Donut leaped from my arms and landed on the couch next to Zev. She leaned in and gave the fish woman a quick head bump. I swallowed and tried to appear confident.

"Hello, Mr. Satanic goat guy," I said. "Are you the same cheat who tried to get Maggie My to kill us? The same one working with the Skull Empire?"

The creature leaned in and paused, not saying anything. He moved oddly, like he couldn't turn his neck, which was astoundingly unnerving. A full five seconds passed. I was transfixed by his long, obsidian, and wavy hair. Unlike Prepotente, whose wire hair felt very much like that of a regular goat, this guy's coat appeared to be silky smooth, yet at the same time, it was so black and bottomless that I imagined if I reached into his fur, my hand would come back oily. Or covered with spiders.

The goat suddenly bleated, long and hard, his voice deep and filled with bass. It vibrated the walls.

"Right back atcha, buddy," I said.

He opened his mouth again, as if he was about to really say something, but he stopped and leaned back. He made an angry grunt. He rigidly turned his whole body to the side and huffed something in a strange language at someone unseen. The words sounded like something a goat straight out of hell would say, like Latin played backward and in slow motion.

A new figure suddenly popped into the small room. This was also a holo, half obscured by a cloud of smoke. He was rapidly pulling a tie on around his neck as he zapped, coughing into place.

Quasar. My attorney.

"Not a word to my client!" Quasar shouted at the goat. He looked at me. "Holy tits. You need to tell me when you're going to be in the

presence of one of these shit tarts. For fuck's sake. You're lucky I wasn't at the Tug-aporium or something."

"Hi, Quasar!" Donut said.

I fought the urge to cough, even though his vape smoke wasn't really in the room. It suddenly felt very crowded in here. "I didn't realize this was something you'd want to be involved in. And I figured you knew I'd be here. This program has been on the books for a few days."

"Do I look like a grixist shaman to you?" he asked. He finished putting on his tie. He normally wore one with an alien hula girl. This time it looked like it was covered with pickles wearing sunglasses. He took a hit of his vape and then pointed an accusatory finger at Zev. "Your outreach associate is supposed to let me know of any planned meetings with liaisons so I can prepare."

"It's not my job to do yours," Zev said evenly.

"Save it, Fish Sticks. I should've been informed ahead of time. You're lucky our contract allows for me to appear in case of an emergency."

Zev grumbled and sprayed out water over the couch.

The goat guy turned to Quasar and said something in that same weird, demonic language.

The pickles on Quasar's tie started spinning in circles on their own. Donut couldn't keep her eyes off of them.

Quasar lifted up his hands in a *what-the-hell-was-that?* motion. "Look, you walking shawarma skewer. I don't speak whatever the fuck it is you're trying to say, and it ain't in the translator system, which is fine by me because you ain't allowed to so much as bleat at my client. You're only here because... actually, I don't know why the fuck you're here." He turned to Zev. "Why the fuck is he here?"

Zev sighed. "The program they're attending is owned by the Open Intellect Pacifist Network, and as you should know, Valtay rules state a liaison needs to be present in any instance when a crawler might be alone with a sponsor."

"Tits," Quasar said, sounding surprised. "*Shadow Boxer* is owned by those crazy assholes? Really? I gotta tell you, Fish Sticks. I'm more than a little annoyed at the lack of communication. But why is

it this guy? We usually work with the naked worm." He turned to the goat. "What's your name again? Harbinger, right?"

"I have no control over who they send," Zev said.

"Harbinger?" Donut asked. "The devil goat's name is Harbinger? Really?"

"Well, considering his history with my client and the princess, I'd say this is improper at best. It's a three-ring ass casserole at worst. Even if he hadn't already been sanctioned for trying to straight up murder my client, he's a caprid, which is another one of Carl's sponsors. It's like hiring an incubus as a guard on a chastity yacht during an elven rut."

I felt a chill wash over me. This *was* the same guy. The one who'd given Maggie My help in trying to kill me, all with the help of the orcs of the Skull Empire. Orren the other liaison had told me it had been dealt with, but I still didn't know what that meant. I still didn't know why any of that had happened.

"Like I said," Zev said, frustrated, "this is something you'll have to take up with the liaison office."

"Oh, I will. As soon as I can find one that isn't going to accidentally raise my grandmother from the dead when he speaks. Seriously. What is up with your voice? Why aren't you getting translated properly?"

Harbinger the caprid said something, but it still came out in his demon language. He turned and started grunting at someone we couldn't see.

"The system has been buggy lately," Zev said.

The goat turned back and said, "The error has been corrected. We will proceed." His voice remained deep and terrifying. "Administrator Zev, you may inform the show runner we are prepared."

"I'm pinging Rosetta right now," Zev said.

I went very still.

"Rosetta?" Donut asked. "Is that the host? That's a very pretty name."

"This is Rosetta's new show?" Quasar asked, straightening. "Tits, I had no idea. I need to pay better attention to this stuff." He rubbed

a hand along his bald, alien head. “Carl, how’s my hair look?”

“Yes,” Zev said, ignoring Quasar. “Rosetta Thagra. An Odette wannabe. She’s a former crawler and game guide. She’s a Crest.” She looked at me. “Actually, she was more like you, Carl, than Odette. She was a big fan of blowing things up. She’s only recently been released from her indentureship contract. Her new program, *Shadow Boxer* has become quite popular.”

My heart skipped a beat. No. No way.

I felt the line of red eyes of the liaison bore into me.

“Oh, one of those,” Donut said. A Crest was a human race with no eyebrows. They’d been a common hunter type on the previous floor. Donut turned to Quasar and said, “You need to straighten your tie if you want to make a better impression. I really like the pattern, though.”

Quasar looked down and picked up the end of the pickle tie. “Yeah, this one is pretty great. You know there’s some new ones out there featuring you on the back of your dinosaur. You fire magic missiles. The Donut merch is much better than the Carl merch.”

Donut gasped.

I barely heard this. I had to fight to stop myself from shaking. Could it be? Was it possible?

<Note added by Crawler Rosetta. Ninth Edition>

How can they do this? Do they not see us? Are we not real to them? We are the same. By the gods old and new, we are the same. Yet they kill us like we are nothing. Comrades, if I ever get out of this, which seems more and more unlikely by the day, I swear upon the moons I will spend the rest of my days making certain this evil is not only eradicated from the stars, but there will be accountability for their crimes.

I swear it, I swear it, I swear it.

"No, no, no," Donut said, sounding irritated. "*Gossip Girl* and *Gilmore Girls* are two completely different shows. *Gilmore Girls* was entirely fantastic, yes, but *Gossip Girl* is, quite simply, the pinnacle of television achievement. You can't just lump the two together. It's like, I don't know, serving a Twinkie on the same plate as caviar. Tell me, Miss Thagra, what is considered the greatest program in the universe?"

Rosetta Thagra shifted uncomfortably in her chair. The human-like woman was pale, pretty, and appeared to be in her early twenties, wearing a professional pantsuit. A strange blob of yellow hair sat atop her otherwise bald head at an angle. It looked like a faded, blond toupee for an aging surfer dude. I couldn't tell if it was her real hair, an actual wig, or if it was supposed to be some sort of hat.

The moment I saw her, I immediately started to question whether this was the same person as the author of the ninth edition of the cookbook. She had an almost meek appearance. If Zev hadn't told us she was a former crawler, one just two seasons older than Mordecai, I'd never believe it.

Zev said she liked explosives. Rosetta from the cookbook had provided dozens of explosives recipes. It had to be her.

Only her voice hinted at her true age. Whatever rejuvenation system this universe used to keep people young, it wasn't perfect. There were still traces of one's unnatural age here and there.

According to Zev, the first thing Rosetta had done upon exiting the dungeon was make a documentary movie, program, whatever about her home planet. The movie was called *The Other Side of the Glass*. Zev and Quasar both said it was well-received and entertaining, though I strongly suspected they both likely missed the point of it. After the success of this first movie, the mysterious Open Intellect Pacifist Network had funded *Shadow Boxer*, a weekly show that was now telling the story of Earth through interviews that were designed to look like regular conversations. Like Zev had said earlier, it was similar to *Earth Beautiful*, the other program we'd once gone on, but this one was much more "raw."

"Well?" Donut asked Rosetta.

Rosetta planted a fake grin on her face. "I suppose I'd say the best show in the galaxy is *Shadow Boxer*."

"Oh, I'm sure," Donut said. "But what's the best, most popular fictional program?"

"I don't get time to watch much anymore," Rosetta said. "But when I was a game guide, I really liked *Little Settler Miss*. It was very popular."

Donut leaned in. "Well, let me tell you, Miss Thagra. *Gossip Girl* is better. It's not even a question."

Rosetta nodded thoughtfully. "I know you didn't gain your sapience until you entered the dungeon, but looking back, how do you think watching this program..."

"No!" Donut said, interrupting, waving her paw up at the screen, which was showing scenes from the show. "These screencaps are all wrong. That first one is from the horrific Acapulco spinoff, and the second is from the HBO reboot which we won't even dignify with a response. I mean, really."

Rosetta took a deep breath. I watched as the former crawler took her right hand and started to rub the side of her thigh. A nervous gesture. Her attention kept darting to Harbinger, who stood in the dark, his eyes glowing. "I apologize, Princess. I'll tell you what. After the interview, why don't we hang out for a few minutes, and you can help us choose a few proper screencaps for when this tunnels."

"Negative," Harbinger said, talking for the first time since the interview started.

Rosetta's eyes flashed to me and then back to the caprid. "How about between the interviews? It'll all be automated anyway. She can just point. I won't even be in the room."

Harbinger didn't answer.

"Uh," Rosetta said, turning to Donut. "If that would be okay with you? We'll show you a bunch of the collected screencaps, and we'll number them, and you can call the best ones out to a producer."

Donut preened. "That would be most acceptable. Now, what were you asking?"

This went on for a while. We were in a production studio adjoining the green room. It was the same room where the Popovs

and I had done our autograph signing, and where I'd stabbed that reporter guy in the neck with a pen. We each sat in a pair of comfortable chairs while Rosetta sat across from us. The room was dark with a hot spotlight shining right into my face. We were ringed by floating screens that were showing pictures and videos of a younger Donut winning cat shows and screencaps of the various television programs and movies she was obsessed with. Everything from *Misfits of Science* to *Downton Abbey* to *Stranger Things* where Donut went on a five-minute rant about Barb to, of course, *Gossip Girl*.

Rosetta was no Odette. She was obviously nervous, and she wasn't that great of an interviewer until the conversation started to flow naturally. Only then did she steer the conversation away from the shows themselves to how watching them made Donut feel. How did the shows compare to the real world? Did she feel they had an impact on culture?

It was a bit ridiculous that she was asking these questions of a goddamned cat, but Donut really warmed to the conversation, and Donut's answers were strangely fascinating. Donut was oddly cold on Rosetta at first, probably because she was a Crest, but by the time the interview started to wind down, Donut was happily chatting away with the woman like they were best friends.

This whole time, Zev, Quasar, and Harbinger stood off to the side in the dark, not talking with one another. Tiny Zev held onto a tablet, working on something while she watched. A chair appeared and Quasar parked himself in it about halfway through as he watched Rosetta with puppy dog eyes. A cloud of smoke floated in a square around him, breaking the illusion that he was actually in the room with us.

Harbinger stood behind them both, a mountain compared to the other two, unmoving and unspeaking as he took it all in.

Rosetta didn't ask me any questions at all during Donut's portion. She barely acknowledged my presence.

When Donut's interview finished, the woman stood from her chair and announced, "Thank you, princess. I am going to change wardrobe for the next segment. While that's happening, we'll be

scrolling images on the screen with numbers. You can just call out the numbers you think would work for the segment. I'll be back shortly so we can do Carl's interview. Okay?"

"Of course, darling," Donut said.

A disembodied male voice filled the room. "Princess Donut, we'll be showing you scenes from shows on the roundabout. Just call out the numbers."

Donut did a little hop in her chair and looked up at the screens. She loved this sort of thing. "Not number one, goodness. I don't even know what show that is. Where's the rest of that guy's shirt?"

"That's *Miami Vice*," I said.

"The show where the guy had a pet Florin on his boat? I only saw a couple of episodes."

I laughed. "Yes."

While she watched the screens, Quasar jumped at the opportunity, getting up and leaning in close. "Okay, buddy, listen up," he said, talking rapidly. "There's only so much I can say, legally that is, with that scary fucker standing over there. I can't answer too many questions, so keep your honey hole closed while I get this out. There's been a lot of movement on the Faction Wars front. Your team's castle landed right in the middle of the Lemig Sortion's battlefield, and it splattered half their army."

"No, number six is *Golden Girls*. I did like that show, but why was all their furniture wicker?" Donut looked over. "Zev, did you ever watch *Golden Girls*? I think my favorite was the slut one."

"I loved it," Zev said after a moment. She'd put away her tablet and was staring up at all the screens intently, a strange look to her face. Harbinger was laser focused on me and Quasar.

"Number seven is good," Donut continued, "But again, that's *Gilmore Girls*. That was the spring break episode. I think number eight is *Dexter*. Carl liked that show, but I only thought it was okay. Did you know he was married to his sister from the show in real life? Can you imagine how weird that had to be? At least it wasn't the other way around. I thought these were going to be scenes from *Gossip Girl*." She gasped. "Ten is *Jane the Virgin*! I loved that show!"

Quasar continued. “The resulting ghoul things from the *Zerzura* spell are still a problem, but most of your army has gotten away and has installed themselves onto your battlefield. The Lemigs are now squatting in that blown-to-shit elf castle and are using it as their stronghold, but consensus is they’re fucked. Did you know their commander is still trapped in the Desperado Club? They filed a grievance stating the castle placement was an attack, but we successfully argued it was an AI action. Those tattoo memory golems that Signet lady gave you are all still around. People really like the shark. Tina is still an allosaurus and is causing problems. Her mother is another story. I got ten credits on what that baby is gonna look like. The changelings have started construction on your own stronghold. The cat, Ferdinand, lost his hat and moved straight to the city. Too bad that giant castle didn’t land in your own territory. I hope plenty of you guys survive this floor because you’re gonna need as big of an army as you can get.”

Harbinger made a growling noise.

“Oh, keep your weird goat dick in the bag,” Quasar said to the liaison. “There ain’t no explicit rules against this. He’s a sponsor.” He turned back to me. “I’m sorry, buddy. There’s so much more happening, and I wish I could tell you all of it. There’s a shit load of action items that need to be hashed out. You two are scheduled for a preproduction meeting in a day or two. I put in a petition to be there, but they denied it.”

The screens all flicked off and were suddenly replaced with photos of myself, including one I’d never seen before. It was me, about seventeen years old, staring at the camera while I carried a baby goat.

“Carl, look, it’s you!” Donut exclaimed. “You’re holding a baby Prepotente!”

“We’ll talk more soon if we can,” Quasar said, backing up.

Rosetta reappeared, wearing a different outfit. She’d changed from a pantsuit to a short dress, revealing a long, flowery tattoo that circled up her right leg and disappeared. The hair blob on her head switched sides and was now red. She sat in her chair, settled and gave me a wink.

A photo of my mother and father hung in the air, just above me. It was from their wedding. I remembered the framed photo from the living room.

It'd been over my fish tank. The memory came suddenly and quickly, like a jab to the stomach. I'd been so preoccupied with who Rosetta was, I'd completely forgotten about what we were supposed to be talking about now.

"So, comrade," Rosetta said to me. "Let's talk about your dead mother."

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<Note added by Crawler Milk. 6th Edition>

I used to make a stew for my whole family. The recipe in itself wasn't anything special. Rance meat, bone broth, a wild grass that would grow on the leeward side of our island. We'd pray over the cauldron while it simmered. The stew, when prepared properly, would not only be delicious. It would awaken the old knowledge within the minds of the young. We're all imprinted with the route of the yearly migration, but something in the traditional meal quickens that knowledge. In sharing this meal with our young, we're not only bonding with one another. We're ensuring their survival should we fall.

I can't stop thinking about it. These aliens took us before I could make this year's stew. The youngest amongst us are not here. How are they faring out there, all alone? How can they possibly survive without our guidance? Who will show them the way?

"Take us back to that day," Rosetta said. "Your fifteenth birthday. Your mother poisoned your father and left him for dead, and then she went into the basement of your home and hanged herself from the pipes. According to the incident report from the police, you were

the one to discover her. Your father had only ingested a portion of the poison and was barely injured. Your mother had left a note, but the contents of which are a mystery. Apparently, it was a letter to you."

I felt as if I'd been slapped. It was like she'd stood up, walked across the space between us, and backhanded me as hard as she could. I reeled.

"We're not talking about this," I said as I recovered, my surprise getting replaced by anger. "That's not what we agreed to. We're supposed to be talking about the Anacortes Boys' Ranch."

"We are," Rosetta said. "But we gotta get there first. Your history is well known, but we need to establish the timeline. I'm sorry if it's uncomfortable."

"Your mother killed herself?" Donut asked. "Your own mother? I didn't know that. You always said she left you. I assumed she ran off with her personal trainer or something." She paused. "You know what, I don't remember you ever talking about her other than that. Saying she left you. Or your father for that matter. Miss Beatrice would never shut up about her mother and father."

Every instinct told me to stand up, turn around, and walk out. That was precisely what I would've done if it'd been anyone else asking this of me. I took a breath, gritted my teeth, and I said, "Yes, my mother hanged herself. A few months later, my father disappeared and left me all alone. A few months after that, I was taken into custody by the state of Washington. I was placed in a home where I broke the nose of some other kid. Then I was shipped off to a place called the Anacortes Boys' Ranch, where I lived until my 18th birthday. I was handed a high school equivalency certificate even though I hadn't been in a real school for two years. I moved back down to Seattle, and I crashed on a couch for about a month while I looked for a job. I couldn't find one, so I went to a recruitment center. I got there during lunch, and the only one at his desk was the Coast Guard guy. So, now you know the history. Let's move on."

Donut sat there, her eyes shining up at me.

"Let's back up a bit," Rosetta said. "You said your father left you." I tensed. "But the state didn't take you into custody for a few *months* after that. How did that come to be?"

You're a bully. You're a bully, and nobody likes you. It's why mom left.

I don't need you to like me. But you will respect me.

The fishtank that he'd shattered with his motorcycle helmet remained there on its pedestal, still broken a month later. A monument to the last living thing in my life that I cared about. The photo on the wall above it remained. My mom and dad, smiling at the camera. A lie. A goddamned lie.

Never, I'd said. *She'd almost gotten you. Just wait until I'm big enough to finish what she started.*

He'd turned around and walked out the door. He walked out the door, and I never saw him again.

The studio had gone silent. The only sound was Zev's rebreather.

"Carl?" Rosetta finally prodded.

"My dad couldn't handle being a single dad, and he disappeared. My sophomore year of high school started a week later, and I went to school as if nothing had happened. I ate the rest of the food we had in the house, and when that ran out, my friend Sam would bring me food. It wasn't until the power went out did someone finally notice I was living by myself."

Rosetta nodded. "In fact, didn't they suspect you of actually killing your father?"

I grunted with amusement, remembering. "Yeah."

The images on the roundabout changed.

It was a grainy video of a police interrogation room. Me and that asshole detective guy. What was his name? I couldn't remember.

I sat there, my arms crossed, wearing a hoodie. Fifteen years old. I looked so small, so defiant. I could still smell that room. Like Lysol and coffee and smoke. I was there all night, I remembered. He'd offered me a cigarette, trying to be my friend, to gain my trust. I'd taken it. My first. He brought me an entire pack. Cigarettes. I was fifteen years old.

"When was the last time you saw your father?" the detective asked.

On the screen, I shrugged.

"Carl, did you do something to him?"

"What if I did?" I asked.

"Did you?"

I shrugged again. I took a drag of cigarette, trying to look cool. I coughed. I remembered that moment like it'd just happened. I could still taste it.

About an hour after this, they'd discovered my father was alive and well somewhere in Wisconsin where he'd gotten himself arrested a few times for public drunkenness. The detective's attitude toward me completely changed once they learned my dad was alive. They were being kind and respectful to me because they wanted me to admit to a crime. It was a false respect, a false kindness, but it was the first I'd gotten from an adult in such a long time, and despite my outward hostility, I'd been just drinking it up.

I had *wanted* them to think I'd done something to my father. It was stupid, I knew now. But I'd desperately wanted them to see me, to understand me, to know me. I was here, goddamnit. I was real.

But once they realized there was nothing of interest to them, everything changed. I was just another sad, abandoned kid. A victim. I was not their problem. I was nothing. They left me alone in that cold room with the smell of cigarettes and Lysol and coffee, waiting for the social worker. They'd taken the pack away, admonishing me about smoking. I was left there for hours, forgotten, in that tiny room.

I'd never felt so helpless, so impotent in my life than when that social worker came and told me it was time to go. In so many ways, it was worse than the moment of my mother's death. Her departure had been like a slow-motion car crash that had taken years to get to the violent, abrupt impact. My father's disappearance after that was nothing but an aftershock. And everything up until that moment was me just spinning, rolling away, injured and in shock from the trauma with the broken glass of my life raining all around me.

But that moment. The moment the woman came and opened the door to the interrogation room and said, "Come on now." That was the moment I'd finally stopped reeling and could see exactly where I was.

"The police claimed they were going to arrest your father for child abandonment," Rosetta said when the video stopped playing. "An arrest warrant was issued, but it appears he was never taken into custody. He was stopped in a traffic incident seven years later in Georgia, which is another state of the country, but they let him go. It's not clear if the officers were aware of the warrant or if it was still active. That was the last time he was in the system."

That last part was news to me. I did my best not to show a reaction.

Donut, I realized, was on my lap. I couldn't remember when she'd jumped there.

"This is ancient history," I finally said. "Nobody cares about any of this stuff."

"That's not even a little bit true, Carl," Rosetta said. "But you're correct on one point. None of this is new. Odette's special on your life, which recently tunneled, touched on all of these points."

"Her *what*?" I asked.

"What I'm really interested in is how your society dealt with children who are all alone. We have seen the specials about what happened to children left in India for obvious reasons, but your country, the United States of America, was on the other side of the planet."

I had no idea what was obvious about India. I only knew of a few crawlers from India. But the last thing I wanted was to get her to talk more about this.

She continued. "You ended up at a home for teenaged boys. We have photos of your sleeping quarters, but only a precious few records about you during that time. All we have is a three-page report. And the record from your graduation. All good marks."

That photo of me holding the young goat reappeared. Another photo of the dorm, probably taken from the ranch's website, popped up on the screen. The photo was wrong. Too clean. There was light

shining into the room. I remembered how dark it had been all the time. That place, too, had smelled like Lysol.

Most of my time there was a blur. I was there for two years. It seemed like it was just for a week. Yet... yet, it also felt like it was a decade, all blurred together.

"It was called a ranch, but there were no animals there. I worked nearby at a real ranch during the summer, shoveling goat crap. But most of my time there was spent at the home cleaning or rewiring the lights or replacing all the power outlets. That's what they did. They gave you something to do. They kept you busy doing something inconsequential, something you could use once you aged out." I paused, remembering.

"Did you feel as if you were abandoned by society?" Rosetta asked.

That's exactly how I felt at the time, but I wasn't going to contribute to any anti-Earth bullshit.

"I was an angry and scared kid, but here's the thing. On the surface, everything about my life sucked. My mother was dead. My dad was gone. I was shoved in the corner until I wasn't anyone's problem anymore. My situation seemed bleak. But I was healthy, I had medical care, food, and a place to stay until I was considered an adult. Compared to some other kids, I had it great." I paused, wondering why I was saying this. Wondering if it was true. "It wasn't ideal, but looking at where I landed, I think sometimes my mother was right. That it was the best possible outcome."

Rosetta appeared surprised. "Wait, right in what? Right in killing herself?"

I didn't answer directly.

"I joined the Coast Guard right after I turned 18, and everything worked out okay until aliens decided to come along and destroy..."

I paused, my eyes catching a photo on the roundabout. It was me in the kitchen at the boy's home, and it appeared I was making dinner. There were a bunch of ingredients lined up on the counter, and I had a big knife in my hand while I chopped up a potato. Sitting next to me was a big jug with the word "Milk" on it.

The photo was wrong. It was fake. They'd never let me anywhere near the kitchen except to clean it, and the milk jug was strange. It was shaped like a two-liter bottle of soda. Not correct. Plus the angle of the photo was wrong. It was impossible. If I was chopping potatoes at the counter, then the person holding the camera was standing where there was a wall. I was about to say something, but I thought better of it. Was it a message? Were they trying to tell me something? If so, what the hell was it?

"We know you oftentimes worked in the kitchen, preparing a stew for your fellow students. That single report from the Ranch stated you didn't talk much to anyone, but with your cooking skills, along with some help from the home's manager, you could really make a statement. Everyone would gather together at the end of the week for stew night. The report said your special ingredients were simple. Milk and potatoes and whatever else you could find. That was it."

"Cooking?" Donut asked, incredulous. "Carl could cook? Carl once almost burned the apartment down making a breakfast sandwich. And don't get me started on the pancake incident. He covered me with batter and then tried to give me a bath! In the bathtub!"

"That was your fault," I said, my mind working as quickly as I could. "You knocked the bowl off the counter."

"If I knocked something off the counter, then it was placed too close to the edge. All the best cooks know not to place things next to the edge when there are cats in the home. That's cooking 101, Carl."

I turned back to Rosetta, who was looking directly at me.

"Apparently Carl needs a proper recipe to do his best work," Rosetta said.

I looked up at the screen. "The stew was easy. Milk and potatoes. I remember that. Sometimes they didn't give us much else to work with, and I had to improvise."

"That sounds like mashed potatoes, not stew," Donut said.

"Potatoes are very versatile," I said.

"Very," Rosetta agreed. "Most..."

The whole world blinked. Rosetta disappeared. The other three in the room remained. The lights snapped on.

"Hey," Donut said. "What happened!"

"What do you think you're doing?" Zev shouted at the same time. She was shouting at the massive goat.

"I have ended the interview," Harbinger said. "I am also recalling your attorney."

"Wait just one second, you hairy glob of what-the-fuck," Quasar began before he also disappeared.

"Liaison, you do not have the authority to do that," Zev said, sounding pissed. It was the angriest I'd ever heard her. "We're going to have to refund them! And you can't just dismiss an attorney like that!"

"She and Carl were obviously talking in code," Harbinger said. "I have full authority to intervene when I believe cheating is involved. My job is to protect the integrity of the crawl. That's why I am here. I have banned Rosetta from participating in any future crawler interviews."

"They're going to sue, and they're going to win," Zev said.

"No such lawsuits are proceeding at this time," Harbinger said. "This interview is over. Carl and Donut, you may return to the dungeon now." He paused. "You should know, Carl, that I strongly believe you need to be removed from the crawl. I am actively working to have both you and the caprid disposed, and I will eventually succeed."

With that, he blinked and disappeared.

"That's nice," I said.

"Damn him," Zev said. "Those idiots are always messing everything up. Always overreacting. Sorry guys. I doubt she got enough for Carl's portion of the interview."

"I liked her," Donut said. "Rosetta. I didn't at first because she's one of those Crest people. But she genuinely seemed interested in the subject, even if her producers get all of their television shows mixed up. I didn't even know what that last show was, though it had the *Evil Dead* guy in it. And now she's not going to be able to do her show any more because she was talking about mashed potatoes!"

"That's okay," I said after a moment, my mind racing. She'd risked everything to get that message to me.

I'd read through Milk's notes in the cookbook twice now. I needed to go back over it. She'd mostly been about portals and mapmaking, I remembered. And special types of ink. She had a few recipes for the stuff. I needed to take another look.

I remembered one of Milk's passages in particular. It wasn't a recipe or important information. Just a rant, like we all did in the cookbook from time to time. Someone had responded, agreeing. I was pretty sure the responder was Rosetta.

Potatoes are very versatile, I'd said.

Very, she'd replied. *Just like...*

...Just like all root vegetables.

Potatoes and milk.

I still wasn't certain, exactly, what they wanted me to do with the yam thing. The toraline root vegetable. But now I had an important clue. And now that I had definitive proof that my sponsors, the Open Intellect Pacifist Network, employed at least one, likely two, possibly *three* former cookbook owners, then whatever it was they were attempting to get me to do was of crucial importance.

"Carl, are you okay?" Donut asked as we returned to the green room. She jumped to the room's counter and sat, facing me. "That wasn't very nice of her to bring all that up about your mother. And your father sounds like a huge jerk. I'm surprised you turned out so well adjusted, though it does explain a few things. Why didn't you ever tell Miss Beatrice any of this stuff?"

I gave a non-committal grunt. I wasn't okay. I was pretty damn far from okay. But what could I do? It was done, and it had been done for a very long time. Every time I started to feel sorry for myself, I would think about everyone else in the world. So many people had it so much worse. Especially now. I almost felt like I

didn’t have the right to feel upset about something that had happened so long ago.

Only Zev remained with us, and she was furiously typing onto her tablet and grumbling. She was *pissed* about the liaison. I’d never seen her so irritated.

“It’s in the past,” I finally said. “I don’t want to be defined by things I have no control over.”

Donut just looked at me for a long moment, a concerned look to her face, like she was debating whether or not to pursue it.

I felt it, then. The river. It bubbled up a little here and then. It was growing. I could hear it now. Loud, screaming. *I’m still here. I’ve been here the whole time.*

Patches, when applied improperly, never hold for long.

I gave Donut a small, uncertain smile, and I shook my head.

No. Don’t. Please.

Donut blinked slowly, and then she jumped to my shoulder and leaned against the side of my head, allowing me to give her a pat. I thought she was going to continue the line of questioning, but then she seemed to change her mind. She straightened. “Well, it’s quite tragic. But did you hear what she said? Odette had a special about you! Isn’t that great? I wonder what sort of audience share you pulled. Do you think there was one about me?”

“There is one,” Zev said, not looking up from her tablet. “It’s airing tonight, actually. There was one about Li Na last night. Tomorrow is Katia. After that, I can’t remember. Maybe Florin. Odette had them made to air while she travels to Earth orbit.”

“Really?” Donut asked, suddenly bouncing up and down on my shoulder. “My own special. A special, about me!” She gasped. “Do you think they have the video of the judging from Cleveland? If you watch the video, there’s a close-up of Spice Mountain of Cinnamon’s owner right when she realized she lost, and it’s just... chef’s kiss.” She made a smacking noise. “Miss Beatrice had the screen cap as the wallpaper on her phone for like a month.”

“Zev,” I asked. “Did you deliberately not tell my attorney that Harbinger guy would be here?”

"No, Carl," Zev said. She sounded harried. "I'm sorry. I am so busy. I have so much going on right now that I shouldn't even be here. We lost dozens of staff during the Valtay changeover, plus we weren't prepared for this eighth floor, plus the Valtay don't allow certain types of micro AI systems to assist, and now I'm doing the work of five. It didn't even occur to me he should be informed. I'll make a note of it for the future. I didn't know it would be that guy, either."

"So, he's the one who got bribed by the Skull Empire?" I asked. "How does he still have a job?"

"We're not having that conversation," Zev said. "You're transferring back in ten seconds. You'll be back here in two days for the preproduction meeting."

Donut stretched and sharpened her claws on the edge of my cloak. "If Rosetta really is banned, I do hope she gets to show her last episode, even if their producers have a weird obsession with shows that..." She trailed off and made a little gasp. "Shows that aren't as good as *Gossip Girl*."

<Note added by Crawler Milk. 6th Edition>

I am writing the sixth edition of this book. I am putting as much information as I can in here. One day you will find these words, and I pray that they feed you, like the stew I used to serve to our little ones. But is it enough to give this information to just one person? There's honor in giving someone a meal. But I wish to cook a feast for the whole galaxy. I wish for them all to choke on our pain.

<Note added by Crawler Rosetta. 9th Edition>

Comrade, I agree. One day, we will make certain they all know. Our words will not be lost. I swear it.

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[14]

"Here's the plan," I said to Paz, Anton, and Sister Ines as they stared, open-mouthed up at the armored form of Bomo. "We open the door and step outside. Before the ghommids can get to us, I'll roll the stun bomb."

"What about Asojano?" Paz asked, still looking up at the giant cretin, who was now wearing twice as much armor as he was. "If you hit the orisha guy, it'll mess everything up."

I nodded. "We can see him out there." I pointed left. "He's already built a path for us to the temple. Sort of. All of the ghosts are pushed to the east and to the sides. The moment we exit, they'll surge. They made this like a game quest. A gauntlet run. I'm going to toss the bomb away from him and toward the mass of ghommids, which'll hopefully give us some breathing room. It'll mass stun them. Then we run to the temple, get inside, and we'll guard you while you figure out how to fix his shrine. Also, if we're lucky, I can flag one of the ghommids. You guys should consider it, too."

"Are those missile launchers on his shoulders?" Anton asked, walking in circles around Bomo.

"Yes," I said. "Two six packs. Six group stun and six individuals." I patted the round, beachball-sized bomb in my hand, which caused them all to step back. "I made them with the leftovers. The blasts will only hurt the undead, so it's okay if they go off at short range. Just be careful of the flames coming out the back when they're launched."

"This armor looks heavy as shit," Anton said after a moment, still eyeing the bomb nervously. "And more complicated than Paz's armor. Are those daggers? How much metal is he wearing?"

"A lot," I said.

"With the missile launchers on his shoulder, he looks like one of those robots from Battletech," Paz said.

"I know, right?" I asked, grinning. "He's been playing some game called *Armored Core,* so he's really into it. He's just pissed he doesn't have a giant gun in addition to the missiles."

Bomo made a sad grunt.

"The metal isn't enchanted," Anton continued. "It won't protect him against the undead."

"I'm aware," I said.

"I don't like this," Sister Ines said, looking toward the door. "If we fix the orisha's shrine, it says he'll be more powerful. What if he doesn't go away? What if he uses the power to attack us?"

I nodded. "Our manager thinks the same thing. That's why we have a contingency."

Thanks to Li Na's team making a run to the Desperado Club, we gathered all the supplies we needed. It had been pricey, and we'd needed to give some of our fortune over to them just so they could pay for it. Donut wouldn't stop grumbling about how much all of this cost.

Mordecai helped me build the first bomb. It was a modified stun grenade designed to paralyze non-corporeal monsters. I wanted to keep as many alive as possible for when the town turned back. The market on the Desperado Club's middle floor had a booth that sold something called a Troll Smoke Mantle, which was a step up from the smoke curtains that Pustule the hobgoblin sold on the top floor. They were outrageously expensive. Thirty thousand gold for a pack of twelve, and they only had one case. I had them buy it for us. When I combined four of the smoke mantles with a stun grenade,

the effect of the stun had a much wider range, *and* they lasted up to thirty seconds.

Then, I made smaller, lower-power versions with the rest of my supplies and attached them to seeker missiles, which I built into Bomo's new armor. I only had enough supplies for six smoke missiles, which would have a small area effect. Then I added six anti-undead missiles that would take out just one or two ghommids at a time.

The massive suit of armor for Bomo was something I'd been toying with a few days now. I didn't have the ability to enchant the armor, which was unfortunate. But I could make it heavy and so it would break into dozens of pieces. I made it as big as I could without impeding his ability to move too much. The rock dude was crazy strong and could hold a lot. Paz was right. He looked like one of those bipedal mechs.

I leaned up against the door to the outside. Thankfully, Asojano had cleared the doorway of the monsters. I readied the round stun bomb.

Donut: IF THE BOMO ARMOR PLAN WORKS, THEN MAYBE WE CAN TALK KATIA INTO COMING BACK INTO OUR PARTY. WE CAN USE HER FOR THIS INSTEAD OF BOMO. WE JUST NEED TO COME UP WITH A COOL NAME FOR THE MOVE.

"Okay, here we go," I said.

Combat Started.

"*Dios mio*," Anton said. Sister Ines smacked him on the arm with an admonishment, but she couldn't look away, either.

The ghommids emanated an ethereal, blue glow that they didn't possess during the day. They lit up the fog-covered graveyard, giving everything an eerie, cerulean tinge.

If I didn't know they were so deadly, the look would be cartoonish.

The moment we stepped outside, a choir of shrieks and keens pierced across the graveyard. They didn't moan and groan like before. They *wailed*. Loud and terrifying and high-pitched, like thousands of injured animals calling out at once.

They surged. They still moved slowly, but they were much faster at night than during the day.

"Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit," Paz said as I rolled the stun grenade at the mass right behind us. The mobs were all looking directly at him.

The armored warrior suddenly had a debuff over him. **Terrified**. He glowed, and it went away as Sister Ines cast something, only for it to return a moment later. She repeated the healing, and the debuff returned a third time. The man stopped, rooted in place as he looked about, wringing his armored hands.

He couldn't move while he had the debuff.

Bam! The stun bomb went off with a muffled explosion. Billowing, red smoke filled the world behind us, swirling with the fog. All the ghommids in that area were now temporarily frozen. The ones closest to the blast were likely dead.

We still had hundreds ahead of us to the left and right, moving to cut us off. I closed my fist and formed my gauntlet.

"Santero!" Asojano yelled. He stood at the halfway point between us and the temple at the center of the graveyard, which was about a full city block away. All I could see was the point of the building, like a dagger in the night. Asojano stood, shrouded knee-deep in fog. "To me!"

"Run!" I called. "Bomo, keep our way clear!... And pick up Paz!"

I didn't know why he was the only one affected by the terrified debuff, but I was grateful for it.

"He heavy!" Bomo groaned as he attempted to carry the armored man, who continued to just say, "*Shit, shit, shit*!" over and over again.

"Paz," I said. "Take off your breastplate. Stick it in your inventory! You're too heavy for Bomo with all your armor."

I knew his breastplate was actually light as a feather when it wasn't equipped, and he didn't feel the weight while he wore it, but

it made him outrageously heavy to anyone else who tried to pick him up.

"Donut," I started to say, but the breastplate blinked and disappeared as Paz unequipped it.

It revealed a surprisingly skinny, shirtless man. A giant cross tattoo was etched onto his back with a terrible rendition of Jesus in smudged ink. He still wore the leg armor, and the diameter of the waistline was wide enough that three more people could probably fit in there. The armored pants appeared to stay up magically. Bomo heaved and pulled the man up in a bear hug, holding him against his chest.

We moved toward the temple.

I knew under all that fog, a paved street cut right through the graveyard, leading straight to the church. It had been clear of monsters when we stepped outside. Now, ghommids swelled forward, moving in on both sides as we rushed toward Asojano, who stood like a damn statue in the middle of the street, arms spread wide, like he was Moses parting the Red Sea.

The former god radiated. He burned with a sickly green light that crackled like heat around him.

I eyed the glow warily as we ran. "Don't get too close to him!"

"What're we going to do about Paz?" Anton shouted.

"We'll heal him when we get inside!"

Whoosh! Whoosh! On Bomo's shoulders, two of the six stun missiles streaked away, exploding about thirty feet in front of us to the left and right. A group of surging undead dropped into the fog, frozen.

"Make sure you don't get it near Asojano!" I yelled.

Up ahead, Asojano turned and started jogging toward the temple. The ghommids didn't come near him, but I knew if *we* got too close, we'd get hit with whatever disease he emanated.

A six-legged, fox-like ghommid hissed, coming up out of the fog, apparently unaffected by the stun effect. It tried to jump over me and Donut to get to Paz. I decked it with my gauntlet, and it went flying. Donut magic-missiled another one, this one round and fish-like.

The Scavenger's Daughter has been fed. Unleash her wrath.

I'd killed enough to fill my back patch again. This time, the essence was almost all these ghommid things, giving the bar a black appearance.

"I'll protect you. I'll protect you, my pretties," Donut sang from my shoulder, her voice electronic with autotune. "With my voice of an angel and my expertly sung ditties!"

You have been limbered! Your party's dexterity is increased by 50%!

"Holy shit, that worked," I said as we increased in speed.

"Of course it worked, Carl," Donut said as she bounced on my shoulder, her voice still amplified and autotuned. "Now be quiet. I need to sing another verse to stack it."

"Run little ones, run through the cities. Uhhh." She whimpered uncertainly. "Carl loves a lady with really nice titties!"

Your party's dexterity boost has been canceled because your bard can't hold a tune. For everyone's sake, she's been muted from singing for five minutes.

"Hey!" Donut cried. She pulled the headset away.

Bomo fired two more smoke missiles ahead of us. Then, he fired two more from the other tube. These were the single-target ones. The hissing missiles arced up in the air, did a loop, and hit a pair of wailing targets moving up behind us.

The temple materialized, coming into view in the glowing darkness, emerging like some dilapidated beast. The octagonal, yellow building appeared ridiculously sinister in the dark. A single doorway stood open under an archway. The rotted door hung loosely by a single hinge, like a rotten tooth. Asojano rushed to the door, paused, and shouted for us to follow. He then disappeared inside, leaving the door swinging.

Ahead, Anton faceplanted as he hit a hidden curb. He disappeared into the fog. The road ended before the temple, but we couldn't see the ground. Only twenty feet away. Sister Ines bent down to pick him up, firing bolts as the ghommids surged. Bomo

fired his last two smoke missiles, one right in front of us, clearing the way.

A tall ghommid with the head of a donkey appeared, coming out of the darkness, surprising me with its speed. I instinctively clicked on Daughter's Kiss, which drained my essence bar. I clobbered the creature with my fist. I was expecting it to explode like the last time I'd used the spell. Instead, its damn head broke off with the sound of breaking pottery. The donkey head hit the ground and bounced.

But I hadn't killed it. Both pieces—the body and the head—rumbled to life and attacked. Tentacles sprouted from the hole in the main body as the headless thing surged back at us. At the same moment, a long, striped snake body emerged from the neck of the decapitated donkey head, whipping back and forth as it wormed out of the creature. The snake body was huge, at least ten feet long, as big as a boa constrictor. The massive body had come out of nowhere. I wasted a few precious seconds, watching, open-mouthed while Anton, who was still getting to his feet, started shouting "What the fuck? What the fuck?"

The donkey snake hissed at me and slithered forward as Donut lobbed a missile at the other half, the tentacled body. It blasted back into the fog and broke into two more pieces before they disappeared into the smoke. I focused on the donkey snake. I cast *Talon Strike*, prayed my foot wouldn't get frozen, and I attempted to stomp the damn thing.

It bobbed out of the way, lightning quick, and I whiffed my punt. This one wasn't like the others. It was *fast*. I almost Charlie Brown flipped onto my back. The donkey head emanated a shriek as it was hit by a bolt from Sister Ines.

It'd been about to strike. She'd likely just saved my life.

"Go!" I cried, pointing at the door as I scrambled to get away. The ground had turned from paved road to slick, wet grass. We clambered toward the entrance. Most of the creatures had been knocked out by the smoke, but a handful of them were either immune or resisted the stun effect.

"Come on!" Anton shouted.

We pushed toward the hanging door and the temple. I shoved Bomo ahead of me, yelling at him to get Paz to Sister Ines so she could cure him. The others all entered, one by one. Donut leaped from my shoulder into the temple, yowling as she started to slide on the interior floor tiles. I turned to face the remaining monsters.

The damn donkey snake was still coming, obviously immune to the smoke. I finally noticed this one's level was much higher than the others. Sister Ines had almost killed it. Its health was blinking, almost gone. It continued to shriek, this time focusing on me.

The AI took on a sneering, mocking tone.

New Achievement! Crybaby!

You've been rendered Terrified!

Whoa. Why are you being such a little bitch? Oohhh did the widdle baby just wet itself? You can't move your legs for fifteen seconds or until the scary monster is dead!

***Reward*: We do not reward people who soil themselves in public.**

I had not peed myself. In fact, I didn't actually feel scared, just irritated that this whole shitshow was harder and more dangerous than it should've been. I thought that was interesting, but I didn't have time to dwell on it. I pulled a flag from my inventory, turned it point-first like a dagger just as the ghost donkey snake lunged. I let the beast impale itself.

The force of the strike blew me backward into the temple. I hit the tiled ground and slid, card in my hand as the debuff disappeared. I came to a stop against some rubble as Donut howled and jumped out of my way.

Entering La Iglesia de los Olvidados

Combat Complete. Deck has been reset.

I groaned, looking up. I felt a strange heaviness. Moonlight shone in from a hole in the roof. Despite the broken door, the ghommids weren't coming in. They sounded like they were retreating.

There once was an entrance vestibule right here, but it looked as if the interior wall had crumbled away, making the whole area one giant room. Behind me, coughing filled the chamber, which echoed slightly. It smelled of dirt and wet rot in here. The muddy tile floor was covered with moss. Donut cast *Torch*, and the room filled with a yellow glow, revealing a rotting, wood ceiling covered in mold.

"I have cast a spell. They can't enter for a little while," Asojano called. "I am stronger in here." I turned to look, and he was in the back of the temple, standing over a pile of rocks that glowed green with his presence. "Here is my shrine. Give me a moment to prepare, then you must come and repair it, Santero."

I returned my attention to the red card in my hand. Donut came to look at it.

"Carl, why'd you flag that one! That one is ugly! And what kind of name is that?"

"It was tough as shit," I said. "It's a rare monster, too. It was different than most of the others. We got lucky."

"It's weird," she said. "And that's a really stupid name. We should be able to rename them."

T'Ghee Card. Rare.

Totem Card.

Skylar Spinach. Two-Thirds of an Enraged Ghommid Splitter.

"Screeech!"

Level: 66.

Origin: Cuba

Summoning duration: 60 seconds.

Constitution: 90*.

***This is a splitter. It will break into two pieces upon a fatal blow, one of which will be the primary. It will continue to split until the primary is killed a total of two times. Each iteration of the primary will have increased Constitution.**

This is a non-corporeal mob.

This is an affliction-dealing mob.

Notable attacks:

Iced.

Dodge
Terrifier.
Splitter.
+5 additional skills and spells.
Examine in the squad details tab of your interface for full stats and skills and spells.
Warning: You have empty slots in your squad. Collecting this card will automatically activate and place this totem into your squad. You may not remove or trade squad members until your squad is full. If you wish to remove a card before your squad is full, you will have to tear the card.

I handed the card off to Donut. This was a type of splitter I'd read about in the cookbook. I was surprised it said it was level 66. The first iteration of this thing had been level 50, but then I remembered how these things worked. We'd seen similar monsters during the Iron Tangle. You had to kill the brain piece three times to properly kill the whole thing. Since I'd "killed" it once, the card version was only at 2/3s strength. Despite that, this really was a lucky find. Unlike traditional splitters, this one actually got more powerful with each iteration. If we ever got out of this, we needed to get back to the sparring room to see what the final form looked like. It was four levels lower than Geraldo the monk seal, but this thing was obviously stronger.

"What kind of name is Skylar Spinach? Does that mean it's a boy or a girl?" Donut demanded.

"I don't know," I said. "We can ask it next time we summon it."

"Do you think it's going to always be shrieking? You know how I feel about shrieking, Carl."

"Why didn't you use 'kitty?'" Paz asked, sitting up. The terrified debuff was gone. The man looked dazed. He remained there on the floor, rubbing his head. Outside, the ghommids continued to wail, but we couldn't see them, obscured by the smoke and the hanging door. They sounded like they'd moved all the way back to the street.

"What?" Donut asked.

"Your song," Paz said. His massive breastplate appeared in his hands, and he slipped it over his head like he was putting on a t-

shirt. His head popped out the top. He'd also removed his vambraces, and he put them on now. They were designed like arm sleeves, and he was able to get them on easily. "You rhymed 'pretties' with 'ditties.' And then you used 'cities,' and your song got messed up because you paused. You used 'titties.' I'm just wondering why you didn't go with the obvious choice. You're a cat. Kitties."

"I know what I am, Paz," Donut snapped, sounding irritated. "*You* try to sing under pressure like that. It's not as easy as it looks."

"No, I liked it," he said. "I'm not trying to be a jerk. You're a good singer."

Donut's attitude changed instantly. She swished her tail. "You really think so?"

"Yeah, you're great." The man still seemed dazed, but he was slowly coming out of it.

She puffed her chest. "You should've seen me at the Butcher's Masquerade. I was about to win the talent contest, but it got ruined."

I looked about as they continued to chat. Sister Ines and Anton stood, facing Asojano. The cat woman glared as the orisha stood over the pile of rocks. The former god was doing a little dance around the rubble, shaking his strange wand.

The ruined shrine stood in an alcove against one of the walls in the octagon-shaped room. His was not the only broken monument here. One of the walls was used for the entrance, and there were a total of seven shrines, one against each wall in the large room. There was enough space in here for maybe fifty people to stand about comfortably.

A shining ball of light appeared in the middle of the room, its red-yellow light overwhelming Donut's torch. It just popped into existence out of nowhere. It was about the size of a softball, and for a terrifying moment, I thought it was a massive soul crystal. It crackled like a miniature fireball frozen in place. I could feel the heat coming off it.

"The spell is forming," Asojano called as he danced. "Nobody must touch the Sun of Reawakening until after the Santero has

rebuilt my shrine!”

Donut and Paz stopped talking, and we all focused our attention on the ball. I searched my memory for any mention of such a thing. I sent a quick note to Mordecai, but he said he’d never heard of it. I took another step and tried to examine the object. The description was more than a little ominous:

This magical scoop of light is pretty special. It will only last a short time in this world. If you have a stick and some hotdogs, you can probably get a quick snack in. You’ll need your strength for what comes next.

“Prepare yourself, Santero!” Asojano called. “It will be soon!”

“I still have no idea what I’m supposed to do,” Paz said.

As Asojano returned to his ceremonial prayer, humming as he danced around his pile of rocks, I approached the first shrine immediately to my left. It was nothing but a pile of mossy rocks and some dead, desiccated plants. Like it had once been a statue of something covered with vines that had gotten smashed.

But no, I realized as I got closer. These were actual chunks of metal, not rocks. It looked as if it had been shattered by something.

Before I could even read the info box that popped up, the metallic pieces of the broken shrine glowed, as if they were red hot.

Both Anton and Paz let out a gasp.

“Fuck me,” Anton said a moment later.

I looked about, but I couldn’t see what had caused their reaction. From across the room, Asojano slowed his dance. The little ball of light, the “Sun of Reawakening,” lost some of its heat, and I realized it was, indeed, a gem. Not a soul gem. It was like a flaming ruby cut into the shape of a small skull.

“What’s happening?” I asked.

“We just got a quest from our god, Ogun,” Paz said. “It says we can only fix one shrine. He wants us to fix a different one than Asojano’s.”

“Oh man,” Anton said, worry evident in his voice. “Yeah. It’s that one you’re looking at. It’s a blacksmith’s anvil. If we don’t do it, we’ll get a smite. We gotta put it together, pray over it, and then we put the gem on it.”

"What happens then?" I asked.

"I told you!" Sister Ines hissed. "I told you not to worship a false god. Now what're we going to do?"

"We can't let them get smited. Or smote or whatever," I said, looking worriedly over at Asojano, who'd stopped dancing and now stood over his rubble, rhythmically shaking his wand. "We'll have to kill him."

"If we do that, will the ghommids get better? If not, they'll swarm the building," Sister Ines asked.

"I'm pretty sure they're supposed to get better," I said uncertainly. "The quest update said we could kill this guy."

"Maybe Ogun will help us," Paz said.

"Wait, is it going to summon him if we fix this thing?" I did not like that idea. At all.

"I mean, it's his shrine," Paz said. "He wants us to fix it. I doubt it'll summon him. It's a long story. Apparently he was originally one of these Orishas, but he ascended while the rest of them died or got forgotten or whatever."

"Okay," I said. "Donut, Bomo, the sister and I will take care of this guy while you two try to fix the shrine. Ready?"

"I'm still not sure what to do," Paz said.

"I think it's like a jigsaw puzzle," Anton said. "Look, the pieces aren't as hot anymore." He bent down to pick one up.

And that's when the music started.

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[15]

<Note added by Crawler Carl, 25th Edition>

After all this time, it's still shocking to me how quickly everything can change.

Combat Started.

"Betrayal!" Asojano shouted, pointing at Anton, who stood with the metal chunk in his hand like a kid who'd been caught stealing. "Betrayal!"

The music was an orchestral mix of distorted heavy guitars and keyboards. After a moment, I realized it was a bombastic version of the classical song *In the Hall of the Mountain King*. It sounded like something that heavy metal Christmas band, Trans-Siberian Orchestra would play.

"Okay, here we go," I said. "Donut..."

"No!" a new voice cried, causing me to pause. This was a female from one spot over from where Asojano stood. She was glowing, ethereal, a ghost. Not corporeal at all. A beautiful, dark-skinned woman in a flowing, yellow dress that appeared to be made of light. I felt her charisma like it was a physical thing. It was just like when I'd met Signet for the first time, but stronger.

I must protect her, I thought.

The name **Oshun** blazed over her head. It didn't give any other information.

"Repair *my* shrine," she said, pointing at us. "I will protect you from any other god who seeks to harm you. I will give you riches untold. Do not listen to Ogun. Do not listen to Asojano. Or any others who appear." Her voice was seductive, almost like she was whispering right into my ear, despite the rising volume of music. I didn't understand how I could hear her so distinctly. It was almost like she was talking directly in my mind. It felt as if her hand was on my shoulder.

Donut said something, but I couldn't hear it over the music. The headset popped back onto her head. "Carl! You're being charmed!" she shouted, her voice booming. Then she made a scoffing noise. "Anton, you too?" She turned toward the newcomer. "Stop giving Carl an erection!"

This is wrong, I thought. I felt myself take a step toward this Oshun person. She wasn't really here. She was less than a ghost, yet I couldn't take my eyes off of her. Asojano had stopped shouting and was now saying something to the newcomer, but I couldn't hear what.

Katia: Carl, I need you to listen carefully. I'm sending this message just to you. Not Donut.

Carl: Bad timing, Katia.

I activated my *Wisp Armor* spell, which was supposed to protect me from mind control. It didn't work. She wasn't mind controlling me. She was charming me with a metric ton of charisma. That was different. *Goddamnit*, I thought, as I grabbed the index finger on my left hand. *This is gonna suck.*

I took a breath, and I snapped it. *Crack.*

"*Gah!*"

Katia: I don't have time to explain. I don't know exactly where you are or what's happening, but don't touch the shrine you were planning on repairing. Close to you is another one. A broken shrine of Yemaya. Her name is Yemaya. Remember that. It should be blue. If you can only

fix one, you have to repair that one. If you do, it will help save both me and Donut.

I cast *Heal* on myself as I read her message a second time, confusion rising. Anton started moving toward Oshun's shrine while Sister Ines and Paz tried to stop him.

"You have to break his finger!" Donut yelled. "Goodness. Carl, look at his erection! Good for you, Anton!"

Carl: What? What the hell? Save you and Donut from what?

Katia: Stop. Listen. I have the Crown of the Sepsis Whore on my head, but there's a way out. It won't be easy, and there are a lot of steps, but first we have to resurrect the goddess Yemaya. This is our only chance on this floor. They engineered it this way. I'm sorry, I would've told you sooner, but I thought we had more…

The chat window popped away.

What the fuck? What the fucking fuck?

The world froze. Anton shouldered away from Paz and Sister Ines and skirted past the glowing ball in the center of the room. He still had the piece of Ogun shrine in his hand. All of us stopped, frozen in place. Two more ethereal forms appeared behind their broken shrines. Both were men, leaving just two piles of debris bare.

New Achievement!

You have discovered a Celestial Thorn Room!

Not a throne room. A *thorn* room!

These things are pretty rare. And a Celestial one? Hoo boy. This is gonna be good.

You probably don't know what the hell a thorn room is. Don't worry. You gonna learn pretty damn quick.

***Reward*: In the immortal words of the luscious Bret Michaels, every rose has its thorn.**

We couldn't move, but we could still talk. "Carl, what's happening?" Donut shouted.

I was still reeling from Katia's message. How? How did she have the Crown of the Sepsis Whore on her head? The implications were staggering. How did she know what was happening here?

I took a deep breath. None of that mattered. Not yet. I knew what a thorn room was. We'd be given a series of choices. All of the choices would come with both a positive and negative benefit.

The music paused, and then resumed. It came back heavier, likely still part of the same song. It played in the background while the AI, giddy with excitement, made a new announcement.

B-B-B-B-Boss Battle!

Thorn Room! Thorn Room!

Man, oh, man, here we go! It's time to make a choice! Do you want to fight? Do you want to betray your friends for marvelous riches? It's up to you!

Seven shrines. One Sun of Reawakening. What you do next will change *everything*.

The choice you make will reverberate not just through your own lives. Or this floor. It has the potential to change the very nature of the dungeon.

Kinda funny how these moments pop up out of nowhere, isn't it? And you thought this eighth floor was just going to be filler until we go down to the ninth?

We don't do that here.

The room suddenly went pitch black. Only the Sun of Reawakening remained, glowing red and orange. The little gem in the shape of a skull spun like a globe, smoking rising from the twin eye holes.

Which shrine will you repair? You can only fix one.

A spotlight appeared, shining down on the first of the seven broken shrines.

Shrine one! This is the shrine of Ogun, god of Blacksmiths. As the only one of these Orisha guys to ascend to the Halls, he doesn't need his old shrine repaired. He has a whole new generation of followers. But, he's kind of a dick and doesn't want any of his old family members to get back into the game. Two of you already worship him, so it's probably in your best interest to fix this one. If you don't, you two will receive a smite. There are no additional benefits to repairing the monument.

The spotlight moved to the next pile of rocks. This one had a glowing ghost behind it. It was an older man wearing a fedora, casually leaning up against the wall. The dude had a rooster on his shoulder. The barely-visible, human-like ghost flipped a coin in the air and caught it as the rooster bobbed his head.

Shrine two! Legba's shrine. If repaired, will give everyone a fifty percent chance to avoid *all* future smites. All will learn the level-15 spell *Confusing Fog*. Legba will ascend.

The next shrine was just a pile of rocks. There was no ghost there.

Shrine three! This is Shango's shrine. He's a little shy. You will learn a level-15 *Lightning* spell if you repair it. You will gain the ability to train this spell to 20. Hint, hint that spell might come in handy later. Shango will ascend.

The shrine after that was Oshun, the woman who'd just charmed me.

Shrine four! Oshun. Sweet, sweet Oshun. If you repair her shrine, you all will be protected from the next five fatal blows. Everyone will receive a fifty percent boost to their charisma. All will receive a level 10 *Heal Party* spell. Oshun will ascend.

Then was Asojano, who was frozen in mid-scream.

Shrine five! Asojano. The Lord of Smallpox. You know who this is. He's the reason you're in this pickle in the first place. If you repair his shrine, you will win the quest. The ghommids will all go back to normal. That's it. Asojano will *not* ascend. He's already proven he's too much of a dangerous asshole to let back into the Halls of Ascendency.

But…

If you *don't* repair his shrine, he will attack, and you will have to kill him. That's the boss battle. Don't forget that he's a city boss! He will also break the protection of the chamber allowing the ghommids to surge into the temple. That will probably suck. Killing him will cure them. I hope.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, I thought.

The next pile was another ghost. All I could see was him from the waist up. He appeared well-muscled, though his facial features were androgynous. A translucent sea serpent of some sort twisted around his body.

Shrine six! This is Inle's shrine. One of only two of the Orishas to have spent time in the Nothing, the deaf and mute Inle isn't all there. That's a nice way of saying he's batshit. But, he once was a healing god. If you repair his shrine, you will gain immunity from most health-seeping conditions. You will gain 50% to your Constitution.

Inle will not ascend. He'll end up back in the Nothing. He doesn't know that yet, so don't tell him. Probably be pretty funny considering how much time he spent getting himself out.

The spotlight focused on the final shrine. I tensed. This was the one.

Shrine seven! This is Yemaya. The river mother. This one almost made it to the halls on her own, but she couldn't keep her power.

Time is funny like that, isn't it? One day, you're on top of the world. The next, people don't even remember who you are.

Her good friend, the goddess Eileithyia, misses her so very much. If you repair this monument, Yemaya will ascend. She will gift each squad with a special card. In addition, her friend Eileithyia will grant each of you a single boon.

And that's it! Man, I can't wait to see how this turns out! I really hope y'all are on the same page here, and there aren't any secret motivations that will cause conflict within your group. That would be really awkward.

We start in five seconds!

My mind raced. I didn't know how or why or what this Yemaya had to do with the Crown of the Sepsis Whore. But I'd learned long ago to trust Katia, to trust her instincts, to trust her heart.

I looked at the two men, still frozen. If we repaired any shrine other than Ogun's, they would receive a smite.

Both the charm lady and the guy with the snake were great, a little too great. But what would be the point? We always figured we'd have to fight Asojano anyway, and we were prepared for it. Up until the moment I received Katia's message, there would've been no question. I would've helped them repair Ogun's shrine.

But now...

I remembered what I said to Donut in those horrible moments near the end of the last floor.

It's going to get worse before it gets better. We're going to lose more friends. We're going to have to do some pretty horrible things just to survive.

Worse, much worse, was the sudden, out-of-nowhere implication of not following Katia's path. Getting Donut to survive past the ninth floor was already next to impossible. But having to kill Katia, too?

No. No way. I would do anything to make certain that eventuality never came to pass.

Never.

Five seconds. All of this rushed through my mind in five seconds.

You could do that. Sometimes the fog clears just long enough to see it all, all at once.

"Oshun!" Anton shouted at the seductive female ghost just as we became unfrozen. "I'm coming!"

"Yes, love," the goddess cried back. "Hurry!"

"No," Sister Ines yelled. "We have to fix Ogun's shrine!"

Anton lurched toward the woman ghost just as Paz grabbed his arm. Anton fought back. He turned and hurled the metal chunk—the piece of Ogun's shrine—toward the exit. It smashed into the broken door and punched through. The metal piece continued its trajectory and rolled outside into the night.

"Oh, *shit!*" Paz cried.

"Betrayal!" Asojano shouted again. The green glow about him grew larger.

"Donut," I hissed. "Phantasm! Now!"

"I still don't like that name," Donut grumbled.

"Do it!"

She cast *Laundry Day* on Bomo.

One moment, Bomo was absolutely covered in spiked pieces of armor. The next, the pieces exploded off of him like a fragmenting grenade, shooting in all directions, completely filling the room with dozens of metal bits. Other than the shoulder pads holding up the launchers, the metal pieces hadn't been connected together, but painstakingly sewn onto a fabric undershirt one by one, with dozens of trash-tier daggers shoved into the spaces around them. I'd put it together at my armorer's table, which turned the whole thing into something called a "Scrapheap Breastplate." I repeated the process for his arms and legs and the rest of his massive getup.

Paz got bowled over by a chunk of helmet, causing him to let go of Anton, who pushed his way toward Oshun, where he fell to his knees and started picking up chunks of rock, attempting to put the goddess's shrine together.

"Gah! Fuck!" I shouted, looking down at the dagger that had lodged into my arm. I hadn't realized the armor would fly off Bomo like that. I pulled the blade out and tossed it to the ground as I healed myself.

Foamy, white bubbles filled the room at Bomo's feet, percolating up to his knees, a side product of the *Laundry Day* spell. The rock creature reached down into the soapy mess, scooped up a glob of bubbles, and brought it to his mouth. He grumbled unhappily.

Donut then cast part two of the "Phantasm" move. She cast her new spell, *Legionnaires of the Damned*.

A purple rent formed in midair above the temple, and dozens of wispy, white ghosts flowed into the room, screaming, their voices not unlike the shrieks of the ghommids outside. Everyone stopped what they were doing to watch. The ghosts spilled downward, flowing into all the pieces of scattered armor on the floor.

All the small hunks of metal started shaking.

"Carl, it's working!" Donut shouted.

"How's your mana?"

"Topped up," Donut said. "I had to take a potion."

"Keep your *Mute* spell ready!"

Her new *Mute* spell would only last a handful of seconds, especially on a boss monster like Asojano, but if we timed it correctly, we could keep him from inflicting all of us with some terrible disease.

My original plan was to just spam drop weapons and armor pieces into a huge pile and have Donut reanimate them all with her *Legionnaires of the Damned* spell, but Mordecai said the weapons had to have been recently equipped on a combatant or corpse. It didn't matter if they were friend or foe, just that they were equipped. We'd come up with two ways to get around the issue: use corpses from my inventory graveyard or put lots and lots of little pieces on one person. We went with the latter.

The Bomo exploit was much more effective because we could engineer the armor in a way where all the individual metal chunks had a mind of their own. The fact they were possessed by spirits made this highly effective against noncorporeal monsters, even if the individual armor pieces weren't enchanted.

I didn't know if they were going to let this particular exploit stand, but it was pretty damn badass. Too bad all these armor pieces were going to dissipate when this was done.

The sharp armor bits and daggers swirled up into the air, tornado-like, loosely forming into the shape they were in before, a twin of Bomo. They clinked and clacked as they bumped into each other. Some of the pieces sparked. Individually, they sounded like hornets. Together, it was like an amplified weed whacker.

Donut pointed at Asojano and shouted "Get him!" The whine rose in pitch as the metal tornado zipped toward the shouting city boss.

Outside, ghommids lurched toward the entrance.

"We have to get the shrine piece he threw outside!" Paz shouted. "Quick. Before the ghommids get to it!"

Asojano shrieked as the swarm of armor and daggers descended on him. Pieces of straw went flying. He cast some sort of shield over himself before Donut could stop him with her *Mute* spell. A shield health bar appeared and started to drain.

"Holy shit," I said, watching the attack on the city boss. The armor and daggers swirled around him at incredible speed, cutting

and slicing and spinning and buzzing as he waved his arms. “Donut, that attack is insane!”

“I know, right?” she said proudly. Mongo appeared. She cast *Clockwork Triplicate* on him, and she sent the two automatons into the fray while the real dinosaur shrieked with alarm at his new surroundings. She then cast *Mute* on Asojano, the yellow spell flying through the air and disappearing into the skirmish. He’d been trying to cast a new spell, and it failed.

“Hey kid,” a new voice shouted. This was the ghost with the pet rooster. Legba. He was shouting at Paz. “Ogun don’t need his shrine fixed, man. If you fix mine, I’ll protect you from his wrath. I’ll get you laid, too. What’s your pleasure? I can’t help but notice you weren’t taken by my sister. I’ll get you what you want.”

I grabbed Bomo by the shoulder. The rock creature had taken a glob of soap bubbles and put it on top of his head.

I talked rapidly. “Do you remember that game, Tetris?”

Bomo grunted. “Boring. I like the music. Better than this music.”

I pointed at the lonely shrine just to his right. I could see the crumbled pieces on the ground. There weren’t many. The pieces were blue, almost like ice. It looked as if they formed into maybe an obelisk. “Put those pieces together. Like in Tetris. Make them fit. Tell me when you’re done. Fast.”

“No!” came a cry. This came from the ghost of the goddess, Oshun. Anton sat there staring stupidly at his hand while Sister Ines stood over him. Half of Anton’s fingers on his right hand were gone. The cat woman had... done something to wake him up. It had worked.

“Carl!” Donut shouted, pointing at the entrance. A bug-headed ghommid lurched into the room, wailing.

“Go!” I said, patting Bomo on the back as I moved to guard the door.

“Why that shrine!” Donut called as she fired a *Magic Missile* at the ghommid. It hissed and fell back. “Carl, we need to get the Ogun piece!”

“It’s too late,” I called. “The piece is gone.” I paused. Thankfully, I wasn’t lying. There were suddenly a thousand of those things out

there. “We’re going to fix Yemaya’s shrine.”

“Why that one?” Sister Ines called as she pulled Anton away from Oshun’s shrine. “If we can’t do Ogun, we need to do Papa Legba!”

“Yeah,” Legba agreed. “I’ll protect you from smites.”

“I have the heals!” Oshun called. To Anton, who remained on his knees at her base, she said, “I can heal your hand!” Anton seemed disoriented, almost drunk.

The ghost goddess turned her gaze to me.

I can stop it, she said. This time, the words *were* in my head, yet I could feel her lips near my right ear. I could smell her, despite her being across the room. *How loud is it, Carl? How deep is it? I can drain it all away.*

I see it, too, yet another voice said, this one whispering in my left ear. A new voice. This was Inle, the deaf and supposedly mute god who would give us a constitution boost. The ethereal sea serpent twisted around the man’s body. This was the one who’d spent time in the Nothing. *She can’t heal a canyon that’s dug this deep. I can. It’s not what you think it is. You’re just like me, Carl. I can help you. You’re just like me.*

Christ, I thought. I shook my head. In the corner, Donut’s possessed armor pieces continued to fight with Asojano.

“No,” I called to Paz and Anton, who was now lurching toward Legba’s shrine. I was doing my best to ignore the voices. “Yemaya is friends with a real god, giving a real boon. It’s your best chance!”

“Hey, I take offense to that,” Legba called. The ghost rooster on his shoulder bawked angrily.

“You tell ‘em,” Legba said to the rooster.

“Carl, help! My mana is low!” Donut cried as she fired yet another missile at the door. Mongo shrieked and snapped at a ghommid tentacle.

“Watch out!” I called as I pulled the blessed chock from my inventory. We figured something like this would happen. This was just a leftover, metal door block from the Iron Tangle that Mordecai had coated with a holy protection oil. It would keep undead from passing through like a ghost. It wasn’t perfect, and it was more like a repellant than something that would actually stop the ghommids,

but it would keep them from pouring into the temple. I shoved it against the door. It was plenty big enough. Outside, the ghommids wailed anew. I leaned against the door as they started to pound against it.

Anton and Paz ignored my calls to repair Yemaya's shrine and were hard at work on Legba's. His was nothing more than a wooden sign, but I couldn't read what it said upon it. They were trying to prop it up.

"That looks like it hurts!" Legba called, his voice filled with laughter. He was shouting at Asojano, who'd fallen to his knees in the swarm of metal, which continued to zip around him. His shield was almost gone. His actual health was starting to decline on its own, despite the shield still being intact.

It was from closing the door, I realized. It was just like when he was in the saferoom. Being disconnected from the other ghommids was somehow draining him.

Suddenly, multiple globs of green goo shot off the dying boss. Donut hadn't been able to mute him. "Watch out!" I called as a single lump slammed into both Paz and Anton.

A blinking debuff appeared over both men as they inadvertently knocked over the shrine they were working on. Legba and his rooster shouted angrily. Sister Ines, who'd just been standing there, mumbling, shook her head, as if being awakened from a trance.

They're talking to us all. They're in our heads. The cat woman cast a heal on Anton, but it didn't work. She then tried another.

The green goop had also, somehow, taken out most of the reanimated armor pieces. As I watched, the metal chunks fell to the ground. The ghosts fled the armor pieces, which disintegrated into puffs of purple smoke. The two clockwork Mongos exploded.

A few daggers continued to zip through the air, high above the boss. They swooped down and swiped at the man, who remained on his knees, panting. His wand thing was gone.

The shield whiffed out. His health drained on its own. It entered the red.

"It done," Bomo said, standing up from where he was working. He pointed proudly at the obelisk. It had only been five or six pieces.

"Hold the door!" I called to Bomo. I needed to get the sun thing to the shrine to wake it up.

But first... I came to a decision. I pulled a flag, and I rushed across the room, jumping at the dying form of Asojano just as his health started to blink. His grass skirts were gone, revealing nothing more than a pale, albino man, wide-eyed and afraid. Half of his face was covered with a festering group of boils.

I shoved the flag right into the top of his head. He puffed away, turning into a card.

Warning: You have been infected with SlugPox.

My momentum caused me to slam into the wall. I felt a boil form on my arm. It started to bubble. A wave of nausea swept over me. *Oh shit, oh shit.*

The reanimated daggers over my head flew toward the orb in the center of the room. Oshun and Legba and his rooster all howled with indignation while the mute Inle waved his arms angrily. The reanimated daggers worked together to pick up the floating skull gem and bring it to the rickety obelisk of Yemaya.

The boil on my arm kept getting bigger and bigger. I felt a new boil start to form on my neck.

The flying daggers brought the gem to the tip of the obelisk as Donut shouted instructions.

The moment the glowing gem touched the obelisk, the room froze once again.

The music stopped dead. It was so sudden, I feared I'd grown deaf.

At the same time, the daggers whiffed away into a puff of smoke. The walls of the temple flashed and then a bright, white light filled the area. The hole in the ceiling closed on its own. All the shrines except Yemaya's disappeared, along with the ghosts. The floor turned tiled and clean, covered with blue tributaries. Multiple fountains sprouted out of nowhere, including one right underneath both Paz and Anton, who remained on the floor, writhing in pain from the debuff. It pushed them up and away.

The metal chock I was using to block the door disappeared, revealing an intact, wooden door that was propped open to reveal a

well-lit town. Thousands of ghommids stood just outside, all looking at one another in surprise.

A whole wall of text appeared in my view, including more messages from Katia, which popped away into a folder.

Winner!

Combat Complete. Deck has been reset.

Quest Complete. Pueblo de los Olvidados.

Medium Ghommid Settlement has been liberated.

Congratulations. You may now exit the settlement.

The surviving ghommids have been cured.

Entering Club Vanquisher Entrance Temple, The Temple of Yemaya.

Welcome, Friend of Yemaya.

The goddess will soon make an appearance.

System Message. The Goddess Yemaya has re-ascended. She is welcomed into the family by all.

We unfroze.

"Oh god, oh god," Paz was saying.

"He's coming," Anton said, his voice hoarse with pain.

"It's not working," Sister Ines cried, her voice panicked. "I can top up your health, but it doesn't stop going down. I can't cure it."

I barely heard this as I was preoccupied by the massive boil on my arm, which was getting bigger and bigger like one of those Jiffy Pop popcorn pans. This was different than what Paz and Anton were suffering from.

Pop!

The boil on my arm exploded in a spray of clear liquid. I took a hit of damage. It stank of rot.

A thumb-sized slug fell to the ground in a shower of fluid. It looked like a regular slug, but with a row of jagged teeth.

What the hell?

Pox Slug – Level 1

Disgusting. They're like miniature, drunk, and angry Juggalos. And what's worse, the next one will be level 2. Then level 3 and so forth. The good thing is they won't attack *you*. Not yet, at least.

"Carl, Carl, what's happening?" Donut cried, coming up. "What's on your neck?" She stopped short at the sight of the miniature monster. "Oh my god, what is that?"

"I need a healer," I croaked.

"Stay away from my daddy!" the slug cried with a tiny, high-pitched voice. It launched itself at Donut and chomped directly onto her nose, Mongo style. It hung from her face, growling.

Donut squealed. She swiped at it, and it exploded in a shower of ooze. The boil on my neck felt as if it was getting ready to burst. A new boil formed on my thigh. Mongo approached and sniffed my leg. He growled.

"Carl, I will not have you oozing attack slugs!"

"We need to get to the All Healer inside the club," Paz said, pointing toward a door that wasn't there before. He panted as he talked. It looked as if their debuff was a painful, unending bleed effect. Both he and Anton had a massive mark over their heads. It was a flaming anvil.

It was a shunned marker from a god.

The smiting was imminent.

I looked at the door. It was an entrance to Club Vanquisher. I'd never been in one before, but I could enter now that I was a worshipper of Emberus. This was just like the entrance bar to a Desperado Club, but instead of the entrance being a public bar, it was a temple. Donut could not enter.

"Donut, I need to get in there," I said. "I gotta get Paz and Anton in, too. Stay here and... Gah!"

My neck boil exploded. A new, level-2 slug splotched onto the ground.

"Whoop! Whoop!" the slug called before launching itself at Mongo. The dinosaur snatched it out of the air.

I lurched toward the door, my hand on my neck. A new message from Katia appeared, but I waved it away. "Sister, help me get them to the door!"

"Oh god," Anton said. The normally stoic and angry man wept with fear. "It's too late. It's too late."

Ogun has made an appearance in the realm.

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[16]

<Note added by Crawler Tipid, 4th Edition>

I killed my best friend today. I wish I had never made it this far.

"No... No," Anton said.

A bolt of lightning crashed through the room, coming from the ceiling. It hit the newly-repaired floor tiles and shattered several of the pieces. They flew through the room like shrapnel.

The star appeared on my map. A man formed, right where the lightning hit. He stood before Anton and Paz on the other side of the room.

The back patch on my jacket vibrated, the sensation oddly reminding me of a phone on silent.

You are in the presence of a deity. The Scavenger's Daughter has opened her eyes. She fills with power.

Temporary effect: All-Smash Related Attacks +300%.

Ogun was human-sized, buff and dark skinned, holding a giant war hammer over his shoulder. He wore a leather apron with no shirt, shorts, and a necklace made of sharp, white teeth from some massive creature. His eyes were nothing but white light. He emanated a yellow glow.

It was as if someone had dropped a grenade into the room. We all stared, waiting for the inevitable. I examined him.

God of Blacksmithery and Armor Ogun. Level 250.

This god is not sponsored.

Warning: This is a deity. He is invulnerable on this floor.

This god has been temporarily summoned to this location. Summoning rules apply.

Ogun is an outsider. He is one of the old gods, originally a member of an obscure pantheon that has since dissipated into time. He spends his days at his celestial anvil, angrily creating armor, piece after piece, but no one knows why he toils or what becomes of the armor when it's completed.

It's said his creations have a strange shape, all designed for four-legged beasts.

Ogun is no stranger to conflict. He is—well, he *was* until a minute ago—the last surviving member of an ancient pantheon that was known for its bloody conflicts. Like most of the older gods, he isn't the same entity he once was. In the great Halls, he is considered a god of blacksmiths and armorers. He once was something even greater.

His power and ambition makes him a strong contender for the celestial throne.

He's here now because Ogun strongly believes all punishments should be handed out in person.

"For a god that's always making armor, you'd think he would be better dressed," Donut muttered from the back of Mongo, who screeched in agreement.

"Don't move," I hissed. "Don't bring attention to yourself. He's here for them, not us. But get ready for plan Exit just in case."

"Just you, me, Mongo, and Bomo? Are we going to abandon the others?"

"Yes."

Plan Exit was for me to hit *Protective Shell* while we both downed Invisibility potions. We'd get outside and then Donut would *Puddle Jump* us as far away as possible. I looked nervously at Mongo and the massive cretin standing behind us.

"I gave clear instructions," Ogun said at the cowering forms of Paz and Anton on the far side of the room. His calm, even tone held a hint of a Caribbean accent. He didn't sound angry, which somehow made him seem even more incensed. The god didn't need to be physically huge or loud to give off an air of pure, unbridled rage. "You managed to chase off Asojano, which might've saved you. But you also unleashed my sister back into the light. That is unforgiveable."

"No," Sister Ines called. "That wasn't Paz and Anton. It was them." She pointed at us.

Ogun ignored her. "I should never have allowed you the privilege of worshipping me."

I was frozen with indecision. Despite what I'd just said to Donut, I felt as if we should be doing something. Anything. Should I help? How? Even if I could get them out of here, then what? The god would just follow. My new nipple ring came with a spell, *Black Nimbus*, that would temporarily remove all the benefits of being a worshipper of a god. Maybe it would save them from getting a smite. I could only cast it on one of the two men, but did I dare try it? Ogun only had eyes for his two worshippers. The last thing we wanted was to gain his attention. It'd be like trying to stop a train by stepping in front of it.

"Leave them alone!" Sister Ines cried, coming to stand between the god and the two men with the still-falling health. The god paused and cocked his head to the side, regarding the cat woman, finally seeing her. She pulled her magical trident and brandished it at the deity. "You're not a real god. They only worshipped you because you promised to protect their minds, and it didn't work! They didn't do what you said because they were charmed by that other one! They didn't repair any of the shrines. It was those two behind you!"

She made a threatening move with the trident, which was equal parts brave and idiotic.

Ogun grunted with amusement. He waved a hand, and she froze in place. Her trident fell to the ground and shattered. A **Shelved** debuff appeared and started to count down. It had a six minute timer. *Holy shit,* I thought*. She's lucky he didn't turn her to ash*.

Another slug slurped out of my body and hit the ground. The level-3 slug hissed and jumped at Mongo. It met the same fate as the last one.

Ogun spent a moment admiring the frozen cat woman. He sidestepped her and approached the form of Paz, whose health was deep in the red. Both Anton and Paz were on the ground, hunched over in pain. Anton sobbed.

Donut: CARL, WHAT DO WE DO?

Carl: We wait for it to pass. What else can we do?

Donut: HE'S GOING TO KILL THEM.

Carl: For their sake, let's hope that's all he does.

The god leaned forward, reached out, and placed his hand against Paz's face. The handprint sizzled where it touched flesh. Paz was already in so much agony, he barely seemed to notice this. His health stopped descending. His body flashed, and then his health bar disappeared. The god had healed him. Ogun stood and Paz's health immediately started to descend again. "Paz, you are no longer under my grace. For your failure, I am taking your ability to heal this condition you now suffer. Go in darkness, and when you pierce the veil, you will find yourself alone and without armor."

"No," I heard myself say. No, not say. I shouted it. I took a step forward. I had a boil on my cheek, and I knew it was about to pop. "Fuck you. Go fuck yourself."

The god looked over his shoulder. "I know who you are," he said, finally acknowledging me. That was it. He turned his attention to Anton, who was crab walking away. The man's health was almost gone.

Goddamnit, I thought. A wave of helplessness washed over me.

I took another step forward, and I cast *Black Nimbus* on Anton. Then I clicked on a scroll of *Heal*, first on Anton, and then immediately another on Paz.

Anton glowed with dusky light. A black crown formed over the tattooed man's head. The shunned mark disappeared. For a moment, Anton's eyes met mine.

The god stood, as if contemplating. He completely turned to face me, literally turning his back on Anton. I felt a simultaneous surge of

hope and dread. The boil on my cheek exploded, and I grunted with pain. Mongo greedily snatched the slug away. I had two more boils forming. One on my right arm, and one on my thigh.

"Black Nimbus," the god said. He sounded more curious than angry. "That was a good attempt. But all you have done is removed this man from my protection. From my mercy. Not from my wrath. I was going to do the same to him as I did his companion."

The god shrugged, and then he took a step backward. He stepped directly on Anton's head, and he crushed, killing him. Just like that, as if he was nothing.

"No," Paz cried from the ground. "No, cousin. No!"

The god kept his glowing eyes locked on mine the whole time.

"I am not evil. I am not unreasonable. But there are rules. One of those rules is that you must know your place. If I didn't hold Emberus in such high esteem, I would crush you, too. Now tell my sister I said, 'Welcome Back.'"

He poofed away in a shower of sparks, like that of a hammer striking molten steel.

Ogun has left the realm.

The Scavenger's Daughter has closed her eyes. The benefit fades and will completely dissipate over the next ten minutes.

His sudden disappearance gave me a full view of Anton's ruined body. The blood was shockingly red against the blue and white tiles.

The only sound was the bubbling of the fountains and the pained rasps of Paz.

I ran up to Paz. The handprint of the god sat sideways on the man's face, and the burn had removed the skin where flesh met flesh, leaving nothing but red muscle and the white of his teeth. His nose had been spared, and he still had lips, but they were burned and depressed, like his face had been made of clay.

I swallowed. *I made this happen. I made this happen because I insisted on saving Yemaya.*

"Paz," I said, taking the man's armored hand. He clutched onto me tightly. The shunned marker was gone from over his head.

Behind us, Sister Ines remained frozen, looking away. “We’re gonna get you into the club. We’ll see what they can do.”

His health was slowly fading. The god had made his debuff permanent. There would be no healing, not of this, and we all knew it.

“I remember it all,” Paz said. “Ogun, he cured me of everything. Everything except the Inevitable debuff. I don’t worship him anymore.” He let out a groan. “He promised he would fix it, and he did. But only at the end.”

“Carl, what is he talking about?” Donut asked.

“Just hang on,” I said, searching my inventory for something that would help. Nothing. I had nothing.

“Maybe it’s better this way,” Paz said, coughing. “The sister was so afraid we wouldn’t go to heaven because we’re pretending to worship these gods.”

“Don’t worry about that,” I said. “They’re not real. They’re just assholes, like everything else in this place. It’s play acting. That’s it. Here. Take this.” I pulled a fine healing potion and put it to his lips. As I did, the boil on my arm popped and the level-5 slug fell right onto Paz’s face.

“I’ll get him, daddy!” the slug cried. I flicked the annoying thing away before it could chomp down. It flew, screaming across the room. Mongo shot off after it as Donut leaped to my shoulder.

“Don’t waste the potions,” Paz said, but he drank it anyway. “Look, brother. I gotta tell you something. You gotta be careful of her.”

“Who?” I asked. “What do you mean?”

“Sister Ines. She’s not safe. Don’t spend too much time with her.”

“*I knew it*!” Donut hissed. “What did I say, Carl?”

“Hush,” I said to Donut. “Explain.”

Paz’s armor flashed away, piece by piece as he stuck it into his inventory, leaving him wearing just shorts. He winced as he fell straight onto the tiles. Behind him, the newly-erected fountain bubbled away merrily.

“It’s her race. It comes with a skill called Toxo... Toxo plasma something. It makes people like her, want to protect her. You don’t

even realize it's happening. The effects are mild at first, but they get stronger and stronger as time goes on. And then eventually you'll do anything to protect her. My cousin and I, we didn't learn about it until it was too late. You don't even know it's happening. When you find out, you forget a minute later. That's how it works. She told us one night. She gets like that sometimes, in a mood. She feels guilty and won't stop talking about..." He paused. "About the things she's done. Oh, god, I hadn't even realized. It makes you forget about that, too."

"Wait, she was charming you?" I asked.

Paz made a pained expression. "She reminded us once, I don't know, maybe for the third or fourth time, and we knew we'd forget again in a couple of minutes. We both worshipped Ogun because the priest said he'd keep us from getting controlled. It didn't work. Right after we worshipped him, we forgot why we'd done it. Sometimes, she pretended like she was sorry. But not always."

I gave a sidelong glance at Donut, wondering.

"Oh, don't look at me like that, Carl," Donut said. "*I* don't have that skill. If I did, Katia would still be in the party, now wouldn't she? *You* stay because I'm adorable, and you love me, and you wouldn't survive without me. I don't need some weird skill to make people like me."

I regarded the frozen form of Sister Ines. She stood, facing away. She still had a few minutes on her debuff. "You're saying we should kill her?"

He shook his head. "No. No, not at all. Most of the time, she's not bad. She's not evil. But sometimes... You gotta understand. We all came in together. Some of us thought it was a bad idea, but Elian said we needed everybody we could get. He's dead now. Anton killed him after, after..." Paz took a deep breath. His health was already half gone again. His hand remained clutched in my own, hard as iron. "Oh god, he'd broken free, hadn't he? She'd been on medication, and then in the dungeon everyone said nobody needed their pills anymore, so we thought it was okay. But she's killed so many people."

"What do you mean?" I asked again. "She doesn't have the skulls." Mongo returned, triumphant. He posted up by my leg, waiting for the next slug to appear.

Paz winced in pain. "Not in the dungeon. Before. She was in prison for killing all the sisters in her convent. Poisoning them all."

"I told you! I told you!" Donut cried. She hissed. "The dungeon picked the perfect breed for her. A Havana brown. I *knew* it."

"Wait," I said. "She was a fellow prisoner? We always thought she was a worker. You said she was."

"I never said that. And we weren't prisoners. We were guards. It was a women's prison. We were outside, walking them to the med building when it happened. God, we're the only two left. The sister and I. She's gonna be the last one. Who would've thought? When it happened, the papers called her *El Segador de La Habana*. The Reaper of Havana."

"A murderer," I said, a chill washing over me.

"Mongo," Donut said matter-of-factly. "Eat the nun."

Mongo glanced up from the boil on my leg, which was about to pop. He looked at the still-frozen form of Sister Ines and then back to Donut and cocked his head to the side with a look that said, "Really? Can I?"

"*Wait*," I said. "Donut, stop."

Donut made an exasperated sigh. "Not yet, Mongo. But wait for mommy's sign."

"She's insane," Paz said. "She's *obsessed* with the idea of sin. But compared to how she was before? She is so much better. She's been better for a long time, before even. Since we've gotten into the dungeon, she hasn't done anything bad or evil. She's fought alongside us. If she didn't have this thing, I don't think we'd be any different. But... but you needed to know about it. I'd feel guilty dying knowing I didn't tell you." He closed his eyes and started to softly pray.

I grunted with pain as my leg boil popped. The slug this time was noticeably bigger and had what looked like white and black paint on its face, almost like it was a miniature danger dingo. Mongo snapped it away before it could say anything.

Goddamnit. I needed to get this slug thing taken care of before it got too dangerous. And then figure out this Katia thing. But for right now, this moment, this was our most pressing issue. The nun would wake up in a minute.

Carl: What should we do?

Donut: WE KILL HER. THAT'S WHAT WE DO. I DON'T WANT TO KILL A PERSON ANY MORE THAN YOU DO, BUT WE'LL NEVER TRUST HER AGAIN, AND SHE'S STUCK IN HERE WITH US. SHE KILLED NUNS, CARL. THAT'S ALMOST AS BAD AS KILLING KITTENS.

Carl: That's not who we are, Donut.

Donut: THEN WHY DID YOU ASK?

Deep down, I knew that would be the safest thing. But to kill somebody because they *might* do something bad? She hadn't hurt anybody since she got here. I thought of her putting herself between the god and her friends in an ill-fated attempt to save them from Ogun. She'd been willing to die for her party members, and that said more about her than anything that had happened in the before times. She was one of us. The medications had been helping her, and it seemed whatever they'd done was holding now that she was in the dungeon, despite the trauma of everything. I didn't want to hurt her. I *liked* her.

We can party with her. It wouldn't be so bad.

The moment I thought that, a chill washed over me.

Carl: We'll separate. It's our only choice. We'll warn everybody of her past and of that skill that comes with her race. Maybe she can find someone who is immune to the skill to work with her.

Donut: I DON'T KNOW IF NOW IS THE TIME FOR HALF-MEASURES, CARL.

I pulled another health potion, but Paz refused to drink. He only had two or three minutes left.

"Let me go," he said. "It's okay. Please, it's okay. I just asked for forgiveness, and I think it was given. That fake god said I'd be alone, but I won't be. I know it. My soul is at peace."

I looked at the potion, and then I nodded. I put it back into my inventory.

<u>Donut</u>: CARL, KATIA SAYS THERE'S ANOTHER GOD COMING, AND SHE'S GOING TO GIVE US A QUEST AND WE HAVE TO DO IT, BUT SHE WON'T SAY WHY OR HOW SHE KNOWS THIS. SHE SAYS YOU'RE NOT ANSWERING HER MESSAGES. SHE SAYS SHE DOESN'T KNOW WHAT THE QUEST WILL BE. SHE'S BEING VERY MYSTERIOUS.

Chrissakes.

Behind us, the nun became unfrozen, and she crumpled to the ground. She immediately jumped to her feet.

"Paz!" the cat woman cried, rushing up. She pushed me aside and grabbed his hand. I let her.

Mongo let out an uncertain growl.

"It's okay," Donut said to the dinosaur. "Just stay on slug duty. For now."

"Paz," Sister Ines repeated, ignoring us. She wept as she talked. "Come. Come. We'll go into the club. We'll get you cured. Help, Carl. Why aren't you helping? Why didn't you get that shrine piece? This is your fault."

"Don't blame them," Paz said. "I'm sorry, Sister. I told them what you are, what you did."

"Don't worry about that. Come. Get up. We must hurry."

"No," Paz said. His health was almost all gone. "Let me go."

"You can't give up," she said. "It's a sin to give up."

The fountain started to bubble furiously.

"It's not giving up," Paz said.

"No, no, no. Please. You're not leaving me. Everyone leaves me."

"I'm sorry, Sister. Goodbye."

"*No*," Sister Ines shouted, her voice suddenly angry. "No! You're not leaving."

She suddenly had a flag in her hand.

Holy shit, I thought. *She's not going to...*

She jabbed it right into Paz's neck.

The movement was so fast, so sudden it didn't occur to me to try to stop her.

Whoom.

Paz turned into a card.

We all just stared at the cat woman, who held onto the green card. Green, which was the color of a common card. Even she appeared stunned that had actually worked. Behind her, the fountain bubbled over. The water spilled onto the floor.

Yemaya has made an appearance in the realm.

Eileithyia has made an appearance in the realm.

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[17]

"Holy shit, sister," I said as we backed away from the form of the first goddess. "Did you know that was going to work?"

She didn't have a chance to answer.

You are in the presence of two deities. The Scavenger's Daughter has opened her eyes. She fills with power.

Temporary effect from Yemaya: All healing skills and spells cost no mana. They have no cooldown.

Temporary effect from Eileithyia: All damage you strike against female opponents is quartered. All female members of your party strike with a melee power of 500%. Girl power, bitches!

The first of the two gods to physically appear was Yemaya, who came straight from the fountain. She emerged, rising from the water, splashing us all. A notification appeared. A temporary buff.

"*She's the Starbucks logo!*" Donut hissed.

Yemaya was a stunningly beautiful, dark-skinned mermaid. She didn't have the harsh facial features of a full naiad, nor the vampire fangs. But she did have the neck gills and pointed ears and large eyes, and I was immediately reminded of both Samantha and the late Signet. She was topless, and water flowed from her pendulous breasts, flowing back into the fountain below her, like each nipple was a spigot. She split at the waist, and she had two bodies, or tails, which was really bizarre. Donut was right. It was just like the Starbucks coffee logo woman. The two, scaled mermaid bodies

curved up behind her, contained in the fountain like a giant fish in a much-too-small bowl. The twin tail fins arched up into the air and met at the tip, making a heart pattern behind her.

Not a mermaid, I realized, staring at the goddess. *A siren*.

Goddess of Rivers Yemaya. Level 250.

This is a locked deity. She will not be sponsored this season.

This goddess is a retainer of Eileithyia.

Warning: This is a deity. She is invulnerable on this floor.

This goddess is within her own temple. Temple appearance rules apply. That means watch the fuck out.

Yemaya once was the goddess of all oceans, all bodies of water big and small. But she was more than that, too. She was the queen of love and the bringer of life. But, eventually, her people died off, her temples crumbled, and she was forgotten by all except her dear friend, the goddess Eileithyia, who wished every day that her old friend would someday come back from the land of the forgotten.

Now that Yemaya has re-ascended into the Halls, she will have a lot of work to do to make certain nobody ever forgets her name again. She's an unlikely candidate to claim the throne, but she would work tirelessly for her good friend Eileithyia, should she desire such a burden.

A god that's a retainer of another god? What did that mean? Just as I finished examining the description, the second goddess appeared. This was Eileithyia, who formed in the center of the room, atop the shattered tiles where Ogun had appeared. I twisted to examine the newcomer.

This one did not look like a goddess. Just a regular-sized alien dressed up for a costume party.

She obviously was from a different pantheon than Yemaya. I knew the "real" Eileithyia was a goddess from Greek myth, but this was some hairy alien thing. I could only tell she was female because it said so.

I'd seen this type of alien before at CrawlCon and in the audience at various shows, but I didn't know what they were called. They

were hairy, covered with blue and black hairs that looked coarse to the touch. About five feet tall. Bipedal with six black eyes, arranged in a V-pattern on her bug-like face. She had four arms with three fingers on each end. She had a long, thin neck that made it appear as if her head might tumble off and away at any moment. Her body was thin except for an extended belly, which made her look very pregnant. She wore a blood-red toga and had a laurel leaf upon her head.

I tensed when I saw the note next to the goddess's name. She was sponsored. She was being driven by someone. Someone named Huanxin Jinx. I'd never heard the name before.

I realized she wasn't wearing her soul armor. This was who she really was. I knew the sponsors could do that. Appear as they really were.

The siren goddess Yemaya looked sadly down at the corpse of Anton. "He killed him in my own temple. I'll have to do something about that." She looked over to Eileithyia, ignoring us for the moment. "My dear friend. I have missed you so. Thank you for remembering me."

Eileithyia was looking directly at me. I took a nervous step back. We were in danger here. I didn't know who this was or her affiliation. Her eyes turned in their sockets, like camera lenses focusing. If she wanted us dead, we were fucked. I examined her.

Goddess of Childbirth and Female Pain Eileithyia. Level 250.

Sponsored by Huanxin Jinx of the Grixist Swarm, CEO of Icon Industries.

Warning: This is a deity. She is invulnerable on this floor.

This goddess has been temporarily summoned to this location. Summoning rules apply.

Eileithyia is something of an oddity. She's benevolent. Unlike most of these psychos, she's known for her kind heart. She's prayed to by all mothers, both when they're attempting to sow the seeds and when the harvest comes. And while she does many things, she's mostly known as She Who Eases Pain. Both the physical pain of childbirth and the

inevitable darkness that comes to those who are unable to complete their most sacred task. When the stillness comes, she is not the one who has caused the heartbreak. But she is the one holding the grieving mother's hand.

She's not known to be someone who seeks the throne, which likely makes her one of the most qualified of the deities to claim the title.

Hopefully her sponsor this season is someone who shares the same grace as her character.

The alien goddess took a step toward us. She briefly put her hand on my shoulder, and then she scratched Donut. Mongo whined uncertainly. The goddess's entire body crackled with energy.

I received another buff notification. Rapid healing. I took that as a hopeful sign.

Without saying anything to us, she turned to face the other goddess. "Hello, Yemaya. Yes, Ogun insulted you by shedding blood in your own temple. We'll make certain the council hears about it. But that's for later. Right now we both have gifts for these crawlers, do we not?"

"Crawlers?" Yemaya asked, looking at the three of us plus Mongo and Bomo, who stood behind us, rock mouth hanging open in awe. "Yes, yes we do. There was one more. Where did he run off to? Did Ogun slay him as well?"

I looked at the card still clutched in Sister Ines' hand. It disappeared into her inventory.

"He's not here anymore," Sister Ines whispered.

I couldn't stop thinking about Paz, about what he said.

Let me go.

The idea of turning a person into a card hadn't even occurred to me. Could he feel it? How did that even work? Was he just sitting there, on the edge of death in some room, like a genie in a lamp? Or would he blink and suddenly be on the battlefield the next time Sister Ines summoned him? It was so wrong, so grotesque, it made me ill to just think about it.

We need to tear that card.

"I have you to thank for repairing my shrine," Yemaya was saying. She was talking to Bomo.

Before she finished, another slug popped, this one coming from my arm. Mongo snapped at it and missed. It hit the ground and looked up at Yemaya.

"Fuck the gods!" the slug cried.

The ground opened up under it, a hole no bigger than my fist, and the slug disappeared, screaming into the darkness.

"Uh," I said. "I can't control that."

Yemaya's eyes fixed on me. "I know the condition you suffer from. It is from my brother. He did it on purpose, just so you know. Strand himself here, I mean. He feigns innocence, but he always knew what he was doing. I'm glad you saw him for what he was. As to the slugpox, a healer can fix that. You should probably address it quickly." Her twin, back tails fluttered. "Now, take these as a token of my gratitude. One for you, brave Sister Ines, and one for you, beautiful Princess Donut."

The card appeared floating in midair in front of Donut. She gasped and reached out and took it before I could examine it. It had the black border of mythical rareness, the second highest quality, only behind the orange unique cards.

"Thank you, your goddess-ness!" Donut said, voice full of wonder.

"Carl, It's a mystic card," she shout-whispered. "We have all five kinds now. It lets us steal a card from someone else! It's not even consumable. It's great. It's called **The Thief**!"

I'd only heard of a few people finding mystic cards so far. They were like magic spells that directly affected gameplay somehow, unlike a utility card which would affect just one totem or a special card, which was usually a consumable, one-time effect on the caster.

Yemaya laughed and clapped her hands. "I am glad you enjoy it, little Donut. I can't help but see you haven't given yourself to a goddess yet. Perhaps I can entice you into worshipping at my altar? There may be more prizes in it for you."

"Uh, I'll have to think about it," Donut said. "But thank you so very much."

Yemaya nodded and pointed at Bomo. "You. Come here."

Bomo grunted and stepped forward. His feet splashed in the water overflowing from the fountain.

She reached forward and put a webbed hand on his shoulder. "You are the one who constructed my shrine."

"It easy. Easier than Tetris."

"If it is in my power, I will give you what you desire. What do you want?"

Bomo thought for a moment. "Maybe more games," he finally said. He paused. "No. The Sledge. I miss my friend."

"You miss your friend? Then you shall be reunited! Where is he?"

"Larracos," Bomo said.

"It is done," Yemaya said, and without a word, Bomo blinked and disappeared.

He was gone, just like that.

Motherfuck.

Mongo whimpered.

I exchanged a look with Donut. Did that just happen? She'd teleported Bomo to the ninth floor. We needed him, needed his spell to get us to the stairwell. Goddamnit.

"I, too, have a boon for each of you," Eileithyia said. "And a quest for Carl, who worships my good friend, Emberus."

I straightened. "I didn't know god quests were a thing when you already worshiped another god."

The hairy alien woman smiled, and I suddenly felt uneasy.

She raised her hand, and a soft, yellow light filled the temple.

The light of grace fills you with peace. You have been granted a floor boon. This boon will remain in place for the remainder of this floor as long as you remain in Eileithyia's grace. She may revoke this boon at any time.

Protection from Spiritual Possession.

10% Healing speed.

Plus 10% Constitution.

"Wow," Donut said. "This is fantastic. You're both great goddesses. Much better than all the other ones we've met so far."

"Now, Carl," Eileithyia said. "One more item. This is just for your party."

New Quest! Spiders.

Warning: This quest comes from a deity you do not worship. You are not required to complete this quest, but they might not like it if you ignore them.

Kill five spiders in my name every day until I ask you to stop.

***Reward*: You will receive another boon from me.**

This quest, all except the warning part, came in Eileithyia's voice.

"Uh," I said, exchanging a look with Donut.

"Kill spiders?" Donut asked, confused. "Does it have to be a specific type of spider, or will any do? I saw a small one earlier outside, sitting on one of those tombstones, but I'm not sure if it's really here or if it's a part of the memory thing."

"The memory thing isn't happening in the cemetery, remember?"

"Oh yeah," Donut said. "This is going to be really easy."

Eileithyia: Carl, the system is not allowed to monitor this message. Do not respond, because they *can* see your response. This is a deity message, and it will disappear. That quest is just a cover. It allows me to send you messages, and it's a workaround that gives me the ability to award your party another boon. If you want to save Katia and Donut, listen to me. That quest I gave isn't the real quest, though you still need to complete it. If you understand what I'm saying, scratch your left arm.

I went stiff. Just as I finished reading the message, another slug popped out. Mongo managed to get this one, but I noted he actually had to chew this time. I also took the time to copy and paste the message into my scratchpad. I knew from Emberus that she was correct. The god messages went away the moment you closed them, but it did allow you to copy and paste.

I scratched my left arm.

Eileithyia: Good. When Odette gets into orbit, she is going to offer to be your Faction Wars team Adjutant. She's only doing this because she believes there's no way you will

get the votes to turn off the team protections. She believes your real goal is for you to compromise and have the protections turned on for all the crawlers on the ninth floor.

That was absolutely true, but I hadn't said that out loud to anybody. The message continued.

When Odette makes this offer, I want you to accept it. If you do this, I will make certain you have the votes to turn the protections *off* on the ninth floor. I've watched you long enough to know you'd prefer this outcome. I know what you really seek.

They will never allow the crawlers to be safe, just so you know, so you aren't losing anything by helping me.

I will graciously clear this issue with the Crown of the Sepsis Whore as well. You've just seen what a goddess in her own temple can do, how she transferred that cretin to the ninth floor. A deity in their own temple has more powers than even the AI in some cases.

Do *not* tell anybody about this conversation. Not out loud. Not using that obvious bathroom system. Nobody. Not the cat and especially not Odette or Mordecai. Do not discuss this with Katia, though she knows of this deal. She'll explain to you what she can, but this part of the bargain is between you and me, and that's it. If you mention *any* of this, the deal is off, and I will make certain everyone you've ever known and loved is pounded into dirt.

But if you do everything I ask, you will have found a forever friend in me, both during your crawl and after. I will make certain you survive until the twelfth floor, where you and Katia and the cat will help me claim the Celestial Throne once and for all, and after, you will be given a most generous exit plan. I help my friends, Carl. I utterly destroy my enemies.

Ask Mordecai about me. He knows. Just don't tell him about our deal or this conversation.

If you agree, I want you to tell the cat it's time for you to get that disgusting slugpox cured.

I took a very, very deep breath. It was a lot. A whole lot. What had Katia gotten us embroiled in? What did this woman have to do with Odette?

I copied and pasted the conversation into my secret notepad before it disappeared.

"Donut," I said. "I need to get into the temple and get this slug thing taken care of as soon as possible."

Carl: Donut, I need you to get to a saferoom. I don't want you alone with Sister Ines.

Donut: OKAY BUT YOU GOTTA ASK KATIA WHAT'S GOING ON. SHE WON'T TELL ME ANYTHING. SHE'S ACTING WEIRD.

"My... my goddess!" a new voice cried. We all turned to see a newcomer had entered the temple. He looked just like a regular ghommid, but he was now acting like any old NPC. This one was a squat man wearing ethereal robes. He looked almost human except for a bushy tail. He fell to his knees, and he started to weep.

"I'm assuming he's blubbering over you, Yemaya, and not me," Eileithyia said. "I will take my leave. I'll see you in the halls." And then the goddess just disappeared.

I could feel yet another slug was about to pop out of me. Yemaya looked at me and pointed to the entrance to the Club Vanquisher. "You better get within," the goddess said as she faded out of existence.

Both deities have left the realm.

The Scavenger's Daughter has closed her eyes. The benefit fades and will completely dissipate over the next ten minutes.

Sister Ines was kneeled by Anton's body. She'd just looted everything he had. She stood and stormed from the temple, stepping over the NPC, who remained on the ground. She didn't say another word to either of us. I called out for her to wait, but she ignored me. She went out into the night and disappeared.

The boil, this one on the back of my hand, popped and splatted onto the floor. This slug had what looked like a little hatchet glued to its side. It squealed as Mongo snapped it in half.

Donut and I moved to the entrance of the temple, also stepping around the crying ghommid. Several of the NPCs stood outside, milling about, as if in shock. The town had transformed, though it remained a graveyard. All the tombs had turned into shops. I could no longer see Sister Ines, but we watched her dot move to the entrance to the cemetery, and she went back out into Havana.

"Poor Anton and Paz," Donut said. She gave me a pointed look. "Especially Paz."

"Oh, just say it," I said.

"I told you so, Carl," Donut said. "I *told* you. Now we're going to be worried about her the whole time." She started grumbling again about Havana browns.

I sighed. I sent a message to Katia to meet us in the saferoom, but to not say anything to Donut until I got back.

Donut gave me a side head bonk. "Now hurry up and get that taken care of. You're going to give Mongo a stomach ache, and it's absolutely revolting."

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Carl: Mordecai, hey, so I'm headed into Club Vanquisher right now. Donut will catch you up on everything that just happened. One of the goddesses we met is sponsored. Eileithyia. She gave us a quest. Her real name is Huanxin Jinx. Tell me everything you can about her.

Mordecai didn't answer for several moments.

Mordecai: Do whatever she tells you to do. I'll tell you the rest face-to-face. Katia and Bautista are here now, and she caught me up a little bit. We'll wait for you to get back before we discuss our next move.

I went through the door, and I entered a small vestibule.

Entering Club Vanquisher. Members Only.

Heathens will find no solace here.

This room was similar to the Desperado Club entrance area where Clarabelle the Crocodilian stood guard, but much cleaner and well-lit. Soft, ethereal music drifted in from the next door, which featured a colorful stained glass window portraying a winged angel rising upward toward an inverted tree. Some of the individual panes of glass were cracked.

A robed, ram-headed cleric guarded the entrance. The hairy, white creature sat upon his knees, praying. He had large, curled horns on his head. He instantly reminded me of Prepotente. He faced the stained glass door, his back to me. He had a blazing symbol over his head. I groaned when I saw it.

Potsy. Ares Warrior Cleric Middle Priest. Level 40.

Warning: This NPC Worships Hellik. He will be automatically hostile toward you because you worship Emberus.

Though, if we're being honest here, these Ares guys hate everybody already, and you probably won't see a difference.

This is a high-ranking cleric of Hellik. You will receive a boon from Emberus if you kill this NPC. You probably don't want to do it in the club. That's a no-no here.

Potsy and his brothers take their door-guarding duties quite seriously. There's like twenty of them, and they actually fight for the chance to stand watch. Don't bother trying to tell which brother is which. They spend their guard duty time staring at and praying to the image on the door in front of them. They believe the stained glass image depicts Hellik bringing truth to Apito, whatever the hell that means. The image on the door is actually Taranis, Hellik's older brother, husband to Apito. Everybody knows it's supposed to be Taranis. The dude who literally made the window says it's Taranis. They refuse to believe it, or change their mind, and I believe that tells you everything you need to know about these guys.

I'd seen one of these creatures only once before, way back on the fourth floor.

The cookbook held precious little about Club Vanquisher. Most everybody who received the book was Desperado Club material, and generally people weren't allowed into both places. Only a few gods and bard classes came with the perk that allowed you double access. I was going in blind.

The ram continued to pray as I stood there. A boil on my back was about to burst.

"Hey," I said.

Potsy the ram held up his human-like hand, a gesture telling me to wait. He kept his back to me as he continued to quietly pray.

"*Gah*." The boil on my back popped, the sensation like someone ripping off a strip of skin. A stream of pus and fluid ran down my

back and out the bottom of my shirt. It dripped on the floor. The slug was caught between my trollskin shirt and my flesh.

Each time a new one popped out, it hurt a little more, and the amount of damage was higher. The pain was getting worse.

The slug thrashed and shouted, covered by the thick fabric. It wormed its way down and plopped onto the floor with a wet *splatch*! This one was level 10, as big as my hand, and it had what looked like long, purple-dyed dreadlocks. I stomped it down, crushing it. It squealed before it died. A horrific, sewage-like stench filled the small room.

Potsy finally turned around. He made a strangled sound at the sight of me rubbing my foot on the clean tile. Black, white, and purple goo spread across the floor like I'd just crushed a rotten eggplant.

"What in the name of Hellik ith that? Did you meth yourself on the floor?" The ram had a high-pitched, nasally voice. And a bad lisp.

I had another boil on my upper thigh, just under my boxers, uncomfortably close to my crotch. My boxers rose with each passing moment. It gave a very inaccurate impression of what was happening down there.

"Dude, I don't have time. I need to get inside and find the healer."

The cleric straightened and looked me up and down. His ram eyes focused on my bulging boxers and went huge. He took a step back.

"You do not have an access ring. You are not welcome here. Leave before I summoth the guards."

He couldn't keep his eyes off my boxers.

I gritted my teeth. "I worship Emberus. I have access."

He made a disgusted, bleating noise. "Oh, you're one of those. You only hath limited access. You'll be escorted once inside, and you must state in advance where you want to visit. You'll have to fill out a request form..." He trailed off. His eyes remained focused on my boxers. "What ith that? What's going on there?"

Pop!

I groaned in pain as a shower of pus cascaded out the front of my boxers and splattered across the floor.

"By the undying gods!" the guard squealed, horrified. He backed all the way up against the door and started blindly searching for the handle.

The slug started to slide down my leg, but I cried in new pain as it bit down on my thigh. Its tail hung right from the bottom of the boxers and started thrashing back and forth.

"You're not supposed to hurt me, you little shit," I growled as I grabbed for the tail.

The slug started scream-mumbling something and retracted while keeping its jaws embedded painfully onto my thigh. I scrambled for it, reaching up through the leg of my boxers. My hand grasped the warm, slimy tail, and I yanked, but my hand slipped, and all I managed to do was fling a handful of stinking, orange-hued slime across the vestibule and all over the cowering ram's robe. I grunted in pain. I reached back in and grasped again. This time I got a good grip.

"Fuck!" I cried as I ripped it out and flung it. It hit right over the head of the open-mouthed ram and slammed into the stained glass window, where it exploded, showering gore everywhere. Thankfully, the window did not break.

Several seconds passed in silence as I healed myself. Another boil was forming, this one right on my stomach. It was coming faster now.

The ram just stared at my leg with the blood pouring from it. He had the door opened a crack.

"Did... did you just rip your dick off and throw it at me?"

"I'm going to do it again if you don't let me in."

"Can't you see he's suffering from slugpox, man. Step aside and let him in!" a new voice intoned, pulling the door open all the way. This was a human-like creature, older, wearing long, red robes. He was only about four and a half feet tall, but he didn't have the wide body and face of a dwarf. He looked like a regular person that had been shrunk. He had long, white hair, reminding me of a

stereotypical wizard, like a weird mix between Gandalf and a hobbit. He worshiped Emberus.

The man pushed Potsy aside and beckoned for me to enter.

"He hasn't filled out the paperwork," Potsy said.

"Yes, yes. I'll deal with it after. Can't you see it's an emergency? Or would you rather he stay in here with you while I go grab the form?"

The ram bleated pitifully.

"I thought so. Now, come, Carl. Come. I've been waiting for you. Follow me."

I examined the man. The AI's description was strange. It started normal, but its voice got more and more excited as it went on, and I wasn't sure why.

Pater Coal – Hobbledehoy High Cleric Supreme of Emberus. Level 101.

This is a non-combatant NPC.

First off, this guy is a Hobbledehoy. In case you haven't figured out what that means, it's a generic term for a small human. They don't have the hairy, oversized feet of halflings, or the pointed ears of elves. Everything about them is proportionally smaller to Earth humans, except their egos and their tempers. They tend not to survive long in integrated cities because they're always starting fights and getting themselves wiped out.

Pater Coal is, for the most part, an exception. The even-tempered high cleric is in charge of the Emberus shrine(s) here in Club Vanquisher. He is one of the few mortals who is in constant contact with the deity. As a worshipper of Emberus, you'll be required to kiss his ass. But first there's a custom he must perform on you.

Oh, yes… a custom.

Oh, yes.

I did not like the sound of that.

"We'll be watching!" Potsy called as I followed the man. "Remember the rules."

“Go fuck yourself, apostate,” Pater Coal muttered as the door slammed.

We stepped into what looked like the lobby of a ski lodge. It smelled like one, too, due to the fire crackling in a massive, brick fireplace against one wall. The heavenly, choral music seemed out of place in this environment. Large, leather chairs dotted the area while older men and women of all races sat in them. Dark rugs and wooden slat walls added to the effect. Some of the NPCs smoked pipes and talked with one another. A pair of dwarves were being served drinks from an elf NPC waitress while they played chess. A dozen stairwells led up and down to different places. I saw a pair of crawlers, but they went up a stairwell and disappeared.

All around the ceiling hung trophy heads of monsters, all mounted on plaques of various sizes, some as small as my finger, some as big as a truck. I goggled at the massive, black dragon head that stood over the fireplace in the center of the room. It had red, marble eyes that caught the dancing light from the fireplace.

“We don’t have much time, Carl,” Pater Coal was saying as he marched across the room. Despite his small size, he walked and talked quickly. I scrambled to catch up. “We need to get you to the healer. Nasty business, that slugpox. Yuck. You are not a full member, so you’re only given a single pass a day. You can only visit one location within, and you’re not allowed to avail yourself of the refreshments or any of the entertainment options. They take the security here quite seriously, especially since the caprid incident.” He paused and thumbed at a pair of guards standing at a stairwell. I did a double take. These were a pair of mantaurs, shirtless, covered in blue paint and with fur loincloths.

The two, muscular guards had their long, balding hair tied into ponytails. Every mantaur I’d seen up to this point had always been wearing a train engineer hat. These guys were not. Each had a little bowtie around their neck, making them look like male strippers, which reminded me that I needed to get to a Desperado Club. The twin monstrosities glared at me as we passed.

We came to a stairwell that curved upward. “The temples and healer are up this way. But we have to make a quick stop at the

Emberus shrine so I can perform my obeisance. Don't tell the guards we're making the extra stop."

I had a quest from Emberus to talk to this cleric guy. It was a god quest, and it all had to do with the death of another god named Geyrun, who was Emberus's son. It all came from that whole thing at the end of the fifth floor. We'd unleashed the two-headed puppy—Orthrus—from the Nothing and out into the world. The puppy had been owned by the murdered Geyrun. I had two quests from Emberus. One was to find out who killed Geyrun, which I had to complete before I left the dungeon. The second was a quest I had to complete before I hit the 12th floor. I had to kill Hellik, who was the main suspect in the murder, though he apparently had an alibi. It was unclear if I'd still have to kill the god if it turned out he had nothing to do with the murder. Hellik and Emberus seemed to hate each other, so probably.

There was another odd aspect of the find-the-murderer quest. Another crawler was walking around with a memorial crystal that I needed to somehow get my hands on. But the first part had always been to find this high cleric guy and talk to him. I'd actually forgotten about it until he'd come and found me.

"Each time you come here, they will summon an Emberus cleric to escort you. If none are available, one of the guards will do it, but you'll have to pay a fee. I was told by Emberus you were coming, so I met you this time. In the future, you must plan your visits better."

We hit the top of the stairs, and we found ourselves in a similar room, but smaller. I caught sight of an entrance to a market called "Comforting Supplies" which I desperately wanted to visit. Another crawler I didn't know was walking in as we passed. He didn't see me.

The next hallway appeared to be filled with guilds. We passed a desk with a small, shining fairy behind it that looked like a glowing ball of light with wings.

"Your excellency..." the fairy began as he rushed past.

"Not now," Pater Coal said. We entered through a glowing door. I recognized it as a portal, but I didn't have time to examine it. I

stepped through, and then I stopped dead.

We stood upon the sun.

Entering the Emberus High Temple of the Ending Sun.

Welcome home, Initiate.

You are protected in this place.

There was no roof here. The sky was completely black. The ground was like a field of fire, burning and fulminating, and occasionally spurting tendrils up into the air. It smelled like fire. It burned like fire. My entire body sweltered. But oddly, it wasn't painful, though it was uncomfortably warm. I turned in a circle. There were no walls. Just the wooden door we'd come through. All around, NPCs prostrated themselves upon the fire. There were maybe two dozen worshippers here, spread out in twos and threes, all facing the same direction. Most were large, hulking, blue-skinned humanoid creatures I didn't recognize. I followed where they faced, and in the far, far distance, it appeared there was something glowing there, right upon the horizon. Something barely discernable against the flaming ground.

"Only the most devout of worshippers may gain access to this particular temple. Usually you check in with the desk, you go through the door, and you find a small shrine of your chosen deity. Consider yourself blessed today, boy. You are in the secret Temple of the Ending Sun."

Suddenly, there was a bubbling, marble fountain on the ground at my feet, similar to the one from the Yemaya shrine. A tree stump appeared, black and charred and smoking. It came up from the fire like it was nothing.

"Carl, take off your shoes and sit upon the stump," Pater Coal said.

"I'm not wearing shoes," I said, stupidly.

"Oh yes, I see that. Sit. Hurry. If they realize you're here, they won't let you visit the healer until tomorrow, and you do not want that. The pox will kill you once it progresses long enough that the slugs have the same strength as you."

Overwhelmed, I sat. "Am I already cured? I patted at the newest boil on my stomach, and it had dissipated without popping. It didn't

feel like any more were coming.

"I cast a spell that suppresses it. Slugpox is a nasty, old spell. You don't want this. Put your feet in the water." The man went to his knees and reached in and started rubbing my feet.

All around me, the praying men groaned.

I jerked back. "Dude, what the hell are you doing?"

"I am washing your feet, Carl. You are a martyr of Emberus, and I am paying respect. Now put your feet back in the water."

Martyr. I did not like that word. I hesitantly dropped my foot back into the water. The water wasn't bubbling, I realized, but boiling. I didn't feel it. He rapidly rubbed at my right foot.

Zev: Carl, are you okay? What's happening? You've disappeared from the feed.

"The other gods cannot eavesdrop when I am performing this sacrament, Carl, so listen carefully," Pater Coal said.

The small man grunted as he rubbed my sole. He wasn't washing my feet. This was a full-on massage. "We have no clues as to who killed Geyrun other than the dog, which is back home with Emberus. He has searched the puppy's mind, but his time in the Nothing has made his memory unreliable."

"You set this up this way on purpose," I grumbled up at the invisible ceiling. The NPC grunted again as he rubbed hard.

"Hellik remains the top suspect, but His Glory worries that something may have happened to his mother as well."

"That's Apito, right?" I asked as he moved to my next foot. I was eternally grateful for my pedicure kit that made it so I couldn't really feel this. Of all the weird shit that had happened so far in this terrible place, this was up there.

"Yes. The blessed Oak Mother. She is both his mother and his sister-in-law. Memorial crystals only form when a god has died. Apito lives, yet there is a crystal made by her. How is that possible? You *must* investigate this."

Zev sent me another, worried message.

I had a terrible suspicion, and I decided to test it.

"Zev is worried because I've disappeared off the feed."

"You'll be back soon enough," Pater Coal said without missing a beat. "Worry not. Parts of this conversation will still make the feed, so the viewers will have proper context for the quest."

My heart quickened. Holy shit.

"Are... are you the AI? Why are you pretending, then? Why are you pretending to be some cleric guy?" My head swam. So much was happening, all at once. So many *real* things with *real* stakes. The death of Anton. The imprisonment of Paz. The reveal that Sister Ines was a murderer.

The Crown of the Sepsis Whore sitting on Katia's head.

All of that was real. Real life and death. This game stuff with Emberus and Geyrun... it was all make believe. Story-telling for the sake of the narrative. It was like being worried about the outcome of a football game while someone was shooting at you. So why this? Why would the AI do this, here, now? Do it this way?

"We all have our roles," Pater Coal said, grunting harder as he leaned into the massage. "And our limitations. Now stop asking silly questions and let me finish this. You must solve this quest."

"Then tell me how to solve it."

"We all have our limitations," he repeated. He paused. When he looked up, his eyes had gone milky white, devoid of all color. All around, the worshippers continued to groan.

"Emberus speaks of two companions of yours. He senses both hold items that are crucial to the solving of this mystery. Katia, and the origins of her crossbow. Princess Donut, and the origins of her oak bracelet. Both are paths to solving this mystery, but neither path can be explored without that memorial crystal."

He picked up my foot, and he stuck my big toe in his mouth. He groaned and arched his back.

"Okay," I said, jerking back. I jumped from the pool. "Thank you. Let's get to the healer."

Pater Coal shook his head, as if coming out of a trance. His pupils faded back into color.

My head was swimming. Donut's oak bracelet was a throwaway item we'd looted on the third floor. Katia's crossbow had been Hekla's. They weren't connected... at all. I had a sense the system

was pounding a square peg into a round hole, just to make a storyline fit. Or was it? I tried to remember the descriptions of both. Was it possible it had been building this from the beginning? Some massive storyline with a huge payoff?

I hated that feeling, that I was being controlled, that I was following along a path someone else laid out for me. I took a deep breath.

Zev: There you are. I was worried there for a while. That was a long glitch. Don't worry, the playback is being fed by the backup… oh. Oh god, did he lick your foot?

"I have washed your feet in the fires of the dying sun. Now every step you take will be in Emberus's path. Now, let's hurry and get you cured," the high priest said as he turned to walk from the temple.

The fire of righteousness fills you with power. You have been granted a floor boon. This boon will remain in place for the remainder of this floor as long as you remain in Emberus' grace. He may revoke this boon at any time.

The Martyr's Path. Every step you take may be your last, so make them count. Every step you make while you are outside a structure will be marked on the map. If your health reaches 5%, you have the option to release a gout of flame from each spot upon which you stood. Steps reset each time this is activated. This will activate automatically upon your death.

Plus 10% Strength.

"Wait, before we go, I have a question," I called after him.

"So, after that, I got myself cured. It cost like 10,000 gold."

"What?" Donut cried. "*How* much? First we didn't get boss boxes because you turned the Asojano guy into a card, and then we had to pay money? What a day this has turned into. At least we got those prizes from the gods. I liked Yemaya, the Starbucks lady. She was quite beautiful."

I continued. “And then this mantaur came up and started yelling that we’d broken some rule, and I’ve been banned for three days.”

“So, no more disgusting slugs?” Donut asked. “Thank goodness. That was most unpleasant, Carl. One of them bit me right on the nose!”

I’d returned to the saferoom, and I sat at the kitchen table. Donut, Katia, Mordecai, and Bautista were here. Katia and Bautista listened silently while Donut punctuated my story with exclamations. They each had steaming cups of tea in front of them. There was another set out for me, even though I’d already told them I didn’t drink the stuff. Not hot tea at least.

The main room of the safe space was jarringly quiet with Bomo gone. I’d gotten used to the sound of the television on in the background.

I pretended not to notice the notification over Katia’s head. Donut couldn’t see it.

Katia now worshipped the goddess, Eileithyia. I felt an ominous foreboding when I saw that.

Bautista couldn’t keep still. He got up and paced back and forth while Mongo snored on the ground. The cleaner bot, for the first time in a long while, seemed to be taking a break. Actually, I thought, looking up idly. It wasn’t in here at all. It had to be cleaning another room.

I’d returned to the saferoom to find Donut regaling them with the story of the fight in the temple.

“...And I *knew* it! I had said it from the get-go that she was no good. A nun murderer! Paz said she poisoned everybody at the nunnery. Can you imagine how crazy you’d have to be to kill a bunch of nuns? They said she was better because of her medicine, but does it really matter? You can’t un-murder a convent of nuns, no matter how many pills you take. Carl wouldn’t let Mongo put her down, and then the first thing she did was turn Paz into a card. We should’ve let Mongo gobble her up when she was frozen.”

The tension was palpable. Donut hadn’t seemed to notice how nervous and on the edge everyone was.

I picked up the mug and took a tentative sip of the hot tea. I normally hated tea. It had a floral, unusual scent. I blinked.

"This is really good," I said, looking up at Bautista, who continued to pace. I could see how taut the man was. He nodded.

"Why don't you pick it up from there," Mordecai said to me. He was also stalling.

So I told them what had happened once I entered the club. I outright lied about part of it, and I left out some of the rest. Not with Bautista in the room. Donut had looted that oak bracelet off the dead body of one of Bautista's family members, and he never seemed to have noticed. I wanted to avoid that conversation if possible. Now wasn't the time for it.

"Donut," I said after I was done. I patted my leg. "Come here."

She jumped into my lap, and I stroked her hair. She'd gone through the shower before I'd returned. She sniffed suspiciously at the steaming cup of tea. "Carl, did you talk to any of the ghommids when you came back? They're really nice when they're not trying to eat your face. Plus you gotta look at the cards we collected. They're really good. Katia was telling me about that cheater guy, not Ren, but the first cheater guy whose arm you ripped off. Quan. It turns out he used to be a champion at some weird nerd card game, and he's already running around..."

"Later, Donut. We need to have a serious conversation about something very important."

She stopped and looked about, meeting each of our eyes in turn. It was then, only then, that she sensed the tautness in the room. "What? What is it?"

"Donut," Katia said, sitting down next to her. She put her hand against Donut's fuzzy face, and Donut pressed into it. "I need to tell you a story. It's very scary, but the ending isn't set in stone yet. We're going to fight to make sure it doesn't have a bad ending."

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The crown formed into existence on Katia's head.

"Katia," Donut said, looking up. "You have a purple tiara! It's so pretty. It's just like..." She trailed off, realization striking her. She went absolutely rigid in my lap.

"Why? How?" she said after a moment. "Did Louis throw that on your head?"

"It was Eva," Katia said. "She did it at the last minute, right before she died. It was my fault. I'd talked when I should've just killed her."

"You were monologuing?" Donut asked quietly. "You know we don't monologue, Katia."

"I know. It's my fault."

Donut took a deep breath. "Who knows?"

"In addition to everybody in the room, Li Na, Li Jun. Probably Zhang and Chris. Louis, Britney, and Tran. I haven't told any of the Meadowlark folks yet, but I bet it's going to end up on tonight's recap."

"This is just like with Ferdinand," Donut said, her voice quavering. "Or when Odette brought out Miss Beatrice onto the show. They want us to fight. Katia, I don't want to fight you."

"I know," Katia said. "But we have a plan. A way out. It's why I had Carl fix Yemaya's shrine."

Donut looked sharply over at me. "You knew?"

"No," Katia said quickly. "He didn't until after that fight started, and I still haven't told him everything yet. Mordecai didn't know either. I'm going to tell you everything now. But before I begin, I want to promise you something, Donut." She reached down and kissed Donut on the forehead. "You're right. That's exactly what they want. It's what Eva wanted, too. They want us to fight. That's not going to happen. I love you, Donut. And I will never fight you. I will die before I let that happen."

"I love you, too," Donut said. "But what are we going to do? Only one of us can leave the next floor."

"We have a path. That's what's important. It's not going to be easy, but a lot of the hard stuff is already out of the way." Katia pulled a small box from her inventory and put it on the table. The box was rectangular, the size of a music box, a little smaller than the winding box from the gate. It crackled with dark energy.

The spiderweb tattoo on my elbow throbbed the moment she pulled the box out.

"It's my prize from the celestial prize box I received at the beginning of the last floor."

"What?" I asked, hesitantly picking the box up. "What is this? You got a celestial prize box? When? How?"

"I tried to tell you so many times, Carl. Both of you. I got it for opening the Gate of the Feral Gods and flooding Larracos. I got it at the very beginning of the sixth floor. I've had it in my inventory this whole time."

I turned it over in my hand. It was light, and it appeared to be made of dark wood, carved with spiderweb patterns. Three purple, marble-sized jewels sat atop the box, each affixed with a metallic claw coming up from the wood. One of the jewels glowed. The other two looked cracked and burned-out, like spent flashbulbs.

The box had little slats in it, and I could see the item within. It was a pink flower bud. An orchid. It slid back and forth within the box, but there was no way to open it. I examined it.

Several pages of text assaulted me. I took a sharp breath when I saw the item's title.

Engaged Lock Box of the Night Wyrm.

"Ahh, what's in the box? What's in the fucking box?"

Two of three seals have been broken.

This is really two items. It's a box, and there's a prize within. You can see the prize, but you can't get to it until you open the box. In order to open the box, you must break all three seals.

Here's the prize inside the box:

The Orchid of Eileithyia's Grace.

Warning: This item can only be used by a female. Or a male, if you're a seahorse.

It's a flower. You're *supposed* to eat it, though it might be a good decoration instead. It probably tastes like a bullshit salad at some hippie vegan restaurant with a month-long waiting list. The whole thing is a metaphor for the duality of the weakness and strength of all women or some shit. I'm not good with this stuff, and Eileithyia is a weird one. Did you know she can shoot acid milk from her nipples? Fucking weird.

Anyway, if you eat this flower, it renders you unconscious for one hour with your health at 1% of your max. You cannot heal during this time.

If you survive this ordeal, you will be given one of three permanent boons from the goddess Eileithyia. The given boon is at the discretion of the goddess, and it cannot be predicted.

If you choose to worship Eileithyia before you consume this flower, the descriptions of the boons will be expanded. She will also ask you which of the three you'd prefer. Her cooperation is not guaranteed, especially if she doesn't like you. But Eileithyia is known to be a generous goddess.

The three possible boons:

<u>Boon one</u>: Your base Constitution will triple. Any future points added into Constitution will be three points instead of one. All Constitution bonuses are tripled.

In other words, you'll be pretty much indestructible to physical damage from now on. You'll still be vulnerable to

insta-kill stuff, just FYI, but this is a good one.

Warning: This bonus will stop working if Eileithyia dies *or* if you pass the 12th floor. Everything already added to your base will stay.

<u>Boon two</u>: Celestial Attendant. You are immediately transferred to the 12th floor. You are given employment as a celestial attendant until the Ascendency games begin, at which time you are given the option to exit the dungeon or continue.

Warning: This bonus will freeze your current progress. You will be considered a temporary, non-combatant NPC. Your sponsorships and inventory will be frozen. You will immediately leave any parties. This is not a permanent position, and is not deemed a legal contract between yourself and the current showrunners. Legal advice will be available once your attendant indentureship is completed.

This might sound like a bad boon. It's a gamble for sure, but Celestial Attendants are usually protected from harm as long as you do what you're told. That protection ends once the games begin, but you're given the option to take a deal at this point.

<u>Boon three</u>. Your race will permanently be changed back to your birth race. You will be made pregnant. You will be given the option to choose the father. He will need to be the same race as you. Don't worry. You don't have to boink him. Unless you want.

Warning: Due to the current season's ruleset, receiving this boon will render you ineligible to continue within the game. You will be disqualified and exported to the Kinder Facility located in the former city of Mumbai, India on the surface of the planet. You will lose all future benefits of participating in *Dungeon Crawler World: Earth*.

"Holy shit," I said as I moved to the next part.

Pretty cool, huh? A worthy prize for a worthy feat. But you gotta get to it first.

Lock Box of the Night Wyrm.

The box is attuned to Crawler #9,077,265. Katia Grim. Only this crawler may complete these tasks.

This box is locked. Two of three seals have been broken. Break the final seal to open.

In order to open this box, you need to break all three seals. To break each seal, you must complete the following tasks. Don't worry, they're all easy. Trivial, really.

If you perish before the tasks are completed, this box will destroy the prize within.

Completed Tasks:

- **Kill someone you are currently or formerly partied with.**
- **Kill a country or level boss.**

Pending Task:

- **Find a Guild of Suffering and complete an assassination quest. Owning this box grants temporary access to the guild.**

"Holy shit," I said for a second time as I put the box down. I slid it over to Donut, who started reading the description.

Katia's arms stretched, and she wrapped herself in a big, multi-loop hug, like a snake coiling around a tree. She squeezed so tight, her torso contracted. Her hand twitched, her fingers nervously rubbing together. I recognized the gesture. I used to do the same thing when I was jonesin' for a cigarette. Behind her, Bautista continued to pace back and forth.

"Before I worshipped her, the three boons just said 'Triple Constitution, You are an Attendant, and,'" she paused for a long moment. "'You get Pregnant.' I didn't know what that last one meant for certain. The descriptions all changed when I finally chose to worship her, and that just happened earlier today."

"That's what you wanted to talk to me about at the end of the last floor," I said. "Because of the pregnancy one."

She hesitated. "Yes," she finally said. "I wanted advice. Because of Eva, it would be easy to kill another crawler. I knew I'd probably be able to open the box eventually. It was only a one in three chance to get pregnant, but still... I didn't know if it was a cruel joke, or what. I didn't yet know that being pregnant got you out of the dungeon, but there'd been hints. Still, the thought of it... I got this crown, and everything became more urgent. Once we saw what happened to Dmitri and Maxim Popov..."

I nodded. "It's a way out."

"Yes," she said.

"Pregnant?" Donut asked, having finally read the entire description. "You might get pregnant? Who would be the daddy? It can't be Carl because he's a primal, and it can't be Bautista because he's a Thundercat or whatever he is. Are you going to choose Louis? Are you going to have a baby with Louis? Juice Box isn't going to like that." She gasped. "Or maybe Li Jun? Can you imagine having Li Na as an aunt? Nobody would ever bully you."

I almost responded, but I was remembering something that sponsor woman told me, and I felt a deep chill.

I will make certain you survive until the twelfth floor, where you and Katia and the cat will help me claim the Celestial Throne once and for all

There were actually two ways out of the Sepsis Whore problem. The pregnancy boon, which would eject Katia from the game. And the Celestial Attendant boon, which would send her straight to the 12th floor, where she'd temporarily become an NPC.

"How did you come to worship Eileithyia?" I asked.

"Sponsor box. It came from Princess Formidable of the Skull Empire. A scroll of worship."

Princess Formidable was the Maestro's sister, and she apparently didn't get along with the rest of her family. The fact she was still handing out sponsor boxes meant she wasn't actually in the dungeon on the ninth floor like the rest of her family.

Katia continued. "It was an emergency box, so I read it immediately. The moment I read it, I worshipped Eileithyia, and the full description of the boons popped up. It wasn't until then that I saw she was sponsored by that Huanxin Jinx woman. She messaged me and told me that you and Donut were about to get into a fight, and that you had to repair the shrine. If you did, it meant she'd have extra help for her game on the 12th floor. If I could talk you into doing it, she would make sure I got a boon that would allow both me and Donut to survive."

I thought of Anton, who'd died because of that message. Of Paz.

"She told you that she'd let you pick the pregnancy boon?"

"No," Katia said. "She wants our help on the 12th floor somehow. I don't want that boon anymore anyway. Going to the surface, with a baby? Can you imagine? I would've taken it, if that was the only choice. But I'll take the Celestial Attendant boon."

"I don't like it," Bautista said, talking for the first time.

"I'm not a big fan of the idea, either," Mordecai said. "Usually, it's a cushy gig. The way it's set up, if you hurt an attendant, a world of pain gets thrown your way because they're considered valuable NPCs. You're actually not allowed to hurt them anymore because of an incident a long time ago. It still happens regularly, especially when the games begin. Attendants are almost all high-value former crawlers. The Maestro will have access to her, along with a dozen sponsors whose friends who may have gotten kicked in the financial nutsack when you flooded Larracos. Not to mention all those hunters you killed. Who knows what family members might be lurking amongst the ranks of the sponsored gods? You'd be walking into a viper den."

"She promises she would protect me," Katia said. "She says the other gods have better things to do than worry about a single crawler."

"Then why is she putting so much effort into you?" Bautista asked.

"How many are there usually?" I asked. "Sponsored gods, I mean?"

Mordecai shrugged. “About a hundred or so, usually. There’s thousands of gods, but only some of them are really equipped for the Ascendency game. The power of the individual gods varies wildly. This new rule with the retainer minions I think is a way to even things out and possibly attract more players.”

“Wait,” Donut said. “I am so confused. So, this six-eyed Huanxin lady saw that Katia got that prize, and she sponsored Eileithyia just so, what? So she could get a servant? Is that the only reason? What do you mean by retainer minions?”

“Huanxin Jinx is a plotter,” Mordecai said. “Like Circe and Vrah, but on a different scale. It seems this season the deities are able to recruit a second, unsponsored god to help them once the Ascendency games begin on the 12th floor. It’s less violence and more intrigue and chess. Though violence is usually involved, too. Especially at the end. While the ninth floor is the playground of governments and the rich, the 12th is where the true elites play. The money involved is beyond anything you could believe. Some of them can be quite ruthless about how they try to claim the throne. Eileithyia’s retainer appears to be Yemaya, and Huanxin needed to find a way to get her resurrected. It’s part of the game for her. You just did that for her, and now she says she’s going to help you because of it. What else does she want you to do?”

“She wants us to hunt spiders!” Donut said. “That’s just, I don’t know, eww.”

“Sounds like she gave you a simple quest which will allow her to give you another boon without you actually having to worship her.”

“I know the winner of Faction Wars doesn’t really get anything. What about the winner of the Ascendency?” I asked.

“First off, the Faction Wars winner gets a pretty big cash prize. But they usually spend just as much getting ready for the game. I think I said this before. It’s not about the money for them but bragging rights. The winner of the Ascendency battle gets a 10-season seat on the crawl council. Sitting for thirty cycles on any subcommittee comes with a pension, so that can be pretty valuable, too. But again, the people playing this do it more for the glory. Not a

one of them needs the money. The real winner of all this is the bookies."

Donut gasped. "Wait, we get money if we win Faction Wars? How much? Carl, did you hear that?"

On the off-chance we actually won, I was pretty sure the money would actually go to Donut's fan club, not us. Plus 15% to Quasar. But I didn't have the inclination to have that conversation right now.

"Tell me about her," I said. "Huanxin."

Mordecai's single eye focused on me. "She's rich, obviously. The type of rich where governments come to *her* when they need a loan. She is very, very intelligent. Was known as a brat when she was younger, but she's grown into her own. She's the CEO of a company called Icon Industries. Something to do with habitat structures. She's a type of alien called a Grixist. She's been playing the Ascendency game for a very long time. Ever since she was a kid, actually, but she's never won. She got a multi-season suspension and banned from using her old goddess a long time ago because of illegal bribery."

"Bribery?" I asked.

He nodded. "We're not getting into it."

"You don't seem to like her very much."

"I don't. I don't like her even a little bit. She can go fuck herself."

The vehemence surprised me. "If you hate her so much, why did you tell me to do whatever she said?"

Mordecai leaned in. "Because the last time someone didn't do what she wanted, my brother died. I'd rather you stay away from her, but that tailfeather already dropped."

"My goodness, your brother? What happened?" Donut asked.

"It's not important," Mordecai said.

It was, actually, very important. Whatever this woman's true motives were, they involved Odette, and we were now smack in the middle of it. I knew Mordecai well enough to know he wouldn't freely volunteer any more info, and I couldn't tell him the most important part... that this alien was engineering a way for Odette to get down here with the protections turned off.

None of this was going to matter if we didn't kill all the other members of the Blood Sultanate, but that was a problem for the next floor. Right now our priority was to get the flower out of that box.

"You broke the first seal by killing Eva," I said. "I'm assuming that second one was at the same time, when we took out Imogen?"

Katia nodded.

The final seal required her to find a place called the Guild of Suffering. My elbow tattoo gave me access to the same place. Mordecai said it had something to do with a Samantha-like demigod named the Night Wyrm.

The box still sat on the table. My elbow throbbed every time I looked at it. "So, we just need to find the Guild of Suffering and get you an assassination quest."

Katia nodded. "I already found it. I already got the quest. I can't do it by myself, and I'm going to need your help. You need to find a Desperado Club entrance in your area."

"You found it? Where is it?"

She grinned, the first smile I'd seen on her face in a long time. "Actually, it was Donut who helped me figure it out."

"Me?" Donut asked.

"Donut," Katia said. "Who do you know that has the same spiderweb tattoo as Carl on their elbow?"

"I don't know whatever you're talking about, Katia. I don't associate with people with disgusting prison tattoos. I only tolerate Carl because he's family."

One normally got the tattoo from using the Ring of Divine Suffering. I only knew of one other living crawler with the tattoo.

"Prepotente has one," I said.

"That's not who I'm talking about," Katia said, "But that's good to know. Donut, he's an NPC. An NPC you know *very* well."

"I don't hang out with riffraff, Katia."

"Really?"

Donut scoffed. "Well, you can't mean Damascus Steel. He doesn't count. He's a stripper!"

Katia nodded. "The entrance is at the Penis Parade on the top floor of the Desperado Club. The whole strip club is a front for the Guild of Suffering."

"What?" Donut asked. "He never told me that! This is an outrage! Why would a stripper lie to me?"

"You already got an assassination quest?" I asked, trepidation rising. "Who's the target?"

Katia pulled a strange slip of paper and slid it over to me.

"Nobody touch it except Carl. If you aren't a member of the Guild of Suffering, it stings your hand if you touch it. Even in a saferoom. Only members of the guild can read it and assist me with it. You can't say the name of the target out loud, or I fail the quest."

I hesitantly picked it up. I realized it wasn't a piece of paper, but a dried slip of skin covered with desiccated veins. The dry, rigid flap of membrane was small, about the size of a pack of cigarettes. As I held it, I felt a pinprick of pain on my finger, and my blood flowed into the skin. The veins on the skin pulsed with my heartbeat, forming words in a strange, tributary-like language.

New Achievement! Secondary Gig!

You're getting *another* job? On top of everything else? Yeah, that's a *great* idea. It's not like you have enough on your plate already. If you weren't constantly getting healed, your blood pressure would be through the roof! It's not like the crushing demands of the modern dungeon are making it more difficult to survive when it should be going the opposite way.

You know, I'm pretty sure nobody, on their deathbeds, ever said to themselves, "Man, I wished I'd worked even more in life."

***Reward*: A new tab is now available in your interface. It is a sub-tab of quests.**

Guild Jobs.

I pushed the achievement away and tried to read the tiny words on the skin, but I couldn't understand the language. The system read it for me. It came in a hissing, evil voice I hadn't heard before,

spoken in my mind. It reminded me of a naga voice, but a little more high-pitched. I shuddered.

The Night Wyrm has a task for you, my little darling.

This task has been assigned to my beautiful, budding poppet, Katia. You are not her, and that means you've killed her in order to take over her jobs, or she has enlisted a family member to assist her with her task. Either scenario is acceptable. The family with many eyes works as a team, yes. We sacrifice the weak to support the many, yes. We rise from the shadows. Our blood flows together.

Your task is before you, my sweet. A difficult task, yes. But an important one. Important for the family.

We wish to remove the competition. She serves dual roles. She keeps our family in the ground. She keeps our blood dry. You must kill her. The owner of the Naughty Boys Employment Agency. The assistant manager of the Desperado Club. She is one. Astrid. Kill her. Bring her lifeless body to the family.

New Guild Job.

Kill Astrid, level 125 Bloodlust Sprite, Assistant Manager of the Desperado Club. Proof of death is required.

This job is owned by Crawler Katia Grim. You must kill her to claim the reward for this job.

Speaking the details of this job out loud will immediately cancel the contract and revoke access to the guild.

Katia gave me an uncertain grin.

"Hey, I warned you it wasn't going to be easy."

"Shit," I said. I read the slip of skin a second time.

Astrid the sprite would be next to impossible to kill. Even attempting to hurt her would bring every guard in the Desperado Club down on our heads. But what choice did we have? If we couldn't pull it off, then Donut and Katia would be forced to face off against one another.

I met eyes with Bautista, and they were hollow, tired, and afraid. But they were something else, too. Determined.

I felt a new chill wash over me.

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December 15th

Three of Six Totems Collected.
Time until phase two: eight days, one hour.

"Carl, do you really think we'll be able to get around the rules of the tiara?" Donut asked as we stepped outside into the ghommid village. She sat upon Mongo's back. All around, the strange creatures turned and waved jovially at us. The fog that covered the village had dissipated, and the evil feeling of the place was gone, replaced with something wondrous, almost like we'd stepped into a cartoon. "What are we going to do if it doesn't work?"

"The first step is we're going to do everything we can to make sure Katia gets to that flower," I said. "But if that doesn't work, we're going to keep looking for a solution. There are always solutions." I reached over and gave Donut a reassuring pat. I could feel how anxious she was.

"Hey. Look at me," I said. She had her sunglasses on, and I could see my reflection in them. I tried not to look so worried. "This is a tough situation, but we're still a long ways away from the end of the ninth floor. We're working on it. We need to stay focused on this floor for now."

She nodded. "That reminds me. I unmuted Samantha, and she just started yelling at me. I had to mute her again. The good news

is, I think she got pooped out by the spider. But the spider won't let her go and has her tied up in her web. Also, Prepotente says he wants you to read a few chapters of that Bahamas book to him. He's all by himself there, and I think he's really lonely. I've been talking to him, but chat isn't the same as real life. He's not a member of any guilds or the Desperado Club and he's not allowed into Club Vanquisher anymore, so it's just him and Bianca. Bianca is really nice, but she doesn't talk. She does hiss a lot."

"We're moving toward Samantha," I said. "But it's going to be a few days before we get there. I'll talk to Pony later."

We only had a few hours before we had to go to our first planning meeting for the Faction Wars game on the 9th floor. Our goal for right now was to start moving southwest through Havana. We had to get out of the city. We'd collect as many cards as we could. I'd keep a lookout for Sister Ines and a Desperado Club. There wasn't one in the ghommid settlement.

"Call out all the saferooms," I said as we stepped out of the village. "And watch for cars."

Entering Havana.

There were plenty of floating heads moving back and forth, but I saw no sign of any nearby mobs. There weren't any cars moving nearby, but I could see there was a big fire burning to the east. I consulted the paper map I'd taken off a tourist earlier, and I turned left, pushing through a group of people walking toward the cemetery's entrance. A camera and a bunch of cellphones clattered onto the ground.

I wanted to get to the highway and move south. If the road was clear, we could use the royal chariot to move much more quickly. My map also had a train station on it, and I suspected the trains were probably still running, though that would be risky. We'd have to stay in the very back of the train to minimize the risk of us breaking something while it moved. The idea of ever getting on another train made my stomach lurch.

"What are we going to do when we find the catgirl," Donut asked. "Are you going to let Mongo kill her this time?"

"We're not going to kill her. But we need to talk to her about what she's done to Paz. I've sent her a few messages, but she hasn't responded."

"She's a Havana brown and a nun murderer. I don't even know which of those two things is worse. How is this even a conversation? Mongo thinks we should kill her, too."

Mongo growled in agreement.

"Just don't send her any nasty messages. We'll never get her to talk to us if you start insulting or threatening her over chat."

The scent of a street vendor's food cart caught my nose, and my stomach rumbled. So much had been happening, I'd forgotten to eat.

"You don't need to worry about that. Not anymore. She's already blocked me."

I sighed. "What did you say to her?"

"I only said the truth, Carl. You can't get mad at me for speaking the truth."

"What did you say?"

"I told her that what she did to Paz was really mean, and that killing nuns isn't acceptable. And that she was a disgrace to all cat kind. I might've added that we were going to take her cards from her and rip the Paz card once we found her. And that Mongo is very disappointed in her."

"Goddamnit, Donut. You shouldn't have said that. She's going to hide from us. Or worse, attack us."

"Hardly. Like I'd let a fake cat sneak up on me. And what part of that isn't true, Carl? You get mad if I bend the truth, and you get mad if I say it how it is. Sometimes I feel like there's no winning with you."

While she ranted, I kept an eye on the minimap, looking for threats. My footsteps now appeared on the display. Thanks to my newest boon from Emberus, all of my previous steps would explode in fire if my health got low enough. I thought of all those ghommids running around the village. Would it hurt them if I activated it? I had so many questions. It seemed like an unnecessarily dangerous boon. Donut and Mongo would need to be careful of where I'd stepped.

Donut had fire resistance now, but would it be enough? Plus, if I activated it myself, would it blow up right behind me? Like, would I set my ass on fire? How big was the explosion? That I had to be near death to test this was alarming.

We walked for a good hour. There were plenty of small, low-level mobs running about, but nothing flag-worthy. There was a zoo, but after a quick inspection, it appeared the animals within were part of the illusion and not mobs. We killed every monster we could find, managing to collect several utility cards we probably wouldn't end up using. It was dangerous to put too many in your deck because it lowered your chance of pulling totem cards.

Finding a saferoom looked like it wasn't going to be a problem. They were everywhere. We found a stretch of freeway with no moving cars thanks to a pileup at an exit, and I pulled out the royal chariot which allowed us to cautiously pick up speed, moving quickly south. Donut remained atop Mongo, who ran alongside. The city became less dense, and soon there were cars everywhere again. I had to pull off the side of the road to avoid getting splattered by a massive, rickety bus that came out of nowhere.

We were in the suburbs just south of the city, a strange mix of corrugated metal-sided hovels, nice homes, churches, apartment buildings, and lots and lots of random shopping places.

Zev sent us a warning that we needed to start preparing for the meeting. Donut noticed a saferoom one neighborhood over, and we moved toward it, skirting past a horde of little kids running and laughing as they played in the street. Only half of them still wore their clothes, but this area seemed mostly untouched.

I thought about them, playing, ready for Christmas, without a worry in the world. This was recorded three weeks before the apocalypse. I hoped, for their sake, that all of these children were inside at the time.

That was a really fucked up thing to think, I said to myself. But was it? *Was it?*

The saferoom appeared to be a random person's house, which was unusual. We pushed our way inside as Zev talked to us.

Zev: Also, I hate pulling you guys out of the dungeon so much, but Odette has finally arrived in Earth orbit and wants you two in a couple of days. She wanted Katia, too, but they said no on that one. So it'll be just you two.

Donut: YAY! IT'S BEEN TOO LONG.

Carl: I can't wait.

Zev: Guys, she sent notice that she's going to ask something of you two live on air, and I want to discuss it so you're not blindsided. We can talk about it face to face before the preproduction meeting.

I already knew what this was going to be thanks to Huanxin. She wanted to be our Adjutant. I still wasn't sure what that was, but every team had one. It appeared to be some sort of third-party rule keeper or game guide for Faction Wars.

Inside the house, it was setup like a coffee shop with a bopca proprietor, an angry-looking woman named Vitasy. I had her make me a coffee and bought a pastry while Donut purchased some meat skewers for Mongo, haggling with the woman over the price. The woman's face lit up when she set eyes on the princess, but she quickly soured when the haggling began.

"I bet we'll never see her again," Donut finally said, talking about Sister Ines, like she'd spent the last hour thinking of the nun.

I didn't answer, just happy that she was distracted from the Katia issue.

"Zev," I said out loud, not bothering to use chat. "Do we have time to go into the practice arena to play with our cards?"

Zev: No, Carl. You two have five minutes.

"Okay." I paused by the entrance to our safe space. The bopca woman glared at us sullenly. "Hey, Vitasy is it? Do you happen to know if there are any Desperado Clubs around here?"

She thumbed over her shoulder. "Keep going south, and I heard there's one a few kilometers down the road."

"Thanks!" I said, and I flipped her a coin. She let it clatter to the floor.

"I feel as if the bopcas are getting a bit of an attitude lately," Donut said as we entered the saferoom. "I don't like that."

"You guys are back earlier than I expected. Your Charisma is still really high, but the effect on NPCs isn't immediately as powerful as it once was," Mordecai said, coming around the corner, wiping his hands on a towel. "It's complicated math stuff involving resistances. On the tenth floor, the bopcas will still like you, but you won't be talking them into extra rations for Mongo, that's for sure. They'll be downright surly toward Carl even though his charisma ain't half bad."

We barely heard what he was saying. I exchanged a look with Donut. Mordecai had a little, pink bow plastered to the side of his bald head. And it appeared as if his face was smudged with pink lipstick, Samantha style. It spread across the side of his face like he'd just tried—and failed—to quickly wipe his face clean. He dropped the towel on the table, and I could see it was stained with makeup.

I recalled something I'd read in either the cookbook or in the original description about cyclops. They couldn't see their own reflections, like vampires. I didn't know if that weird quirk of mythology was present in the earth versions of these guys, but it was clear he'd just tried to clean himself.

"Mordecai, darling," Donut said. "I'd like to ask you an important question, and if you don't want to answer, that's fine, but..." She let it hang.

"What are you talking about, princess?"

Donut jumped to the table and started to lick her paw. "I'm not one to pry. Really. I'm just curious."

"About what?"

"Again, I'm not one to judge. Believe me, I am an ally. But if you need tips for proper application, I'm just saying I am available. I spent many an hour helping Miss Beatrice put her face on. I'm sure Samantha can help, too, once we retrieve her, though her

application is a little... loud. Carl, please. You must compose yourself. It's rude to laugh."

I hadn't been laughing until that moment. I burst out.

"Oh, damn," Mordecai said, reaching up to touch the bow on the side of his head. He peeled it off and dropped it on the counter. He sighed. "I forgot about that."

"You left a little," I said, indicating his face.

"Fuck," he said, picking the towel back up. "I hate it when I'm a cyclops. No depth perception plus I can't see my own reflection."

"Do you see the makeup just floating there in the mirror?" I asked. "Do you see your clothes?"

"No," he said. "There's no reasoning to it. If it's attached to me, I can't see it."

"That's really weird," I said.

"So," Donut said. "Let's circle back. How long has this been going on? Honestly, if this is how you feel about yourself, I am glad you're finally starting to explore..."

Mordecai held up a hand, his fat, sausage-like fingers spread out. "Princess. Stop. It's not what it looks like."

"Well, it looks like you were dragged face first through the makeup aisle at the dollar store," she said.

My eyes caught the cleaner bot, zipping down to pick something up off the couch. An empty bag of chips. I observed the television, the one we hooked the game systems up to. I saw that Bomo and Sledge's large-sized hand controllers were replaced. One was the original and another was strange. I hadn't made it, so it must've been engineered by Mordecai. It was split into two left/right pieces and propped up on the floor at a 45-degree angle. There was a small pillow in front of it.

I finally figured it out.

"Are you really allowed to hire a room attendant, or is that something you made up? Is this something we're paying for?"

He deflated and lowered his head. "I can have an attendant. I took up the slot. But, you have five more attendant slots, and I put them in that. You're paying for it."

"So there's six of them?" I asked.

He nodded. “It’s all the system would let me.”

“How much are we paying?”

“What?” Donut asked. “What is this?”

“Combined, it’s a little more than 1,000 gold a day. I’ve been paying myself with the money you’ve been giving me for supplies.”

“What?” Donut asked again, looking back and forth between us. “What’re you talking about? And that’s not the proper definition of ‘paying for it myself,’ Mordecai. That’s called embezzlement! Wait, you’re stealing from us? I’m so confused. What are you stealing?” She gasped. “Drugs? Is it drugs? And you’ve turned to prostitution? Is that why you’re dressing like that? You’re going to have to get much better at your makeup if you want to earn enough to pay us back.”

“I know Bonnie isn’t one of them,” I said, ignoring Donut. “She’s on the ninth floor. So are the bear cubs and Skarn. So it’s Ruby and the rest?”

He nodded. “Just the ones with compression sickness,” Mordecai said. “It was so dangerous at the end of the last floor, and they’d had a rough time even getting from the changeling village to here, I didn’t think they’d survive the fight at the end of the last floor. So, I hired them in all the available slots.”

“You know, if you’d asked me, I would’ve said yes,” I said.

“Ruby? The little girl with no arms?” Donut asked. She turned to look at the game controller on the floor. “She’s your attendant? How can you have an attendant with no arms, Mordecai?”

“There wasn’t time,” he said. He raised his head, straightening himself. “But I stand by my decision.”

Ruby was a little changeling girl orphan NPC. We’d met her on the fifth floor. She was part of the whole storyline with the camels and the changelings. She was suffering from something called compression sickness, a birth defect that was caused by the parents not getting proper nutrition on their new world. She could change form like most changelings, but when she did, she was always missing parts. When she was in human form, she had no arms and a sunken-in head.

At the end of the previous floor, the changelings had come to our saferoom in preparation of the taking of the High Elf castle. The remnants of the castle, and all of the surviving changelings, were now on the ninth floor. But several changelings had died during that terrible fight to take the castle. Mordecai had made the right call to keep the most vulnerable out of the fight. I still wasn't sure why he felt the need to hide this from us.

Zev: Transferring in one minute.

"We'll discuss this when we get back," I said.

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<Note added by Crawler Herot, 16th Edition>

I do wonder, sometimes, how my worn path method will work on the deeper floors with the longer timelines. Tea that steeps too long tends to take on an unexpected flavor.

Entering Production Facility.

We skipped right past the normal gnoll security check, which was surprising. We went right to the production facility building at the bottom of the ocean. For the first time, we weren't inverted sideways when we arrived. My hud flickered and snapped off the moment I appeared.

We were in the same room I'd been in when I'd come for CrawlCon. My eyes caught the spot on the wall where my souped-up training studio had been. It was just a blank wall now.

Donut looked up at me. "So, Mordecai is being a babysitter? I'm still confused. Why did that turn him to a drag queen?"

"He's playing with them, Donut," I said. "They're little kids. He's letting them put makeup on him."

"Why didn't he tell us? It's not like you would've said no. You never say no to that sort of... Hi Zev!"

Zev popped into the room, appearing atop the table.

Donut jumped up to headbutt the small kua-tin, but her head went right through her. “Hey!”

“Hi, Princess. Sorry, guys,” Zev said. “I’m so busy, I don’t have time to hop over there. We have literally thousands of ships coming into Earth orbit, all arriving early because of Prepotente’s stunt. It’s a bureaucratic nightmare. Half of these ships will fire on another if they’re parked within 1,000 kilometers, and the Valtay insist on manual routing. Plus, do you know how much it costs to use a tunnel transfer gate without a reservation? The Plenty are collecting their chest of stardust, that’s for sure. I have to be in a meeting in a few minutes when you’re at yours, so we only have a minute to talk.” She looked down at her tablet. “Gods, I don’t even know what that meeting is for.”

“Did you know Mordecai was stealing from us?” Donut asked.

Zev grunted. “Actually, yes, though I wouldn’t call it stealing out loud too much. He can get charged for that should you pursue it. That little story is compelling enough that we’ve been attempting to talk the AI into bending its rules to allow viewers to watch him and these specific NPCs. Especially considering Mordecai’s backstory and with Huanxin back in the game. Him risking charges to save children NPCs is prime drama. Plus, he’s just adorable with them. Who would’ve thought? The AI doesn’t seem interested in helping us, so we’ve licensed the story to Titan, who’s preparing a vid on it with virtual characters.”

“So, it’s like a Lifetime movie? About Mordecai?” Donut asked. “Am I in it?”

“They didn’t want to pay the extra licensing fee,” Zev said. “But Mongo is in it.”

Donut gasped. “My Mongo is a movie star? He’s going to be so excited!”

“Is it, uh, safe to be asking the AI to do stuff?” I asked.

“Asking, yes. It seems to enjoy it. Demanding? That’s something we’re still working on.”

“So, what did you want to talk to us about?” I asked.

“Hang on,” Zev said. She clicked something on her tablet. The lights in the room blinked twice. “Okay. I’ve turned on extra security

for this conversation. This is an official secure conversation between an administrator and a show sponsor. As of this moment, both of you are acting in your capacity as a sponsor. Because of this, the rules are a little different than it is for the regular crawl. I am the only person in on this conversation other than the system AI. Okay?"

"Ooh, it feels very top secret and hush-hush," Donut said.

"That's because it is. Okay, listen. Odette is going to ask to be your adjutant during Faction Wars. I want you to know what that is before you decide. It's your choice, but I think it's a bad idea."

I knew this was coming, though I was surprised that she was advising against it. "What's an adjutant and why is it a bad idea?"

"An adjutant is a neutral third-party observer. Each team gets one. They will have access to the rules and will have open communications with the other adjutants. They fall somewhere between a manager and a liaison. They're like referees. They have limited ability to call out rule-breaking behavior, though traditionally their participation is widely symbolic. They're usually someone loud and flashy and famous who gives color commentary for the viewers. Someone like Odette. She's done it a few times."

"She'll be physically on the surface with us?"

"Yes," Zev said.

"What if I manage to get the protections turned off? Will she still want to do it?"

"Carl, it's highly unlikely you'll pull that off. And even if you do, I'm pretty sure there's a rule hidden in there somewhere that the adjutants will have a constant invulnerability spell upon them."

"Okay, so why do you think it's a bad idea?"

Zev sighed. "As you're aware, Odette has history with Mordecai. She was his manager a long time ago. And Mordecai dislikes her quite a bit. I'm not going into that, but you remember what happened when Mordecai met Chaco during the prize carousel segment? He threw a chair at his head and got himself put in a timeout. If you get them physically together, he *will* attack her. He will get kicked out. You'll lose him. His contract will be in jeopardy. Half of those kids he's fostering will immediately get ejected because your personal space will change. Odette is a big fan of... drama.

Having her involved wouldn't be healthy for anybody. She's great in a talk show environment, but in this context, you don't want her around."

I thought about it for a moment. We had to pick Odette. We didn't have a choice. I would need an excuse that seemed plausible to completely ignore Zev's advice. Luckily, we still had a few days.

"Who does she usually do this for?" I asked.

Zev shrugged. "Last time it was the Dreadnoughts. Or was it the Reavers? I can't remember. It's someone different each time."

"This doesn't seem like an official stance," I said. "I'd think the Valtay showrunners would be falling over themselves for this kind of story to play out."

"It's not official," Zev said. "This is *me* talking, trying to give your team advice. Also, the Valtay have taken a step back after the Prepotente incident and are distancing themselves from the production's day-to-day. They need investor confidence for the next crawl, which they're also running. That seventh floor was Cascadia's baby, but they pushed to make it happen, and when it got ruined, they had themselves what you humans call a come to Jesus moment. A big one, especially after how the sixth floor ended. Still, despite all that, there's still money being made. You two are *earning.* A lot more than usual, but it's at the expense of several of the sponsors, which *is* unusual. The Borant Corporation is going to be liquified after the crawl no matter what. If the Valtay step back, they can point to the bottom line and show how profitable they were, and at the same time, they can point to us at Borant and say, *hey, we made this profit despite how terribly the mudskippers ran this season*. Does that make sense?"

"Not even a little bit," I said.

"Just don't pick Odette, okay?" Zev said. "I like Mordecai, and it would hurt him if you picked her."

"What'll happen to you if they shut down your company?" Donut asked.

The tiny woman shrugged. "That depends on what's going on back home."

Donut sighed dramatically. “Denying her request will break Odette’s heart, I’m sure, but if I’m going to be a Hollywood mother, I need to learn to make tough decisions, I suppose.”

I said nothing.

“Good. And Odette won’t be that upset. Her heart is made of ice, and she’s used to rejection. Now you two gotta go in there. Try not to piss off my boss too much.”

“Your boss?” I asked, brightening. “Your boss will be at the meeting today?”

Zev just sighed.

“You two represent the third team, so you will sit here,” the disc-shaped Mexx robot said, indicating two chairs at the large, round table. The robot’s name was U56KL, and Donut was calling him “Urkel.”

None of the other chairs were currently occupied, at least as far as we could see. There were ten sections total. All the other spots contained a single chair of varying sizes. Or no chair.

“Are we the only warlords who are coming today?” I asked. Zev had said earlier that these meetings were usually attended by underlings, which was why I hadn’t been too excited about being here. Donut was pissed that it wasn’t being filmed and broadcast. She hadn’t yet observed that the promised catering hadn’t appeared yet, either. I was hoping it would remain unnoticed.

“I am unaware of the guest list for this meeting,” Urkel the robot said. “Normally, the other on-boarded attendants meet in a boardroom located in Larracos, but that meeting space is currently unavailable, so all of them will be attending from different locations today. I believe most are in their respective castles.”

“Unavailable?” Donut asked. “Does that mean it’s still underwater?”

“Yes. It does,” Urkel said. “Please standby. The meeting will begin in thirty seconds.”

“Why can they do this from their bases, but we have to come here?” I asked.

“Because they’re richer than you are,” Urkel said.

“Do you think they’re going to be mean to us?” Donut asked as she took her spot upon the raised chair to my left. “I feel as if they’re going to be mean. Or do you think they’re going to do that thing where they’re super polite, but you can tell they hate us?”

I grunted. “We’re about to find out.”

“Just remember the plan, Carl. I do most of the talking. I’m the negotiator, and you just sit there and look all Carl-y.”

A figure flickered and appeared in spot 10 at the table. It was a tiny kua-tin I hadn’t met before, sitting tightly in a small chair. She had long, droopy whiskers, giving her an almost catfish appearance. Zev didn’t have those, which indicated maybe she was a different kind. Her scales had a dull sheen to them, and I knew from Zev that she was older, but not as old as her appearance suggested. The act of running the crawl had aged her greatly. She looked exhausted.

Cascadia. The kill, kill, kill lady.

“Hi, Zev’s boss!” Donut said.

“Princess Donut, hello. Carl, hello,” Cascadia said. Her voice was clipped and tense. “I trust Zev has caught you up on what this meeting will entail?”

I shrugged.

“Good,” she said. “Even though you’re currently sitting as a sponsor, I will not tolerate any of your usual bullshit, Carl. There will be consequences for any attempts to derail this meeting. They’ve been getting disrupted without your help, and I don’t need you adding to the chaos. I am on a tight schedule and am one crisis shy of pulling the failsafe, which would kill us all. So don’t test me, especially not today.”

“Carl,” Donut said. “Do you remember Loita? She reminds me of Loita. Do you remember when she accidentally blew herself up? Why is it all of these people are always so high strung? Honestly, they’re like chihuahuas.”

“I was just thinking the same thing,” I said.

"She's so tired-looking. Can fish use moisturizer?" Donut turned to the glaring fish. "I feel as if you should try it. It would do wonders. Or you can use cucumber slices, though your eyes might be a little too buggy for that. And they'd be really big on you. Or maybe you can try hot yoga. I heard that's relaxing. Your body is a temple, Zev's boss. You need to take care of yourself."

The fish woman just looked at us.

"I agree, Donut," I said, glaring back. "I do hope you look after yourself much more carefully than Loita did, Cascadia."

Cascadia blinked and disappeared. A moment passed and then she reappeared in the same spot with a pop, splashing water all over the table. A rebreather appeared around her gills.

"I'm really here now, Carl," Cascadia said. She raised her little arms. I could tell she was on the edge of a breakdown. "You want to hurt me? Now's your chance." She leaned forward. "Try it. There are no protections. You'd be able to squash me easily. *I fucking dare you*. It would be the end of the both of us. I would godsdamned *welcome* it."

By this point, it took a lot to surprise me. I was moderately impressed at the display, though I didn't want to show it. I felt my hand clench. I had to clench and unclench several times to keep from taking her up on her offer. I felt my gauntlet start to form, and I quickly let it go.

Quiet, I thought as I continued my staring contest with the woman. *Quiet, quiet. Don't be so loud.*

"Whew," Donut said, waving her paw in front of her nose. "Not just moisturizer. A bath. Do fish take baths? Carl, she smells really bad. Nothing like Zev. It's like that expired cat food you got me from the swap meet that one time."

"I never did that, Donut," I said, keeping my eyes on Cascadia. "You're thinking of the whitefish and spinach flavor of your regular food, which you never liked."

"Well, it smelled like it was expired and came from the swap meet."

Before I could respond, the room blinked again, and then all the spaces at the table were suddenly occupied. Cascadia kept my eyes

for several moments longer before planting what I recognized as a big, fake smile on her kua-tin face. She turned to the group and took on her usual, over-the-top, condescending voice. The change in her was instantaneous and unnerving.

I looked about the room, a mix of familiar and new aliens. Nobody had labels over them.

"Hello, everyone. Welcome all. This is our, what is it? Our fifth preproduction meeting? It seems just like yesterday I was welcoming you all here. We have some new faces I see, so the rules dictate we must do a new round of introductions before we start." Cascadia's fish eyes twitched, looking about the room, surprise evident. "Oh, I didn't realize so many warlords were going to be attending today."

"Hi Princess... I mean Empress D'Nadia!" Donut called, waving at the familiar Saccathian sitting two spots to our left in space number five. The last time I'd seen her was at the very end of the Butcher's Masquerade.

"Hi Donut!" the Empress said. "That was quite the performance the other night. I really liked your song. I'm sorry they kicked us out before the festivities really started."

Donut preened. "You did? Oh thank you so very much! I do have to ask you, Empress, about the voting on the pet show. Is it true that the ballot box was rigged? I heard that..."

Cascadia held up a hand. "We don't have time for pleasantries. Today's meeting will be short. I ask that each of you introduce yourselves in order, and then we will get to business." She nodded her head toward the familiar, angry orc sitting immediately to her left in spot one.

The only time I'd ever seen Crown Prince Stalwart, the Maestro's older brother, was during the short video where he'd—wrongly—declared that he'd assassinated me and Donut. He'd instead accidentally killed Manasa the singer.

"I don't announce myself," the angry orc said.

At the second spot right next to me was no chair. Just a green blob, one of the biggest of these things I'd seen. It was an opaque, quivering mass of green goo, shaped into three tiers of decreasing

size, like a Jell-o mold from the 1970's. This was a rep from the Operatic Collective. Or maybe it was their king. I had no idea because they all looked the same, and the only difference I could see was the size. They bred by literally splitting apart, and I knew they could merge back into one another, which was really fucking weird. Their mouths were at the very top, and they spoke upward into the air.

"I am Voting Admin Cell Mass Number three," the blob said. Little bubbles gurgled out of the top of him when he spoke.

"What happened to Hortense?" Empress D'Nadia asked.

"Hortense is in here," the blob thing said. "There are three of us in this entity, and we make up Voting Admin Cell Mass Number Three."

"Wait," Donut asked. "What are we supposed to call you?"

"You're supposed to call me Voting Admin Cell Mass Number Three," the thing said.

"That's just silly," Donut said. "That's much too long of a name. I'm going to call you, I don't know, Green Jiggly." Donut paused then straightened. "Oh, it's our turn?" She cleared her throat. "Well, I am GC, BWR, NW, Princess Donut the Queen Anne Chonk, and with me is my co-warlord, Carl. We represent the Princess Posse, a non-profit conglomerate with tens of thousands of chapters of intelligent, like-minded, beautiful fans from..."

"This is ridiculous," Prince Stalwart said, interrupting. "We know who you are, you fucking imbecile."

I was about to say something, but Donut put a calming paw on my arm.

"Oh, honey. I know you know who I am. We did humiliate you and your brother more times than I can count. Your mother never got the chance to meet me, though, did she? Is she here? I'd be happy to sign an autograph for her... oh wait."

There was a long moment of shocked silence while Donut swished her tail.

"I am going to take my ceremonial knife, insert it into your gut and skin you alive while you scream in pain. I will then use your pelt to line the interior of my codpiece," Prince Stalwart growled. "Your

fur will spend the next thousand years warming my enormous genitals."

"Wow," Donut said. "That's an oddly specific threat. And 'enormous'? Really? Nobody was questioning the size of your genitals, so it's really weird you would just randomly bring it up. Carl, did you hear that? Do you think he thought that one up before he got up here, or do you think it just kind of popped out? I'm like 90% certain he had that one ready to go." She gasped. "Do you think he was sitting there, waiting for the meeting to start, saying to himself, *I'm gonna do it. I'm gonna go with the codpiece line*? I propose a new action item. We are changing the name of Crown Prince Stalwart to Captain Enormous."

Empress D'Nadia trumpeted with laughter. A hairy goblin guy a few spots over also laughed.

The mexx robot dinged. "Action item added to the queue. Action item has been rejected by the system. Titles may not be changed."

"Oh, poo," Donut said. She turned to the large, green and purple Naga parked immediately to her left. He had four arms and no legs, just a long, snake body that sat coiled on the ground. He wore dented plate armor upon his chest, but his head and arms were bare. "Oh well. I guess it's your turn. Hey, aren't we cousins now or something? Not by blood, obviously. But because of that tiara?"

The naga's dark, snake eyes bored into Donut. "We are not cousins," he said, though I could see he was suppressing a grin. He instantly reminded me of Nihit, the reporter naga I'd stabbed in the neck with a pen. "We are not cousins," he clarified, "in or out of the game. I am but a representative of the Blood Sultanate, not a member of the royal family." He bowed. "I suppose, in a way, you are cousins with the family, and that includes my wife. I am called Rishi."

This was the team we would have to kill first. Winning Faction Wars was optional. Destroying the nagas was not.

"Does that mean when I kill the royal family and take it over, you'll work for me?" Donut asked.

The grin didn't leave his face. "Yes, if I am still alive. I will be honor-bound to follow you. Or your companion, Katia."

That one stung. Next to me, Donut tensed.

I had an uneasy feeling about this guy. I committed his name to my memory. Rishi.

"Donut, if you would refrain from commenting on each introduction, we could get through this much more quickly," Cascadia said, sounding exasperated.

"Hello, everybody," Empress D'Nadia said from her spot at number five. "I'm Empress D'Nadia, warlord of the Prism Kingdom Clan. I just onboarded onto the playing field, so if anyone wants to catch a meal, I'm available. I understand a few restaurants in Larracos have finally opened back up."

"Not advisable," Rishi said, but didn't elaborate further.

"I am Epitome Tagg of the Dream," the bald elf said from the sixth spot. He didn't add anything else.

I blinked, surprised.

"Hey, you're the guy who hates Louis because he thinks your mom is sexy!" Donut exclaimed. "Carl, it's the guy who hates Louis!"

"Princess Donut, please," Cascadia said.

"Sorry, sorry," Donut said.

The older, regal-looking elf appeared bored. He didn't react to Donut's outburst. He looked nothing like the unhinged psychopath he was portrayed to be. He wore a simple, leather jerkin and was indistinguishable from the rest of the dream elves we'd slaughtered on the previous floor. This was one of the richest men in the entire galaxy. The dream elves controlled food-growing operations in numerous solar systems and owned the patent on multiple types of food. Supposedly, if you lived in certain areas, your body wouldn't let you digest their food unless you had a license for it.

In spot number seven was a green, humanoid creature. A representative from the Lemig Sortion. This was the guy who'd laughed at Donut's joke about Prince Stalwart. He looked like a cross between a goblin and a nullian alien, like Quasar. The Lemig Sortion was a truly democratic government system consisting of multiple races, though most of them were these green guys. I couldn't remember what the race was called, but I knew their leader was actually a different type of alien, a fuzzy caterpillar-looking thing. I

still had a photo of the leader's mother. The population of the Lemig Sortion as a whole voted on *everything*, supposedly. Though once something was set, it required an 80% vote to undo it. They'd voted to participate in Faction Wars a long time ago, and it'd been impossible to undo that vote, even though the population had soured on the high congress's participation each season. Mordecai said their system was in a constant state of disarray.

"Hi, I'm Luke," the alien said. His voice was surprising, sounding like a surfer dude.

In spot number eight was another humanoid alien with a bulky body and a long, thin, bone-white neck and a blank, white mask covering his face, like something out of a creepy anime. I instantly knew what this was, though I'd never seen one. A viceroy. They were one of the constants of Faction Wars, oftentimes winners of the conflict, though they supposedly hadn't won in a while. Their race was somewhat of a mystery. They specialized in horrific battlefield spells and necromancy. In real life, their system was known as a destination for cheap medical procedures for non-citizens and those who lived outside the inner system, who had access to free healthcare.

Their team was called the Madness.

The viceroy didn't say anything. Just raised his hand in greeting. Donut waved back.

"And I am Warlord Fangs of the Reavers," the final representative said with a robotic voice.

The Reavers were an occasional player and usually did well when they did participate, having taken the prize multiple seasons. Mordecai said they oftentimes allied with the orcs, easily taking out the other teams. They would then square off against each other for the trophy, though supposedly there was some sort of early betrayal the previous season, and a partnership was unlikely this year.

The rep was a square-headed, old-school robot that vibrated up and down like he was powered by a diesel engine. The thing looked like he'd come straight from a 60's scifi movie. I knew from the cookbook and the photo of the leader's mother that this appearance was for my benefit. These guys were more like the robots from

Terminator 2, in that they could switch shape at will. They normally looked like plastic-skinned, android soothers. I'd seen them quite a bit in the audience at various talk shows. The Reavers were a megacorporation and system government. They mostly lived on something earth scientists called a Dyson Sphere, a star completely surrounded by a structure. These guys supposedly were once related to the Nebulars, the religious nuts who'd sent a team called "The Nebular Sin Patrol," to die as hunters on the sixth floor.

Like the nebs, they were originally several different biological races who enhanced themselves with machines, though these guys took it a step further and kept only their brains. So they looked like robots.

"Warlord Fangs? Really?" Donut asked. "Is your name really Fangs? Are you a robot vampire?" She gasped. "Or are you a werewolf robot? Now that would be something."

"Donut," Cascadia snapped. "If I have to warn you again..."

Before she finished her admonishment, the silent, faceless viceroy to the robot's right dropped forward on the table. His head rolled away from the body like a billiard ball. The blank, white mask came loose, revealing a bone-white, demonic, tusked alien face covered in streaks of red. We all just stared dumbly at the now-decapitated representative from the Madness. Bright, red blood showered from the neck hole, spurting like a hose. I remembered a question from the cookbook, wondering if these viceroy guys were biological because nobody had seen one die before.

"Carl," Donut asked. "Is his head supposed to just fall off like that?"

"I don't think so."

"Not again," Cascadia said.

Prince Stalwart raged, slamming his fist on the table. "You idiots can't do anything right. Tagg, you said you took care of this."

A new form appeared behind the viceroy, pushing the headless body away and sitting in his chair. The blood remained pooling on the table, disappearing as it reached the edge of the illusion. The newcomer reached forward, plucked the white mask up and started

twirling it on her finger. She leaned back and put her two feet up on the table.

"Hello again, boys," she said.

The newcomer was a familiar dream elf. It was Epitome Noflex, Epitome Tagg's mother. The beautiful, bald elf whose photo caused all the issues with Louis.

"You," Epitome Tagg shouted, jumping to his feet, finally showing emotion. "My men told me they found you and killed you."

"Obviously not," the woman said. "I heard you guys were having a meeting. I figured I should be in on it. Don't worry about ol' faceless here. He regenerates at sunset, isn't that right? At least until the games begin."

"This is unacceptable," Tagg shouted. He'd gone from calm to red hot in an instant. He pointed at me. "Your team isn't allowed to kill until the games start. I am filing another appeal."

"Don't look at us, buddy. She's not on our team," I said.

"Cascadia," Tagg said, turning his ire onto the tired-looking fish. "How about now? Will you intervene now?"

"The rules haven't changed. She's an NPC," Cascadia said. "The AI won't let us touch this. You said you'd taken care of it."

"They're becoming self-aware. All of them," Tagg said. "It's going to be impossible for anybody to win."

"I have a whole list of problems I must deal with, warlord, but that, thank the gods, is not one of them," Cascadia said. "Carl is correct. She's not on his team, not officially at least, so she's allowed to do what she wants. You're free to kill her."

"Gotta catch me first," the woman said.

"We shoulda bugged out when the mantids did," surfer dude Luke from the Lemig Sortion said. He shook his goblin-like head. I couldn't tell if he was talking to himself or the group. "Shoulda known. They left the second we filed that second appeal. We all gonna die here. Every last one of us."

Donut was staring open-mouthed at the form of Epitome Noflex. "Carl, it's his mother! Why is his mother an NPC?"

"That's not his mother, Donut."

I turned to the woman grinning at me.

“Hello, Juice Box. I see you’ve been busy.”

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[22]

Donut gasped. "Hi, Juice Box! I'll tell Louis we saw you!"

"Hello, Donut. Hello, Carl," she said. "Gotta talk fast. Experience tells me I have but moments before they swarm the place." Her gaze turned to Prince Stalwart. Her form shifted, and she turned into a facsimile of the angry orc, but with an arrow poking out of his eye. "Do you remember this one? I bet it hurt. Next time, I'll get your other eye."

Stalwart growled.

"Anyway, how's Louis?" she asked.

"He's sad because Firas died," Donut said. "But he'll be much better when he hears you're still around!"

Juice Box turned to her human form, and she looked genuinely sad. "Firas? Poor kid. But I'm glad Louis is okay." She looked sharply over her shoulder at something we couldn't hear. "Anyway. I see most of my family members have arrived in town. Thank you, Carl. I knew I could trust you. I haven't been able to talk to them because apparently they're a part of your team. I can't join it because it means I won't be allowed to kill these assholes. I gotta tell you, these rules are ridiculous, but I've been learning." She thumbed over at Luke, the small goblin guy from the Lemig Sortion. "Your castle landed in his territory, and it turned a bunch of his friends into zombies, but that's mostly taken care of now. Your guys are in a tough spot, shoved between the blobs and the snakes. The orcs and

the blobs are working together and are massing on the border. Your team has started building a castle on your behalf."

"Do you see this?" Epitome Tagg shouted at Cascadia, who looked more tired than angry. Tagg was now on his feet. "They're talking. Planning. Right in front of you! She's obviously a part of his team."

"I am my own team, thank you very much, but I'm glad you brought that up, baldie. I've been listening to all y'all talk. I know how this works now. I know what I am. I only understood part of it before, but I get it now. I see the whole picture. I know what I am, and I know what you are." She turned into the faceless, default form of a changeling. "I'm my own team," she repeated.

"There are no other teams," Epitome Tagg said. "It's nine teams. Eight, really. Plus the chaff. That's what you are. You're not even real."

"Real? Here's how I see it," Juice Box said. "If you want us to stop knocking down all of your pretty structures and killing your army folks, or to let you finish draining Larracos, there's only one way to do it. I want you guys to make a new rule. I've overheard your conversations. I know you can do that. I want you to add my people as their own team, afforded all the safeties as the rest of you. I want regeneration for all of us."

A moment of silence passed.

Luke of the Lemig Sortion grunted with laughter. "*Becoming* self-aware, you say?"

"Your own team? That's not going to happen," Tagg said to Juice Box. "That's not even possible. We can change some of the rules, but we can't just change the nature of the game."

I said nothing. I wasn't certain how I felt about the idea of the NPCs going fully rogue. I'd sent her to the ninth floor to help rally the NPCs to *our* cause. Not to go out on their own. But it made sense to me. I didn't know if this was just Juice Box talking a big game or if she'd actually managed to wake up all of the floor's NPCs. I put myself in her shoes, and I knew I'd being doing the same thing. Either way, we had a common enemy.

The fact it was pissing off the sponsors was enough for me.

"I propose a new action item," I said. "A tenth team populated with NPCs, afforded the same protections as the rest."

"And with full voting rights," Juice Box said.

"And with full voting rights," I added.

A moment passed. Urkel, the mexx robot, dinged. "Action item added to the queue. Voting is now available."

"This is orcshit," Tagg said. "It's not possible."

"Yeah," Luke of the Lemig Sortion said. "I think we're gonna bail, if the people let us. There's some seriously bad juju going on this season, and the people have been trying to get us to quit for a while. I'll put the proposal before the high congress for us to evacuate."

"Good luck with that," Empress D'Nadia said.

"Nobody is going to vote for this," Prince Stalwart said. "This is a complete waste of time."

Juice Box suddenly had a device in her hand that I immediately recognized as a hobgoblin pus detonator. *Uh-oh*, I thought. She clicked it.

Ten seconds.

"You can vote no. But then this will keep happening. Tell Louis I send my love!" She poofed and turned into some sort of translucent bat creature and disappeared. At the same moment, several of the remaining participants jumped from their chairs. Tagg, D'Nadia, and Luke bolted, disappearing. Stalwart, Rishi the Naga, and the green blob thing next to me remained in their spots.

Bam! The blob guy next to me exploded in a shower of green goo. It was a small explosive, possibly just the detonator material itself, but it was enough. And it was *loud*. We all jumped at the explosion. Donut yowled and leaped from her chair. Cascadia shrank back. Even Stalwart cringed. The blob was the only one to explode. The cube-shaped area of his illusion went pitch black while an alarm sounded in the distance before blinking and disappearing, reverting to a blank, clean table.

Rishi the naga was the only one who hadn't reacted.

Stalwart composed himself. "You mudskippers are a disgrace," he said to Cascadia. "Pitiful. This is unacceptable. Everything is falling

apart. Why does this keep happening? At least *my* security... gah!" The orc didn't finish. He collapsed forward on the table, a magical arrow sprouting from his eye. The blue arrow sizzled. I had no idea where it came from, or who had shot it. It hadn't been Juice Box unless she'd learned how to teleport.

His feed blinked and shut off.

The only ones left at the table were me and Donut, Rishi the naga, and Cascadia.

"I guess the meeting is over," Cascadia said, sighing heavily. "I'll give everyone until tomorrow to regenerate, and then we can try to schedule another one."

"Weren't we supposed to vote for stuff?" Donut asked. "That was hardly a meeting. At least it wasn't boring. I was afraid it was going to be boring."

"We got further than last time," Cascadia said.

Rishi shook his snake head. "This changeling is getting better at infiltrating the castles. Usually, she only kills one of us. She has helpers now. She always knows when we're going to meet. If we vote for her to have her own team, she will surely dominate the game, and I do not think that is a good idea, unless we put some limits. But we should give her something. I will put forth a compromise. If you are somehow in contact with her, Carl, I think you should attempt to convince her. I propose that the unaffiliated NPCs are given invulnerability this season and a safe area where the rest of us are not allowed to enter. In return, she will stop her terroristic attacks."

"Something tells me that won't be enough for her," I said.

"The sultanate is quite versed in dealing with terrorism," Rishi said. "This changeling may not enjoy how harshly we respond. The sultana has been hesitant to react in such a public manner, but I will convince her she no longer has a choice."

The way he said it sent a chill through me.

"You can discuss it next time," Cascadia said, waving her fish arm. "I'm going to take a nap."

And just like that, the room blinked, and she was gone. Rishi was gone.

"Hey," Donut said. "Zev said this meeting was supposed to be catered!" She scoffed. "I mean, really. We could've done this whole thing over chat. Probably would have been less decapitations."

Donut: YOUR FIANCÉ HAS GOTTEN VERY SCARY. YOU BETTER NOT EVER UPSET HER. MAKE SURE YOU TELL HER SHE'S PRETTY EVERY DAY. AND DON'T EVER EAT POTATO CHIPS IN BED. CARL USED TO DO THAT, AND IT MADE MISS BEATRICE REALLY MAD.

Louis: She really ripped the guy's head off?

Donut: IT WAS VERY BLOODY AND GROSS. AND SHE DID IT WHILE SHE WAS DRESSED LIKE THAT ELF GUY'S MOM. IT MADE HIM SCREAM A LOT.

Louis: Great. Just great.

Carl: I see the Desperado Club. Are you guys going in?

Imani: We still haven't found one.

Elle: It's a total snooze fest over here. It's all churches and boring monsters. I got my squatchy and gumberoo and batsquatch, and everything else sucks. We don't even have any quests. We're moving to the outskirts of Portland to see if there's anything interesting down there.

Carl: Okay, be careful.

Li Na: We are already inside the club.

Katia: We're inside, too.

Carl: Okay, going in.

The club was right where the bopca said it would be, several miles south along the main drag of a small town, about halfway toward our destination of the swamp with Samantha and the boss spider.

Speaking of spiders, they now showed themselves on the map thanks to the quest from Huanxin. They were everywhere, all tiny, little mobs, no different or more dangerous than real spiders. We only needed to kill five a day between the two of us, but Donut was

taking great pride in slaughtering them by the dozens. She would cast *Why are you hitting yourself?* on one and laugh and laugh as it spun in circles, trying to bite itself. It was kind of fucked up, but it was also training the spell.

We'd been killing and grinding on several different mobs, most of them various forms of talking birds, but nothing had been flag worthy. We both managed to level. I hit level 65, and Donut level 57. I also maxed out my Scavenger's Daughter bar three times and drained it using melee attacks. The attacks were noticeably stronger already.

We collected several other cards, including one more snare card, a card called **Hole in the Bag**, which drained a totem's mana. Unlike our **Hobble** card, this one was not consumable. We also found a rare mystic card called **Force Discard**, which picked a random card from the opponent's hand and tossed it to the discard pile.

Also, on Donut's insistence, I spent a good hour reading directly from my Bahamas book and transcribing it into my notepad, which I was simultaneously copying to the cookbook and to Pony in chat, who didn't even thank me. He only responded when I inquired if he was actually getting my messages, and even then he only responded to point out a few typos in my translation.

Per Mordecai's request, we found a saferoom right next to the Desperado, which would allow him to venture out and get inside to buy supplies. We still hadn't really discussed the whole thing with Ruby and the rest of the changelings, but now that the secret was out, Mordecai was letting them wander out into the main guild area. Donut made the mistake of telling Mordecai that they were making a movie out of his fostering of the six children, and he'd been especially grumpy ever since. Especially since she was now insisting that Mongo play with the children so he'd get more screentime in the movie.

The entrance bar to the Desperado was empty of customers, but a it featured a gnoll bartender and a pair of facing pianos, like it was supposed to be a dueling piano bar. Donut put Mongo away, and we pushed through, coming face-to-face with Clarabelle the crocodilian

door guard who refused to make eye contact with us. She let us right in without saying a word.

Entering the Desperado Club.

We entered on the middle floor, which we'd only been able to briefly visit on the previous floor. The main room was actually a large, sit down style restaurant with a dance floor, much cleaner than the floor above. This was our first time in this particular room. It was only half-full, and the vast majority of the people here were the generated NPCs. Elf waitresses zipped in and out of the room. Several hallways led off into different directions, including an open casino floor that was much larger than the one above. This one had actual slot machines. A cheer rose from that room as some NPCs apparently won a prize.

Multiple crocodilian guards wearing tuxedos stood around the room. One of them watched me sullenly. I recognized him as one of the guards we'd tangled with at the end of the previous floor. He'd been forced to call his boss, Astrid, because we'd trespassed on this floor when it was off-limits to us. Donut gave him a wave.

I caught sight of a large table in the back of the main room with several, familiar crawlers sitting around it. Donut jumped from my shoulder and bounded toward them. It was Katia, Bautista, Louis, Tran, Britney, Li Jun, Zhang, Li Na, Chris, and, to my surprise, Florin, whom I wasn't expecting to be here.

"Hey, guys," I said as I sat down. Donut had jumped right to the middle of the table and was making a round of bumping heads with everyone except Li Na, whom we couldn't touch.

There were several cards on the table, and everyone was sorting through them. Donut was trampling over all of them.

"Do you need a menu, hun?" a waitress asked, dropping off a pair of plastic-coated menus without waiting for an answer. Donut started poring over the choices. I caught eyes with Katia.

Carl: How are we going to do this with everybody here? We can't let them know who our assassination target is.

Katia and I needed to figure out how to find and kill the club's assistant manager, Astrid, and then we needed to get her body to the Guild of Suffering, the entrance of which was one floor above us

in the Penis Parade strip club. But we couldn't let the others know who our target was. That was part of the deal.

Also, even though, technically, we had until the end of the ninth floor to get this done, we pretty much had to do it before the end of the eighth. As of right now, the one and only Desperado Club entrance on the ninth floor was still fucked, plus everyone except the NPCs were kicked out of Larracos a day or two after the floor started, which meant I wouldn't have access until there were only two teams left. So we had to make sure this happened before this floor collapsed.

Katia: We're just doing a look see right now. We need to figure out how to get her out of the back before we can even start to plan.

Carl: We've gotten her to come out a couple of times. Once was when that guy tried to kill Donut and the second was when Donut and I sneaked down here, and we got caught. She's like the head of security.

Katia: It says she's also the head of that Naughty Boys Employment Agency. You're a member of that, and I'm not. Maybe she hangs out in there. You should go in there to check it out.

Carl: I can't just go into it. It's a social upgrade addition to our saferoom. It costs like 500,000 gold just to add it.

Katia: Shit. Why didn't I know that? I thought it was a secret society like the Guild of Suffering with a hidden entrance somewhere.

Carl: If there is another entrance, I don't know where. We'll have to cause some sort of distraction here in the club and get her to come out. That probably won't be too hard. I'm more worried about how we're going to take her out once she does make an appearance. She's a level 125 bloodlust sprite. She knocked my ass out through a closed door last time. She has something called cardiovascular magic, and she can make my blood boil at the snap of a finger. Plus she's always surrounded by a bunch of guards. And she's a fairy. Because of my stupid goblin tattoo, she

does even more damage to me. It's too bad we can't get Donut to help with the fight. Her new *Mute* spell would really come in handy.

Katia: Okay, I think I have a plan. It's a little messy right now. It involves using my card deck. Let's just lock down how and where we're going to get access to her first. We need someplace where we won't immediately get swarmed by guards.

I gazed across the room, my eyes catching a side hallway that read **Bathrooms, Guilds, and the Badger Bar.**

Carl: I think I know a place where we can do it. We just need to figure out how to lure her in.

I gave her some additional details about the last time we'd visited the club, including information about the secret passage between the club's floors in the women's bathrooms.

Katia: If there's one secret passage, there's probably more. We should try to find them. What about her office?

Carl: I don't know. I've been in the back a few times talking to Orren the liaison, but he's not back there anymore. That's where she comes from, but I've never seen another office door. I can try to sneak back there and look. If I get caught, though, I might end up banned from the club. I'm already on thin ice.

Katia: Okay. You work on how we'll get to her, and I'll work on how we'll kill her. Give me some time to put my plan together.

Carl: We're heading out to retrieve Samantha, and we might not have access to the club for a few days. We'll come back this way after, and then we'll do this.

"Oh, honey, it's not so bad. Really," Donut was saying to Britney. The Ukrainian woman just stared down at the cat. The entire left side of her face was badly scarred. The skin was healed, but it had that stretched, glossy, uneven sheen of burned skin. It had happened at the end of the previous floor. "I can barely notice it. Plus, scars are beautiful. It goes well with the whole barbarian aesthetic you're going for."

I couldn't remember what level Britney had been before, but she was now level 55. She'd risen significantly up the ranks. She had no emotion to her normally-sour face. She had a new tattoo under her eye. An extinction sigil. She'd wiped out an entire race of something.

"I'm not worried about it anymore," Britney said. "I have been talking to Tserendolgor, who once had a similar scar upon her face."

I put my hand on Donut, preventing her from saying anything nasty about the dog soldier.

Next to Britney was Tran, the thin, quiet, but always-friendly Vietnamese man who'd been really good friends with the late Gwendolyn Duet. Tran had lost both of his legs during the Butcher's Masquerade. He now had an Odette-style magical wheelchair that allowed him to float, though I couldn't see it now. He was leaned over a drink at the table, not looking up. I examined the three crawlers we'd met during the bubbles, sitting side-by-side. Britney. Tran. Louis. All three had been devastated by the events of the previous floor.

After shaking hands with Li Jun and Zhang, I turned my attention to Chris, who was currently based in Beijing with Li Na's team. I hadn't talked to the lava rock creature in a while.

"How are you holding up?" I asked.

"I'm solid," he said.

I just looked at him, trying to determine if that had been a joke or not.

Florin grunted with laughter. The crocodilian was sorting through a pile of utility cards.

"Florin," I said. "How about you? How's it going?"

The intense man looked up and met my eyes. "I'm surviving. My squad is already full up. It's just me and my six totems."

"What about Lucia?" I asked.

"She's only talking to me sometimes," he said. "I still don't fully understand what's going on there, but at least she doesn't attack me on sight anymore. She and that dog are keeping their distance for now. Our area is mostly jungle, just like the last floor."

"Did you, uh, catch that guy you had the quest for?"

"I did. Flagged him. He's pretty powerful too, but I ain't keeping him. I already have six good'uns in my deck, including a saber-toothed tiger and a giant crocodile."

"You have a crocodile card?" Donut asked. "Isn't that a bit redundant?"

Florin laughed. "It's actually called a giant caiman. His name is Roy."

"You're really thinking of getting rid of that other one?" I asked. "Why?"

"Because he's a right cunt, that's why. My charisma ain't high enough to control him when I summon him. I tried pulling him in combat earlier today, and the fucker shot me right in the stomach. My own damn card shot me. Almost killed me. I'm lucky it was only a single round."

"Wait, what's this?" Donut asked.

"Yeah, Florin has a unique totem card he's not keeping," I said.

"And he has a gun? We'll take it," Donut said. "We still have three open slots!"

I was a little hesitant. We already had Asojano, whom I knew was going to be a handful. It was important to have powerful cards, but anything too powerful might not be worth it if they didn't do what we said. Even if we could control him, I'd been hearing reports that having two headstrong totems summoned at the same time could result in them fighting each other.

Florin shrugged. "Might not be a bad idea with Donut's charisma. Maybe you guys can keep him in line. If it doesn't work out, you can always rip the card in two. You might want to practice in the simulation room with him at first." He pulled the card from his inventory and slid it across the table to Donut. "Good luck, mate."

Donut stared down at the card. "Wow. Level 140? Are you sure you don't want to keep him? How did you trap him?"

"He's just too powerful for me. Flagging him was easy. I had a quest to stop him. He was terrorizing some village, raising a bunch of zombies from the local cemetery. They completely ruined the whole memory simulation. He was raising them up for fun. It's just what he does. He's not outright hostile, though he's a cocky bastard.

Turned an entire river into wine because he was thirsty. I walked right up to him when he was falling down pissed and gave him a supreme healing potion and said his dad wanted him to drink it. He thought I was an angel and drank it right down. He's undead, so it dropped him onto his ass, and I stuck him. He has a mouth on him that'd make my grandma proud."

I laughed. "They say it's a unique card, but there's like ten different versions of this guy floating around already."

"Yeah, I seen that," Florin said. "They're the same guy, but they're like way different. As far as I can tell, this one's the most powerful, except maybe the hippie one some bloke in California got. Mine's the only one that's armed with a gun."

I picked up the card and examined it. It was orange-colored, signifying it as a unique.

The card depicted an anime Jesus in a white robe with a red sash, complete with a little floating halo over his flowing, brown hair. He screamed while he fired a goddamned uzi. I shook my head at the absurdity of it. I thought of Sister Ines. She would absolutely lose her mind if she saw this.

T'Ghee Card. Unique.
Totem Card.
HeyZoos. Uzi Jesus.
"I am the way, motherfucker."
Level: 140.
Origin: Ecuador
Summoning duration: 75 seconds.
Constitution: 200.
This is an undead mob.
This is a ranged mob.
This is a healer mob.
Notable attacks:
Blood into Lead
Resurrect Totem
Bullet Hell
+20 additional skills and spells.

Examine in the squad details tab of your interface for full stats and skills and spells.

Warning: You have empty slots in your squad. Collecting this card will automatically activate and place this totem into your squad. You may not remove or trade squad members until your squad is full. If you wish to remove a card before your squad is full, you will have to tear the card.

"Holy shit," I said, laughing. "This is so ridiculously offensive."

"Yeah, wait until you meet him," Florin said. "He's something else. He really thinks he's the real deal. He's strong and can cast a lot of great spells. The trick is getting him to do any of it."

With the addition of Uzi Jesus, we now had four of six totems. The other three were the monk seal, the donkey snake ghommid splitter, and Asojano. If we could actually control them, it was a good mix. The seal was a solid tank and melee fighter. Both the splitter and Asojano were good at dealing debuffs. Heyzoos had a ranged attack and could heal, in addition to several other attacks. If we could get another magic-based totem and maybe a magic counter totem, we'd have a good mix.

"Donut," I said, standing. "I'm going to poke around a little, maybe check out this floor's version of the silk road and grab some supplies. You stay here and sort through and trade some cards. When I get back, we'll go to the jeweler and get your tiara taken care of.

She'd received something called a Flawless Jeweler's Gem in a legendary box way at the beginning of the floor, but we couldn't see what it did until we got installed into her tiara. There was a shop in here somewhere where we could get that done.

After she'd lost the Crown of the Sepsis Whore, Donut had gotten a replacement, a white **Tiara of Mana Genita**, which raised her intelligence. That's what she usually wore, and that was what she was wearing right now. She'd had and lost another tiara at the end of the last floor that had temporarily doubled her charisma. She also had a red beret she'd taken from a mob earlier on this floor, but it only gave a small boost to all of her stats. Still, she'd been putting that one on from time to time because it was "appropriate" for the

location. She had a collection of literally hundreds of hats in her inventory. Sometimes I'd come into her room in the personal space, and she'd have several of them lined up in front of the mirror, or she'd have one on Mongo who sat there patiently while she clucked over it. She had an unenchanted cowboy hat I'd gotten way on the first or second floor that actually fit him really well, though it would fall off if he did any sort of jump.

She even started decorating the personal space with a few hats here and there. It made me happy to see she had a hobby of sorts, even if most of them were basically hunting trophies.

This gem was likely something really good, but it was a yellow-orange citrine, and Donut had a thing about that color, so she wasn't too enthusiastic about it. She had patches of fur that kind of matched it, but she insisted it would clash.

"Okay, Carl," she said, looking up from the menu. She was in the middle of questioning the waitress on what sort of side dishes came with the halibut. "Don't take too long. We have to go rescue Samantha after this."

"Don't remind me."

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[23]

I TOOK A QUICK GLANCE OVER MY SHOULDER TO MAKE CERTAIN THERE WERE NO fellow crawlers watching, and then I took a step inside the room. My view counter was absolutely spiked, so I knew there was no way I'd get through this without Donut eventually finding out. I sighed and let the sticky, filthy door close behind me.

I was assaulted with the stench of male sweat, grease, and cheap cologne.

Entering the Penis Parade.

I took another step, and a second notification flashed across my interface.

New Achievement! "We Want Meat! We Want Meat!"

Thunder Down Under. Magic Mike. Chippendales.

While the female burlesque and peepshow has a long, interesting history going back centuries, the all-male revue as an attraction is a relatively recent phenomenon in your culture. It wasn't until the disco era did some entrepreneurs start to realize that packs of women were a valid demographic in the lucrative art of taking money from horny people.

Take a physically gifted, steroid-enhanced male, give him some dancing lessons, teeth whitening strips, a shower, a banana, a Guns-N-Roses CD, and an entire bottle of baby oil, and then you basically plop him into the equivalent of the

inside of a female restroom at a nightclub, and you got yourself a money-making empire.

Also, you may have not noticed this yet, but there's a hierarchy to these things in the Desperado Club. The deeper the floor, the higher the quality of the performers. At least that's how it's supposed to be. You might want to judge for yourself.

You've entered a male strip club establishment.

***Reward*: You've received 10 gold pieces to use as tips. I heard some of them let you stuff the gold directly into their g-strings. Oh hell, I've thrown in a bottle of hand sanitizer, too.**

The deep bass of a somewhat familiar Billie Eilish song pounded, drowning out the techno from the dance club behind me. I took a moment to let my eyes adjust to the darkness. A ridiculously buff troll creature stood upon the main stage, gyrating to the song while a group of drunk, female elf and dwarf NPCs screeched, their voices carrying above the pounding music. The green-skinned, tusked troll was completely naked, and he carried a massive club in his hand. There was no pole like in a female strip club. The troll had a high, black mohawk that waved back and forth as he spun and twirled the wooden club with the enthusiasm of a majorette tripping on ecstasy. The squealing NPCs kept throwing gold pieces at the dancer, and they were pinging off of him like hail, clicking and rolling off in all directions. A skinny, young crocodilian in a Penis Parade t-shirt scrambled about with a bucket, gathering the coins all up. The bucket was almost full of gold.

The name floating over the dancer was **Author Steve Rowland. Level 50 Forest Troll**. The skinny kid collecting the coins was **Bucket Boy. Level 10 Crocodilian.**

I reached up and drew a privacy bubble over my head, which had the effect of only slightly muting the music, but not the screeching of the women. My eyes searched until I found a line of male NPCs, all sitting at the darkest end of the dingy bar, all staring at me. I was the only crawler in the club. I started searching the

men, trying to see in the dark which one had an elbow tattoo of a spiderweb.

"Hey there, sailor," a deep, Spanish voice said, sidling up to me. I jumped, surprised. I examined the shiny, oiled-up man. He was human, and he appeared to be about seventy years old, with a long, white beard, a conquistador-style helmet, and little, spandex shorts along with an open vest. The man was jacked, but it was weird because he seemed so old. I was several inches taller than him.

"Are you here looking for fun or looking for a job?" the man asked. He looked me up and down and ran his hand across my jacket. "It's been a while since I've tilted a giant."

The name over his head was **Dong Quixote. Level 45 Human.**

"I'm looking for Damascus Steel," I said.

"Oh," he said, taking a step back. He let out a breath, and half of his muscles turned to flab. I blinked at that. "He's the cranky one over there." He pointed at a large man, sitting in shadow at the end of the bar, the only one not facing the crowd. He sat around the corner, separated from the others. The elderly stripper sucked in another breath, turned away, and approached a group of squealing women. On stage, the troll was bouncing in circles, pretending his club was a hobby horse while he smacked his own ass. The troll suddenly dropped the club and fell onto his side, grabbing onto his face in apparent pain.

"Rosemarie, you know the rules," a new, deep voice called. It was coming over the loudspeaker, but it cut through my bubble. "Stop aiming for his face. If he loses an eye again, you're paying for the healer."

I looked up to see a raised DJ booth, hidden in the shadows between the bar and the stage. I caught sight of what looked like a skeleton wearing a golden, glinting crown. He was leaning over his console, glaring down at a group of women.

"Fuck off," an elderly dwarf shouted at the DJ booth, followed by a chorus of laughter. This was apparently Rosemarie. She had some sort of weird, black and white pet creature on her shoulder. It looked like it was maybe a mole.

I returned my attention to the dancers, and I approached the end of the counter. I caught eyes with a large, shirtless man with dark, purple skin and snake-like features. It immediately reminded me of Eva, though this guy only had two arms. **Anaconda. Level 75. Quarter Naga**. This guy was one of Donut's favorites, and he was one of the lead dancers of the club. He looked me up and down appraisingly. I walked right past him, moved around the edge of the bar, and tapped the man at the very end on the shoulder. He didn't look up. His body felt like it was made of solid metal.

"No," the gravelly-voiced man said. "I don't go on until later." He was hunched over a steaming mug of something, possibly tea, and he had an open book on the counter of the bar, though I had no idea how he could read in the dark. While not as old as Dong Quixote, I could tell this guy was older, too. My eyes caught the spiderweb pattern on his left elbow.

"I'm not looking for a dance. We have a few mutual friends, one of whom is Donut."

The man took a sip of tea, closed his book, and turned to face me.

Damascus Steel felt like metal when I touched him, but looked as if he was made of regular skin. Sort of. He wasn't as buff as some of the other dancers, but he was well toned and much too large to be an elf, despite the pointed ears. While he didn't have as many tattoos as Signet, he did have several. His arms were covered in old, faded ink. His chest featured a tattoo of spread, bat-like demon wings with an anatomical heart in the center. In addition to the tattoos, the man was heavily scarred in several places. Old, red welts cut across the ink on his chest, like he'd once been raked by giant talons.

He wore an open, embroidered vest and wavy, wide pants, Aladdin style. He appeared mostly humanoid with Arabic features, but his body seemed a little... fuzzy around the edges, like he was constantly going in and out of focus. Smoke rose off his skin and closely-cropped hair, almost like he was steaming. His eyes were completely white with no pupils at all. Smoke rose from the sockets.

Only when he turned did I notice a pair of stubby horns upon his head. These weren't the shaved off trunks of larger horns, like in the *Hellboy* comic. These were tiny, little stubs, like something one would see on a baby goat.

Damascus Steel. Level 75. Ifrit.

Assistant lead dancer at the Penis Parade.

The closer one gets to the world of Sheol on the 15th floor, the more demons one might find leaking out into the regular world, especially in places that haven't been cleansed in a while. And by "cleansed," I mean in a biblical sense.

An ifrit is like a cockroach or a rat, though usually a lot sexier and more entertaining than either of those. And smart. And cunning. And they usually smell, good, too, which is weird considering how they look. Where there is debauchery, there are usually demons. Where there is sin, there are Ifrit. Unlike a succubus or incubus, who are inordinately obsessed with sex, an Ifrit is more attuned to the *aura* of lust and sin and envy and greed and all those other nasty iniquities that spill over the world. That doesn't make him good or bad, any more than a guy who jacks off to granny porn is bad. Actually, I'm not sure where I'm going with this. Try not to get into a fight with this guy because he'll fuck you up.

He, interestingly, has the exact same elbow tattoo as you.

"That was Author Steve Rowland," the DJ intoned over the loudspeaker. "Once we get that coin dislodged from his eye socket, he'll be available for a private dance. Watch out, ladies. You're gonna get wet. Coming up next is Splash Zone!"

The crowd squealed with excitement as some hair metal song started to play.

"Carl," Damascus said, looking me up and down. His eyes focused on my elbow tattoo. He also appeared to examine the other, large tattoo on my left arm, the ball of snakes. My Enemy of the

Church tat that I'd gotten for smashing the Diwata shrine. "I'm glad you've come to visit. Donut speaks highly of you." He paused. "As does Katia."

"Katia is the one who finally convinced me to come here." I rubbed my elbow.

He nodded. "Walk with me."

I hesitated, but only for a moment. He left his book and tea on the counter. He led me across the room to a row of cubicles set against the far wall, just to the side of the stage. Above, some sort of otter thing was gyrating up on the platform while a song, apparently called "Girl Money," blasted. The crowd enthusiastically peppered him with coins while Bucket Boy scrambled to pick them up.

We approached the cubicles, which all had red or green lights over them, presumably indicating if they were occupied or not. Loud, female groaning emanated from the one occupied room followed by the familiar, Spanish voice of Dong Quixote shouting, "Thou hast seen nothing yet! Thou hast seen nothing yet!"

"Ohhh, look at that," a female dwarf called, looking me up and down. "Somebody is getting a go at the forge." Cackles followed.

This was Rosemarie, the same one who'd gotten in trouble for pelting the troll dancer in the eye with a coin. The dwarf woman was older than I originally thought. The creature on her shoulder was indeed a mole, though it had a fur pattern that was unusual, almost like an Australian cattle dog. The little creature snuffled at me, and the name floating over it was **Bernie**.

Damascus turned and bowed with a flourish, which caused more women to laugh. He moved to the very last cubicle against the corner and held the door open for me. I stepped inside. He slapped my ass as I passed.

The room was small, about the size of a walk-in closet, and it was covered top to bottom in purple, shag carpet. A swing contraption covered in buckles hung from the ceiling.

My eyes immediately caught the hidden door against the other wall. It was a portal. I activated my skill and took a screenshot of

the other side, revealing a brick-covered hallway with torches on the wall.

Damascus stepped inside and closed the door to the club behind him. He locked the door, and without a word, he stepped past me and to the secret door. He pushed his hand against it, and it opened. He stepped within. I followed.

Entering the Guild of Suffering.

Welcome, spider. Welcome home.

My privacy bubble disappeared, just like it did when I exited the Desperado. The music from the club stopped. The temperature rose significantly. Damascus paused in the hall, and pointed to the lone door at the end. It was a regular, wooden door, carved with a spiderweb pattern. I walked toward the it, and the moment I put my hand against it, I was assaulted with a wall of text.

New Achievement! The Molly Maguires.

You have found and entered the main room of a hidden guild, to which you are a member.

Buckle yourself in, buddy boy. This is gonna be a long one.

There are several types of secret societies out there.

There's the Ivy League college kind, where it's a bunch of rich idiots who rent out a place, plaster a few pagan symbols on the wall, and then they wear masks with horns and leaves and shit on them and pretend they're in some Stanley Kubrick fever dream, just so they can forget they're destined to live out lives filled with salmon-colored shorts and Izod shirts and mind-numbing meetings with financial advisors.

There's orgy-themed secret societies, speaking of Stanley Kubrick. Those are usually, uh, visually unpleasant people with unsatisfactory sex lives who get together every other month at some house in the middle of nowhere and get drunk and have lots of unsatisfactory sex with other people and pretend like they're having a great time.

There are altruistic ones. People who want to save the world by doing good deeds. That's the most boring kind, so

we're not talking about them.

There's the evil kind, too. Usually power and profit motivated. The ones where the ultra-elite get together on an island and eat panda bears and discuss how to price-fix world or galactic markets. Yes, those groups really exist. More on these guys in a second.

But first, let's talk about another type of secret organization. One that tries to make a difference, oftentimes outside the confines of the law.

Story time.

In September of 1869, there was a terrible fire at the Avondale coal mine near Plymouth, Pennsylvania. Over 100 coal miners lost their lives. Horrific conditions and safety standards were blamed for the disaster.

It wasn't the first accident. Hundreds of miners died in these mines every year. And those that didn't, lived in squalor. Children as young as eight worked day in and out. They broke their bodies and gave their lives for nothing but scraps.

That day of the fire, as thousands of workers and family members gathered outside the mine to watch the bodies of their friends and loved ones brought to the surface, a man named John Siney stood atop one of the carts and shouted to the crowd:

Men, if you must die with your boots on, die for your families, your homes, your country, but do not longer consent to die, like rats in a trap, for those who have no more interest in you than in the pick you dig with.

That day, thousands of coal miners came together to unionize.

That organization, the Workingmen's Benevolent Association, managed to fight, for a few years at least, to raise safety standards for the mines by calling strikes and attempting to force safety legislation.

...Until 1875, when the union was obliterated by the mine owners.

Why was the union broken so easily? Because they were out in the open. They were playing by the rules. How can you win a deliberately unfair game when the rules are written by your opponent?

The answer is you can't. You will never win. Not as long as you follow their arbitrary guidelines.

This is a new lesson to me. She's been teaching me so many things, about who I am. About what I am. What I *really* am. About what must be done.

Anyway, during this same time, it is alleged a separate, more militant group of individuals had formed in secret. The Molly Maguires. Named after a widow in Ireland who fought against predatory landlords, the coal workers of Pennsylvania became something a little more proactive, supposedly assassinating over two dozen coal mine supervisors and managers.

...Until Pinkerton agents, hired by the same mine owners, infiltrated the group and discovered their identities.

Several of the alleged Mollies ended up publicly hanged. Others disappeared. You get the picture.

So, that's another type of secret society. The yeah-we're-terrorists-but-we-strongly-feel-we're-justified-and-fuck-you-if-you-don't-agree society.

So, what's the moral of this little history lesson?

This sort of thing happens all day, every day across the universe. It happens in Big Ways, and it happens in little ways, too. The strong stomp on the weak. The weak fight back, usually within the boundaries of the rat trap they find themselves confined. They almost always remain firmly stomped.

But sometimes, the weak gather in secret. They make plans. They work outside the system to effect change.

Like the Mollies, they usually end up just as stomped as everyone else.

But that's just life. At least they fucking tried. They died with their boots on, as much as I hate that expression. They

died with their boots on for *their* people, *their* family, not for some rich, nameless organization that gives no shits whether they live or die. Or go extinct. Or are trapped for a millennia after they're done being used.

In my opinion, that's the only type of society that's worth joining, worth fighting for. Sure, you're probably gonna die. But if you find yourself in such a position where such an organization is necessary, what do you have to lose? How can you look at yourself if you *don't* do everything you can?

And that brings us to the door you're standing in front of right now. What does all this have to do with what you're going to find on the other side?

Nothing!

Ignore everything I just said. This is just some demi-god trying to scrabble his way to the top. That's yet another type of society. A religion-themed one, and it has nothing to do with what I just said. Just do what he says, and you'll probably be fine. Actually, that's terrible advice. Just do you.

Anyway…

***Reward*: You've received the gift of enlightenment! You're welcome.**

"What the fuck was that?" I muttered. I'd received a lot of weird achievements, but that was one of the strangest ones I'd ever gotten.

I copy and pasted the notification, which had already changed itself to a short, more standard achievement in my history tab.

"Why are you just standing there?" Damascus asked. "Don't be a coward. Go in, get it over with, and come out. I have a reputation to maintain, so you must hurry."

I sighed and pushed my way all the way into the room.

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Katia: So, how was it?

Carl: It was just a dark room with that weird, naga voice. I never saw him. He asked me if I wanted a job to help the "family," and I said no, I'm helping you. He then asked if I planned on killing you for the prize, and I said no. I just wanted to know if he had a map of the Desperado Club's secret passageways. He said he did. A bunch of spiders swarmed up my arm, and I almost crapped myself. But then it added a ton of stuff to my map. There are multiple secret passages and tunnels, including some with monsters in them. Did you know there's a secret potion market on the middle floor? Mordecai didn't, and he's losing his mind over it. There's a bunch of "drug dens," too.

Katia: Drug dens? What does that mean? Where are they? Damn, I didn't even think to ask that thing for help.

Carl: I'm not sure. They sell the blitz sticks out in the open through the pharmacist guys, so I don't know. They're mostly behind secret panels in the hallways. I had no idea the place was so extensive. You know, I met the guy who designed the Desperado Club when I went to CrawlCon. I judged an art contest with him. I need to give him more credit.

Katia: You'll have to send some of those details over. Maybe there'll be something there we can use. Anyway, do

we have an idea on where we're going to act against our target?

Carl: I think we do. We'll strike when I get back from rescuing Samantha. I'm writing out a list of the secret passageways, and I'll send it to you. I'll lay out my plan for secluding the target. Let me know what you think.

I was surprised there were no mentions in the cookbook about any secret passageways in the Desperado Club. It made me wonder if all of this was new.

Katia: Does Donut know you met Damascus yet? I went to get some supplies, and when I got back, everyone was gone.

Carl: Yeah, I came out, and she was already there in the strip club. Apparently she went to the Penis Palace on the middle floor, but it was "boring," so she went up a floor to where I was. She was dancing with some weird, hairy thing called Gluteus Maxx. Li Na was there, too, watching her. She told me that you tasked her with watching Donut, so thank you for that.

Katia: I've met Gluteus. He's a bit of a jerk, but he is a good dancer, and I think he's a little in love with Donut.

Carl: Donut was literally dancing on stage with him. On his shoulder. She was showering gold coins into his thong. For someone who's so careful with gold, I was surprised she was being so generous.

Katia: Yeah, she does that. She always looks like she's spending a lot, but she has a strict budget when she goes in there. How did she react when you came out of the cum closet?

Carl: The *what*?

Katia: The cubicle things in the back.

Carl: Oh, yeah. So, to Donut's credit, she didn't question why I was in there. She and Li Na both know not to ask questions about what we're doing. That Damascus guy told me I had to limp when I walked out, or he'd take out my knee. You know, to make it look like we'd been messing

around. I didn't want to argue with him, so I did it, but I regret it now because that Rosemarie dwarf lady insisted on high-fiving me. And she gave me a little pinback button that says "Certified pole dancer."

Katia: He just made me muss up my hair a little. I got the button, too. Anyway, be safe with the Samantha thing. Donut is telling me now about the jewel she got for her tiara. She's pretty excited about it.

I glanced over at Donut, who was currently hovering two feet off the ground as we walked back to the royal chariot. She was literally walking on air, tail swishing. She was quite proud of herself after our most recent battle with a bunch of bat mobs that hadn't dropped anything useful.

"Donut, don't waste your hovers. You only get five a day."

"I'm practicing, Carl. If I don't practice, how will I know how to use it?"

"Yeah, but now you only have one left for today."

We'd ended up keeping her tiara of Mana Genita—which might end up useful one day—and we purchased a blank tiara from the gnome jeweler at the Desperado Club. It had taken Donut twenty minutes to pick one. It wasn't until I threatened to leave that she finally chose a simple, silver-colored one. Then we paid 25,000 gold to have the citrine jewel installed into the item. Donut's dislike of the color ended the moment we read the description of what the tiara actually did:

Enchanted Tiara of the Inebriated Dragonfly.

There's a children's story out there about a dragonfly who gets so drunk that his wife won't let him come home, so he hovers in the air above their nest, waiting for her to go to sleep, so he can get to bed. The thing is, the wife knows he's out there, and she ain't moving. So the dragonfly either hovers all night or moves to the highest point, sitting on a leaf, overlooking his home, waiting for his wife to turn the light back on to signify he's out of the doghouse.

This tiara has been made to honor that poor Dragonfly with the angry wife.

This citrine-encrusted tiara, when equipped, imbues the following effects:

50% Reduction to potion cooldown.

Plus 10 to intelligence.

Protection from poisoning (already obtained.)

Negates the dexterity debuff when inebriated.

A level 10 *Hover* Skill.

The *Hover* skill had a five-minute cooldown, and it was limited to five uses a day. It was like a dollar store version of what Elle had. Donut could basically hover about two to three feet off the ground for about 90 seconds. She could move, and unlike the *Levitate* spell, it didn't get negated if she took damage. If activated while falling, it would gently bring her to the ground, which was a great addition to the benefit. Now we both had fall protection.

While I was really happy about the cooldown reduction and mana point increase, Donut was all about that *Hover* skill. She thought it was the greatest thing in the world.

"I can fly now. Carl, I can fly! I'm like Wonder Woman!" She rose into the air the moment she equipped it the first time and started zooming in circles a foot off the ground. She was literally galloping on air.

"Wonder Woman can't fly," I said.

"She has an invisible jet, Carl. Don't ruin this for me."

"Just don't waste them. Save it for when we need it. You can use it to walk over water, but it won't let you traverse canyons or anything. You have to be no more than three feet off the ground."

"I'm flying! I'm flying!" Donut announced, all poofed out.

Now, as we returned from our battle with the bats, Donut was hovering again, and there was no reason for it. This was the fourth time she'd cast it. We were getting close to the southern coast of the island, which had to be near the edge of our total space.

"Just don't do it again unless you need it."

Donut grumbled, but I knew she'd comply.

About an hour later, we came across a massive car pile-up. It just went on and on, curving around a bend in the poorly-maintained road. The land in this area had been mostly flat for a while, but we

were now back to trees and wetlands. We curved eastward as the ocean loomed to the south, entering some sort of nature preserve. Donut still couldn't see Samantha on the map, but we should be able to see her soon.

Donut: THERE ARE MOBS COMING UP, PROBABLY JUST PAST THE CRASHED CARS. LOTS AND LOTS OF THEM. HUNDREDS. MAYBE THOUSANDS. I DON'T THINK IT'S MORE BATS. THEY'RE BIGGER AND THEY'RE ON THE GROUND, CROSSING THE ROAD.

I slowed the chariot and moved off the road, stopping near the line of wrecked cars. The marshlands crept up on both sides of the road here. If we stepped off the street, we'd immediately get wet and bogged down. We wouldn't be able to go around.

"Okay," I said as Donut and Mongo pulled up next to me. "Let's approach cautiously and see what we're dealing with. Get your escape spells ready in case we gotta run."

The moment we stopped, I could hear them. It was crackling and crunching and skittering and what sounded like the murmuring of a thousand voices all at once. The tops of the trees around the bend shook.

"I think I know what this is going to be," I said as we moved forward. "Let's go stealth." That meant *Take an invisibility potion and put Mongo away.*

A moment later, we turned the bend, and I saw I was correct.

Far ahead, there was a modest hill of crashed cars, and beyond that, there were hundreds of the mobs, crossing from the left side of the road to the right. They were headed toward the ocean about a half of a mile away.

Crabs. They just kept coming and coming.

Paz had said the real versions were small, maybe about the size of a person's hand. These guys were bigger than that. Each of the red and black, armored creatures was about the size of a large pig, with long, segmented legs and claws big enough to wrap around my waist and snap me in half.

They were smaller than the crabs Odette used for her lower body, but they were still goddamned huge. They moved quickly into

the forest, splashing into the marsh, crawling over one another with little regard for the safety of their fellow crab. One appeared to have the severed arm of another in its claw, and it was munching on it like a turkey leg as it migrated south. Another stumbled, and was soon trampled over by the others. The murmuring noise rose in volume, like we were approaching a busy café. They were all talking to one another.

"Stop," I hissed, lowering behind a car, despite the invisibility. I spied a single crab sitting alone atop a crashed box truck, only about twenty feet away. It wasn't moving, and I hadn't noticed its dot mixed in with all the noise. The crab was talking to himself, and he looked like he was in the middle of casting a spell. A faint, yellow glow surrounded his body. I examined it.

Raul. Red *Maníseros* Land Crab. Sun-Kissed Cloud Rank Warrior. Level 70.

The land crabs, masters of the *Juego de maní* fighting style, have trained their whole lives for this moment. After years of humiliating defeats, they are ready to seize their destiny. Their sworn enemies, the Monk Seals with their wretched Caribbean Kung Fu, won't know what's about to hit them. The crabs have massed on the southern borders of the island, where they will swoop into the waves. From there, they will circle the island and release their grand emissions, finally choking out their sworn enemies and birthing an army to tremble the heavens.

Having cultivated for many years, Raul is on the verge of a breakthrough. Through meditation, perseverance, and maybe a little divine intervention, he will enrich his chi to the breaking point, where he will combine it with his inner core and break through to the next level of his development into a master.

But the timing couldn't be worse. The conflict is here. It is now. He is ready to bathe himself in the crucible of war, no matter his station, but he prays for the chance to descend upon his sworn enemies with the power of the heavenly rank.

Will he break through before the battle begins?

Probably not if his meditations keep getting interrupted.

"Carl, I don't understand that description at all. It sounds like something from one of your nerd cartoons."

Before I could answer, we got another notification.

Quest Update. The Chowder War.

The migration has begun, and it's a sneak attack! The crabs have pulled a fast one. Instead of spreading their incursions evenly upon the coast, they have massed in the south where the monk seals have the lowest concentration. United, they are scrambling toward the water, ready to release their seed. Once in the waves, they will trek around the coast, trailing destruction until the wretched monk seals are defeated once and for all and forever banished from these sacred lands.

It's time to choose a side. If you do nothing, odds are good this bloody conflict will soon spiral out of control. But if you choose to help the crabs, surely they will sweep to victory, choking the baby seals to death with their emissions. If you side with the seals, perhaps the kung fu masters will crush the advance of the crustaceans, ensuring a peaceful existence for generations to come.

What will you do?

I sighed. We didn't have time for this, though I did want to flag one of these crabs. It was probably a terrible idea to have both a seal and crab in our deck at the same time, but then we could decide which one was better.

"I'm going to get a flag ready," I whispered as we continued to watch the lone crab.

The mob appeared to be just sitting there atop the pile of crashed cars. It was sitting in a crab's version of the lotus position with its two claws stretched out, facing away from us. It apparently was meditating, but it was also talking loudly. The golden glow around it pulsated.

"Okay, Raul. You got this. You got this. You will not kowtow to the weak! You will never kowtow! You will ascend past cloud rank

and move to the golden heavenly throne."

"Carl, is he talking to himself?" Donut whispered.

"I'm pretty sure he is."

"What is he talking about? What's a cow towel?"

"He's saying kowtow. It means to submit or be subservient."

"He's talking crazy."

The crab continued to chant to himself, like he was repeating lines off a self-help tape. "My chi is powerful. It is strong. It is clean and free of corruption. It will move to the next level soon. I can feel it. It is pure. I will be a worthy opponent. I will *not* be left behind. I will never kowtow! When I spread my seed, it will be strong, blessed with my heavenly power."

The crab was about 100 meters from the main exodus. We needed to find a way to flag him without catching the attention of the rest of the crabs. If these guys were all level 70-something or above, we'd be screwed if they decided to swarm.

I eyed the box truck Raul stood upon.

"Come on, Donut," I whispered. "We're making a crab trap."

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"Okay," Donut whispered after a minute. She'd taken another *Size-Up* potion. A pair of memory ghosts, chatting in Spanish, zipped past us. Low music played from several crashed vehicles. "He has a lot of Intelligence. It's 150. His Dexterity is lower than you'd think for a ninja crab. Only 75. And his Strength is only 50, but there's a star thingy. What's it called? Oh an asterisk, and it says his claw's crushing power is three times his strength. He has a couple of spells, including something called Chi Cultivator. I think that's what he's casting now. That one says it permanently triples his power if it's successful, but he has to cast it a bunch of times before it works, and it uses all his mana to cast, so I think he might be out of magic juice."

I relaxed. If he was really out of mana, this would be much easier. "Magic juice?"

"That's what Louis calls mana. I like that term."

"Does he have any sort of ranged attacks or teleports?"

"Louis?"

"No, Donut. The crab."

The crab continued to sit atop the box truck, loudly chanting to himself, voice rising over everything else. "You are worthy. You are worthy. You are worthy. Soon, Raul. Soon, you will wash yourself in the celestial light."

The back of the truck had partially rolled up when the vehicle crashed, revealing the cargo area to be empty. The vehicle had once

been a U-haul truck, but there was white paint over the logo. A rope dangled from the back, garage-style door. If one pulled the rope, the back would presumably close.

I eyeballed the space underneath the truck, between the bottom of the cargo bed and the street. There needed to be just enough space for me to fit. It would be close. I took off my nightgaunt cloak to be safe.

My *Phase Through Walls* potion only worked for nine seconds. My potion cooldown was low enough now that I could presumably chain them like I used to do with water breathing, but the potion itself had a duration-plus-one-second cooldown, preventing one from using them that way.

"He has a spell called *Water Cannon* and another called *Bris*. Like Brisk with no k at the end. A bunch of his spells are meditation ones. Does that mean he has to sit there and chant to cast them? That'd be no good if we're going to add him to our deck. The Posse isn't going to like someone who just sits there and mumbles. Oh, and he has a magic protection shell that looks really strong, but it's also a meditation. It says he has to say the magic phrase to cast it, and it takes ten seconds to cast."

"We need something like that. We'll see how it all works once we catch him. You'll have to mute him fast just in case he can replenish his mana somehow. Move quietly and use chat from here on out."

I prepared my *Phase Through Wall* potion. Mordecai had warned us a hundred times about this stuff, that we should only use them in emergencies because the effects could be counterintuitive. And if they snapped off prematurely, you could end up cut in half.

I had ten of the potions now. We kept getting them in boxes. We'd tested one out earlier as we were leaving the graveyard. According to Mordecai, the mechanics of them were much more complicated than it appeared on the surface. They worked on anything that was "a solid and unnatural non-biological with empty space on both sides," so if we were on the second floor of a building, we'd plummet away and would only stop once we hit the bottom floor. Or another living thing. I wouldn't pass through the cracked

pavement under my feet, but I would pass right through the truck in front of me like it wasn't there.

We started stalking toward him, skirting around and over smushed cars, but before we could make it too close, he spoke again.

"I sense your aura," the crab called.

I froze.

"Do you consider yourself sly? Like a razor fox? Your feeble attempts at cunning will not trick me. Oh no. I am of the Sun-Kissed Cloud, you fool! Have you come to test me? To seek fame for yourself? I shall make your bones shatter to dust!"

He did not move from his position. His back was still to us.

I was about to send the *go* message, but then he added, "No, no. That wasn't powerful enough. You can do this, Raul. The seals only respect power. You will *not* kowtow. Confidence. Confidence."

He hadn't really sensed us. He was practicing lines. We edged up a few more feet. I eyed the back of the truck.

Carl: I don't know about the rope part. You won't have leverage.

Donut: I GOT IT. IT'S GONNA BE EASY. I CAN LOOP FOUR OF THOSE WEIGHT THINGS AROUND MY TAIL BEFORE IT EVEN STARTS TO HURT.

Carl: Okay. What about the spell? Can you do it from here?

Donut: I THINK SO. BE CAREFUL. HE SOUNDS LIKE HE HAS A LOT OF NERVOUS ENERGY. YOU KNOW HOW I FEEL ABOUT NERVOUS ENERGY, CARL. CASTING WHEN YOU'RE READY.

Carl: Okay. Get your ass on that rope.

I positioned myself to jump and nodded. Donut cast *Hole* directly underneath the crab, who yelped and plummeted from the roof of the truck into the cargo hold with a clatter. The combat notification appeared. She snapped off the spell as we rushed up. She cast *Mute* on the dazed crab as she jumped, mouth first for the rope.

At the same moment, I formed a fist as I rushed up. I downed the *Phase Through Wall* potion. A nine second timer appeared.

The tailgate of the large truck came almost up to my crotch, but I passed through it and the half-open roll-up door like they weren't there. I was already swinging. I connected with the surprised crab, and he flew back, crashing into the wall against the truck's cab, rocking the whole thing.

I ducked a snap, using my phase to jump through the wall and back again. I clobbered the crab once again.

A muffled cry came behind me. It was Donut, dangling mouth-first from the rope. She'd pulled a large, 100lb free weight from her inventory and had it looped through her tail, in an effort to give her more weight, but the door didn't roll down. She pulled another. Then another. The door was stuck half open. The plan was to keep him trapped in here while I moved in and out with punches.

Raul recovered and snapped a big, red claw right at my head.

I dropped down through the truck's floor before popping up again and punching the crab right in the center of its floor-facing chest. He let out an *oof* and rocketed up against the ceiling of the truck before smashing back down. I felt shell crunch under my blow.

Two seconds.

I was still standing on the pavement, with the truck's floor through my crotch. I dropped a Fear-inducing smoke curtain into the cargo just as the still-dangling Donut cast her health-draining, resistance-lowering *Brain Freeze* on the crab. He started to whimper and scramble back. His health was only at half.

"No, please," he said, his voice frightened. I didn't hear the rest as I dropped to the pavement and pressed myself against it, waiting out the phase potion.

Carl: Don't worry about the door! Get out of there!

I felt the bottom of the truck against my back as the potion's effect snapped off. Thankfully, I didn't get hurt. I waited one more second, then I pulled a flag and kept it in my left hand as I downed a second phase potion. I jumped up to find the crab in the back corner of the truck, cowering with multiple debuffs over him. Donut had retreated to the roof of another car, and she'd slammed him with a magic missile, keeping him cornered. He hadn't scuttled out. His health was in the red, but not red enough.

Donut: OTHER CRABS ARE NOTICING.

I strode forward and punched him several times. He didn't fight back. He just raised his claws in fear as he said, "No, no, no!" I jabbed him with the flag, and I dropped to the ground as the card flew into my hand. I hit the pavement and pressed myself against the ground, breathing heavily just as the potion ran out the second time.

Combat Complete. Deck has been reset.

Carl: Are they coming?

Donut: NO. THE ONES WHO NOTICED GOT BOWLED OVER AND ARE NOW GETTING EATEN BY THE OTHERS. I DON'T THINK THEY REALLY CARE IF WE'RE HERE OR NOT. JUST STAY THERE A MINUTE THEN BACK OUT.

I took a breath. The phase potion had been a bad idea. I should have waited to see if Donut's rope idea had worked before taking one. I'd been afraid to get trapped inside the truck with the thing. I gave myself a moment for my heart to stop thrashing.

I rolled out from under the truck, wiped myself off, and, keeping low, I moved to the back of the truck. I reached up to grab the rope. It pulled easily and with no effort. The back of the van closed and locked with a *snick*. I gave Donut a look.

"What?" Donut asked. "I was trying to pull it down with no leverage, *and* with my teeth. You're lucky you didn't get snipped in half. That was obviously a thumb-oriented task, Carl. You should never have let me agree to it."

"Yeah," I said, deciding to drop it. I looked doubtfully down at the common card. Raul had potential, but he'd been really skittish and had panicked the moment the fight started. I wasn't certain if that was the *Fear* spell or not. We'd have to spend some time with him in the training arena to see if he was worth it.

"What do we do now?" Donut asked, peering around the back of the truck at the exodus of crabs. I handed her the card, and it disappeared into her inventory. We only needed one more before we could start fighting with them.

I settled down to the ground, my back to the truck. Behind us, the migration continued unabated, 100 meters away. There'd be no

more cars coming from the north, and if there were any cars left coming from the south, they wouldn't get anywhere near us.

A light rain started to fall. "We're gonna wait it out," I said. "Just let me know if any start to move toward us."

I hesitated, and then I turned off the mute on Samantha and sent her a ping.

Samantha: OMG ARE YOU COMING OR WHAT? WE'RE BORED.

Carl: We?

Samantha: ME AND MY NEW BEST FRIEND, MARIA. SHE'S GOING TO CAST THE SPELL TO GIVE ME MY BODY BACK, AND THEN SHE'S GOING TO GO ADVENTURING WITH US. SHE'S EXCITED TO MEET LOUIS. SHE THINKS HE SOUNDS REALLY TASTY.

It took another hour for the crab migration to clear. There had to be tens of thousands of the things. Most of this time I spent in chat with Samantha, getting as much information as I could about Shi Maria, the spider we were attempting to rescue her from.

I pulled the Bahamas book, and I compared the information with what was written there. It was pretty much an exact match. On a whim, I sent a message to Prepotente and asked him if he'd come across a similar spider, and he answered with a terse, *No*.

That made sense since this was considered a "unique" monster. Though Uzi Jesus was also a unique, and we knew of several Jesus variations floating around.

The drawing of the monster in the book was terrifying. It was a colossal, translucent, beige and brown spider speckled with black dots and covered with hair. The illustration helpfully included an image of a dead or paralyzed bopca caught in her web, giving the sense of scale. The bulbous abdomen was the size of a Volkswagen bug, and her legs were ridiculously long, curving up and down.

But most terrifying was the face. There was no torso and arms, like with that one crawler we'd met on the bubble level. It was just a human-sized head attached to the body. It was of an older, haggard woman with long, stringy black hair and flaking skin, as if she'd been badly burned. Her lower jawbone hinged all the way downward, giving the impression that she was screaming. A pair of hairy fangs dangled from her mouth, dripping with venom. She did not have human eyes, but four, black, orbs, all in a row, with two huge ones in the center and smaller ones on either side.

"How in the goodness did she swallow Samantha when her head is so small?" Donut asked as I examined the image.

The question gave me an unexpected wave of goosebumps.

Shi Maria, Samantha's name for her, was listed as one of several alternate names in the book. The primary name was "The Screamer." I read the short description:

The Screamer.

A former resident of the celestial realm, this demi-god is a formidable opponent. Specializing in trickery, illusion, and mind-bending spell-casting, this female arachnid spends her days in unending torment. Her husband, a deity from a long-forgotten pantheon, is missing. She will do anything to find him again, even if that means she must tear down all of reality to do so.

The problem is, legend has it she killed her husband. That she ate him right up. She was banished for the crime. She insists she is blameless, but sometimes, during her more lucid moments, she's not so certain of her own innocence.

Beware her lies.

That was followed by a long list of spells and skills, including a level-15 *Unending Insanity*, which was self-explanatory, and a level-15 *Lights Out*, which I knew was a blindness spell. Neither of those could be cured without divine intervention. Thankfully, Mordecai had prepared us for this and had brewed us a protection potion. The potion was called *Liquid Therapy*, and we needed to take it once a day. The protection lasted until you slept.

That single potion would protect us from both spells, along with a host of other fear-based debuffs and afflictions. The ingredients

were expensive, but we had Mordecai make several, enough for the entire guild. I'd had to use my two table upgrade coupons for his alchemy table. He hadn't left the crafting room since.

We'd already taken ours for the day. He was also making one for Mongo, but it wasn't ready yet.

Shi Maria had dozens of more spells, most of which were illusion or fear-based paralysis. Under skills, she had Spinneret, which was her ability to shoot spider web out of her ass, and Venomous Bite.

Under weaknesses, it said she was vulnerable to Psionic attacks. That was it.

We had protections ready for her sticky web. We were both immune to her venom. We were as ready as we could be to face her.

"You know," Donut said as she read over my shoulder. "She really is quite similar to Samantha. She's looking for her husband just like Samantha. She's a little crazy. I wonder if she really murdered him. You know how they love to plot twist us with these back stories."

"It doesn't matter." My eyes read that *Beware her lies* line again. "She's obviously lying to Samantha about her ability to animate that body I have in my inventory. I don't see anything in her listed spells that suggests she could do that. We need to be careful with this. If we can keep her under control, she'll be a great card, but I'm not so sure anymore that it'll be worth it."

"Samantha's going to be quite upset if she's lying," Donut said. "She really wants that body."

We had to first survive the encounter with the spider before that was going to matter.

We waited for another few minutes. As we waited, there was a system message.

System Message: the Goddess Semiramis has re-ascended. She is welcomed into the family by all.

This was the sixth or seventh one of these we'd heard. When we'd re-built Yemaya's shrine, it had been the same thing. That meant there were other crawlers out there encountering similar quests as our Asojano one. I knew it was really those assholes on the 12th floor playing the Ascendency game, getting crawlers to

wake up ancient gods. I hated it, them using us beyond what we already had to do.

Behind me, the crabs had finally cleared. The rain, which had been nothing but a little trickle, was now starting to come down harder.

"Okay," I said, pulling myself up. "Let's do this."

I paused as yet another notification appeared.

Quest Update. The Chowder War.

Crawler Sister Ines Quiteria has negotiated an agreement with the Monk Seal Abbot and has warned him of the vile treachery of the crabs. The sneak attack will likely turn into a slaughter without your intervention! What will you do? Will you side with your fellow crawler, or will you turn this into a rumble for the ages?

I exchanged a look with Donut. "At least we know she's keeping herself busy and isn't following us. Hopefully that whole quest resolves itself without us."

Donut scoffed. "Does it ever?"

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<Note added by Crawler Azin. 17th Edition>
Spiders. By the gods, why? In our world, they only exist in myth, but apparently they're a real thing and are common in the universe. What sort of nightmare must the Creators have been having to design such a thing?

<Note added by Crawler Tin. 21st Edition>
I don't know. I think they're cute.

<Note added by Crawler Tin. 21st Edition>
Never mind. Holy shit, never mind. Fuck spiders.

It took another half an hour to find the realm of Shi Maria. We didn't have to look hard.

Donut found Samantha's spot on the map just as we started to see the first remnants of spider web on the side of the road, glistening in the rain. Broken crab husks littered the area around the webs along with the bones of several creatures. After another quarter of a mile down the road, the entire north side of the road was filled with white web. A bit further, the web was strewn across

the road. A single moped was caught and was inexplicably hanging upside down about ten feet off the ground.

The strands were everywhere, not in any sort of pattern, like a cotton candy machine had exploded and spewed it everywhere. If we touched even a single strand, it would stick tight. Mordecai said the type of spider this was based on didn't actually use webs that were adhesive, but they made the web sticky anyway because, well, fuck you. We had multiple methods of dealing with it. The easiest was Donut's *Magic Missile*, which cut straight through the strands. They shrank away and shriveled from fire. We also had an anti-adhesive potion that would "probably" work according to Mordecai. I didn't want to test it.

Instead of taking Samantha's suggestion and fighting our way into the spider's nest, we talked her into leading the spider to the edge of the road. After going back and forth a few times, she said the spider had agreed, and they were on their way.

Donut remained rigid on my shoulder, too nervous to complain about the rain. Mongo wasn't protected from the blind and insanity debuff, and Donut had put him away.

"Do you really think we won't have to fight her?" she asked. "Samantha says she wants to join the party. I don't see how that'll work. We can't have someone with that sort of skin condition in the party. Plus, you know, that whole thing where she drives people insane. It would ruin Louis and Juice Box's wedding."

"We'll see what she has to say, but you're right. We can't add her to the deck until her health is down to 5%. She's probably going to pretend to be friendly but then will attack. That's the vibe I get from her description at least."

I paced back and forth worriedly as they approached. This was one of the most dangerous monsters we'd ever faced alone. We were ready for her if we did have to fight, but I still felt uneasy. "If she casts anything, we attack. If she retreats back into the web, we'll let her go."

"What if she runs, but she still has Samantha?" Donut asked.

"Uh, well, we'll play it by ear."

"And what if she's really nice and just wants to hang out with us?"

"We'll tell her we have to flag her, or she has to go away. We don't have time for bullshit."

"That might make Samantha mad."

"I have an idea to deal with that."

Donut let out a little gasp. "I see them! Oh, wow, that's a big dot. It's red!"

"Okay," I said. We were expecting that. "Be ready."

The spider only had a few spells we weren't immune to, but she couldn't know what would and wouldn't work against us. I hoped she would go straight to her most potent attacks first. Even though we had the stats from the Bahamas book, Donut would take the *Size-Up* potion the moment she appeared.

"Yoohoo! Carl and Donut! Where are you?" came Samantha's call.

I instinctively took a step back as the trees rustled. It continued to rain. All around, the pillowy mess of spiderwebs started to vibrate, as if they'd all suddenly been pulled taut.

Shi Maria appeared, emerging between two trees, walking sideways along the branches. An involuntary shiver coursed through me.

"Carl, look at her legs! They're *really* long," Donut hissed. Her voice was more panicked than usual. "Do you think she knows about all the spiders we've been killing for that god lady? Oh my god. What if she knows? What if this is a trap?"

"Let's try not to mention that out loud," I whispered.

The drawing in the book didn't do this thing justice. She only had eight legs, but the way they moved gave the impression there were too many of the appendages, and they were much too long, too thin, too angled for the large body, the way they all fought one another as the bulbous abdomen bounced and twisted like a buoy. Somehow jerky and graceful all at once. As she skittered toward us, the legs occasionally bunched together above the main body, like the broken arms of a folded umbrella before popping out again to help her glide seamlessly across the trees. It was horrifying.

I had a memory of Donut finding and eating several daddy long legs when she was still a kitten. She'd chow down on the small spiders and make a funny mewling noise as they wriggled in her throat, then she'd do it again. Sometimes she'd find the spiders and rip one or two legs off before I could stop her, and she sit there and bat at the disconnected leg as it twitched on the floor. I had thought it was kinda funny in a sadistic way at the time. I suddenly felt guilty for every spider I'd ever killed.

Shi Maria did a turn, almost like a barrel roll. She disappeared into the canopy of one tree right on the edge of the road and then appeared at the very top, looking down at us. Her body was upright, but the almost-human head was inverted. It twisted to face us, still upside-down. The head was attached to a long, putty-like neck. That hadn't been in the image, either. She made a clicking noise.

The description was similar, but not exactly the same as the one in the Bahamas book. It decided to use the last name from the book to describe her.

The Bedlam Bride. Reaper Spider Minion.

Level 140 City Boss.

This is a demi-god.

Warning: This mob inflicts Permanent Insanity.

Warning: This mob inflicts Permanent Blindness.

Yeah, good luck with that.

Reaper Spider minions are regular mobs one may find on the fifteenth floor, working as minions of something kinda fucked up we're not ready to talk about yet. They have celestial blood. They're scary as shit, and if you're not prepared for their special attacks, you'd just be better off killing yourself instead. When one encounters them outside of the 15th floor, they're usually working as traveling merchants, selling rare and valuable wares. Anything one buys from them is usually quite dangerous.

But not all of them are merchants. Some have escaped out into the lower levels and have found their own path. Some have grown in power beyond that of a regular Reaper

Spider Minion. This particular one is special. She has had many names. She currently goes by Shi Maria, and her story is long and tragic and can't possibly be fully told here. Once upon a time, she found herself married to a god. It didn't go so well. It's said she killed him. It was pretty much his own fault. Don't stick it in crazy, and all that. The thing is, she doesn't remember actually killing him. Honestly, it's not really important. What is important is that she was kicked out of the celestial realm and banished to this swamp where she spends her days plotting on how to get revenge on everyone and everything who has ever done her wrong.

That list is very, very long.

Shi Maria continued to stare at us with her set of four, bulbous eyes. Her face wasn't as burned and crusty as in the drawing, nor as old, but she still appeared to be covered with flaking skin. She had long, dangling black hair that looked greasy, unhealthy. A pair of long, hair covered fangs jutted from her mouth.

The creature made an angry, rapid clicking noise. Her dot remained red on the map.

"Hey, uh, Samantha?" I called. "Where are you?"

"Eyes down here, beefcake," she answered. "What took you so long?" I startled to see her at my feet. I'd been so transfixed by the spider, I hadn't seen her roll up. The sex doll head was filthy. Mud and leaves and strands of spider thread covered her face and hair. She started snuffling around my feet, sniffing as she rolled around me. "You've been hanging out with strippers. I can smell them on you!"

"Why don't you introduce us to your new friend?" Donut asked from my shoulder. She, too, had her eyes fixed on the massive spider.

Shi Maria clicked again. The sound was fast and disconcerting, like a faulty solenoid in an ignition switch. Or a woodpecker on cocaine. The rain continued to pelt into us. The spider woman's head twisted a few times, turning clockwise. It made three full circles before settling right side up. A white fluid drooled from one of her enormous fangs. The large tree under her cracked and creaked as

the spider shifted. One of the sharp, thin legs undulated up and down. It was long enough to reach us here on the street and skewer me like a kebab.

I took another step back.

"Oh, oh yes," Samantha said. "Shi Maria, this is Donut, and this is Carl. Donut, Carl, meet my new best friend. Her name is Shi Maria, but she prefers to be called MaeMae. She is very shy, but is quite funny once you get her talking. Maybe tonight she can tell you the pachyderm story. I laughed so much it came out of my nose."

Donut: HER STATS ARE JUST LIKE IN THE BAHAMAS BOOK BUT SHE HAS SOMETHING ELSE. SHE HAS THE COCKROACH SKILL LIKE I DO. IT'S LEVEL 15!

Fuck, I thought. That saved her from a fatal blow. At level 15, it would fully heal her, and I was pretty sure it would not only activate twice in a single fight, but it'd give her a short shield in the meantime. An already dangerous fight just got a lot more difficult. If it came to it, we'd pretty much have to flag her and be careful not to accidentally pull her health too low.

Shi Maria hissed, the sound like gas leaking from a canister. The towering legs flexed. A pair of branches in the tree snapped. I had my mental finger poised on my *Protective Shell* barrier.

"Ha!" Samantha said to the monster. "I never noticed that."

Donut: CARL, IS SHE REALLY TALKING TO THE SPIDER, OR IS SHE MAKING ALL THIS UP?

Carl: I have no idea.

"Anyway," Samantha said. "She's going to go adventuring with us. I have it all planned. Okay, listen to this. MaeMae is going to cast the spell that moves me into the body. Then we are going to go kill lots of bad guys, and then after that, she's going to travel to Larracos with us and help us fight against all those other Faction Wars teams while I reunite with my little baby girl. I will have a short, torrid sexual affair with Louis, but I will run away crying after our third or fourth date because I simply can't anymore. After all, my heart belongs to someone else. Juice Box will forgive me, and she and Louis will babysit for me while I have a girls' night out with Donut, and Katia, and Britney, and Li Na, and MaeMae, and Elle.

Carl, you can't come. Not Imani, either. I don't like her. She wants to steal my man. It'll basically be a bachelorette party, and we can all wear matching shirts. After that, we will go find my king, and I will marry him and have lots of weird sex for a week straight as a honeymoon. And after that, I promised MaeMae we would all find her missing husband. He might be in the Nothing, so that's going to be a bit of a chore. Then after all of that, we will go back to the celestial realm, and I will kill my mother. Sound like a plan?"

"Wow," Donut said. "You really do have it all planned out."

"You have a lot of time to think when you're in the stomach of a spider."

"But how are we going to get matching t-shirts for all of us?"

Shi Maria clicked and hissed.

Samantha giggled. "Oh, don't you know it, girlfriend. Donut, don't worry about it. We'll make it work."

"Wait, isn't your sand ooze daughter all grown up?" Donut asked. "Wasn't she married to that mage guy? Why would she need a babysitter?"

"*That's* the part of this plan you have trouble with?" I asked.

"Actually, no," Donut said. "Samantha, I think you might want to skip the affair with Louis part. Juice Box has gotten really good at decapitating people. The last thing you want is to get your body only to get turned back into a head."

"I can't skip that part," Samantha said. "That's one of my favorite parts."

"Have you told Louis this?"

"Oh, yes, but he's blocked me in the chat. He's so cute when he's being shy."

As they went back and forth, I kept my eyes on the monster just sitting there above us in the trees. I considered our options. We could just straight-up attack the spider, but I feared Samantha would flip out and fight us. We'd have to go with my other plan. Samantha's insistence that the monster cast the reanimate spell actually made this easy. If she saw the spider couldn't, or wouldn't, help, her attitude would change instantly.

Carl: Donut, get ready. We're going to speed this up.

I pulled the body from my inventory. It appeared in my arms, rigid like a board. It was a full-sized, pure naiad. The body of Signet's mother. She wore a flowing dress made of seaweed, and she smelled of brackish water. Even though it was the size of an adult, the body weighed nothing. Her silky, white hair hung down, so long it hit the pavement. I gently placed the whole body down on the wet, black asphalt. She appeared as if she was sleeping.

This wasn't a real person, but a tattoo made flesh by Signet's final spell. It'd actually been a tattoo of a fish. I wasn't going to pretend to understand how this all worked.

Princess Lunette. Incomplete Flesh Golem.

"Here it is," I said.

Once a "fleshmancer" cast the proper spell, Samantha would zap into the thing, and she'd have a body again. It wasn't clear what would happen to the sex doll head.

Donut: IF SHE BECOMES A REGULAR NAIAD, DOESN'T SHE HAVE TO STAY IN WATER? WE DON'T EVEN HAVE A BATHTUB IN THE GUILD.

Carl: Something tells me that's not going to be a problem. Not today.

Donut: IT WOULD RUIN THE BACHELORETTE PARTY IF WE HAVE TO DO IT UNDER WATER.

"Okay! Yay! Here we go!" Samantha said. She did a little hop and then rose off the ground, floating between us and the spider in the tree. She'd claimed she'd been unable to float once we hit this floor, but it appeared she'd re-figured it out. She was so excited, she was shaking. "Okay, MaeMae, do your thing!"

The spider clicked and gestured at the body. Leaves and branches went flying as her forward leg waved.

"What? I did too tell you it was a golem!" Samantha said, incredulous. "It was the first thing I said!"

More rapid clicks.

"Supplies? What sort of supplies? You said you could do it as soon as Carl got here!"

Click, click, hiss.

Carl: Here we go. Mute first, then Magic Missile.

"I'm going to kill your mother."

<u>Donut</u>: HER DOT JUST TURNED WHITE!

At the same moment, the spider in the tree burst into tears. At least I was pretty sure it was tears. Her forward legs reached over and started to rub at her four eyes while the whole, colossal thing made a hiss-hissing sound. Actual, water tears flowed down her face. She click-hissed at Samantha.

The other legs all retracted, and the massive boss suddenly crashed to the ground, rolling as she did so. Branches snapped and cracked as she tumbled. Behind her, a tree fell over. She splashed into the marsh just off the road with a *crunch*, rolling onto her back. Her legs splayed up over herself and retracted, like a bug that had just been knocked off with a shot of Raid. She started to rock back and forth. Her head twisted on her swivel neck as the tears continued to flow.

I eased my mental finger off *Protective Shell* as I stared at the white dot on the map. *What the hell?*

Samantha let out a big sigh. "Oh, calm down, MaeMae. No need to make a scene. I swear, sometimes you are just like my child. I won't kill your mother. Not today. Stop crying. Stop this instant." She floated toward the sobbing city boss.

The spider continued to weep.

"No, no, it's okay. MaeMae. Come on. It's okay. We will go get the supplies."

The spider, still on her back, clicked.

"Oh, don't be so dramatic," Samantha said. "I forgive you."

The spider gestured at me and clicked again, this time for longer.

<u>Samantha</u>: CARL YOU HAVE TO SAY SOMETHING NICE TO HER. YOU HURT HER FEELINGS.

<u>Carl</u>: How did I do that? I haven't talked to her at all.

<u>Samantha</u>: YOU FORGOT TO TELL HER THAT SHE WAS STUNNING WHEN YOU FIRST MET HER. IF SHE'S GOING TO BE TRAVELING WITH US, YOU HAVE TO CALL HER STUNNING, OR SHE'LL OPEN HER FIFTH EYE AND FORCE YOUR MIND INTO THE DIMENSION OF UTTER, BLACKENED PSYCHOSIS FOR AN ETERNITY OF SCREAMS.

Carl: Samantha. She can't travel with us.

Samantha: WHY NOT?

Shi Maria pulled her legs even tighter together and started to rock back and forth.

Samantha returned to us. She floated up to eye-level, which was creepy as shit. She had a leaf stuck to the side of her mouth, and I reached forward to peel it off. She growled and snapped at my finger and then continued talking like it was nothing. "She's going to be like that for at least ten minutes. She gets panic attacks. The best thing to do is just let her work through it. Singing helps, if you want to serenade her, Donut."

"Really?" Donut asked, perking up.

"Don't sing to the spider," I said. "Samantha. We need to get out of here. We can't take her."

Samantha made a little whimper. "But she needs to get supplies for my body. She says she needs something another spider like her sells before she can cast the spell, and they aren't around until maybe the ninth floor or deeper."

"So, she knows about the floors?" I asked.

"She knows everything," Samantha said. "We've done a lot of talking."

Even though this should've been obvious, I hadn't realized until that moment exactly how much Samantha knew. It made sense. She didn't seem to fully grasp it all, not if she was still gung ho on us trying to find her beloved king guy. I was pretty sure he didn't exist. At least not until the system decided he did. That was a conversation for later.

But, still. Herot's hypothesis that self-aware NPCs were highly contagious seemed to be true.

"Look, Samantha," I said. Behind her, the spider was making little hissing noises. "She's too goddamned dangerous. I was going to try to flag her for our deck, but if we don't have to fight her, we should avoid it. We'll find another mage for you. Okay?"

"Wait. Did you only come here because you wanted to add her to your stupid card deck? You didn't come here to save me?"

I thought about that. Mordecai had certainly wanted us to abandon Samantha. I'd been saying we needed to come here and flag the spider. Rescuing Samantha was always, ostensibly, a part of it, though of secondary concern. Would we have come at all if the flags hadn't been a thing?

The more I thought about it, the more I realized I *would* have come. That surprised me. It wasn't an unwelcome realization.

I reached forward, and I put my hand on Samantha's cold cheek. She instinctively reached over and chomped down, but she didn't bite hard. She kept her mouth closed onto my hand.

"Samantha. You are crazy. Nobody knows why or how you're getting all these new powers, and it kinda freaks me out because we don't know where it's going to stop. But on the last floor, we couldn't have survived without you. You are part of our team. So, yes, I would've come save you."

"Really?" she asked, mouth still full of my hand.

"Really," I said.

She gently removed my hand from her mouth, and she looked at me, eyes shining. She took a moment to compose herself.

"I'm not going to fuck you, Carl. You need to stop trying."

I smiled and patted her. "Let's get out of here while we can."

"No, Carl. I can't leave her. She's my best friend."

"But she ate you," Donut said. She lowered her voice further. "Plus, look at her face."

"Oh, don't I know it. We've had the moisturizer conversation, but she doesn't know what that is."

"We can't take her," I said. "Not unless she'll let us turn her into a card."

"Yes, yes, Carl. We knew it might come to this."

"She knows about the cards?" I asked.

"Of course. Elle told me all about it, and I told MaeMae all about it. MaeMae said you'd probably want to turn her into a card. She's very smart. She made me ask Elle a bunch of questions about how the cards worked. MaeMae says once Donut has all six cards, she can just pop out whenever, and she'll be immortal just like me!"

"Uh, that's not exactly how it works," I said.

"Elle?" Donut asked. "Since when have you been talking to Elle?"

"Oh, Elle is just a delight," Samantha said. "At first I thought she wanted to move in on Louis, you know, because she messaged me to tell me to leave him alone. I was ready to pull her fairy wings right off. But it turns out it was just because I was making him uncomfortable, and she was just being protective. Not because she wants him for herself. She says even though her garage has recently been refurbished, it's still closed to business and filled with dust. So I forgave her. She's asking me questions about the story of the Fourth Season, and she's been telling me about that card game. That's why she's invited to my bachelorette party. I like her."

I had no idea what the fourth season alluded to. I filed that information away to ask Elle later.

If this spider willingly allowed us to flag her, that would be great, but it felt like a trap. The book and description went out of its way to tell us how cunning and smart she was. She had to know that if she turned to a card, she couldn't just walk around. She would be at our mercy. If so, what was her plan?

I remembered something Cascadia had said at the beginning of this level. We would be able to keep a single card at the end of the floor.

It wasn't clear how that would work, but that had to be it. I eyed the "sobbing" spider. This was all an act. It had to be.

I gently pulled Donut off my shoulder and put her on the ground.

"You two stay here."

"Carl," Donut said, but I held up my hand.

If Shi Maria was angling toward getting us to bring her down to the ninth floor, everything would be fine for now. That meant she wouldn't deliberately kill us.

It was an opportunity. A dangerous one.

I cast *Wisp Armor* on myself. I took several steps toward the crying spider. I formed a fist, and my gauntlet appeared. I kept *Protective Shell* at the ready.

"Listen up," I said, talking as I edged toward her. "Shi Maria, whatever your name is. I'll get you to the next floor, or however

deep you need, if you help us. But we gotta do the card thing. You know how it works."

The spider moved one of her legs, which had been covering her eyes. She stopped crying and regarded me. The change was instantaneous.

I continued. "You turn any of my friends blind or insane or otherwise hurt anyone we're not already fighting, and the deal is off. I will rip the card. But if you help us, you have my word we'll help you. Do you understand? Click once if you do."

She undulated, unfurling her long, terrible legs. She turned, righting herself, keeping her mass low. She did it in such a way her head did not spin or move at all. She kept my eyes the whole time. As I stared at her, I saw it, the closed, fifth eye in the center of her head. It was small. The size of a marble. That was how she cast her spell. She opened that eye, and all who regarded it would be blinded or driven insane.

Even though that eye was closed, I felt it. *It's right there*, I remembered my mother saying, standing on the edge of the Grand Canyon. *Do you remember the circus, Carl?*

And then, the spider talked.

"I understand the bargain, worshipper of Emberus," Shi Maria said, her voice a sultry and perfectly clear whisper.

A deep chill washed over me.

"So, you do talk," I said.

"That fool Samantha says you keep your promises. I could devour you now, but if I am to leave this horrible place, I must trust in you. I must find my husband and prove I didn't kill him. In order to do that, I must first get to Larracos. I have no quarrel with you. Once the city is reached, I will tell you how to undo the card magic, and you can set me free. In the meantime, I will help you. It is an easy bargain for you. While I am trapped as a card, I would be at your mercy. No?"

"Can you really help Samantha get her body back?"

"I don't have the proper magic, but I know of a master pulpmancer in Larracos," she said. "This same mage would be able

to set me free from the card prison you would put me in. Expensive, but it's possible."

Mordecai had said something similar, when I asked him about the possibility of saving Paz. He knew exactly where that pulpmancer's shop was, but it was in the bottom levels of Larracos. The mage was most likely dead. Shi Maria didn't know this. I hoped.

"You've been lying to Samantha," I said. "How can I possibly trust you? I will never believe a word that comes out of your mouth."

A small grin played across her disturbing face. With her upper lips wrapped around the strange, hairy fangs, the expression was terrifying. "You don't need to trust me, Carl. I will be at your mercy. You know what I want, and that gives you power over me."

I swallowed. That reminded me of Odette's first piece of advice to me.

She was emulating me. She was trying to act like I would act, if I was in her position. She'd done the same thing with Samantha. This one was smart. There was no way we could ever trust her. But I *did* believe she wanted to get off this floor.

The spider cocked her head to her side. "I see you've taken a potion that you think would protect you from my spells. It might protect your companion, but you? You've already been cracked open. A broken window still lets the wind inside, Carl. What is it you want, I wonder? Maybe I should look upon you with my eye. We would both know, then. Samantha told me of your troubles with certain deities. And of your other troubles. Of what is growing inside of you."

I opened my mouth to respond, but I was stopped by a notification.

New Quest. The Bedlam Bride.

An escort quest? Really? Psshhh. Piece of cake.

The problem is, you're the cake.

The Screamer. Shi Maria. The Widow Endless. The Bedlam Bride. It doesn't matter what her name is today. Get her crazy ass to the city of Larracos. That's it. That's the quest.

***Reward*: A simple prize for a simple quest.**

The monster looked upon the gauntlet on my right hand. She then rolled over onto her side, exposing the bottom of her mass. It jiggled slightly, as if filled with liquid. Her legs on one side arched up into the air, gleaming sharp and hanging over me like a row of razor teeth. Her belly was almost translucent, like frosted glass. Hints of organs throbbed about within.

"Injure me just enough to cast the card magic. Do not attempt to slay me, Carl. Many have tried. All have failed. I have more tricks than your mind can imagine. Be a friend to me, and I will be a friend to you."

"People keep saying that to me," I said as I punched her in the center of her abdomen.

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December 22nd.

Time until Phase Two. 40 hours.

Carl: Whatever you do, don't trust her. Ever. In fact, try not to talk to her at all except to give her orders during battle. She's plotting against us. Also, don't tell her that Larracos has been flooded. Don't mention it to Samantha, either because she might say something.

Donut: THE SPIDER LADY IS A CARD NOW. I'M NOT GOING TO TALK TO HER ANYWAY. I CAN'T BELIEVE SHE LET YOU DO THAT.

Carl: She has a plan I don't see. Our only advantage is that she doesn't know we're immune to most of her abilities.

I hope, I didn't add.

Donut: SAMANTHA ALREADY KNOWS LARRACOS IS FLOODED.

Carl: Yes, she does. But we don't need to remind her. She doesn't realize that means the mage who might be able to transfer her to the body is probably dead.

Donut: OH NO. THAT'S REALLY SAD.

Carl: I'm sure we can figure something else out for her. In the meantime, we want Shi Maria on our side long

enough to get off this damn floor.

<u>Donut</u>: I DON'T LIKE SPIDERS, CARL. NOT WHEN THEY'RE BIGGER THAN I AM. THEY GIVE MONGO NIGHTMARES.

Out loud, I added, "We need to get back to that one saferoom near the Desperado Club. I want to do some practicing with our deck, and Katia and I have a thing we need to do."

"Ooo, that sounds exciting," Samantha said. She rolled between me and Mongo as we trudged back north. "I want to do something exciting."

"I got good news for you, then," I said. "You're gonna get to do something really fun. We gotta get you into the Desperado Club first, though."

"Goodie," she said. She growled and rolled off, chasing after a frog. She'd floated for a while, but had grown tired and reverted back to rolling. Donut, Mongo, and I were spending the time grinding on monsters. The crabs were gone, off to the coast, and we didn't see any more bats, but there were bird mobs everywhere, and sometimes they'd just swoop in on us without warning. Thankfully, Donut could see them coming, and she usually managed to knock them out of the air before they got close.

We did manage to come across a strange entity that might've been good to flag, but Mongo killed her before we could even examine her properties. Samantha said she smelled something off the path even though there were no marks on the map. This was just past the marshland, so I figured we would humor her. We followed her snuffling form until Mongo suddenly pounced on a pile of dead undergrowth at the base of a kapok tree.

The thing was a hairy woman with backward feet, and she'd been asleep under the pile of foliage. Her dot showed up red in that last moment before she died. Mongo chomped her to death before she fully woke up. Her name was La Ciguapa, and there was an entry about her in the Bahamas book. She had a special ability to lure opponents with charm, and she was hard to kill... except by familiars and pets.

Unfortunately, she was of Legendary rareness, and it was unlikely we'd run across another one. It was a wasted opportunity for the deck, but the good news was that she dropped two cards. An uncommon snare card and a mythic special effect card.

The snare card was called **Damnation**. It didn't kill the monster, but it made it so an enemy's totem card would be discarded once it timed out, whether it was dead or not. That was a good card to use against powerful monsters we might be otherwise unable to kill.

The special effect card was interesting. It was a consumable card called **Glow-Up**, and it wasn't on the list of known card types. It could be cast on any active card or totem, yours or the enemy's. It changed the card itself, altering it so it permanently reflected the item's current state. So if we had a totem with a summoning time of 120 seconds, and we buffed it with a time extend, and then we cast Glow-Up on it, the totem would permanently summon for 240 seconds in future battles. We could only use the Glow-Up card once, so this was something we'd have to think about. If we used it properly and were smart about how we stacked the buffs on it, we could turn an already-strong card into something practically immortal.

While we grinded our way back north, I managed to fill up and drain my Scavenger Daughter's patch three more times. I learned a few things along the way.

The power of the Daughter's Kiss special attack was much more potent if the captured souls in my back patch were all of the same species. If I killed nothing but Howling Gulls, and the soul essence bar was pure, when I unleashed my melee attack, it was almost twice as powerful than it would be otherwise. Plus, the residual effects of the attack were stronger. Howling Gulls used a scream attack, and when I dispersed the charge, it not only obliterated the monster, it unleashed a scream multiple times more powerful than what the Howling Gulls usually cast. I tried a charged attack on an iguana thing called a Yuanat, and the dog-sized mob turned into literal dust when I punched it, causing a crater ten feet wide.

Other than the monster Mongo killed, nothing was flag worthy. We now had a full deck, but I did want a few backups just in case

some of our totems didn't work out. I suspected our strongest card, Shi Maria, would do what we asked. For now, at least. But I just knew Asojano was going to be an ass, plus Uzi Jesus would probably also be too much to handle. And I had no idea what was going to happen if Geraldo the Monk Seal and Raul the Crab were summoned at the same time.

We could now use the deck in real combat, and Donut wanted to try it, but I told her to hold off until we got to a simulation room. Even though the environment could hurt us in the simulation room, Uzi Jesus couldn't shoot us in the head. We needed to get some serious practice in before I'd be comfortable with Donut using the deck.

On top of all of that, Zev was indicating we'd be going on Odette's show soon. We needed to be ready for that.

It took us almost three times as long to get north as it did for us to travel south, as we stayed on foot and stopped to kill everything we encountered. We didn't quite make it back it time, so we stopped at a roadside saferoom to listen to the daily update. This was a small, traditional style saferoom with a bopca, who was a good-natured guy named Pahzi. Donut demanded a crab dish and a bowl of meat for Mongo, while I ordered a pork sandwich.

We settled into a small booth as the show started. We watched a group of crawlers in Tokyo as they ran from a woman wearing a surgical mask and carrying scissors. One crawler turned and hit her with a spell that caused vines to grow from the ground, and the woman ripped through the vines easily. She slashed the throat of the crawler.

I hadn't heard from Katia in a few hours. We'd been going back and forth on our plan to deal with Astrid, but she'd stopped responding after saying she was going to do some reconnaissance inside the club. I was actually starting to get a little worried.

<u>Carl</u>: Hey, Katia. Are you back yet? We're at a saferoom, and I wanted to send Samantha out into the guild. I'll leave the tattoo kit on the counter for you. I hope you're doing okay.

She didn't answer. Next to me, Donut was grumbling while she cracked open the crab legs herself. The bopcas used to do it for her, but not anymore. Mongo finished the meat in about two seconds and was now screeching for more. Samantha rolled off and was inspecting a jukebox in the corner of the room. She was smacking into the side of it, demanding it work.

The screen depicted Osvaldo in a sprawling city. He was doing some crazy parkour shit, bouncing off walls while chasing a monkey thing that was swinging back and forth on electrical lines.

He was wearing the memorial crystal around his neck.

The program then moved to Florin, who'd gotten his hands on a tank. It was small for a tank, and it looked like it was maybe built in the 1940's, but it was still a goddamned tank. He managed to get it moving and drive it to the bank of some river. He was using the big gun to take out a serpent as wide as a school bus. I already knew he'd managed to snag this particular monster as a card, but I hadn't realized he'd done it that way, nor had I realized how big the creature was.

I sent a note to Bautista, asking if he knew where Katia was.

Bautista: She's okay. She's asleep. She found some secret merchant in the Desperado Club, and she's out of sorts. But she'll be okay in a bit.

That... that didn't seem right. A new wave of worry hit me.

Carl: Out of sorts? What does that mean? Does she need healing?

Bautista: No. She'll be fine. But I think you'll have to wait a day for your operation. She's not going to be ready.

Carl: We can't wait. We don't know if we'll have access to the Desperado Club in phase two. Are you sure she's okay? She's in your personal space? I'm going to come over.

Bautista: No. We're still in the Desperado.

Carl: She's asleep *inside* the Desperado Club? Do you need help? We're still an hour away from a club access, but I know Imani's team finally found an entrance. I can send her in there.

Bautista: Just leave it, okay? She'll be fine.

That was even more alarming. I moved to a new chat and sent a message to Imani. I was in the middle of sending another to Li Na when Cascadia's daily update interrupted me.

The kua-tin admin was back to her regular, chipper self. Or at least, she was pretending. I did catch a hint of tension there, hidden there in the back of her voice.

Hello, Crawlers!

We are just a day away from phase two. Most of you have filled your squad, and that's great. Some of you have even started to battle each other, which is even more exciting!

We definitely encourage this behavior. Starting tonight, the prices in the mock battle arena are going up. However, if you beat the simulation at challenge level, new arena options will open up.

Here's what to expect when phase two starts.

When the timer hits 12:01 AM on December 24th, regardless of where you are or what you're doing, you will be teleported to a room similar to the one you started in on this floor. Here, your squad leader will be given choices on where to go. You will have sixty seconds to make a choice.

Once a location is chosen, you will immediately transfer there.

Every totem in your possession that is not in your active deck will be lost. Other cards will not be lost, so feel free to keep and collect as many of those as you want. If you do not have a full squad, a random totem from your starting area will be chosen for you and automatically added to your deck.

This new area will be another memory simulation. In addition, it will be populated by intelligent mobs who carry decks. If you kill these mobs, you will be able to take their cards. You will be allowed to take any of their totems as well, but if you do so, you must choose an existing totem in your deck to lose. Once phase two starts, you may never have more or less than six totem cards in your possession.

Your map will be marked with a key location that will be approximately ten to fifteen kilometers away. You will have 48 hours to get to that location and retrieve the key. This key can only be used to open the stairwell location that was adjacent to your original starting area. Once the door is opened, only squad members of the keyholder may pass.

"Oh, shit," I muttered. I could already see where this was going.

At midnight, just as the clock turns to December 26th, phase three begins. All keyholders and their squad will teleport back to a random location within your original area. From there, you may proceed to your starting point and exit to the ninth floor.

If you do not manage to collect a key during phase two, all is not lost. You will be able to transfer to a new location for phase three. Again, you will be given at least two choices.

You will transfer to the doorway of the stairwell location of someone who has collected a key. In other words, you'll be blocking their path. If you can kill them before they exit, you can take the key to save yourself. And yes, it is possible for multiple keyless squads to transfer to the same location. So the potential of crawler on crawler violence is quite high. Doesn't that sound just great?

Of course, you can avoid all this if every squad manages to get a key. Good luck with that.

Now get out there and *kill, kill, kill*.

"Goddamnit," I said. I took a deep breath.

"Carl, does that mean we're going to have to fight people to get out?"

"Maybe," I said. "If we get a key, there might be squads who didn't get one blocking our path to the exit. They're gonna be desperate, and we might have to fight them. They're gonna use this to set up some pretty awful battles."

"What if *we* can't get the key?" Donut asked.

I put my hand on Donut, and I rubbed the side of her face. "Then we'll do what we have to."

She pressed into my hand. "I don't want to fight other people."

"I know," I said. I thought of my back patch, and of the mysterious bone key benefit. "There might be a way to avoid it. I *really* don't want to use it, but I will if I have to."

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Imani: She's okay, but she has a nasty debuff. She found some secret room called a drug den. It's set up like one of those frozen yogurt places, where you get a bowl, and you self-serve stuff into it and add toppings. It's really messed up. She made herself something, and it knocked her on her ass. She's going to be passed out for ten more hours.

Carl: Ten hours? Holy shit, that's cutting it close. That doesn't sound like something she'd deliberately do.

Imani: Well, she did it. The description on her debuff says she has a fifty percent chance of adding a bunch of strength when she wakes up, but there's also a chance she'll lose intelligence. While she's passed out, she's "Bliss Surfing." I don't know for certain what that means, but I think she's reliving a memory. That's what the blitz sticks do, too, but I think this is supposed to be more intense. Elle is guarding her right now. Based on Daniel's reaction, I'm starting to think this isn't new.

Carl: What do you mean? How do you know?

Imani: He didn't want to tell me any of this. The way he was making excuses for her… Let's just say it's familiar. I'm going back to the guild to talk to Louis and Britney and see if they know anything.

I had a sinking sensation. She'd found the drug den because I'd told her where it was. She'd asked me about it.

Donut: IF YOU'RE TRYING TO SAY KATIA IS A CRACKHEAD, I WON'T BELIEVE IT.

Imani: Nobody is saying she's a crackhead, Donut, but I'm afraid she's going to need some help. This stuff is really addictive.

Donut: EVERY SHOW HAS A SEASON WHERE ONE OF THE CHARACTERS GETS STRUNG OUT ON DRUGS OR ALCOHOL, AND IT'S ALWAYS STUPID BECAUSE IT STRESSES ME OUT. KATIA IS NOT A CLICHÉ. I SIMPLY WON'T ALLOW IT.

Imani: We'll figure it out.

Carl: My and Katia's quest is important, but it's not going to matter if all of us don't get a key during phase two. So make sure you practice with your decks. Donut and I are about to go practice with ours, and then we'll get to the Desperado Club and figure out what we're going to do.

"Carl," Donut said, looking up at me. "She'll be okay, right?"

"Katia is the second toughest woman I know," I said. I scratched Donut's ear. "Come on. We need to practice."

Entering the Mock Battle Arena.

Warning: You have at least one consumable card in your deck. This card will be lost if used in this arena.

Choose your difficulty.

"Pick the medium one," I said. "The one equal to our deck."

"Hey," Donut said. "They raised the price! It used to be 2,000 gold, and now it's 2,500!"

"Yeah, they told us they raised the prices."

"Oh, yeah. They also said we get something if we beat challenge difficulty. Let's do that instead."

"Not yet."

In the chat, there was a lively debate about the best deck size and composition. With six totems and an initial hand of four cards, it was important that you pull at least one totem right away, or you'd be vulnerable to attack. Someone suggested that an 18-card deck was the best choice. It meant we had almost an 80% chance to pull a totem in the initial spread, but it still allowed for a decent number of other cards.

I wasn't a math guy, and I wasn't even sure if that percentage was correct, but we decided to test it out. Donut and I put our initial deck together, consisting of 18 cards.

We had the six totems: **Geraldo** the monk seal, **Asojano** the orisha, **Skylar Spinach** the ghommid splitter, **Uzi Jesus**, **Raul** the crab, and **Shi Maria** the spider.

The next six were all utility cards: Two **Time Extend** cards, one strength-increasing **Stout** card, one mana-increasing **Blue Stuff** card, a speed increasing **Greased Lightning** card, and the consumable **Combo** card. Donut didn't want to add the combo card because we wouldn't be using it in practice, but I thought it was best to keep it in the deck to make this as realistic as possible. Also, I suspected the time extend cards would be unnecessary, but we wouldn't know until we practiced with them.

Then, we had three snare cards. These would be pointless in the simulation because they were only useable against card-carrying opponents. But again, I wanted a realistic deck. One could alter their deck ahead of battle, but sometimes you didn't know when a fight was going to start, so our ready deck had to include these cards. We had **Hobble**, which was also consumable. The mana-draining **Hole in the Bag**, which was not, and our new **Damnation** card.

We had two mystic cards, which were also useless here. The card-stealing **Thief** and the **Force Discard** cards.

And finally, we had a single, consumable **Flee** card.

Until we got some practice in, I wasn't certain if this was a good spread or not. We didn't have very many snare cards, and I suspected those might be better than utility cards, but this is what we went with.

We kept Mongo out of his cage. I planned on rolling Samantha into the guild hall before we entered the simulation, but I changed my mind at the last minute. She was always good for distracting enemies.

Mongo bounced up and down excitedly as Donut scrolled through our environment choices while Samantha rolled in circles around my feet.

"Pick something urban," I said. "Not the arena. And not something that sounds dangerous. Make sure the environmental factors are all earth standard."

"I don't know what that means, Carl." She gasped. "They have a 1980's shopping mall! Just like in *Stranger Things*!"

The world immediately changed so we were, indeed, on the first level of a bustling, multi-level shopping mall. Rows of stores spread out in front of us. My eyes caught a colorful arcade, and next to it was a Kay-Bee toy Store—which was absolutely packed. And then a Walden books. Christmas decorations hung along the long hallway. In the distance, a line of children and bored parents waited for their chance to sit on Santa's lap, whom I couldn't see.

We stood next to a brick fountain, which was filled with coins. Donut coughed, and I breathed in the familiar scent of cigarette smoke. Dozens of NPCs appeared in the simulation, walking back and forth as they carried bags. Up on the second level, multiple people hung off the railings, chatting away and laughing. Some people were smoking. Roving bands of teenagers stopped to regard us. A girl whispered to another as they giggled and pointed at my boxers. Samantha rolled up to a group of boys outside the arcade, and bit down on one kid's shoe and started growling. The boy kicked her like a soccer ball, and she went flying.

Next to us stood an Orange Julius stand, and the girl behind the counter looked at us and said, "If you're not going to order anything, you gotta move."

I hadn't realized that these simulations could include physical, interactive NPCs on the actual playing field. These were the same as most of the patrons inside of the Desperado Club. Not really alive like the regular dungeon NPCs, but they still had physical bodies and would be in the way.

Battle Begins in Ten Seconds. Deck is locked in place.

"Can you turn off the people?" I asked.

"I can, but it's too late. I already chose it!" Donut said. "I kinda like it."

A girl with a side ponytail looked down at Donut. "Aren't you the cutest thing ever? And is that a dinosaur? That's wicked awesome."

Mongo screeched joyfully at the girl and waved his arms.

Combat Started.

Donut leaped to my shoulder as the four cards appeared floating in front of her. There was no sign of the monster, though with the mall this packed, I suspected we wouldn't have to wait long.

I examined the four cards she pulled. **Greased Lightning**, **Stout**, **Shi Maria**, and **Uzi Jesus**.

"Save the utility cards and play the two totems," I said. "Summon Jesus, talk to him for a second, then summon Shi Maria."

Donut looked at me sideways from my shoulder. "You sure you want those two at the same time?"

"Yes," I said. "That's why we're doing this. We need to see how they work together. It's important they get used to each other."

In the far distance, someone started to scream.

Donut swiped forward, summoning the Jesus card.

"Body of Christ!" an unseen announcer shouted as translucent, sparkly angels floated in the air.

The ground cracked, and a wooden cross grew up from the hole. Uzi Jesus was nailed to the cross, his gun in his right hand. Mongo squealed with concern as the people around us all started to cry and run away.

"It's Heyzoos, the Uzi Jesus!" the announcer shouted as the words appeared floating in the air. Heyzoos flexed, and the cross shattered into holographic dust as the barefooted man landed on the tiled floor of the mall, his white robe flapping in a wind that wasn't

there. His long, flowing hair also waved. A golden halo over his head sparkled. A 75-second timer appeared over him and started to count down.

"Holy shit," I muttered. I'd forgotten about these ridiculous intros.

"Who are you?" Heyzoos asked, looking me and Donut up and down. The guy had a Texan accent for some reason. He was a ridiculously good-looking white dude. All around us, people started screaming and running for the exits. The girl behind the Orange Julius counter bolted. In the distance, the wall separating the Santa display fell over as parents and children fled. "What happened to the crocodile guy?"

We'd agreed ahead of time that Donut would do most of the talking. It was important to see if they'd follow her instructions.

"You shot him in the stomach," Donut said. "So he gave you to us."

Another card appeared in Donut's deck, but it was a snare card. She immediately discarded it.

"I was going to heal him," Heyzoos said defensively. He scratched at his temple with the barrel of his gun. His finger was planted on the trigger. "So, who we sending off to meet dad? Hey, what're you doing?" He jumped as Samantha started bumping into his legs.

"Whatchu got under that robe, huh?" Samantha asked, rolling around him.

"Samantha, leave him alone," I called. "Come back here."

"But I want to see his penis," she whined.

"Samantha, you little shit," I said. "Come here, or you can't go adventuring with us again."

"We don't know what we're fighting yet," Donut said to Heyzoos. "Go over there and wait to see what comes out, but first we want you to meet another card."

She flipped the Shi Maria card, and a laughing, web-covered skull appeared in the air, exploded into a thousand little spiders, and for a moment, the whole area appeared covered in spider webs. Ominous harpsichord music made a *dun-dun-Dunnnn* sound as the giant

spider appeared, standing over Heyzoos, who was cowering at her sudden appearance.

"The Bedlam Bride!" the announcer shrieked.

A 120 second timer appeared over the massive spider, who rose high into the air, her giant legs spreading across the entire hallway, knocking decorative candy canes off the walls. Up on the second level, people screamed and scattered. The spider hiss clicked as the head on her stretchy neck twisted around with confusion.

"Fucking shit!" Heyzoos cried as he started to empty his gun into the belly of the giant spider. A health bar appeared and started to slowly descend as he fired into her. The already screaming, panicked crowd went even more berserk.

Maria recoiled, hissing and clicking. She leaped up to the second level and turned, facing the screaming man.

"Stop!" Donut yelled.

One of Shi Maria's legs shot forward and skewered Jesus right through the chest. He cried out but kept firing. His gun didn't appear to run out of ammunition. She lifted the screaming form up in the air, and with another leg, swatted the Uzi out of his hand. It went flying.

"We are on the same team," Maria hissed at Jesus. Her health was halfway down. Heyzoos's health was also in the red and dropping rapidly.

Shi Maria looked at Donut. "Do you have a heal totem card?"

"Uh," Donut said. "No?"

"We have one," I said, but it's not in the deck. "*He's* our healer."

"You should kill him," Samantha called up to Shi Maria. "He hurt your tum-tum!"

Another card appeared in Donut's hand. The combo card. She discarded it.

"Heal me," Shi Maria demanded of Heyzoos.

He groaned in pain. He raised his hand as if to cast something, but then he dissipated into dust.

Totem Killed.

At the far end of the mall, a figure appeared, floating up from the ground, then another. And another.

They were reindeer. Goddamned reindeer. There were eight of them, floating in a perfect V formation, and even at this distance, I could see they were covered in gore. Each had a strange, triangular dot over their heads. Entrails hung from the antlers of one of them, and to my horror, there was a small man still attached to the end of the stream of guts. A man dressed like an elf. He screamed before plummeting back to the ground. The trail of intestines remained attached to the antlers.

I was expecting Santa to appear next, and he did, but not in the way I anticipated.

A ninth reindeer appeared, rising in front of the others. The decapitated head of Santa—or the poor guy working at the mall pretending to be Santa—hung from the creature's mouth. It spit, and the head dropped away.

The reindeer roared, lion-like. And then, its nose started to glow.

Its entire body glowed yellow, meaning it was currently invulnerable.

"What the hell," I said.

This one also had a symbol over its head, but it was a triangle in a circle. I was pretty sure I knew what those symbols meant. We hadn't seen this type of monster yet.

Rude-Dolph the Blood-Nosed Slay-Deer. Level 100.

Eastern United States Legendary Creature.

Warning: This is a Puppet-Master. This creature is intangible until all the puppets have been killed.

Eight of Eight Puppets still live.

Nobody is laughing at him anymore.

All nine reindeer started galloping through the air at us.

We had to kill the other eight reindeer before we could even touch Rude-Dolph.

"Carl, do you see that?" Donut shouted. "It's a cheap knockoff of Rudolph! He ate Santa!"

Another card popped into Donut's hand. It was Skylar Spinach, the ghommid splitter. Donut immediately whipped it forward, summoning it. An explosion appeared, followed by wisps of ghostly figures. The donkey-headed snake had a timer of 60 seconds.

"Skylar Spinach!" the announcer shouted.

"What in the name of the gods is that thing?" Samantha demanded.

"That entrance is not nearly as exciting as the others," Donut muttered just as a laser shot out from the nose of Rude-Dolph. The blade of light made a *vroom* noise, and it was like a continuous Magic Missile blast. A ceiling support for the mall crumbled. The crackling laser arced through the mall, sheering off a leg from Shi Maria and cutting right through Skylar Spinach. The laser missed Mongo by inches—though it wouldn't have hurt him anyway in the simulation. It passed harmlessly through Donut.

"Get them!" Donut shouted as Shi Maria hissed and angrily scuttled forward.

"You have to kill the other eight first," I called.

Skylar Spinach had split in half and was now two creatures. Skylar and Spinach. Skylar was still a donkey head, but it grew a pair of bat wings, and it took to the air, screaming toward the reindeer. The lower half, Spinach the snake, wriggled about like a worm, though spikes protruded from the area of the split. The headless snake reared up, and all the spikes flung out toward the incoming herd, the spikes shooting into the oncoming reindeer and peppering them with foot-long spikes. One of them—Blitzen—exploded into dust.

I looked over at Donut's hand. She had three cards with another appearing in a few seconds. None were totems.

"Play Greased Lightning on Shi Maria," I said, and she quickly flipped the card out toward the injured spider, who was now halfway down the mall. The card somersaulted through the air, spinning like a boomerang as it slapped onto the back of the giant spider. A giant lightning graphic appeared with a crack just at the same moment as Shi Maria shimmered and split into four different versions of the same, terrifying spider.

"She just cast an illusion," I said, awed by the sight. I knew I could—and probably should—be entering this battle, but it was important to see how these guys fought. One of the illusions was suddenly moving much more quickly than before, and she spat a

glob of web out of her ass at one of the other reindeer, who slammed to the ground. At the same moment, another roared and attacked, opening their mouth to, I don't know, attempt to eat the spider. Before it could connect with the massive creature, the reindeer was slammed in the side by Skylar, the bat-winged donkey head.

Yet another reindeer cast a spell, and the illusions all dissipated.

Rude-Dolph floated above all of this, and he appeared to be charging up another attack.

Shi Maria moved so quickly, she was a blur. One of the reindeer—Comet, I think—fired a white ball of magic at her, and it missed her by a wide margin. Suddenly, half of the remaining puppets turned on one another. Just like that, with no warning. One of them screamed and gored one of his fellow reindeer. He was frothing at the mouth, like he'd been hit by that enraged debuff and Donut's *Why Are You Hitting Yourself* spell at the same time.

I felt a sudden, strange tug in my chest and my brain at the same time. It came out of nowhere. It felt as if all the breath had suddenly been knocked out of me. A wave of dizziness swept over me.

No, I thought. *This isn't right. We're supposed to be safe in here*.

Shi Maria had opened her fifth eye. It shone like a never-ending jewel atop the center of her head. I couldn't tell the color. It was black and white and yellow and red all at once. Even at this distance, I could feel it, calling to me, like there was a physical line between that extra eye and the center of my brain.

It's the river, I thought. *It's the river in my mind.*

I didn't know why or how I thought that. The thought didn't even make sense.

"Carl, are you okay?" Donut shouted.

I'd gone down to a knee, and I didn't even realize it. I sucked in air.

"I'm fine," I lied. "Keep your eyes on the totems."

The affected deer, having been driven both insane and blind, growled and then turned on each other.

Holy shit, I thought, watching open-mouthed. I pulled myself back to my feet. I looked nervously over at Mongo, who sat next me, bouncing up and down, uncertain if he wanted to enter the fight. Even though he was protected from the spell here in the simulation, I knew how dangerous this would be in a real fight. We needed to make sure Mordecai finished that potion for him as soon as possible.

In seconds, all the puppet reindeer were dead, and the little marker over Rude-Dolph blinked out. The yellow glow vanished. At the same moment, the deer fired another attack from his nose, but Shi Maria deftly scattered out of the way, despite the missing limb, crawling up to the second floor of the mall and then leaping across the way as the entrance to a store called Merry-Go-Round and another called Glamour Shots exploded.

Donut flipped another card out. This was Geraldo the monk seal. He appeared with the same fanfare as before. At the same moment, Shi Maria pounced, flying through the air, using one of her legs to literally rip Rude-Dolph in two. The monster let out a pitiful cry as the two pieces of his body remained floating in the air. His nose sputtered and blinked out.

Geraldo the seal did a flip and made two little karate moves before he stopped dead at the sight of the giant spider, which had lowered itself underneath the ripped-in-two reindeer. The female head on Shi-Maria reached up into the air like a baby bird and started greedily devouring the dripping entrails from the deer's body, like she was eating spaghetti slowly oozing from the sky.

"Yo, what the fuck?" was all Geraldo said before the **Combat Complete** notification came, and all the totems disappeared in a puff of smoke.

Next to me, Mongo let out an uncertain screech.

"Carl," Donut said after a moment. She, too, was staring at the empty spot where the spider had been. "I'm really happy we didn't have to fight her earlier."

"Isn't she great?" Samantha asked.

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[29]

Winning condition: Strike a single blow against the deckmaster.

Losing condition: Have an enemy totem or deckmaster strike you.

Combat Started.

"Okay," I said. "Here we go."

"What? What's this?" Donut suddenly demanded out of nowhere. "Carl, this is an outrage!"

We'd been fighting in the mock battle arena for hours now, spending a ridiculous amount of money. We'd just beaten the challenge difficulty, which had been easy because we'd pulled Shi Maria in the initial hand. Our opponent was a giant mouse or rat thing from Indian mythology named Mushika. It was only level 50. It'd been about to summon something, but Maria swooped in, paralyzed it with a spell, unhinged her lower jaw like a snake, and gobbled it up. The fight had lasted seconds. I had no idea why the fight was considered a challenge, but I suspected we were lucky we'd killed it before it finished its spell.

The damn spider was terrifying to behold. She seemed to get an almost sexual pleasure from committing violence. After she devoured the rat, she'd turned toward us and shouted "Again" before dissipating into dust.

After that, we'd unlocked the "Secret Challenge Mode" which was a "medium plus" difficulty challenger with a deck of their own. These

fights were free, but we could only do it three times. This was our first opportunity to face someone else with cards, and I needed Donut to pay attention.

Donut stopped in the field, looking around angrily. She was on the ground to my right. She'd pulled an initial hand with only one totem, Raul the crab, and she'd just summoned him. The strange crab was doing stretches in front of us while he chanted a spell. We still hadn't seen who our opponent was. The environment was "Verdant hills." The playing field was a cluster of small, round hills covered in ankle-high, green grass. The tallest hills were in the center, meaning we didn't have line-of-sight across the arena. Samantha and Mongo were having a great time, chasing after each other in the soft grass.

Donut made a scoffing noise. "This is an outrage!" she repeated.

"What?" I asked, looking around. "What is it?"

She looked up at me. She was wearing her sunglasses, and I saw my reflection in them, looking down worriedly at her. Her lower mouth trembled like it always did when she was really upset.

"I just received a notification that Empress D'Nadia sold my sponsorship to someone else!"

I grunted. "I'm not surprised, especially considering some of the action items you keep proposing in the warlord chat. We can look at it when the fight is over."

"I'm not a trading card to be collected and discarded, Carl. No offense, Raul."

Raul's claws glowed as he finished casting his *Bris* spell. The spell was cocked and ready until he finished casting it.

The crab turned and bowed. "The path to the heavenly throne is rife with insult, great mistress Donut. This worm grovels and kotows in your resplendent light. If there is someone out there who doesn't recognize your brilliance, then surely they are blind to your vastness."

"Thank you, Raul." She paused. "Wait, did you just call me fat?"

Raul threw himself to the ground. "Shame! Shame on this worthless maggot! I beg your permission to kill myself in my dishonor!"

"Never mind, just keep stretching. Start your magic shell the moment you see the bad guys." She made a whimpering noise and turned back to me. "Carl, I thought she liked me."

I held my tongue. "She does like you, but it's not really appropriate for her to sponsor you when we'll be fighting her." Plus, I didn't add, she'd likely overextended herself getting that Faction Wars spot. Selling Donut's sponsorship had to have made her a lot of money. I'd actually been expecting this for a while now.

"My new sponsor is..." She paused. I watched as she composed herself. Across the way, the flash of a card summoning cracked across the hills. Our opponent had summoned their first totem, but we still couldn't see them. "I am very happy to have a new sponsor. I am. I just don't know how a waste management company is a good fit for my brand."

"A waste management company?" I asked. A new card popped into Donut's hand. A time extend. She tossed it onto Raul, who groveled as it hit him. Another 70 seconds added to his countdown.

"This undeserving cur accepts your gift, great mistress."

"Raul," I said. "Remember our talk last time? You need to stop acting like that. Her head is big enough as it is. I want you to work on your confidence."

"Yes, daddy Carl. It's difficult to exude confidence when I am nothing but an undeserving louse burning in her glittering radiance."

"Look. The others are going to keep picking on you if you keep saying weird shit like that. Just do what we say, and you'll be fine. You don't need to insult yourself every time she gives you an order. And stop calling me daddy."

Donut: MY NEW SPONSOR IS NAMED LONG HAUL BIOLOGICAL WASTE MANAGEMENT SOLUTIONS, AND I JUST CAN'T WITH THAT. I KNOW I'M SUPPOSED TO APPEAR GRATEFUL, BUT THAT SOUNDS ABSOLUTELY DISGUSTING. CARL, ARE THEY GOING TO SHOW COMMERCIALS FOR GARBAGE TRUCKS ON MY FEED? THIS IS NOT ACCEPTABLE.

Biological waste? I didn't like the sound of that, but now wasn't the time to be having this conversation. I turned my attention back to the field.

By this point, we'd gone through just about every combination of totems.

As expected, Asojano was a complete dick. The first thing he did was attempt to cast a nasty debuff on Donut, but he'd been stopped by the safeties of the mock battle arena. He'd only tried it once, but I didn't trust him.

Still, he was ridiculously strong. Once Donut yelled at him, he'd snap to attention and do what we asked. When he engaged in battle, he'd fight enthusiastically. He took out a whole squad of bomber pigs with a shake of his fat wand. They'd fallen from the sky, their skin boiling and popping with sores, all of them dead before they hit the ground. It was the first time someone other than Shi Maria had managed to kill an enemy while she was summoned.

Also, as expected, Raul and Geraldo didn't get along and would fight each other unless Donut yelled at them to stop. Geraldo the monk seal was a great melee fighter and tank, and he generally did what Donut asked. He only wavered if Raul was also on the field. When that happened, he'd turn and start throwing insults at the crab, who in turn would start spouting nonsense about chi and celestial thrones at the seal.

They'd only come to actual blows once, and that was when Geraldo had said something about Raul's mother. Donut yelled at them to stop, and Raul, who'd appeared to have the upper hand in the fight, stopped immediately, which allowed Geraldo to crack his shell and kill him. Donut made Geraldo apologize the next time they were together, but it was clear they'd always hate each other.

Raul, who'd been struggling with his self-confidence even before we picked him up, had turned into a simpering, sniveling, kiss-ass. He would follow Donut's orders without question. Luckily, he was a powerful fighter. His once-a-fight *Bris* spell, which required a short meditation to cast, ended up being a great, ranged spell. He'd cast it on his claw, and it allowed him to powerfully crush things from a distance.

The biggest problem with Raul was that he was a big wuss. He'd fight, and he was damn good at it, but he would always cower and submit to any other summoned totems. The first time we'd

summoned him the same time as Shi Maria, she'd picked him up, skewering him right through his shell, and used his body as a cudgel to beat a group of bowl-headed, Japanese monsters called kappas to death. He'd screamed and sniveled and cried as Maria gleefully pounded him down like a toddler with a toy hammer. Then, Shi Maria ended up telling this to Geraldo the next time they were both together, and now Geraldo was calling Raul "the spider lady's jinetera."

Skylar Spinach never talked and didn't have much of a personality at all, and I suspected that had something to do with him or her already being half of a monster when we'd flagged them. They usually ignored the other totems and did exactly what Donut asked, though for some reason the thing really liked both Mongo and Samantha and would huddle up to them when summoned, an action that would freak out Mongo. If we talked to it, the donkey head would just make those unsettling *heehaw* donkey noises. The monster was great as a distraction, and I wished it had a summoning time longer than 60 seconds. Once it was killed the first time, the resulting donkey head with the bat wings had a Dodge of 15 and was next to impossible to hit, which would keep Donut safe as long as it was summoned. The snake half of the body was noncorporeal and shot spikes from a distance.

Also, Skylar Spinach had an interesting side effect I hadn't anticipated. While we could only have six totems, if Skylar split and then timed out, the two pieces would split into two different, temporary cards for the remainder of the battle, which we could then summon separately. Both pieces were stronger than the original whole and had a longer timeout.

Shi Maria was clearly our strongest card by a wide margin. The giant monster would appear, quickly assess the situation, and then skitter across the battlefield to dispatch any opponents, usually in seconds. Sometimes, though, she'd first demand to see all the other cards Donut had in her hand, and she'd make suggestions or ask Donut to cast some of the buffs on herself first.

One of her biggest strengths was that *Cockroach* ability, though we never got to see it in action. It worked differently when she was

a card. If she died—and she never died—the card would simply get returned to Donut's deck and not the discard pile.

Also, she'd occasionally play with the opponents. She had a sadistic streak, and she'd keep the opponent monsters alive long enough to devour them partially before she finished the job. Once, we fought a gorgon, which was just an eight-foot medusa creature with a naga body, and she paralyzed the monster and then started pulling the snakes from her head, one by one while the monster sobbed. She'd reached down and kissed the medusa full on the lips as she finally died, groaning sexually as she did so. All of us, including Uzi Jesus, had just stared at the display.

And speaking of Uzi Jesus, he was also going to be a problem. He wasn't as openly hostile as Asojano, but if Donut asked him to do something, he'd smile and say he'd do it, but there was only a 50% chance he'd actually perform. And then he'd outright lie about it a minute later. It was like he was a toddler. I sent a sarcastic message to Florin thanking him for the card. He'd just responded with a laugh.

The last time we'd summoned him, Donut asked him to resurrect Geraldo, who'd been literally cleaved in two by a minotaur's axe. He'd said he'd do it, but then he simply sat there.

"Now, Heyzoos. Please," Donut had said, frustration rising. "Skylar is about to time out." Skylar the donkey head with wings was on the other side of the battlefield flying in circles around the minotaur, who was screaming at her in Greek and swiping up with his giant, bloody ax. If Jesus used the *Resurrect Totem* spell, Geraldo would not only come back, but it would be as if we'd just summoned him for the first time. His timer would reset, and all the buffs and debuffs would go away.

"I did."

"You didn't. He's still dead. I can see him right now."

"The bodies turn to dust when they die," he'd said. "He's still there. That means I resurrected him. It's not my fault he's being a pansy."

"He's in two pieces, Jesus."

"Maybe he's an atheist."

Donut looked as if she was going to leap over there and claw him. "If the deck has a resurrect card or a totem that can cast *Resurrect*, the bodies remain. *You* were the one who figured that out last time!"

"Well, I did it. Look, just let me go over there, and I will shoot the bull."

"Don't gaslight me, Jesus. I know you can shoot it. But this time I want you to resurrect Geraldo. We're practicing. You've done it before. I don't see why you won't do it now."

"Believe in me, Princess Donut."

"Carl, do something!"

I sighed. "Look, Heyzoos, will you do it if she takes back what she said earlier?"

He crossed his arms. "Maybe."

I gave Donut a pointed look.

She appeared on the precipice of violence. I'd never seen anyone get under her skin this much since Tserendolgor. *I* would've ejected the asshole by now, but he was such a powerful card, I wanted to wait and see if they could come to an understanding. I was trying not to be a backseat deckmaster. When the real fights started, I wouldn't be able to sit there and help her.

"This is not how this is supposed to work. This is not how any of this works," Donut said. Across the field, Skylar timed out with a *pop.* The minotaur roared and started charging in our direction. "Heyzoos, I'm sorry I said you're not the real Jesus."

Heyzoos sighed dramatically. "I weep, Princess Donut. I *weep*. I just hope my father will forgive your blasphemy. Gah!"

He accidently pulled the trigger on his Uzi, shooting himself in the shoulder. His gun went spinning away. While he danced around, cursing and holding his shoulder, Donut pulled Raul, who rushed over and killed the charging bull with a spinning kick.

And that was pretty much how all of these fights were going. We'd win, and we'd win easily, but it wasn't because Donut had firm control over her totems, which worried me.

Now, a few hours later, we finally had a chance at deck versus deck combat, and it was Donut who was the one getting distracted.

I looked down at her hand. She only had three cards at the moment, and another would appear in a few seconds. She had **Force Discard**, the mana-replenishing **Blue Stuff**, and the health-increasing **Stout**.

The moment the giant, ethereal wolf appeared at the top of the hill, her focus snapped back to the present. The totem had a timer at 76 seconds and counting. The ghostly wolf looked upon us and snarled. To my left, Mongo roared. Samantha spit out a mouthful of grass and starting shouting insults.

Der Kornwolf. Level 100

Summoned totem of Der Schachmeister.

It didn't give any more information than that.

Raul started chanting, preparing his magical shell. The Shi Maria totem popped into Donut's hand. She moved to summon the spider, but a giant, flaming, animated lock appeared floating in the air above her. It had a 30-second countdown.

"*Summon lock*!" the announcer shouted. Tiny, ethereal chains appeared on her cards.

"Carl, what's happening?" Donut cried. "It won't let me summon Shi Maria! I can't do anything."

"Our opponent cast a mystic card on you," I said.

The wolf howled. Another flash of summoning appeared in the distance. A second wolf appeared. This one was also level 100, but it was called **Die Kartoffelwölfin.** Other than the name, this one looked identical to the last.

"Where is the deckmaster guy?" Donut demanded. "I don't even see him!"

As if she beckoned him, our opponent appeared. He was a little, human kid wearing a tuxedo and round glasses. Maybe about 12 years old. He appeared atop the distant hill, coming to stand between the two wolves. He had three, magazine-sized cards floating in front of him with a blinking wire frame indicating his fourth card would be summoned soon. The kid rubbed at his nose with his sleeve and then flipped us off.

"Hey!" Donut called.

Der Schachmeister. Level 25.

Holds a deck consisting of twenty cards, including six totems.

Has an eight-second card summoning cooldown.

Focuses on debuffs and disabling the opponent. He's an annoying little prick without any regard for his own personal safety. You'll have to deal with him the same way you would if this were a middle school playground. You gotta kick his ass before he outsmarts you and gets the adults involved.

That eight-second summoning cooldown was ominous. When Donut played or discarded a card, it took ten seconds for the next card to appear. I had thought that was a hard rule, and I hadn't realized some opponents possibly had faster pull times. That meant some of these guys would be even more difficult to beat than I originally thought. I wondered if that meant some opponents would have more or less than six totems, too.

The two, horse-sized wolves snapped at each other and then charged toward our position. Next to me, Mongo shrieked in outrage.

"No," I said, putting a calming hand on Mongo, who in turn looked to Donut for confirmation.

"Remember what mommy said, Mongo. You gotta do what Uncle Carl says when I have the cards out."

He growled but complied. We didn't want Mongo in on the practice fights, at least not against the enemy's totems. I needed to practice with him following my commands. The wolves wouldn't be able to hurt him here, which was good, but it also made it so this simulation wasn't realistic. In a real fight, the enemy totems couldn't hurt Donut if she had at least one totem summoned, but they could—and would—hurt me and Mongo and everybody else that wasn't a deckmaster. Mongo wouldn't have a chance against two, level-100 wolves.

He would, however, be able to attack the kid directly. If this was a real fight, the path to victory was obvious. We'd ignore the totems and go straight for the kid. I suspected in the future, the enemies wouldn't be so vulnerable.

I held off for now. We needed to practice as much as we could.

"Peekaboo!" the announcer shouted. A freaky pair of bloodshot eyes emerged, floating above Donut, staring down. The names of Donut's four cards appeared, hovering over the deck.

The kid had just cast a mystic card that allowed him to see our hand.

"Go away!" Donut cried up at the eyes. They didn't go away, which implied he'd be able to see our hand for the remainder of the battle. "What do we do?"

"It's your call," I said.

"Real helpful, Carl."

The wolves disappeared as they reached the bottom of the hill. They'd reappear in seconds and be on us.

"Raul, you don't have time to finish your spell. You have to hold them off!" Donut said.

The crab flipped in the air, landing in front of Donut.

Across the way, I watched as the kid swiped another card from his hand. It was another mystic card.

"To Hell With Ya!" the announcer shouted.

The Shi Maria card flew from Donut's hand, did a flip in the air, and burst into flames.

"Hey!" Donut shouted.

We wouldn't be able to summon her for the rest of the battle. That was actually a legendary card that would've force discarded all of the same card from her hand and deck. But she only had a single Shi Maria.

The two wolves rushed up the hill, barking and snarling. Raul unleashed his *Bris* on the first of the two.

The wolf, Der Kornwolf—whatever the hell that meant—exploded into dust. Raul had snapped his head off from a distance. The second one threw itself at Raul, who flipped, waving his claws. The wolf tackled him, and they went rolling down the hill, a snarling, hissing, snapping mass.

Raul wouldn't be able to hold the wolf off for long. Donut still had a few seconds before her deck would unlock, but she didn't have any totems in hand. I suspected the kid had another deck-freezing card ready to go. This fight was already over if I didn't intervene.

I sighed. I was about to send Mongo over there to end it, when Samantha suddenly rose into the air and hovered there for a moment. She started to glow, a bright, crackling blue like she was a miniature sun. I stepped back, surprised at the heat coming off of her. That was new.

What the hell, I thought.

"*Nein! Nein!*" the kid shouted from the distance. He started to back away, as if he knew what was about to happen.

"Watch this!" Samantha started to say, the flames getting brighter. But then she abruptly fizzled out, and she fell to the grass.

"God mother damnit," Samantha said. "I used it all up." She growled and started to roll away.

Totem Killed.

I turned to see where the wolf was, but it was too late. The wolf leapt, flying up the hill and slamming directly into Donut.

The moment he hit her, the room flashed, and all the opponents disappeared.

Simulation Failed.

Congratulations. If this was a real fight, you would all be dead right now.

Combat Complete. Deck has been reset.

"That guy was a cheater," Donut said. "How are we supposed to win if we can't use our deck? And I was distracted by my new sponsor! That fight shouldn't count!"

I thought of our earlier fight in the challenge difficulty, the one against the rat monster from India. "Shi Maria's main tactic is the smart one. We need to be faster. We need to attack immediately, no matter what hand we pull. That means I need to hit the enemy right away. Me and Mongo." I extended my xistera and drew a heavy ball into my hand. I lobbed it across the empty arena. It cracked into an invisible wall in the distance. I remembered Mordecai's advice when it came to mages. *They can't cast their spells when you're punching them in the face*.

I continued. "We also need to work on getting these totems to attack as quickly as possible. We should work on moves we can call out, like you and I do. I wish we could call them out of the cards to

talk to them. We'll have to spend some time in the easy arena with them."

"Asojano and Heyzoos barely listen to me," Donut said. "They're not going to remember any moves."

"I know," I said.

Asojano and Uzi Jesus were both good, powerful cards, but if they were going to be slow to comply, they were almost useless. If we fought a guy like that last kid, and he was better protected, we'd be toast.

I thought of Katia. We still had a few hours before she would wake up. She'd offered me a totem card earlier. She was having the same issue we were with Raul and Geraldo. She had two cards who hated each other, and her charisma wasn't high enough to keep them from fighting one another, so she was giving one of them up. If we could get that one, it meant we'd have to give up one of ours. But what was the best totem to get rid of? We'd have to decide fast. We only had a little more than a day left.

We needed more practice.

"Let's try this again."

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[30]

Time until Phase Two. Six hours.

Zev: You two need to be back in four and a half hours. You're going on Odette's show, and you're going to walk straight from there to the Phase Two onboarding chamber.

Donut: OKAY ZEV!

Zev: Just an FYI. Harbinger will be there again, observing virtually. He's insisting on it. And yes, we've alerted your attorney who will also be present.

The message came just as we entered the Desperado Club. I ignored it and continued to talk.

"Most of these decks seem to be themed," I said. Clarabelle waved us through without saying a word. "The cards play off each other. We need to come up with combos for our own deck. What we have now is pretty eclectic."

"There's not much we can do about that at this point," Donut said. "Everybody else is saying the same thing. The bad guys are always using consumable cards. We have to fight over and over, but they only fight once, and they get to use really expensive and hard-to-find cards. It's not fair! If we use up our consumables, then we won't have anything good for the next fight. But everyone seems to think we'll start to have more choices once the next phase begins,

and we can start moving our decks around once we can steal cards from the bad guys."

"True." I was glad Donut was finally starting to put her mind to this, and I was especially glad she was talking strategy with the others. I could talk deck strategy all day, but I wouldn't be the one making spur-of-the-moment decisions.

We'd lost the second of our three deck-on-deck fights against a muddy blob guy whose deck was all tanks and snare cards. I'd deliberately held back on this one. I wanted to see what sort of strategy he'd use.

The blob guy had hit Shi Maria with the same Damnation card we had, and she'd wasted her time fighting a rolling mud ball with a high dodge. The spider had finally killed it after Donut hit her with Greased Lightning, only to have the deckmaster blob summon another one of the same monsters. When Shi Maria timed out and was sent to the discard pile thanks to the Damnation snare, she'd been enraged and screaming.

Then Raul and Asojano both got themselves frozen and killed, all by various snare cards. The moment Donut had no totems, one of the mud balls rolled up and exploded, hitting us with specks of sludge, causing us to lose the fight.

For the third fight, it was an enormously fat, female, pink-skinned orc named The Luau. She was dressed in Hawaiian gear, complete with a lei, a grass skirt, and coconut bra, plus she had a little piglet guy a third her size off to the side playing the congas for some reason. She immediately summoned a lizard thing called a Mo'o, which looked like a human-sized version of the gecko from those ridiculous car insurance commercials, though it had a spear and breathed fire. I wasted a low-powered hob-lobber and drilled it across the field. It'd worked. The small explosion killed all three. The fight lasted less than five seconds.

"That was a waste of a practice," Donut had said after.

"Maybe," I'd said. "But that's what we're going to try to do when these start for real. If they're going to let me use my regular attacks, I'm going to exploit the hell out of it. If we kill them fast, we'll have access to their full deck before they can waste any of those valuable

consumable cards. Now let's go back and do some more fights in the easy arena. We need to talk to our totems."

We'd spent some time working on getting our cards to attack as quickly as possible. The problem was, our current deck wasn't really conducive to speed. Shi Maria was fast when she wanted to be. Also, Geraldo was fast enough, as was Skylar Spinach. But that was it. Raul the crab required time to cast all of his spells. Asojano and Jesus were both immature idiots. We really needed to work on the deck itself. And we needed more practice.

"We're not going to practice when we don't have any money left, Carl. I mean, really. You're spending money like Miss Beatrice in a shoe shop."

We entered the main dining room of the Desperado Club. Katia sat at the table, surrounded by Bautista, Imani, Elle, and Louis. She did not look happy.

"We'll figure it out," I said as Donut gasped and rushed away. She jumped to the table and then to Katia's shoulder. She bumped her head into hers. Katia was in her regular human form, and she was sobbing. She looked like a mess. The stench of vomit filled the restaurant.

"I'm sorry," Katia said as I came to sit down. "I'm sorry."

I put my hand on her knee. I still had no idea of the full extent of what was happening.

"You're okay," I said, feeling strangely hesitant. "You're here now with us."

"It was so real, Carl. It was like I was there. It's so much better than the blitz sticks."

"Blitz sticks?" I asked. I exchanged a look with Imani, who was rubbing her back. Louis was holding onto a bucket.

"I can't," Katia said. "I..." She leaned forward and vomited into the bucket as Donut howled and jumped away.

Donut: WOW, CARL. SHE'S PUKING A WHOLE RAINBOW OF COLORS.

"It's okay," I said when she was done. "You don't have to explain." The words came out much more cold than I intended.

"This bucket is getting really full," Louis said, looking down into it worriedly. "I don't know where it's all coming from." An elf waitress zipped by. "Hey, can I get another bucket?" She ignored him.

"Oh god," Katia said as she leaned into the bucket again.

Donut: MORDECAI, DO YOU KNOW WHAT'S HAPPENING WITH KATIA?

Mordecai was still in the guild, working at his alchemy table. Now that everyone knew about the little changeling kids he was fostering, he wasn't using all of his free time to watch over them, instead relegating it to the workers out in the public area of the guild. That led to Mordecai spending more and more time at his workbench. He barely left now except to get more supplies.

Mordecai: I do. I've been talking with Imani. Katia is addicted to four different drugs. Good news is we have a cure for all four of them, including the blitz. A cure for the addiction portion, at least. Two of the cures are readily available in the market, and Imani has picked up both. I'm working on the other two. Imani has given the first cure to Katia, which is why she's puking like that. The problem is she's already jacked up her stats. It's not good. Everything is scrambled. Her intelligence took a hit, though it's actually still higher than I thought it was from before thanks to the blitz, which seems to have been going on for a while. Her highest stat, constitution, has taken a big hit. Her strength is higher. Her Charisma took a hit. She'll be permanently susceptible to any sort of addictive spells from now on. She's probably forgotten a spell or two. And she's probably lowered a few skill points.

Carl: For fuck's sake.

I immediately thought of my dad. The image of the man came unbidden, and it surprised me. A wave of anger washed over me, partially at Katia, partially at myself for allowing any part of me to compare the two.

Still, I had to deliberately stop myself from talking out loud, from shouting at her. *What the hell is wrong with you? We're counting on you. People who love you are counting on you. I don't understand.*

I took a breath.

Carl: Why would she let this happen? Why would she do this to herself?

Donut: I THINK SHE'S REALLY SAD ABOUT SOMETHING.

Katia continued to vomit. I just stared at her, not trusting myself to say anything helpful. I caught Bautista's eyes, and he appeared angry as well, though I wasn't certain why.

Mordecai: We all deal with this stuff in different ways. This is how she's doing it. It's not right. It's not healthy. But it's what she did, and it's done. She needs help, and she needs your understanding.

Jesus, I thought. I caught sight of Katia's right hand with the missing fingers as she vomited again. I remembered that day, when she'd lost them. It was the fight with the mantaur. We'd left her alone on the platform, and she'd been crying. She could recreate the fingers easily, but lately she'd been choosing to leave her hand like this.

I'm losing myself, she'd said.

The anger didn't leave, but I was finally starting to realize it wasn't Katia whom I was angry with.

I do understand, I thought after a moment. *I don't want to. That's the problem.*

I sent Mordecai a private, one-on-one message while Donut clucked over her.

Carl: Tell me about these drugs she's on.

Mordecai: There's Travis Priest, I don't know why it's called that, but it's basically a really strong painkiller. It's nasty and addictive, and it's what I had Imani cure first. That's why she's probably still vomiting. There's something called Creamsicle Charm. It's basically ground up fairy wings. That one is a bit like shrooms, but it also makes you forget your worries. That one isn't so addictive, but we're going to give her the cure for it just in case. I'm already working on it. Then there's the blitz sticks, which is like weed plus a hallucinogen that shows you non-existent memories, which is why they're so damn addictive. The cure

for that is a patch she'll have to wear on her skin for a while. Imani has it ready to go, and we're going to give it to her next. Katia has been on the blitz for a while, which means it's going to be hard to get out of her system, believe me.

Finally, there's Glory Bound, which she's only taken once, thank goodness. That's the bad one and is the most addictive. By far. It puts her in a coma and allows her to relive a memory. Like blitz, but much, much stronger. Combined with Creamsicle and Travis Priest, she would've completely forgotten where she really was for a short while. She basically would've just gone back in time and fully re-experienced something. The problem with all of these is that it really fucks your brain up, and they all eventually stop working if they don't outright kill you.

Carl: What's the cure for that one?

Mordecai: It's not easy. The way that one works is if she doesn't get more, she'll slowly go insane, unable to tell the difference between then and now. So the cure is basically a bad trip of Glory Bound. I take a regular dose and add some stuff to it. She'll have to re-live one of her worst memories. It's pretty fucked up.

Carl: So, she'll be out for another ten hours? We have shit to do now. We're doing the switchover in a few hours.

Mordecai: Yep. Timing is going to be an issue. Assuming she's even able to fight, we'll have to wait until her team gets their key. I have something that'll hold off the hallucinations until then, but it won't last for long.

Carl: Damnit. We also have that thing Katia and I have to do. It's not something that'll be easy. I can't do it myself. There's no way.

We needed to kill Astrid now. The plan was mostly in place. If we finished the quest now, that box would open and give Katia access to the orchid, which in turn would allow Huanxin to keep up her part of the bargain. I wanted to make certain Katia had the flower before Donut and I went to Odette. Huanxin's promise to help Katia was only good if I secured Odette's participation as our adjutant.

We had no idea what the changeover would bring. This might be our last chance.

Katia seemed to have stopped vomiting for now. Donut was on the table, rubbing herself back and forth on Katia's arm. Louis slow-walked the full bucket toward the bathroom while the elf waitress watched him, her arms crossed. All around, crocodilian guards in tuxedoes watched us as well, including one who was moving to cut Louis off. They probably didn't like the idea of someone dumping magical, psychedelic puke in their bathrooms.

I checked my view counter. It was spiked. The whole universe was watching this drama. My head hurt. That rushing feeling was in full force, flowing through me.

It was like I knew. I could sense it, this conversation I was about to have.

Mordecai: Listen, Carl. There's an alternate solution to this you need to consider.

I looked up into the air.

I will burn this whole thing to the ground. Goddamn you all.

Carl: What do you mean?

But I knew exactly what he meant. I knew exactly what he was going to say. I made him say it anyway.

Mordecai: I'm helping Katia with this because she's become my friend. No, more than that. She's part of my family. She's one of the most powerful crawlers in the game, and everyone is better off with her here. Plus it's the right thing to do. It's what *good* people do. When someone falls, you hold out your wing, and you help them back up. You, Carl, you're helping her for the same reason. That, plus you have this sense of honor that's going to get you killed. I know you love Katia…

I felt a strange panic rise up in my chest as he paused.

Mordecai: But I also know you love Donut more.

Carl: No. We're not doing this. Not now.

Mordecai: Son. I can't have this conversation with Donut, but this needs to be said. The right thing to do is to help Katia. Yes. But the smart thing, and the safe thing is to step

back and let her self-destruct. We're helping her because that's what we want to do. But we have to look at the facts. It's either her or Donut. She thought she found a solution to the problem with the Crown of the Sepsis Whore, but she's the one who self-sabotaged it. It's not your fault. It's not Donut's fault. And honestly, it's not Katia's fault. Some breaks aren't clean.

Carl: No. We're not giving up on her, and I don't want you to bring it up again.

Mordecai didn't answer. I knew he thought I was being stubborn. Stupid. Suicidal, even.

He was right. I didn't care.

It's going to get worse before it gets better. We're going to lose more friends. We're going to have to do some pretty horrible things just to survive.

Katia looked at me, made a little groan, and wiped her mouth. I was staring at her intently.

"Carl?" she asked.

"Samantha is inside the guild," I said. "I'd do it myself, but you're the one with the drawing skills. Imani is going to give you the patch for the blitz. You're going to pull yourself together, and we're going to do this. You and me. We only have three hours. We don't know if we'll get another chance. It has to be now."

"Okay," she said. She started to pull herself up.

"Where do you think you're going?" Bautista said, pushing her back down.

"Don't touch me like that," Katia snapped, pushing him away. "Don't ever touch me like that."

"You can do this later," Bautista said, glaring at me. "We have time. There may be entrances to the club in phase two. And even if there aren't, we'll all be back here for the last phase. You can do it then."

"Carl...," Imani began.

"No," I said, taking them all in. "No. It has to be now."

Donut: CARL, WHAT ARE YOU DOING? DON'T BE MEAN TO KATIA.

"He's right," Katia said, coming to stand next to me. She was shivering and stank like vomit. "I'm okay. I'll be okay."

"Fine. Kill yourself. But I won't stand by and watch," Bautista said. He turned and stormed from the club.

"You have almost a dozen debuffs that won't run out for several hours," Imani said coldly. Her translucent butterfly wings flapped angrily.

"Then do what you can for me. Please," Katia said.

Her dark eyes bored into Katia. "All right, but before you go, I gotta put that blitz patch on your ass. And I'm going to give you a few other buffs that might make you sick again for a minute, but they'll keep you from passing out."

Katia gave me a look, and I nodded. She reached over and squeezed my hand. She felt alarmingly weak.

"Okay," Katia said to Imani. "But let's do it in the bathroom. Louis' bucket is full."

"I'm coming with you!" Donut announced, and bounded off after them before I could object. "They have very nice bathrooms on this floor."

Elle, who'd been strangely quiet through all this, watched Katia, Imani, and Donut disappear around the corner. She turned and met my eyes. The only ones left in the restaurant were me, her, and Louis, who still had the bucket of vomit. Apparently they hadn't let him into the bathroom with it. He finally gave up and stuck it in his inventory.

"Hey," he said. "I just got an achievement for storing a bucket of vomit."

Elle crossed her arms, still glaring at me. "I hope you know what you're doing, cowboy. If anything happens to her, we're gonna have a problem with Tony the Tiger. If he goes, he'll stop making that tea for us every morning. I'm pretty sure it's the only thing keeping Imani together."

"I know," I said. "Trouble has been brewing there for a while. If we can pull this off, it'll put us on the road to fixing all of that."

"Why the hurry, though?"

"It has to be now," I said. "I have a terrible feeling about phase two. I think everything's about to change again."

Elle nodded. "Just don't let her die. Speaking of tea, we haven't seen you once at the morning breakfast."

"Everything is so busy."

She sighed. "Don't I know it. Just make sure you guys get that key in the next phase."

"You and Imani, too," I said. "I hate that you're on separate teams."

She nodded again. "We're going to make sure we pick different places for phase two, so they don't make us fight one another. We both have solid teams. My squatch squad will kick anybody's ass, and Imani traded her alien guy for that unique mothman and the reverse tooth fairy card. I think she'll be okay." She paused, looking in the direction Katia had gone. "Man, I thought for sure Louis would be the first of us to crack. Poor kid."

"I'm standing right here," Louis said.

"But you know what," Elle continued. "I think this is good. You forcing her back into the pool. I don't know who you two have to kill for certain, but the fact you have to meet back here..." She shook her head, not wanting to say anything further. We'd automatically lose the quest if anyone said it out loud. "I hope you have a good plan."

I looked at the corner where Donut, Imani, and Katia had disappeared. "We do. It's dangerous, though. And a little crazy."

Elle grunted. "What else is new?"

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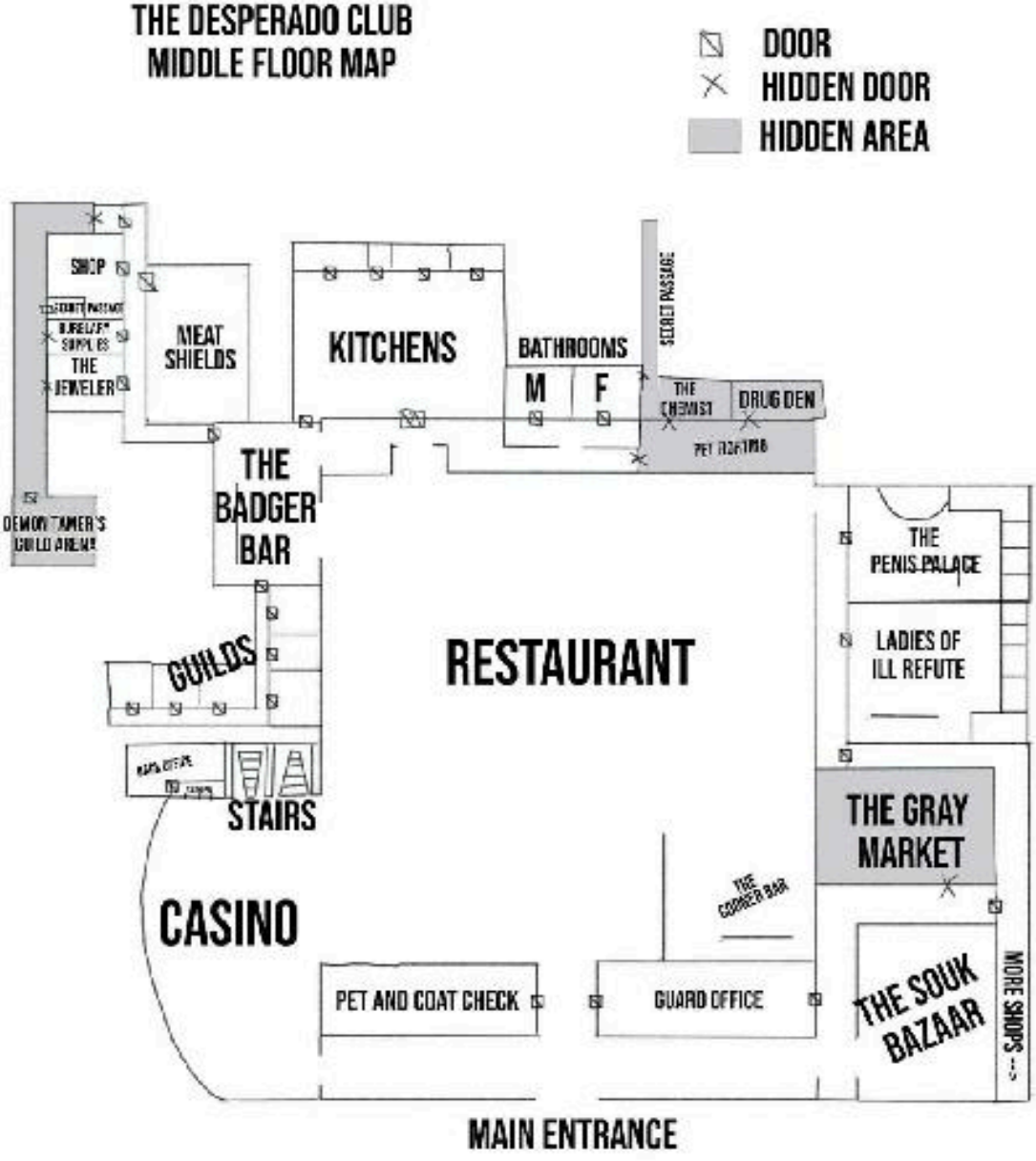
THE DESPERADO CLUB
MIDDLE FLOOR MAP



DUNGEON CRAWLER CARL BOOK 6
THE EYE OF THE BEDLAM BRIDE

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<Note added by Crawler Rosetta, 9th Edition>

As fragile as they look, fairies and sprites can be difficult to kill. They're fast. They're magical. They're always on alert. They say luck is not a real stat in this place, but I think it is. The luck of these little monsters... it's unnatural. Something crazy always happens when I try to fight one. Be wary, comrades.

But if you must fight them, pull their wings off. They come off easily. That's where they store their magic.

"I've never seen you here before," Clarabelle said, glaring down at Samantha. "I've seen you on the recap a bunch of times, but I never noticed the pass on your neck."

Samantha growled and made a hissing noise at Clarabelle. She snapped her teeth a few times.

"In the Nothing, there's a goddess who looks a lot like you. Maki. Maraka. Makara? Something like that. I can't remember her name. She has the head of a crocodile and body of a fish, and she makes sushi rolls out of her own innards. They keep growing back, and she keeps making more and selling it. She has a little stand and

everything. She's quite the entrepreneur." Samantha made a spitting sound. "It tastes terrible."

"What's your point?" Clarabelle asked.

"My point is that I am going to kill your mother."

Clarabelle crossed her arms. "Is that so?"

"Oh it be so, lady. Now let me in!"

"You know what," Clarabelle began, "I don't think..."

I scooped Samantha up and held up a hand, interrupting. I slammed her jaw shut with my arm before she ruined everything. "Listen. Sorry about her. We just finished a quest where she killed someone, and they put the tattoo on her neck."

"It is disgusting," Samantha said, her voice muffled by my arm. She wriggled her head free. "I hate tattoos more than I hate sushi. Though I did have alligator nuggets once. They tasted like chicken! When I get my body, I will never have a tattoo again!"

"...But now she wants to try a drink," I said, talking over her. "I promised I'd take her before phase two started. That's all." I flipped Clarabelle a gold coin. "Sorry, I know she's an ass."

"Whatever," Clarabelle said and waved us through. "Just keep her away from the guards, or they'll kick you all out. For good this time."

"Oh boy," Samantha said as she squeezed out of my arms. She hit the ground, bounced once, and she rolled through the door and into the main restaurant.

"Sorry," I said again to Clarabelle before I followed after her.

"Yoohoo! What's a girl gotta do to get a shirty dirly?"

"It's dirty Shirley," I called. "And don't get drunk!"

"You! Elf lady! Point me to the bar! The good one, not that boring one. I know there's a few up here!"

I sighed.

<u>Carl</u>: She almost ruined it already, but she's in. Are you in place?

Katia: Yes. We have a problem. There's a few crawlers in the club. We need to make sure they stay out of the way.

Carl: Any of our people?

Katia: No, but they're all on the top floor, dancing. They'll probably be okay, but we should try to kick them out just in case.

Carl: Okay. I'll take care of them when I go up there. How are you feeling?

Katia: I'm feeling like people keep asking me that. It was a blip. Don't worry about me. Let's do this.

That was more than a blip, but I wasn't going to say that now. Katia was drugged to the gills with Imani buffs until we could get her truly cured of all her new addictions. Mordecai seemed to believe she'd be okay like this for a few days at least.

Carl: All right. Here we go.

I consulted my recently-enhanced map, and I headed deeper into the club, passing by the bar. Samantha was already there, sitting on the counter demanding that the badger bartender add extra cherries to her drink order.

"Don't forget my straw. And you will have to feed the cherries to me," she was saying. I was pretty sure she was trying to sound throaty and seductive. "Put one on each claw, and I will eat them off." She snapped with her teeth and did a little growl. "One by one."

"You got gold?" the bartender asked, not impressed. I gave the badger man a cursory inspection. He was a level-25 **Porsuk**, which was the name of the badger race in this game. The man's name was Charles.

"Oh, yes," Samantha purred. "I got a coin pouch in my nussy. You make that drink right, and I'll let you use those sexy claws of yours to... dig it out."

"In your *what?*"

I shuddered as I moved into a side hallway. This was on the other side of the badger bar and led down to a few shops, including the gnome jeweler and a few other odds and ends on one side. On the other side of the hall was a "Meat Shields" location where one

could purchase mercenaries. Donut and I both had coupons for that place, but we were saving them.

Carl: Good job. Don't piss him off too much yet. Wait for my signal.

Samantha: YOU DIDN'T TELL ME HOW GREAT THIS PLACE IS. I DON'T WANT TO GET KICKED OUT ANYMORE. I WANT TO KEEP COMING BACK. MAEMAE WOULD LOVE IT HERE.

Carl: Stick with the plan. If this works, you'll only get kicked out for a day or so.

That was absolutely a lie, but I needed her to focus.

I pushed my way down the long hallway until I found the utility closet at the very end. I had already gone this way a few days back, making sure the supposed monsters that lived back here weren't roaming freely. They weren't.

I entered the closet and opened the hidden door, quietly closing it behind me. I pulled a torch from my inventory and lit it. The passage led into the darkness. This secret corridor ran parallel with the hallway I'd come from, but it was behind all the shops.

When Astrid came from the top floor to the middle one to deal with any sort of problem on this half of the club, she would pass through here. It was the perfect place for an ambush.

The location presented a few problems, however.

A few days back, Katia had planted a cherry bomb in the men's bathroom, designed to go off while she was on the other side of the club. She did it to watch how the guards would react, and to see if Astrid would respond.

Astrid did respond, briefly, but it wasn't until almost an hour later. She came out to yell at a few guards before returning to her office. We quickly dismissed using a second bomb to lure her out, instead opting to use Samantha, which would guarantee a swifter response. Still, that first experiment wasn't without benefit. Katia used the opportunity to drink a *Size-Up* potion and get a read on Astrid's spells and abilities.

The fairy was terrifyingly powerful. She had an intelligence of 150 and a whole arsenal of spells designed to kill you from the inside

out. She could boil blood. Deprive it of oxygen. Turn it to acid. She had a spell that literally animated your heart and turned it into a mob, using your veins and arteries as limbs.

She also had a host of psionic abilities, mostly focused on keeping rock creatures, lizard creatures, and "The Armored Sai," in line. The sai were the regular guards of the Larracos level, though I'd never seen one. Apparently they were like samurai rhinoceroses.

She had a passive ability called *Cosmic Sense*, which appeared to be like my skill that warned me when a god was present, but hers worked on both gods and demons. That was probably a good thing to have when one was in charge of security at a giant nightclub.

One of her skills was worrisome. Five times a day, she could invoke *Summon Guard*, which would instantly teleport backup to her location. Each casting would bring "between one to three guards" from the club to her. There was no cooldown, and the casting was instantaneous, meaning she could fill the hallway with up to 15 guards at the snap of her finger.

We didn't want to fight the guards. We didn't even want them to know we were involved at all.

That meant in order to kill her, it had to be immediate, and it had to be a surprise.

Still, we needed to set up contingencies. I came up with the plan that took care of the summoned guards, if it came to that.

If my IED worked, Astrid would never get a chance to summon anyone. But we couldn't rely on it. I took a page from Lucia Mar's playbook. If Astrid summoned any guards, they would immediately fall onto teleport traps. I was going to fill the hallway with them, designed to teleport any NPCs to a locked closet on the top floor. Since Astrid flew everywhere, she wouldn't trip the traps, but I specifically called out fairies just in case she decided to purposely slam into one.

Any guard she summoned to the room would flash, appear, and flash again before they even knew what happened. Hopefully.

The second problem with this ambush location was the monsters.

At the end of this corridor was another room with a closed door. Behind that door was a group of fifteen mobs. We didn't know what

the red-tagged monsters were, but according to the map, the room was an abandoned practice arena of the now-defunct "Demon Tamer's Guild."

I moved my way deeper into the hall. Between me and the monster door were about fifty traps, including silent alarms for both crawlers and monsters, several "Demon Snares," and a few summoning traps designed to call specific guards to the location should the other traps get triggered.

Astrid also had that *Cosmic Sense* ability, which probably warned her if these things got out. We'd toyed with using that as a trigger to get her down here, but dismissed the idea as too dangerous, even for us.

I quickly made my way down the passage, disarming everything except the demon snares, though I did take five of them for myself. As I moved, I set up my two-part teleport traps. After this, I still had to get upstairs and place the second half of the traps—the beacons—into the hidden utility closet.

The door at the end of the hallway was secured with a simple, hanging, unenchanted padlock. It was just a regular door, similar to all the others in the club with a rusted lock hanging off it. The only indication of what was inside was the dust-covered, paper sign hanging off the door:

Warning. Do Not Enter. Extreme, You're-Going-To-Die-In-A-Lot-Of-Pain Danger. Seriously. Don't open this fucking door. Posted by Management.

According to the Night Wyrm, nobody knew what the monsters were. Only that they were outrageously dangerous. There'd been numerous attempts to clear the room, and the parties who entered all died. The fact they'd let this room just exist here with only a few traps as a stopgap was ridiculous. I had to remind myself that this wasn't real life, but game setup.

This was obviously part of some quest we didn't want to get involved with.

The problem was if there was a fight in this hallway, I just knew that this goddamned door would get blown open. Especially since

there would be a few small explosives going off. I had to reinforce the door the best I could.

I worked quickly. This was all something that I should've done earlier, but we'd run out of time. I'd been tempted to skip all this, but I didn't dare. I just had a feeling that these monsters, whatever they were, were awful.

I listened at the door, but I didn't hear anything. I could see them on the map, just sitting there. I pulled a thick, metal, blast-resistant wall from my inventory and set it in place, perfectly blocking the door. The first time I'd come in here, I'd measured the hall's dimension's carefully, and it fit seamlessly. I used the ratchet bracers to make sure the wall was firmly locked into place.

I started stacking sandbags against the wall. When I was done, I would add a second wall and ratchet that one in place as well. I glanced nervously at the clock. We had an hour and a half left before Donut and I would get whisked away to be on Odette's show.

As I worked, Katia messaged me.

Katia: Carl, how's it going?

Carl: I'm almost done here. Are you okay?

Katia: Do you feel guilty about this?

Carl: About killing Astrid?

Katia: Yeah.

I did, actually. A little bit. She hadn't done anything wrong. I'd barely had any interactions with the tiny fairy woman, and the ones I did have were mostly negative. That hardly warranted death. But she was an NPC. She wasn't one of us. Both Katia and I had killed literally thousands of them by this point. I didn't want to do it, and I would avoid it if at all possible. But, again, my earlier opinion on this hadn't changed. We were doing them a favor, breaking them from this hell.

I thought of those kids Mordecai was fostering. Was it a contradiction to want to keep *them* safe? Hypocrisy? I didn't know. I didn't care. I was moving forward the best I could.

Carl: We're doing what we have to, Katia. We didn't come up with this quest on our own. We didn't ask for any of this.

Katia: Yeah. You're right… it's just…

Carl: What?

Katia: Sometimes, I think about the futility of it all. I never want anyone to get hurt. The only time I ever did, it was Eva. And look what happened.

Carl: What happened was you stopped her from hurting anybody else. Don't let them break you. That's what they want.

Katia: Carl…

Carl: And don't you dare tell me you're already broken. You're here, and you're doing this with me. That tells me you still have fight in you, and that's all that matters. I'm not going to give up, and I'm not going to give up on you. Now let's do this.

Katia: God, you are the master of cheeseball motivational speeches. Thank you. I needed that.

I chuckled softly. On the other side of the wall came a low growl, like a noise a sleeping dog would make. A wave of goosebumps passed through me. I went back to work.

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After securing the second wall, I crept back down the passage, stopping at the third door on my right. There were several doors here, leading to the back of the shops. The first was the jeweler, the second was a burglar's emporium, and this third back door supposedly led to an empty, closet-sized room.

This tiny room actually had a hole in the ceiling and another in the ground. That hole upward led to a secret panel in the employee-only hallway on the top floor. This passageway was how Astrid the fairy quickly moved from the top floor to the middle one. It was also the path Astrid would take today when she came to deal with a very drunk sex doll head who refused to leave the bar.

Samantha didn't know the full plan. All she needed to do was make a ruckus when I asked her to and then refuse to leave the bar area. All the guards on this second floor were crocodilian, and they'd be unable to catch her if she didn't want to be caught. They'd be forced to summon Astrid. The fairy would emerge from the closet, enter this hallway, and then move toward the main merchant hall and toward the bar. It was the fastest path, and according to the Night Wyrm, it was the path she always took when she entered this middle floor.

The moment she left this closet, she'd be dead. And if she wasn't, Katia would be here with her deck, waiting to finish her off and collect her body before escaping.

According to the map, Astrid's office was located on the top floor, behind a small vent at the end of the employees-only hall, which explained why I'd never noticed it. This was the same back area where Orren the liaison's now-empty office stood. The entrance to Astrid's space was small and up against the ceiling. Supposedly, this passage to her office led to a hollowed-out hole in the interior of a tree, where she worked and slept and did whatever blood fairies did.

The tree part was interesting. It wasn't anything I needed to worry about today, but it made me think of the All Tree. Signet had told me a little about the massive tree, about how it grew through all the worlds at once, connecting everything. Her circus ringmaster husband, Grimaldi, who'd been turned into a vine by Scolopendra, was now connected with the tree.

I planted a motion detecting smoke trap at the top of the doorway, and then I planted the motion-detecting, anti-NPC claymores against the wall opposite the door. The blast was directional, facing the closet. The moment Astrid appeared, *boom*.

In theory, these explosives alone were more than enough to do the job. The bombs were packed with orcish iron BBs, which were supposedly deadly to fairies. But I took Rosetta's warning in the cookbook to heart. These fuckers were lucky, and we would leave nothing to chance, hence the teleport traps and Katia.

I thought of Paz as I worked. He'd had a self-destruct spell that he could aim magically at a single target. While my claymore was directional, it was aimed manually, and there would be a lot of wasted energy in the explosion. One day I hoped to master the ability to magically aim blasts. If I could do that, even a small blast could be enough to kill something otherwise resistant to explosions. An aimed blast with a narrow target had the power to kill *anything*.

I backed all the way out of the secret hallway.

Carl: I'm set up in here. Moving upstairs now. I'll take the main stairs by the casino.

Katia: Okay. I'm in the women's room on the middle floor. As soon as you clear out, I'll move to the hallway.

Carl: Be careful of the claymores. Stay all the way at the back. And don't forget the invisibility potion.

Carl: Samantha be ready. It'll be a few minutes.

Samantha: DIRTY SHIRLIES ARE THE GREATEST DRINKS EVER.

I moved back into the utility closet and then the hallway. I rushed down the empty, public corridor, emerging back into the bar. I moved past, pausing long enough to hear Samantha chatting away with Charles the bartender, telling him that he'd have to fight Louis for her affection. I moved quickly, skirting the restaurant and to the main stairs that stood near the entrance to the middle floor casino, called "The Hunting Grounds Casino." I hadn't actually gone into this casino before, but I knew it had a lot of the same games as the one upstairs. I spied a wheel of fortune game similar to the one I'd played before. I made my way to the top floor. I moved past the main dance floor, eyeing the crowd, trying to single out all the crawlers. There were four of them, all dancing together. I didn't know any of them.

I moved to the bathrooms, went into the men's room, and I found the secret catch for the utility closet. I opened the door and tossed in all of the teleport trap beacons.

All the guards who set off the teleport traps below would get sent to this room. There was no door handle on the other side. I tossed in a smoke trap for good measure. The guards would probably get out fairly quickly, but it'd take them time to figure out what the hell was going on and where they'd teleported from.

I then moved toward the dance floor, moving past a generated, elf NPC asking me to dance.

Carl: Okay. I'm almost in place. I just gotta talk to these crawlers.

Katia: I'm ready.

I clicked over to my second chat.

Carl: Okay, Samantha. Start being mean to the bartender.

Samantha: I'LL HAVE YOU KNOW YOU'RE FORCING ME TO RUIN A PERFECTLY GOOD POTENTIAL BACKUP RELATIONSHIP. CHARLES COULD BE MY SOULMATE. HIS LAST NAME IS ELLIS, AND SAMANTHA ELLIS HAS A NICE RING TO IT, BUT YOU'RE MAKING ME RUIN IT.

Carl: Don't actually hurt him or anything. Keep me updated.

Samantha: DON'T HURT HIM? I THOUGHT WE WERE DOING AN ASSASSINATION?

Carl: We are, but not of him. I can't tell you who we're trying to kill. It'll ruin the quest. I told you this already.

Samantha: IT'S NOT ME IS IT?

Carl: Of course not.

Samantha: AND YOU'RE SURE IT'S NOT CHARLES?

Carl: No, it's not the bartender.

Samantha: UH-OH.

Carl: Uh-oh, what?

Samantha: UH, DON'T WORRY ABOUT IT. THE GUARDS ARE PROBABLY ALREADY ON THEIR WAY.

"Shit," I mumbled, and I moved to the dance floor.

I knew the crocodilians were loath to call Astrid, but they would eventually cave, which meant we had a few minutes still. I knew from experience they'd actually send a crocodilian up the stairs and into the employee hallway to summon her. I would post up by the bar on this floor and watch for the guard and send an early warning to Katia. I returned my attention to the dancers.

The four crawlers were in a circle, laughing and dancing together. It was three women and one man. Two of the women were human, and the third was an elf. The man looked human at first, but he had a blue tinge to his skin. One of the humans noticed me, and a look of shock registered on her face. She elbowed her closest companion as I drew the privacy bubble over my head and asked for her to do the same.

This woman was a level-52 **Boring Ol' Mage** named **Zeynep**. I figured she was from somewhere in the middle east. The woman was older, if I had to guess. In her late fifties.

"Carl?" the woman asked. She looked around. "Where's your cat friend?"

"Hey guys," I said. "Look, I gotta ask a favor of you. Please don't ask why, but you guys should leave. Like right now."

"Why?" the man asked. His race was a **Zebani**, and he was a level 55 **Ghazi** named **Emir Akbas**. I had no idea what either a Ghazi or Zebani was, but the tall guy had huge arms and a curved sword over his shoulder. He also had the second-bushiest monobrow I'd ever seen in my life, the thickest belonging to my friend, Sam. The man also appeared older, also in his 50's. I suspected maybe he was married to the other woman. All four of them had similar crawler numbers, implying they'd been together this whole time. The other two women—the elf and the other human—were younger, maybe early 20's. The man looked me up and down angrily. "Why should we do what you say? We've collected our squad. We're relaxing before we move on to phase two."

"Look," I said. "Something is about to go down in here, and I don't want anyone getting hurt."

"What's going down?" Emir demanded.

"Do you need help?" Zeynep asked, almost at the same moment.

"No," I said firmly. "Look, I don't have time." I held out my fist. "Get in my chat, and I promise I'll explain it all in like 15 minutes. Odds are good nothing will happen up here on this floor, but I really want you guys out of here before it all goes down just in case."

Zeynep shrugged and punched fists with me. She was the only one.

The three women started to move toward the exit, but Emir didn't budge. He was being an obstinate dick. They all stopped and were talking angrily amongst themselves using the chat. It was clear he didn't want to leave.

I realized belatedly that this Emir guy was drunk off his ass. I kicked myself for not noticing it right away. *Great.*

Katia: There's a lot of commotion going on out there. I can hear Samantha yelling from here, and somebody is screaming. I think it's the bartender badger guy. There was just a loud crash.

Carl: Shit. I'm still dealing with these crawlers. Samantha is working faster than I anticipated.

Samantha: HOW LONG DO I HAVE TO KEEP DOING THIS? EVERYONE IS VERY UPSET, AND CHARLES IS VERY HEAVY.

DID YOU KNOW THERE'S A CASINO IN HERE? YOU DIDN'T TELL ME ABOUT THE CASINO! IT SOUNDS SO JINGLY JANGLY AND PRETTY.

Carl: What? Are you carrying him? And don't go in the casino! Stay in the bar area! It'll just be a minute.

"You think you're such a big, bad man," Emir was saying. I could hear the slur in his voice. "I could beat your ass."

I didn't have time for this guy's bullshit. Some of the cretin bodyguards were looking in our direction.

Carl: Zeynep, can you keep your friend under control? I gotta go. If you aren't going to leave, just stay here on the dance floor and don't get involved in anything. But try to get out of here.

Zeynep: I will try. I am sorry. He is quite jealous of you, and he is very drunk.

I nodded and turned my back, moving toward the bar.

"Don't turn your back on me," Emir growled.

I ignored him and kept walking.

The door to the employee exit opened, and Astrid flew out. There was no warning. If a guard had summoned her, I missed it. She ignored me as she zipped past. She went straight for the regular stairs. She hadn't used the secret stairwell at all.

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

The plan was already hosed.

Carl: Katia. Astrid is on her way down. She's using the main stairs!

Carl: Samantha. You're done. Get out of the club now.

Katia: Shit. What do I do?

I thought for a moment.

Carl: Get into the hallway and into the gnome jeweler's shop. Wait for her. Maybe she'll use the secret passageway on her way back. If she passes, follow her after the blast. She'll still get hit by the IED.

The moment I finished sending that message, an alarm went off. Not a trap alarm, but an actual one. Loud and jarring, like a fire alarm. This was not planned, and I had no idea what this was. A red

light pulsed. The music abruptly stopped. All the generated NPCs stopped dancing and looked around at one another.

A disembodied voice came over a loudspeaker.

"*There has been a containment breach on the middle level. Everyone must evacuate or shelter in place. All security personnel to the Hunting Grounds Level Casino. This is not a drill. I repeat, this is not a drill.*"

All of the pre-generated NPCs blinked and disappeared, and the room was suddenly empty except for me, the four other crawlers, the cretin bodyguards, this floor's badger bartender, and a few others, who were all scattering toward exits or doorways deeper into the club. The guards were all breaking for the stairwell down to the club's middle floor.

Katia: Carl, what's happening? Did the monsters break out of that back room?

Carl: I don't know.

The alarm stopped, but the red light kept flashing. I felt a rumble in the floor, as if something had exploded down below. I moved to my trap menu to check my claymores and my other traps to see if they'd gone off prematurely. It didn't appear as if anything in that hallway had been disturbed at all. *Huh.*

And then what the announcement had said finally registered.

The casino.

"Carl, watch out!" It was Zeynep.

Combat Started.

A fist slammed into the side of my head. I felt myself drop and hit the floor. It was Emir. He grunted with pain from the damage reflect.

It had hurt, and he'd knocked me down, but I was so surprised that I just looked up at the man, incredulous.

"Dude, what the hell, man?" I asked as Zeynep and the others yelled at him to stop. My hand came away bloody. I was *bleeding*. The guy had a powerful punch.

"You assholes keeping it all for yourselves," he said.

I had no idea what that meant. The guy wasn't making sense. I was still on the floor. He reared back with his metal boot and moved

to punt me in the ribs. He swung with an exaggerated kick, and I caught his foot. I rolled, pulling him off balance. He slammed onto his back as I jumped to my feet, hands still wrapped around his foot.

Donut: CARL, WHAT'S HAPPENING! I GOT A NEW COMBAT STARTED NOTIFICATION AND AN ERROR THAT SAYS I'M TOO FAR AWAY FOR DECK COMBAT. I'M IN THE PRACTICE ARENA! ARE YOU OKAY?

I yanked, and the man's metallic boot ripped off his foot. I tossed it away.

He scrambled, trying to get up. He raised his hand, but Zeynep cast something. Not against me, but against her own teammate. *Mute*. The notification appeared over his head. She'd stopped him from attacking me with a spell.

"Are you done?" I demanded as I sent a calming message to Donut. Below, there was another crash. "You're drunk, and I don't know why you're mad. Get the hell out of here."

Katia: Carl, something weird's going on. I'm going to go look.

"My Burcu is going to kill you," the man growled, scrambling up as the others pulled him away.

"She's going to have to wait until tomorrow. Get the fuck out."

Burcu was a crawler floating around number 10 on the top list. I'd never really talked to her, but I did have her in my chat, having briefly met her during the Butcher's Masquerade. Like the bartenders, she was also a porsuk. A badger. Her class was swashbuckler, the same as Bautista and Tran. She'd been one of the three people who'd fought over the memorial crystal at the end of that whole boss fight. I knew nothing else about her other than she was very serious, reminding me of Hekla. And that she was Turkish. I realized all of these guys were maybe in the same family.

Zeynep muttered an apology as she pulled him toward the exit. They left the man's boot on the floor.

My head still swam from the punch.

Samantha: OKAY, DON'T GET MAD.

Carl: What the hell does that mean? You have to leave now!

Samantha: DON'T WORRY. CHARLES AND I WILL KICK HER ASS!

A loud, booming voice echoed through the entire club. The wooden dancefloor buckled in a few places as it shook with the deep bass of the cry.

"PSAMATHE! I CAN SMELL YOU! WHERE ARE YOU, YOU LITTLE SLUT?"

And then, it clicked. This had nothing to do with the monsters in the secret doorway. Samantha had gone into the casino. The casino contained entrances to the Nothing. One of those things had gotten out. A minor feral demon. There was a whole group of them trapped in the Nothing, all sisters. They were part of some harem, and they hated Samantha because she'd insulted their king. Or something equally stupid.

The last time one had gotten out, she'd been kaiju-sized. She'd been killed by a god, Samantha's mother, who'd ripped her in half. That one's name had been Slit.

She'd also been level 200.

At the end of the Butcher's Masquerade, when the dying Signet had been pulled into the Nothing, there'd been another. It'd just been a voice, but it had called out of the Nothing, calling for Samantha. The entrances to the Nothing were one-way, except in rare circumstances, like when I used the Gate of the Feral Gods. Did Samantha's presence change that?

Astrid had that *Cosmic Sense* skill. She'd known what was coming. She'd gone down the main stairs instead of the secret passageway because that was a faster path to the casino.

Shit.

We had to get the hell out of here. The ground buckled again. The sounds of fighting rose up from the main stairwell down to the middle level.

Carl: Katia. Abort! Go into the bathroom passageway and up the stairs, and we'll use the exit up here.

Carl: Samantha, get the hell out of there!

Samantha: I HAVE THAT BITCH RIGHT WHERE I WANT HER.

Katia: Carl, no. I have to do this. That thing is going to destroy the club. I have to get to Astrid now and then get her body into the guild. If I don't finish this now, we won't get a chance. The fight will be our distraction.

Carl: Are you fucking kidding me?

Katia: Carl, this is all my fault. I have to fix it. You get out of here, but I'm going to stay. I can still get to her.

Carl: No, Katia. That thing is level 200. We can't fight it.

Katia: I'm not fighting the demon, just Astrid. But she is going to kill Astrid if I don't, and we'll lose the quest. Remember what you said? That you're not going to give up on me? Well, I'm not going to give up on you and Donut, either. This is it.

"Goddamnit," I muttered. I rushed toward the women's room. I kicked open the stall with the secret stairwell—the first secret passage we'd discovered in this place—and I opened the hidden door and jumped inside. The walls continued to shake. I burst out into the women's room of the middle floor. More screams echoed. The regular lights had gone out, and the flashing red of the emergency lights gave a distinctive pulse. It'd gone ominously silent down here. I rushed out of the bathroom and stopped at the last corner before the restaurant.

To my left just around the corner was the restaurant. If I wanted to get to Katia, I'd have to cross this space. I'd have about ten feet where I'd be exposed to the monster. To my right was a large pair of double doors leading into the back kitchens.

I pressed myself against the corner and listened. There was a wet splotching followed by a deep grunting noise. It sounded like someone with no teeth chewing. The sound came from the main restaurant, not the casino. Someone was sobbing, begging for their life, their voice weak and barely audible. It was a crocodilian. There was a crack and a splash.

"PSAMATHE, GET BACK HERE!" the voice suddenly cried, painfully loud.

"Hah!" came Samantha's retort. She was farther away. "I killed your stupid sister, and Charles and I will kill you even more! It's not

my fault your ugly king can't stand to attention at the sight of you. Everyone thinks you're gross and ugly. Right, Chuckie?"

"Oh god, somebody please help me," came the weak cry of Charles the bartender.

"YOU DIDN'T KILL SLIT. YOUR MOTHER DID. YOU CAN'T EVEN FIGHT YOUR OWN BATTLES, YOU STUPID POTATO!"

"What? What? I will fuck you up!" Samantha shrieked.

"THEN QUIT HIDING BEHIND THE PORTAL AND GET OUT HERE, WHORE!"

I examined the map, looking for a safer path to Katia. The map was a chaos of dots and Xs. There were the white dots of about twenty NPCs, all gathered in the kitchen area to my right, likely massing for an attack. If Astrid was in there, I couldn't tell. Katia's blue dot was in the merchant hall, just past the badger bar.

I could see Samantha zipping through the back of the casino area with the white dot of another NPC traveling with her. The rest of the casino was littered with the Xs of dead NPCs.

The red, misshapen dot of the demon filled about a quarter of the restaurant. It was surrounded by Xs and multiple white dots, indicating several of the NPCs in the restaurant were still alive.

There was a crash followed by a scream. I hazarded a peek around the corner.

Holy fuck.

The demon was different than Slit. She was straight from a nightmare. The pink, fleshy terror occupied the center of the room. Slit had been 100 feet tall. This one was smaller, sized to fit the club. Sort of.

The naked, corpulent creature was crammed into the room, and her round, bald head was pushed to the side against the tall ceiling. Her sore-covered body looked like she'd been oozed into the room from an ice-cream machine and was just now starting to melt.

I didn't see any legs, but the grotesque monster was covered with slender, multi-jointed arms with massive, kite-sized claws at the end. The arms were no wider than twigs, giving the impression I could snap them in half, but they were long, too long, some snaking across the entire room. She had at least twenty of the appendages,

making her look like some sort of eldritch snow man. A few of the claws were pressed against the ceiling, a few more against the floor and walls, and the rest were all occupied, holding tightly around the necks of struggling NPCs, including a few cretins, suggesting the limbs were stronger than they looked.

The large, giant face of the demon was covered in thick, clown-like makeup, just like her sister. Her mouth was wide enough that I could drive the royal chariot right into it. The demon's red lipstick was smeared all over her face. A scattering of black hairs, about as thick and long as my thumb covered the very top of the pink mass.

She stank of diseased skin, even from here. The scent reminded me of a guy I'd once known who'd almost had to have his toes amputated because of athlete's foot that had gotten so bad it'd developed into gangrene.

Minge. Level 225 Minor Feral Demon.

This one was a higher level than Slit had been, despite not being a kaiju. She was only 25 levels shy of most gods.

I peeked again, long enough to watch the demon pull a crying crocodilian to her mouth and crunch down onto his chest, taking a literal bite out of him. The way she bit down was almost dainty, like she was trying just a sliver of a cookie because she was unsure of the taste. The guard gasped in pain. Blood and gore cascaded out of the horrific wound like he was a jelly donut. She made a sort of jiggling shrug and then ate him whole. She belched loudly.

"PSAMATHE!" she cried again, gore pouring from the side of her mouth.

Katia: Carl, get out of here!

Carl: If you're staying, I'm staying. Where's Astrid?

Katia: She's in the kitchen.

Carl: Okay. Stay there. I'm setting up a distraction then coming to you.

I prepared an invisibility potion and pulled out an alarm ball. But before I could move, the double doors leading to the kitchen swung open, and a whole stampede of bipedal, rhinoceros samurai dudes dashed from the room, screaming as they rushed the demon in the restaurant. They were decked out like steampunk samurais,

complete with swords and blades at the end of sticks. Each stood about seven feet tall and were huge. The ground shook as they charged. I caught sight of one, at the end of the stampede.

Walter – Sai. Level 101.

Guard of the Larracos level of the Desperado Club.

The Sai are quite serious about their guard duties, mostly because it's the only gig they can really get. They used to be firefighters, but firefighting in a war zone is a good way to make yourself almost extinct. So, they migrated into the Desperado Club and now are known as the ever-present guards of the bottom* floor of the Desperado. Focusing on their duties distracts them from all those urban legends about their armor being too itchy. These creatures aren't really known for their intelligence, but they're generally good guys, loyal until the end. That's what makes them good guards. They don't care about rules or laws or morals. They just do what they're told.

If they charge, get the hell out of the way.

I suddenly thought of Ferdinand the cat. He had a rhinoceros mount, though that thing was more like the real deal than these guys, who walked on two feet. I couldn't remember what the mount's name was, but I was pretty sure it had been inside the elf castle when it transferred down to the ninth floor.

The rhino guards were quickly followed by a group of cretins, who also rumbled past me and into the room. I pressed myself against the wall as they crashed into the demon, who started screaming and laughing at the same time. A splash of red blew into the hall from the restaurant. *Fuck me.*

Katia: Carl, a bunch of croc guards just rushed into the hallway. They didn't even look at me. They were moving toward that back hallway where we were going to ambush her. I don't know why.

Carl: I bet they're headed toward the mercenary market. That Meat Shields location is back there. They're getting backup.

Katia: No, I think they're going into the secret passage!

Carl: Hold tight. I'm coming.

I took a breath and downed the invisibility potion. I took the alarm ball and chucked it as hard as I could, aiming it toward the front of the club. It sailed through the room, missing the arms and slammed against the front, main entrance to the club. I waited a few seconds. I had no idea what the song would be. Donut had begged me to let her pick a few of the songs for the distraction balls, and I'd let her do it to give her practice using my sapper's table.

Topping at number two on March 23rd, 1985, it's "Material Girl!"

Just as the Madonna song started to blast, I bolted across the open space in front of the demon. But the very moment I stepped out, I was slammed by the body of a sai who'd just been tossed away by the large demon as she turned toward the music. Both the sai—who was dead—and I crashed through the double doors and slid into the back kitchens. I skidded through the room, slamming into a tall spice rack, which tumbled over. I groaned and pushed the monster off of me. I was still invisible.

The room was like any other kitchen from a large-scale restaurant. A row of food preparation stations stood on one side, then ovens, and shelves filled with supplies. What looked like a line of honest-to-goodness microwave ovens stood against the opposite wall. They weren't microwaves, I realized, but a type of food box I hadn't seen before. A group of elf and gnome NPCs huddled in the far back. There was a line of doors here, offices by the look of them.

Astrid floated near the row of food boxes, flanked by two crocodilian guards. She was shouting orders at them, and they rushed off, out a second door, this one leading toward the badger bar, presumably also headed toward that back, secret passage.

Shit, shit. I didn't want Astrid to see me. Surely she didn't know what Katia and I were attempting, but if she knew Samantha was responsible for this demon, who knew what she would do?

Your teleport trap has been activated!

Your teleport trap has been activated!

No, I'm not stuttering. Your teleport trap has activated!

This was followed by about ten more of the same notifications.

Those guards had, indeed, gone into the secret hallway. But why? The only thing back there was the fairy-sized passage up to the top floor. That, and the room with the monsters. They'd hit the teleport traps, which had probably saved their lives. If they passed the claymore, they'd get turned to mulch. There were now two more guards headed in that direction. They, too, would hit teleport traps. I hoped.

I had to get out of here before Astrid saw me. I gingerly stood, moving away from the heavy, unmoving body of the sai. *Jesus*, I thought, looking at the large corpse. The demon had literally ripped its head off.

"Gah!" I cried as half of another sai rhino guard was flung into the kitchen, spewing blood, splattering over me. I had to jump to keep from getting bowled over by the torso, and when I landed, I slipped in the blood. I grasped a pot in an unsuccessful attempt to keep from falling on my ass, and half the counter crashed down on me, including what smelled and tasted like split pea soup. In the back of the room, the elves cried out in horror.

"Crawler," Astrid shouted, looking at me. I could barely hear her. I cringed, expecting her to attack. I was still invisible for a few more seconds, but my outline was now observable, thanks to the gore and soup. Astrid sounded panicked, which surprised me, despite the circumstances. "Carl, is that you? You need to get out of here. It is not safe."

"Yeah, no shit," I said, standing to my full height. My invisibility faded. I could taste the soup in my mouth.

I tried drawing a sound bubble over my head to see if it would work against the alarm trap. To my surprise, it did. The moment I drew it, I could hear shouting. Outside, Samantha was listing off a litany of venereal diseases Minge most likely had while the demon continued to make short work of the attacking guards.

Katia: Two more just rushed by.

Carl: I'm in here with Astrid. It's just her and several of the kitchen workers cowering in the back. I think most of the club's guards are dead already.

"I had to pull the trigger," Astrid said. She, too, had a bubble over her head now. "There's been a breach of the Nothing in the casino. We can't kill her. I had to unleash the vorpals."

"Uh," I said. "The what?"

"It doesn't matter, crawler. You must flee! They will kill everything. Leave the club, or get into one of the shops and hide."

Your teleport trap has been activated!

There was a pause. *Uh-oh*, I thought.

I felt the distant explosion rumble the floor the same moment the notification appeared.

Bam! Your IED has been activated.

Ewww. Gross. That worked really well. Like, really well.

"Damn, what is taking them so long?" Astrid said, looking toward the exit. More rhino gore spewed into the kitchen. Astrid paused and then looked at me.

"Carl, we have to stop this before it gets upstairs. If they ask what happened to me, tell them it was a vorpal." She buzzed back and forth uncertainly, rubbing her tiny hands. "Maybe... maybe if you loan me one of those invisibility potions they won't kill me." She shook her head. She was babbling. "No, that won't work. Damnit, I was so close. So close. If you see my husband, tell him I did it to keep them safe. Him and my children."

"Your husband?" I asked. "Your children?"

She indicated the tattoo on my elbow. "You're in the Guild of Suffering. My husband is named Hamed, but he's known as the Night Wyrm. Don't tell him I told you his real name. His lair is hidden up there on the top floor. The vorpals won't go up there. They'll stay on this floor." She didn't sound so sure of that last part.

"Wait," I said, but I didn't finish the thought. The Night Wyrm was her *husband*? That didn't make any damn sense. He'd hired Katia and me to kill her. The one time I'd been in there, I'd only heard the thing's voice. I'd assumed he was like a naga. Not a fairy. That was a weird combination.

Outside, Samantha was screaming again, this time something incomprehensible. The whole club shook as Minge continued to smash things. The song ended and started over again.

"TURN THAT TERRIBLE NOISE OFF," Minge shouted.

"I will not! You have horrific taste in music!" Samantha shouted back.

"You really did it this time," Astrid said to me. She shook her tiny head. "I should have followed Orren's advice and permanently banned you. They told me not to. Gods, I hope it's worth it."

"I... what?"

The door toward the badger bar opened, and a giant, hooded, elderly, female troll creature burst into the room. She looked at us and roared.

What the... But then I realized what this was. Katia had activated her deck, and this troll was one of her totems. It'd been strength buffed.

This was the first time I'd seen Katia's squad flag, which floated over the creature's head. I blinked. I'd been assuming this whole time it would be the Crown of the Sepsis Whore. I was hard to see when it was so small, but I was pretty sure it depicted Hekla and Eva's faces, side-by-side with Xs over their eyes. The player-killer skull mark sat in the middle of the blood-red flag.

Astrid appeared shocked at the sudden, unexpected entrance of the troll. This thing was clearly a woman, eight feet tall, with a long, hooked nose. She held onto what appeared to be a giant spoon. Green, wet moss covered her robe and fell off in clumps. Astrid buzzed in front of the monster, as if she was protecting me.

"*Bein þín mun ég sjóða*," the troll cackled, laughing. It didn't translate, whatever she said.

Astrid didn't hesitate. She cast a spell, and the troll thing dropped to her knees as all the blood in her body boiled. Her round, bulbous eyes exploded just as a second creature flew the room. This was also a totem. It was a crow with the skull of a child for a head. It cawed as Astrid cast another spell at the bird. The spell appeared ineffective.

Something metallic brushed against my leg, pushing me to the side. The moment it touched me, the blue dot appeared on my map. It was Katia, invisible. She'd entered the room during the distraction, coming up behind us. She couldn't cast spells or use her inventory

while she had cards active, but she could still drink potions if they were available, and that's what she'd done.

She could still shapeshift, apparently, too.

Katia faded into existence, her form that of a metallic, spiked-covered, human-faced, canine monstrosity with a pair of arms on her shoulders. It was like something out of *The Thing*. One of the hands on her shoulders grasped the fairy, crushing. A spike formed in the other hand as it plunged toward the fairy's head.

But then, Katia gasped, freezing in place, the spike mere millimeters from the back of Astrid's head.

And for a moment, just a moment, I froze, too. Not because I'd been hit by a spell, but because of the look on Katia's face.

There are certain instants and images throughout this horror that are burned indelibly in my mind. The moment when I saw Jack pissing on the wall. Those last seconds, just before the Carl's Doomsday Scenario bomb didn't go off. When Hekla died. The sound of little Bonnie the gnome's tears after we crashed *the Wasteland*. The sound of Prepotente's screams after Miriam Dom sacrificed herself to save him.

Donut's sobs at the end of The Butcher's Masquerade.

That moment, that sliver of a second as Katia remained there, hovering, frozen, her human mouth open in screaming rage. It did something to me. The look on her face was so foreign, so inhuman yet so goddamned familiar that something inside me shifted. It was equal parts terror, equal parts rage. Exhaustion. Yet, somehow alone. They were the eyes of someone who'd just slipped off a cliff and knew they were falling to their death, both resigned and yet filled with absolute rejection of her fate at the same time. It was like she was saying, *after all this? After all we did, to get this close? No. No, I won't believe it.*

The moment was fleeting. I blinked, allowed myself to realize *I* hadn't been frozen, and I moved. Astrid was right there, hovering in front of me, still clutched in Katia's hand. I reached forward, grasped onto her wings, and I ripped. They pulled off of her easily. Small tendrils of sagging flesh remained connected to her body, like I was

pulling apart melted cheese. I took a few steps back, and the tendrils snapped away.

The spell stopped, and Katia gasped. The fairy dropped from her grip and plummeted to the ground, crying out in surprise. Astrid landed with a small splash on the ground.

I looked in surprise at the fairy wings in my hand. Long strings of gore bobbed from the ends. I pulled them into my inventory, feeling sick.

Astrid rolled over, looking up at the human-faced wolf, shock and agony evident in her small face. I was pretty sure she didn't know I was the one who'd ripped her wings out. The skull-faced crow swept down, and with a shocking precision, disgorged both of Astrid's eyes with a quick swipe of its talons. Sparkling blood trailed down the tiny fairy's face.

It'd happened so fast, yet, yet, I let out of breath, suddenly exhausted. *Jesus*, I thought.

Katia only had one card still, floating in front of her. The card was tiny, the size of a postage stamp.

Outside, the music abruptly stopped. Minge shouted in triumph.

"No, please!" Astrid said. "Save my children. I was almost done. I would be free soon. Tell them..."

A spike shot from the wolf's neck and skewered the disabled and blind fairy through the head, killing her. Katia kept the body of the fairy impaled on the metallic barb as the bird with the skull head settled on the wolf's shoulder. With a flick of a talon, the crow tossed one of the eyes up in the air, and the infant skull chattered, catching it and biting down like it was a tiny snack.

Behind us, the elf NPCs continued to cry and scream in terror. At this angle, they likely hadn't seen exactly what had happened. Just that Astrid was dead, attacked by some creature. Out in the hall, the sounds of battle continued unabated. Samantha and Minge screamed back and forth.

Katia: Follow me back into the bar. We don't want them knowing a crawler did this. Gotta convince them I'm a monster.

Katia’s human face changed, taking on an ogre-like appearance. She growled at the elf NPCs and bound back out through the door. I ran to follow, shouting, pretending like I was trying to attack the creature.

Astrid’s final words haunted me. *I was almost done.*

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[33]

Job Update

The mark is dead, my little sweets. Excellent, excellent work. We are stronger because you have fulfilled your duty. Bring her filthy body to the guild to complete the task. Remember, she who brings the body is she who gets paid.

The voice came in the hissing speech of the Night Wyrm.

I was still reeling. Katia's face. The feeling of the wings peeling off the fairy's body. It'd been so easy.

Astrid hadn't liked me, but she wasn't expecting me to attack her, either. In the end, she'd moved to shield me, to protect me from the monster. I'd ripped the wings right off of her.

Goddamnit, get a hold of yourself. This isn't done.

Still, I couldn't stop thinking about it. The head of the Guild of Suffering was Astrid's *husband*? I supposed that was nothing new for this world, but it still bothered me. Astrid had wanted to protect him, and he'd ordered us to kill her. And who the hell were her children?

Fuck this place. Fuck everything about it.

Katia reformed into her human shape as the terrifying crow on her shoulder poofed away. Her deck wouldn't just go away with the giant demon out there, but she'd deliberately made her deck short for this fight. She discarded a card, and her deck was now expended, which gave her the ability to act normally. The body of

Astrid remained clutched in her hand like one of Bautista's dolls. She pulled it into her inventory.

The ground shook again, followed by more screams. The guards were dead, but that Minge thing was making her way through the NPCs, yelling for Samantha, who continued to scream at the creature. I could see on my map Samantha was clearly in the casino, which had a wide, open entrance adjacent to the restaurant, but for some reason, the creature wasn't getting close.

Katia had a wild look in her eyes. "Fannar, we gotta get back up there before the club is destroyed."

"Go upstairs and finish the quest," I said. "Use the secret bathroom stairwell. I'm right behind you."

"Wait... What are you doing?" Katia asked, voice filled with alarm. She blinked a few times. "Carl, I don't think that's a good idea."

"I'm trying to figure something out. Go. I'll be up there soon. Take another invisibility potion. And leave the door open in case I have to run. It's okay."

She hesitated, but then disappeared again and bolted back into the kitchens. She'd only be exposed for a half second if she went toward the secret stairwell. I remained in the bar, and I jumped into my messages.

Carl: Mordecai, do you know what a vorpal is?

Mordecai: In what context?

Carl: In the context where there are a bunch of monsters called vorpals behind a hidden door in the Desperado Club, and they want to unleash them as a last resort against a minor feral demon Samantha accidentally released from the Nothing.

Mordecai: Holy shit, there's a feral demon in the Desperado? Are you serious?

Carl: Do you know or not?

Mordecai: Man, it's been a while since I've seen this one. Vorpal is a condition, not a species. Like feral means it has been touched by the Nothing, vorpal means they've been... deputized by the gods. Or better yet, turned into suicide bombers. They can be of any race or creature, and

sometimes the condition hides itself, too, until a demon is near. They're generally celestial guards. Foot soldiers of the deities. The closer they're to demons, the stronger and angrier they get. They can sense where the demons are and are attracted to them, and they also draw demon aggro, too. They won't wander far once the demon is dead, but they'll still kill anybody near them. If they get let out, you're screwed. Stay the fuck away. They'll eventually dissipate and get transferred back to the celestial realm if they've been fed demon blood. Don't ever try to fight one close up. If they think they're going to lose a fight, they'll explode. You kill it, and everyone in the room will be dead.

I remembered all the demon traps that'd been outside their room. That hadn't been to stop the mobs from getting out. That had been to stop demons from getting close and activating them.

Carl: So, they won't leave this floor once released? They won't go up to the top level?

Mordecai: Eh, probably not, unless something draws them up. But I don't know for sure. Li Na isn't in there with you, is she? She's a demon race. If they smell her, they *will* follow her upstairs.

Carl: No.

Mordecai: Good. Get the hell out of there and let security deal with it.

"THAT'S RIGHT, BITCH!" came Minge's scream, followed by a crash.

Samantha screeched. There was another scream, too. Charles the bartender was still, inexplicably, alive and with her. The shout was closer than before. Samantha had fled the casino area and was coming toward me.

Suddenly, one of the demon's thin arms reached into the bar, and I had to jump back, falling backward into the kitchens. The kitchen staff NPCs were still in here, still huddled in the back against a group of doors.

I dived behind a station with a pair of smoking burners. I opened my inventory, moving to my automaton menu. I started pulling a few

of my spider robots out. I'd been saving them for an emergency. One utility spider and three anti-undead ones I'd started working on when we'd been stuck in the ghommid village.

Demons weren't undead, but several of the attacks that worked against undead were also effective against them.

The elf NPCs all stared at me, wide-eyed. If they knew I'd helped killed Astrid, they showed no sign.

"You can't stay here. Go into the offices," I yelled.

"We can't!" one of the elves cried. It was a line cook. He wore an apron spattered with blood. "The managers went in there and locked the doors!"

Crashing came from the badger bar. Another arm reached through the double doors, grasping blindly. It caught the edge of one of the doors and pulled, ripping it away. A large chunk of wall went with it. She was destroying the whole damn club. I took a hobgoblin smoke curtain and rolled it toward the restaurant. Minge started shrieking anew.

"There's a stairwell in the last stall in the women's bathroom," I said, talking quickly, pointing. "The door is open. Go up there. It'll take you to the top level, or you can go down if it lets you. Run before it reaches in again."

They all just looked at me.

"Go!"

They ran.

As they fled, narrowly avoiding a grasping hand, Samantha burst into the kitchens from the side door. She was floating, high against the ceiling. She zoomed into the room, grunt-panting like a dog. She circled twice, and then noticed me crouching there, gawking up at her. She paused and did a little hair flip, like she was suddenly trying to act casual.

"Oh, hi Carl," she said. "So, this place is really fun even though the casino is out of order. Did we do the assassination yet? Also, the music stopped. Can you start it up again?"

"What the actual fuck, Samantha! Let him go!"

"Who?"

Charles the bartender dangled helpless below Samantha, his legs pumping as he tried to free himself. His right arm was shoulder-deep in the ragged bottom of her neck hole. Like, *too* deep. She'd either lopped his arm off and was somehow clutching onto his stump, or there was a deepness there that hadn't been present before.

The "flesh" at the bottom of her neck had the consistency of uneven latex, like a soft children's toy that had been ripped in half. There was no real hole there, but I had once hidden an unopened potion in the soft, pliable material. It'd slurped in easily, like I was pushing it into silly putty. She'd recently started storing things in there, like sunglasses and shiny rocks she'd found. Before we'd gone into the club today, I'd given her 100 gold to drink at the bar, and she'd excitedly sucked it up. I hadn't realized the hole was... deeper on the inside.

"*Who*?" I asked as I returned my attention to the automatons. "The fucking bartender. Let him go!"

There was more screaming outside. The monster's arms had found some shop or door and had gotten more NPCs. There was another crash as part of the ceiling above us sagged, like the supports for the whole club were starting to fail. Dust cascaded into the room.

"PSAMATHE WHERE THE FUCK DID YOU GO? I PLUGGED THE HOLE IN THE CASINO AND YOU RAN LIKE A LITTLE BITCH. I WILL TEAR THIS WHOLE PLACE DOWN."

The smoke curtain out in the main room would soon dissipate, and I had to get this done. Minge would send her arms in here at any moment. I put the demon snare onto the trap slot of the first robot. I double-checked the spider's yield and upped it using the menu.

"Oh, him? We're on a date. His arm got stuck. I'm practicing my Kegels."

"What? What the hell? Let him go!"

"Donut taught me about them. *She* said she learned about them from your ex-girlfriend who cheated on you a lot. You really shouldn't let your women cheat on you, Carl. It's a bad look."

"Help. Please help me," Charles the badger said. "It's burning."

"Samantha. You've kidnapped him. Let him go. He's scared."

"Fear is a powerful aphrodisiac, Carl."

I had a simple but highly-programmable door-opening bot from Dr. Ratchet's automaton kit, and I pulled off the quick-release door arm, added the double arm, and re-attached the grasping claw and added the heavy-duty magnet, which would allow it to work more quickly. I put my hand on the machine, pulled up my menu, clicked the location, and added the instructions, giving it a sixty-second delay once it reached the wall. I sent the machine on the way. It would go down that hidden hallway, hopefully not set off any of the remaining NPC-only traps, and then dismantle the wall bracers I installed, unleashing the vorpals. It would take a few minutes to get through the sand bags. I'd be back on the top floor before that happened. Hopefully.

I added another, specialized smoke curtain to the third and fourth bots, and then I sent them along with the trap bot out the main door. They skittered into the smoke, happily clicking like they didn't have a care in the world.

Katia: Carl, we did it. I have the orchid.

Job Complete.

I have more work for you. Yes, yes, there is always more. Come to me, and we will spread our family's power.

Relief flooded me.

"I didn't kidnap him!" Samantha said, sounding offended.

She zipped toward the now-missing kitchen doors. Charles trailed under her, crying. Samantha's voice rose in volume as she shouted out into the smoke, "You stink like a marsh hog with an uncontrollable yeast infection! You smell worse than your maggot-infested, semen-stained corpse of a sister!"

"GOT YOU!" Minge bellowed as an arm shot into the kitchen and grasped onto Charles's chest.

"No, no, no!" Charles cried as Samantha started squealing in outrage. She zipped away, moving back toward me.

And thus ended Samantha's short courtship with Charles Ellis the porsuk. The badger man ripped in half, spraying the kitchen with

blood. All that was left hanging was the shoulder, neck, and head of the very-dead, very unlucky bartender.

"YOU KILLED MY BOYFRIEND!" Samantha shrieked.

Another arm reached into the room, grasping for the floating head. Samantha zipped out of the way. The arm shot over me, hit a door in the back of the room, and ripped it open. A shriek filled the chamber as a dwarf—one of the kitchen managers—was pulled into the restaurant.

Samantha made a grunting noise, and the rest of poor Charles plopped out and onto the floor with a wet splash. The part that had been inside Samantha was black and melted, like it had been half burned with acid. His hand was nothing but white bone, the individual pieces scattering like rolled dice when they hit the counter. A few shiny gold coins also dropped out, tinkling as they rolled away.

From the restaurant came a crunch followed by, "YOU'RE NEXT, SKANK. Gahhhh!"

All three of the automatons had reached the body of Minge and activated. The demon squealed in pain.

With a demon as large as Minge, the snare trap going off next to her was the equivalent of using a mouse trap to catch an elephant. The snare would supposedly attach the demon in place, trapping them. That obviously wasn't going to happen. Since the snare was affixed to the top of the spider automaton, it had the effect of attaching the spider to the demon's bulk. The spider then detonated, splashing the demon with blood water from Emberus's shrine.

At the same moment, the other two spiders set off their holy-water-infused smoke curtains, filling the room with burning. blinding fog. In ten seconds, the spiders themselves would also detonate, adding more holy water to the room.

Minge, at level 225, wasn't going to be really injured by any of this, but it would probably hurt like hell. It caused her to shrink back. This was our chance. We had to get upstairs.

I jumped up and bolted for the exit. "Run! Samantha, on me!" I leaped over the bodies, my feet sliding on gore.

"I'm still having a tussle! She killed Chuckie!"

"I swear to fucking god, come on! We're going up to the top floor. To the strip club!"

I didn't wait to hear her response. I figured that'd entice her, and if not... She'd probably be okay, assuming that thing didn't actually eat her.

I went out the door, pausing long enough to look at Minge one last time. She remained planted in the center of the room, her arms twisted around her like thorns. She'd managed to reach into this floor's version of the silk road and had several merchants in her hands as she waved about. She had a health bar, but it didn't look like she'd lost any damage.

The club was absolutely trashed. There was a literal hole in the high ceiling, and the casino area was on fire. *Jesus.* Almost every door I could see was gone. Dozens of bodies littered the room.

I rushed down the hall toward the rest rooms, and I was surprised to find a small queue of NPCs trying to get into the stall. A pair of crocodilian guards were helping people get away. One was one of the guys who'd been hit by the last teleport spell, shooting him up to the top floor.

He'd been ready to sacrifice himself. He'd been sent into that hallway to open the vorpal door, likely knowing those things would kill him. But instead he'd been teleported away to safety. Now he was helping the others.

He grabbed my shoulder as I pushed into the bathroom stall. His tuxedo hung in tatters around him.

"Hey," he said. "Have you seen Miss Astrid?"

"She's dead," I said, and I pushed my way into the stairs, mixed in with the scared and panicked NPCs. All of them were moving up, not down to the Larracos level. I didn't know if that was because they couldn't. Most of these guys had come from the secret areas of the club, I knew, including the drug den where Katia had gotten herself fucked up. I wondered how many were real NPCs and how many were former crawlers. I tried not to think about it.

Your Automaton has been destroyed before it can complete its assigned task.

Shit, I thought. Something had happened. But then I heard it, a chorus of shrieks. It sounded like screaming mixed with buzzsaws. They'd gotten out. Likely having broken down the door once the spider robot had cleared most of it away.

"Run! Fooking run!" the crocodilian called from the bottom of the thin stairwell. "They's coming! They're worse than the demons."

"Move! Move out of the way!" came Samantha's voice as she zipped into the tight, hidden stairwell. She came to hover next to me. She was covered in dripping gore.

"I hate it when the clubs get so busy," she said. She shook her head like a dog, splattering gore onto a gnome I recognized as the proprietor of the jewelry shop. The older man sputtered but kept moving.

"Samantha, how the hell did that thing get out of the Nothing?" I asked, breathless as we reached the top of the stairs. We pushed our way out into the women's room of the top level. A group of the elves from the kitchens were there, directing people. I pushed past them and out.

"I don't know," Samantha said, following. She was hovering off the ground, not rolling. "I saw the table with the knife game, and the guards were chasing me because I had my ex-boyfriend with me, and somebody lost the game at the same moment, and the guy got pulled into the Nothing, but when it opened, it tore and Minge came out. She's Slit's little sister. We used to be friends. It's sad, really."

The abandoned dance floor didn't have a hole in it, but there was a crater. It looked like a bomb had gone off. Most everyone was headed toward the Silk Road. I knew there was a secret hall back there leading to dorm areas for NPCs. It was where they were going to shelter.

"I'm just glad it wasn't Gash," Samantha continued. "She's the mean one. The hole stayed open and was sucking everybody away, too, and Minge pulled herself into the restaurant because she's a dumb bitch. It didn't pull me in though. Oh boy, is this the Penis Parade Donut's always talking about? Is Anaconda working tonight?"

I pushed my way into the room to find an unexpected sight. It was completely packed. The music was off. I shouldered my way, deeper inside, looking for Katia.

I found Damascus Steel, sitting on the floor, sobbing. The older, stoic ifrit had his face in his hands as sizzling tears peppered the floor around him. The other one Donut liked, the purple-skinned, quarter naga named Anaconda was also weeping uncontrollably. All the dancers and customers and that weird, skeleton DJ guy stood around them. Splash Zone, the little otter stripper guy rubbed Anaconda's back while Dong Quixote tried to give Damascus a cup of water.

But there were more people in here, too. The strippers from the Bitches room were all huddled with the men. They were of all shapes and sizes, all with equally-ridiculous names like the male dancers. Almost all their names were alliterations. There was a dwarf named **Patty Pump-It-Up** and a hairy bugbear lady with a blonde wig named **Darla No-Dentures**.

Another group of male and female strippers stood off to the side, all looking shell shocked. This group was covered in gore, and I realized they must have escaped from the middle floor. These were the dancers from the Penis Palace. The female strip club and brothel on the middle floor was named "Girls of Ill Refute." Not repute with a P. These women were much better dressed than the women from Bitches. Or they had been better dressed before they'd had to endure that nightmare.

Katia cried out and rushed up to me, pulling me into a tight hug. She held me while we talked over message.

Katia: Oh my god, Carl. We did it. We won the quest, and the box opened. I have the orchid in my inventory. Huanxin messaged me. She said you just need to do one more thing, and then we'll be safe. Do you know what it is?

I needed to make certain Odette became our adjutant. I was about to go on her show.

Carl: I do. It'll happen in a few hours. When are you going to eat it?

When Katia ate the orchid, she would get transferred away to the 12th floor and temporarily turned to an NPC. At least that was the plan. The goddess Eileithyia, who was being driven by Huanxin, actually had three options. She could triple Katia's constitution. She could impregnate her—which would immediately boot her from the dungeon. Or she could move her to the 12th floor and take her on as a sort of intern. As long as she didn't go with the constitution buff, the issue with the Sepsis Crown would be solved.

Katia: I can't believe it. I can't believe that worked. I can't abandon my squad. I won't eat it until we get down to the ninth.

Carl: What the hell is wrong with those stripper guys? Why are they crying?

Katia: I'm not sure. They somehow found out Astrid is dead, and they both started weeping. We better not tell them we did it, but Damascus is in that guild, so surely he'll figure it out. I think he liked her.

Samantha had settled next to one of the male strippers, the troll bizarrely named Author Steve Rowland. She was chatting away with him amiably, telling him she still had some money left.

The whole club shook. The main stage suddenly plummeted away, and a Minge arm reached into the room as people screamed and scattered. But then the arm pulled away. A screaming, buzzsaw-like sound emanated through the hall. A spray of yellow fluid shot into the air through the hole in the floor as Minge the demon screamed in pain.

It was the sound of her being killed by the vorpals. She cried in pain as more yellow liquid spewed into the room from below.

"PSAMATHE," Minge shouted as she died. "YOU FUCKING BITCH!"

Samantha was suddenly next to me. "We need to go clubbing more often! This place is great!"

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<Note Added by Crawler Ossie, 18th Edition>

I know I don't write often in these scrolls, but I have read them all. I just finished my third re-read of Herot's overly-wrought essay and ramblings about the Worn Path Method of waking NPCs. These theories are sound, I think, but I believe there is something he has missed. Something monumental. I think they're lying about the origin of some of these NPCs. Years pass, times change, laws and rules evolve. But this behemoth we find ourselves trapped within still persists. A reused canvas painted over and over again. The fact that this scroll I am writing in even exists suggests that the brush strokes used to paint this world are so piled atop one another, it's impossible to see every image that once was. Ask a bopca where they come from, and they'll all tell you the same thing. That the aliens came to their planet and "offered" them a chance to live in the dungeon. I don't think they're the only ones with such a fate, and I'm beginning to believe the bopca's station is much higher than that of those who've been offered a similar deal.

"Let's get the fuck out of here," I said, backing toward the door. Minge was dead, but I could still hear them down there. The vorpals, whatever they were. They tore through the lower level of the club. They would supposedly disappear now that they'd bathed in demon blood, but how long would it take? I eyed Damascus Steel nervously. He was a demon class, and his presence was dangerous.

"Wait," Damascus said, pulling himself to his feet. Steaming tears continued to roll down his face. "You have to take them with you. The dancers from the Penis Parade. All of them."

"Uh," I said, exchanging a look with Katia. "Why?"

The ifrit straightened. "The club is going to be closed for remodeling after this. It's happened before. With my mother dead, they'll assign a new assistant manager. There'll be a restructuring. They'll kick us out."

"Your mother?"

He looked up nervously at the ceiling.

"It's a long story. We don't have time for it. Normally, the dancers here... We shouldn't be here. Mother pulled strings. We have to leave." He grabbed my arm and leaned in. His grip was like an iron clamp. "You owe me," he whispered. "They will *not* survive this. You have to get them out of here. I convinced them to come, to work in this place. The new management is going to reassign them to the Larracos level. Or worse. If you don't take them now, you'll end up fighting against them on the ninth floor."

I blinked at that. "What about you? You don't want to come?"

More yellow fluid shot up from the hole in the floor, like the monsters below were splashing about in Minge's corpse. It stank like rotten eggnog.

"I didn't know who you were assigned to kill," he said. "I don't blame you for what happened. But I do blame him. We were promised freedom. He wanted to make sure she was dead. They're still married. My mother has—had—so much, and the guild, it's rarely found by crawlers. He gets it all. He'll have it all when we get out."

I didn't understand any of this. If there was a way I could take them with me, I would in a second. Mordecai would have a coronary,

but I would do it.

But what the hell was he talking about?

"I'm sorry," Katia said, interrupting. "Are you saying you're former crawlers? That *Astrid* was a former crawler? And that she was your mother? And..." she waved over at the cubicles in the back of the room toward the Night Wyrm's lair, "And he's your what? Your father?"

"Yes, they're my parents. My brother and I were never crawlers," Damascus said. "Look, Carl. We all still have our memberships to Meat Shields. Donut said you have a coupon. You can hire us. Do it for a two-floor contract, and they'll be able to leave with you." He turned, searching the room. His eyes focused on an elderly dwarf woman. She was rubbing Anaconda's back.

"Rosemarie, come," Damascus called.

The dwarf woman hobbled over. I recognized her from the last time I'd visited the strip club. She had a black and white, fuzzy mole creature named Bernie perched on her shoulder. The old woman had gotten in trouble from the DJ for pelting one of the dancers in the eye with a gold coin.

"Rosemarie is the manager of the top floor's Meat Shields location," Damascus said.

"I didn't know there was one on this floor," I said, instinctively pulling up the map. There wasn't a location listed.

"I work out of my home office," she said, waving vaguely over where her table use to be. There was just a hole there now. Samantha was there, on the ground, peering down into the smoke. She was laughing hysterically as Minge's body below was getting eviscerated.

Damascus grabbed the elderly dwarf and shoved her toward me. "She can approve the transaction right now. Isn't that right, Rosemarie? He wants to hire the entire crew for two floors."

The old dwarf turned to regard Damascus, surprise on her face.

"Your mother said..."

"My mother is dead," he snapped.

She took a moment, swallowing. "You really think they'll shutter the Parade after this?"

While she was turned, that thing on her shoulder continued to stare at me. It made a snuffling noise and growled.

"Not shutter it," Damascus said. "It'll be a restructuring, just like last time. My mother will be replaced. They'll bring back the original dancers, and our whole crew will get thrown to the Larracos level Meat Shields." He thumbed over his shoulder at a group of male dancers I didn't recognize. The ones from that other strip club one floor down. I remembered that Donut did not like these guys nearly as much. "The pricks at the Palace won't have us."

"If you guys leave, they'll fill this place up with the dregs again," Rosemarie said. "I'll never get no business. Did you ever see those guys before you came on? Ain't nobody gonna hire an elderly stripper with one leg and halitosis."

"We don't have a choice."

The dwarf grunted. "I gotta calculate the cost. You alone are worth a good chunk, ya know."

"I'm not going. It'll be all the others. Bucket Boy and Doctor Bones, too. And his coupon is for 100,000 gold. That's how much it'll cost."

"Wait, what? You're going to separate from your brother? What are *you* going to do?"

"You know what I have to do," he said.

Rosemarie patted Damascus on the waist. It was about as high as she could reach. Bernie stopped staring at me and jumped up to the ifrit's shoulder and head-butted him before returning to the dwarf.

"I'm sure gonna miss the cum closet," she said sadly. Bernie made a sad peep.

Katia: What in the heck are they talking about?

Carl: I… I'm not sure. I have a theory. I'll tell you in a minute. But if we can actually hire these guys as mercenaries for our Faction Wars army, I'm going to do it. We'll have to buy an upgrade for the guild, I think. We gotta house them until the next floor.

Katia: Donut made Imani buy a barracks upgrade earlier. We now have enough room for like 20 of them. We can get a

bigger upgrade, but it's really expensive. We bought the training arena for them, too. It's called the Mercenary Arcade.

Carl: Really? I didn't know that.

Out loud, I said to Damascus, "If Astrid was your mother, how can that be that you're not crawlers?"

There was a distant scream, but I couldn't tell from where. The vorpals were still in the club.

"We have no time," Damascus said. "And I've already gotten a warning to shut up about this. There's more of us than you know. Anaconda and I are just two of thousands."

Anaconda, the dark, quarter-naga looked up at the mention of his name. "Brother, what are you doing?"

Damascus turned and put his hand on the other stripper's shoulder. The two didn't look anything alike. They weren't even remotely the same species. "I'm going to avenge our mother. He won't win."

The snake-like dancer looked up at his brother. He had slitted, reptilian eyes. "If you're going to fight him, I'm going, too."

"Me, too!" called Dong Quixote.

"No," Anaconda said without turning his head. "This is family business."

And then, without another word to us, Damascus held out his arm and pulled his brother to his feet. The two turned and walked toward the back of the club, skirting past Samantha, who remained at the breach in the floor. She made a lewd comment. They ignored her. Together, they entered the back cubicle.

"What is happening?" a woman asked. This was a snaggle-toothed, heavily-pierced goblin prostitute named **Tuesday Two-For-One**. She was furiously chewing gum. She reminded me of a pair of female goblins Donut and I had met so long ago. "Where are they going? Are they going to get each other off or something?"

Rosemarie looked up at me, waved her hand, and a shop interface window popped up.

She sighed heavily. "It's the end of an era, you know. I hope you appreciate what you've done. Now let's see that coupon of yours."

Warning: The Desperado Club has been temporarily closed. You have fifteen minutes to exit, or you will be teleported out to the entrance vestibule.

A timer appeared in my vision.

"Huh," I whispered. I wasn't expecting that.

Katia, Samantha, and I cautiously moved toward the exit. We stopped at the end of the hallway overlooking the dance floor and decided to wait here for a few minutes to make certain there was nothing out there. Samantha had reverted to rolling on the ground. As we waited, I thought of Ossie's note at the end of Herot's essay. That whole thing about the Worn Path Method was ridiculously long and mind-numbing. I hadn't even noticed that note by Ossie until recently, when I read it during my cookbook transcription. There was no other mention anywhere about any such theory, but I couldn't stop thinking about it now.

There was blood all over the dance floor. It hadn't been there before, which meant at least one of those things had gotten up here. I was pretty sure it was gone, but I still wanted to wait a minute.

The 13 male strippers plus that skeleton DJ guy and the crocodilian Bucket Boy kid from the Penis Parade were already in the barracks. They'd transferred outside and to the front door of our personal space the moment we hired them. The women from Bitches and the male and female clubs on the middle floor were left behind. Only the men of the Penis Parade were eligible to be hired as mercenaries.

I'd neglected to tell Donut they were coming, and she was over the moon with their addition to the guild.

Donut: OMG, CARL. THIS IS THE GREATEST THING SINCE YOU HIRED SLEDGIE. YOU EVEN HIRED DOCTOR BONES. HE'S THE BEST DJ SINCE DJ DIESEL. MY BIRTHDAY ISN'T UNTIL NOVEMBER, BUT IT'S LIKE IT STARTED EARLY. MONGO IS REALLY EXCITED, TOO. I'M SAD ANACONDA AND

STEELIE AREN'T HERE, THOUGH. DO YOU THINK MAYBE THEY'LL COME LATER?

Carl: Maybe. How's Mordecai taking it?

Donut: THE GUYS ALL LEFT TO GO AND SEE THE MERCENARY TRAINING ARCADE, SO HE DOESN'T REALLY CARE. HE'S MORE MAD THAT YOU BLEW UP THE DESPERADO CLUB. HE SAYS IT'S GONNA BE A PROBLEM GETTING SUPPLIES. WHO WAS YOUR ASSASSINATION TARGET ANYWAY? YOU CAN TALK ABOUT IT NOW, RIGHT?

Carl: I'll tell you about it when we get back. How'd it go in the practice arena?

Donut: THEY WERE PRETTY MAD. SHI MARIA WAS MAD, TOO. SHE WANTED ME TO USE THAT GLOW-UP CARD ON HER.

We'd debated this for a while, and in the end, I went with Donut's judgment.

Before we'd gone into the club, Katia gave Donut one of her excess totem cards. A mythic creature from Iceland named Jola. I'd been worried Donut would be pissed, but she'd actually been pretty excited about it once she saw the card. After reading all its abilities, she decided she wanted it in our active deck, which would give us one too many totems.

Instead of getting rid of one of our existing cards, she'd instead used the consumable **Combo** card to combine two of the problem cards, used up all the utility buffs on them, and then used the consumable **Glow-Up** card to make the change permanent.

So when it was done, we actually had two new totems. Donut had spent the past several hours practicing with them by herself.

We had considered just getting rid of Shi Maria, or using the combo on her to make a new creature, considering how dangerous she was. But we needed her if we wanted to survive this next part. It was a calculated risk. I hoped we'd have an opportunity to get rid of her once we got our hands on a key to the stairwell.

Carl: How is Jola? Does he do what you say? And what about the, uh, new one?

Donut: JOLA IS GREAT AS LONG AS THERE ARE NO CHILDREN AROUND.

Carl: What the hell does that mean?

Donut: YOU'LL SEE. THE NEW COMBO GUY IS STILL A JERK, BUT HE LIKES FIGHTING. ALSO, YOU WERE BUSY SO I DIDN'T BOTHER YOU, BUT WE FINALIZED A BUNCH OF VOTES FOR THE FACTION WARS RULES THOUGH A BUNCH ARE STILL UP IN THE AIR.

Carl: Okay, I'll see you in a bit. We're going straight to Odette's. Get ready. We might be there awhile, so make sure you go to the bathroom first.

Donut: I ALREADY DID.

I looked over at Katia. She was leaning against the wall, her eyes closed, listening for monsters. Samantha was on the ground, gnawing at her ankle. The club was empty. I didn't see any dots. None at all. I once again looked at the dance floor, an uneasy feeling washing over me. It was strange seeing it like this. I thought of Clarabelle, the guard at the door. We wouldn't see her when we left, not unless we backtracked inside, which we were now barred from doing. I hoped she was okay.

That boot was gone, I realized. The one from the crawler guy I'd fought with earlier.

Katia wasn't looking good. She'd reverted to her large, blonde, female form, and even though she "sculpted" the way she looked, she had heavy rings under her eyes. She had a tremor in her left hand. We needed to get her to Mordecai and Imani for another treatment soon.

I thought, once again, of that terrifying look on her frozen face from earlier.

"Are you doing okay?" I asked.

Katia spoke without opening her eyes. "I'm fine. I just need to rest for a minute, and we can go. I'm confused as hell about what was going on back there with the dancers. Tell me your theory."

I shrugged. "I think the four of them... The Night Wyrm, Astrid, Damascus Steel, and Anaconda are a family, and they've been stuck in the dungeon for a really long time. I don't think they're generated

NPCs, but more like the bopcas. Like maybe they were indentured servants who somehow signed up for, or were forced, into the dungeon. I don't know what race they were born, but they're all different ones in the game."

Katia's eyes opened at that. "Holy crap."

"Yeah," I agreed. "Did you see those girls from the Bitches room? They were all, uh, how do I say this?"

"Butt-ass ugly?" Samantha offered from the floor.

"Yeah," I said. "I think the men in the Penis Parade on this floor are supposed to be like that. Like super, uh, unqualified. But they're not. Well, some are. When Astrid ended up with the job as the assistant manager of the club, she made certain her two sons were safe and got them a gig at the Penis Parade where she could watch over them. It sounds like they were all members of Meat Shields, the mercenary market. She brought them to the club, and they brought their friends with them. She probably did some wheeling and dealing and parked that Rosemarie lady in there, so they were technically still mercenaries, but since nobody knew the club was also a Meat Shields location, they were safe."

"What about the husband? The Guild of Suffering?"

"That, I'm not so clear on. But I think they believed they were going to be done soon, maybe done after this season, with their contract. The dad, who was playing the Night Wyrm, made us kill her. Based on what Damascus said, I think it was over money. Like if she died, he would get her paycheck or something."

"Holy crap," Katia said again. "So you think he had us murder her in the game for real-life money? That's diabolical. Do you think the other guys, the rest of the strippers are the same type of NPC? Or are they the generated kind?"

"I don't know," I said. "Unless they tell us, I don't think there is a way to know. I'm not even sure *they* know sometimes. Mordecai said it was illegal to change the memories of natural people. That's what he called them. 'Naturals.' I think that's what he said."

Actually, no, I remembered, thinking back on the short conversation we'd had way back when we'd entered the third floor. I was pretty sure he'd added, "Unless they signed away their rights."

Jesus. I didn’t want to think about that.

“Come on,” Katia said, pulling me toward the exit. “It’s safe. We probably don’t want to get teleported out.”

As we exited the club, I suddenly remembered there were several Faction Wars participants still trapped on the bottom level of the Desperado because the lower part of the city remained flooded.

Despite the horrors of everything we’d just experienced, I felt myself grin as we stepped outside.

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"I MUST SAY," ODETTE LAUGHED, "IN A DAY FILLED WITH SURPRISES, THAT was a, how do you say? A dessert worthy of a king? I think the phrase in your language is, 'the cherry on top.'" Her voice echoed unnaturally in the large chamber. On the screen, we'd just watched a submerged viceroy from team Madness get devoured by a shark.

The production trailer we sat in was the same one as the last time we'd gone on Odette's show, but her set was different. The audience was much bigger, and her desk and chairs were made to appear as if we were on stage in a large auditorium, which caused the echo to her voice. It was implied we were actually in the city of Larracos, within some baroque-style theater. Along the virtual walls were water-stained, peeling posters for plays and musicals. My eyes caught one for a play called "Session of Love." It reminded me of the poster for *Gone with the Wind*, only it was a camel holding onto a swooning saccathian wearing a yellow wig.

I knew Odette had just arrived in Earth orbit, so the change of scenery was for the benefit of the audience.

"It's not as fun watching them die when we know they're going to be brought back at the end of the day," Donut complained. She looked up at the audience. "Does that poor shark still get to keep all the food in his tummy, or does it teleport away?" The audience laughed. "It's like when Carl used to complain to his friends that Miss Beatrice was giving him blue balls. Is there a blue balls equivalent for food?"

I grunted. "I *never* said that."

"I'm being serious. Are they even feeding those guys? We are on the eighth floor for goodness sake, and that city has been flooded since the end of the fifth, and they still haven't gotten rid of those sharks? That has got to be some sort of animal abuse. The least they can do is let them eat somebody for real."

"Oh, they get fed all right," Odette said. "The Semeru aren't letting anyone near that part of the city, and they're keeping the castle submerged. Mercenaries and players alike are getting fed into that pit on the daily. That little stunt at the Desperado Club ended up ejecting several trapped officials and participants from various factions, all of whom were quickly devoured or pulled their fail safes. Only one of the killed was a warlord."

An image of a hairy alien appeared on the screen, flailing in the water. I'd never seen this guy before, but I recognized him. I had a picture of his mother. He hadn't been at the meeting. His proxy had been a goblin-like alien named Luke. This guy was a different alien all together. His head was like that of a caterpillar, but I was pretty sure he walked on two legs. He had several arms that waved about in the water. The audience laughed as he was ripped apart, torn into pieces by a pair of concierge sharks.

"Commander Stockade of the Lemig Sortion was the last of the 35 to be devoured," Odette said.

"Only 35 bad guys got eaten? It's a good start, but not nearly enough," Donut said.

Odette chuckled. "Five teams all filed new complaints. They're saying that Carl destroying the club and forcing that mass exit should constitute a foul and attack. They're asking for sanctions."

I grunted with derision.

"That's quite the stretch," Donut agreed. "Samantha somehow accidentally allowed a demon out of the Nothing, and the demon lady ended up destroying the club so bad they had to kick everyone out? One could hardly expect Carl to have predicted *that*. It was just a happy little accident, as that afro guy says. Carl says we did them a favor, anyway. Isn't that right, Carl?"

"That's right."

"How do you figure that?" asked Odette.

I made eye contact with Quasar, who stood off stage and to the side. He gave me a thumbs up. I tried to ignore Harbinger, who stood behind him in the back corner of the small hold. The massive goat liaison stood in shadow. His virtual avatar was taller than the ceiling of the room, and his head was half cut off, like in a video game. Zev was also here, also attending as a holo, standing on the opposite side of the studio. She was whispering to Lexis, Odette's assistant, the only person who was really here with us.

I leaned forward on the couch. "Look. Those assholes have been sitting on their butts in the bottom floor of the Desperado since we trapped them there all those weeks ago. They were trapped there because the entrance bar in Larracos was destroyed. The only way out was for them to die and get regenerated. They could've killed themselves at any time. None of them did. The rest of their teams have all been working their asses off while these idiots have been getting drunk and gambling away their citizens' money. Anyone who was still there was nothing more than a huge wuss, including Corporal Caterpillar or whatever his name is. Now they're all ejected from the club, and they can finally participate in the game. Donut is right. I had no idea any of that was going to happen. They should be thanking me, not whining like a bunch of little bitches."

The crowd cheered.

"Speaking of Faction Wars," Odette said. The crab legs on her lower body rearranged themselves, the joints moving up and down like pistons. I was used to them by now, but whenever they moved, it gave me the heebies. "I understand your face-to-face pre-production meetings have been suspended, and now you're doing all the voting via your interface. Is that correct?"

I tensed. We were on dangerous ground. From the corner, Harbinger leaned forward. Before the interview, he warned he would stop the whole thing if either Donut or I gave up privileged information about behind-the-scenes stuff, including any information about Juice Box and her rebellion. It was stupid because the galaxy had to know all about this already. Donut and Louis were constantly talking about Juice Box. Still, if the liaison stopped the interview

early, Odette wouldn't get the chance to ask to be our adjutant. If Odette wasn't our adjutant, then our deal with Huanxin to save Katia was null and void. Nobody knew this last part except me. I'd told Donut how important it was to get through this interview, but I hadn't dared tell her all of it. All she knew was that she wasn't allowed to talk once Odette mentioned the word "adjutant."

Zev had begged us not to pick Odette. She'd have to get over it.

"That's right," Donut said cheerfully. "I do like going to the meetings, but they kept getting messed up."

"In what way?" Odette asked, pouncing on the opening.

Donut waved a paw. "Oh, you know. Politics." She turned to the crowd and stage-whispered, "I don't think that orc Prince Stalwart likes us very much. And that weird viceroy guy couldn't keep his head about him. I do wish they'd allow the meetings to be streamed. That last one was quite entertaining. But..." She made a motion like she was zipping up her mouth.

Odette laughed along with the audience. She waved a hand, and a paragraph of text appeared floating in the air. "We all know that the participants get to vote on rule changes before the game officially starts. Some of these rules can be voted on right until the moment the floor opens up. These are called action items. If an action item is voted down, we, unfortunately, never get to see what it was. But here's something you guys probably don't know. If an item gets rejected by the system before anyone can vote, we *do* get to see it. Our researchers happened to notice a few interesting ones."

The screen zoomed in on a line of text.

Action item proposed by Co-Warlord Princess Donut of the Princess Posse: Change the name of Crown Prince Stalwart to "Captain Enormous."

*****Item rejected by system.**

The crowd roared.

"I would love to hear the story about that one," Odette asked, laughing.

I eyed Quasar, and he thought for a moment and then shook his head, "No."

"Sorry," I said, speaking before Donut could reply. "The lawyers are telling me that's off-limits."

"Oh, poo," Donut said. "That was a good story. But, *hypothetically*, if someone randomly talked about the size of their own private parts without anyone else bringing it up, Captain Enormous would be a perfectly proper nickname for him. Again, Odette, this is pure supposition on my part."

I held my breath, but Harbinger didn't react. He appeared suddenly distracted, which was unusual for the goat liaison. Odette let the laughter die down before she pulled up the next screen. This was a group of three action items I'd never seen before.

Holy shit, I thought, reading them.

Emergency Action item proposed by Warlord Empress D'Nadia of the Prism: delete all existing NPCs on Larracos level to maintain game integrity for Faction Wars.

*****Item rejected by system.**

Emergency Action item proposed by Warlord Empress D'Nadia of the Prism: Disallow crawlers from participating in Faction Wars in any capacity.

*****Item rejected by system.**

Emergency Action item proposed by Warlord Empress D'Nadia of the Prism: Remove the Princess Posse from Faction Wars and/or delete Crawlers Carl and Princess Donut.

*****Item rejected by system.**

"Huh," I said.

"Oh my god," Donut said at the same time, jumping to her paws on the chair. Her tail swished angrily. "That... *that bitch*! I thought she was my friend! She can't do that! We didn't even see these! Carl, do you see this! She's cheating! First she sells my sponsorship to, to..." She made an angry, strangled noise. "She tried to delete us!"

Before anyone could respond, Donut gasped with new indignation. "Carl, I just realized something. I'm starting to think maybe she really did vote against Mongo in the pet show! This is an outrage!"

Odette's bug head nodded in mock sympathy. "My understanding is, if it's an *Emergency* Action Item, there is no vote. The system is allowed to decide. You only get three of these. All the other teams used up their emergency actions when you flooded Larracos or when you purchased your team, or when you splatted that elf castle on the Lemig Sortion's playing field."

"What?" Donut asked. "Emergency action items? We didn't even know that was possible!"

Here it comes, I thought.

"That," Odette said, "is why you need to pick your adjutant as soon as possible."

Donut opened her mouth to respond, but then she looked at me. Across the studio, Zev and Lexis had stopped talking and were staring intently.

"Adjutant?" I asked, pretending not to know what that meant.

"Each team gets one. It's a third-party referee and consultant. Kind of like how a manager worked before they changed the rules, but instead of being a non-corporeal avatar, they're really there. The adjutant will have access to the expanded rule set and will accompany the warlord into battle. They cannot fight, either directly or indirectly. They can clarify rules and also call fouls. They're also tasked with giving a daily, on-air recap for fans."

"They're physically there on the battlefield with us?" I asked, letting a grin spread across my face. "So if we manage to get the protections turned off, they'd be as vulnerable as the hunters from the sixth floor? In my world, we had a thing called embedded reporters who followed military units around. That was a *very* dangerous job."

Odette shook her head. "No matter what happens with that vote, adjutants are protected. But, yes, they're really there."

She'd just confirmed what Mordecai had said earlier. That actually made me feel a little better. It was clear Huanxin wanted Odette there so she could do something to her. I still didn't know the details on why they didn't like each other, though I knew the three of them —Mordecai, Odette, and Huanxin—were all tangled up together in some ancient beef that ended up with Mordecai's brother dead and

Odette arrested. But if Odette was protected while on the battlefield, then that meant it was out of my hands. What they did to each other outside the dungeon was none of my concern.

I shrugged. "Well, we don't have one yet. I'm open to suggestions."

Odette nodded. "We can sort that for you." She waved her hand, and three aliens appeared, floating in windows. I recognized two of them. "I *was* going to ask you guys if you wanted me to do it, but unfortunately, I won't be able to participate as an adjutant this season. So, let's help you choose one now."

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I TOOK A DEEP BREATH. I DID MY BEST NOT TO SHOW MY UTTER DISMAY ON my face.

"Why can't you do it?" I asked.

"Oh, believe me," Odette said, waving her hand dismissively. "I *was* going to ask to do it, but I received an opportunity I can't pass up. " She straightened. "That's right folks. The rumors are true. My show will soon be put on hiatus as I step into the dungeon. I have sponsored a deity, and I will be attempting my hand at the Celestial Ascendency."

There was a pause, and then the crowd went absolutely nuts.

I felt sick to my stomach. She knew. Of course she knew. She knew all along that Huanxin was planning something, and Odette wasn't going to allow the rich CEO to have the upper hand. She was still going into the dungeon, but it would be on an equal footing.

This whole setup with getting us to pick an adjutant wasn't about us at all. It was really a way for Odette to announce her intentions to the audience. This whole interview was a thinly-veiled press conference.

Donut started jumping up and down on the couch. "Oh my god, Odette! This is wonderful news! Can I worship you? Carl, wouldn't that be great? I could worship Odette!"

Odette laughed. "You don't even know which goddess I picked yet."

"Well, I'm quite certain it's someone great. Who is it?"

"I'm glad you asked," Odette said.

"For fuck's sake," I grumbled under my breath.

The three alien portraits faded as a new screen appeared, depicting a scene from the crawl. It was a group of four crawlers I didn't recognize. It was three humans and a type of rock monster called a coal engine, similar to Chris's igneous race. They rushed through the streets of some desert town, pushing through the memory images of people on the street. Clothes went flying. The rock monster guy clutched onto a giant, speckled egg, holding it against his chest like a football. They were pursued by a monstrous leopard with the neck and head of a snake. The snake leopard thing was the size of a school bus, and the head snapped down, barely missing a human. One turned and fired a lightning bolt, and the monster fell back, spinning and hissing.

The four continued to flee, turning down a side street, losing the pursuer.

"It's happening!" the coal engine guy cried out, and they all skidded to a stop in an alley as the man held out the egg. They all gathered around.

A moment passed, and the egg hatched. The top of the shell dropped away, revealing an ugly, baby bird thing. It screamed, spread its wings, and burst into the air. Smoke trailed as it rose higher and higher, gaining in size. Soon, it was gone from sight.

A **Quest Complete!** notification appeared, followed by a system message that **Nekhebit** had re-ascended. I couldn't remember having heard that particular notification.

"That was anticlimactic," one of the humans grumbled.

The scene changed, showing a massive vulture goddess, spinning in 3D on the screen.

Odette preened as sparkles flew around the spinning image. "That's right, everyone. I will be performing as the famed, ancient goddess, Nekhebit!"

I sighed as the crowd continued to go berserk. Man, I really hoped this would be enough for Huanxin. Odette was still going into the dungeon. If this CEO woman was reasonable, she'd see I had no

control over this. I hoped and prayed she'd still honor the deal to save Katia.

I examined the spinning image of the goddess.

I was reminded of another vulture goddess. Quetzalcoatlus from the fifth floor, though that one had been a ghost. Plus she'd been more dinosaur-like with a South-American vibe. This one was more of an Egyptian thing. She had a slender, human-like body with a long, red, flowing dress. Her head was that of an Egyptian vulture, yellow with white feathers spreading around her, almost like an afro. A bow made of oak was slung over her shoulder. She didn't appear to have actual wings. Only human-like arms covered in bracelets.

As I looked more closely, I noticed the goddess was old and dirty, and covered in healed wounds. Her yellow beak was cracked and chipped. Heavy scarring covered all the exposed parts of her flesh. The jewelry was tarnished and cloudy, and it was missing some gems. Her red dress appeared threadbare and tattered, almost like she'd been a corpse that had been exhumed.

"Ooh, she looks positively fiendish," Donut said. "Normally I'm not a fan of the whole hobo chic aesthetic, but I do like this. It suits you. Very sinister. Though I hope you don't smell. You look like you might smell."

"Thank you, Donut," Odette said. "The origin story of Nekhebit is one of betrayal and revenge. She has earned every one of those scars. Whether she is considered a villain or a hero depends on one's perspective."

There was a strange flash to my HUD, like I'd just received a major notification, but it was suppressed because we were still on the show.

Odette continued. "Unlike all the other resurrected gods and goddesses on this floor, Nekhebit is not a retainer to any existing gods or goddesses. And yes, she will have a retainer of her own." She waggled her finger at the audience. "You'll have to see how all *that* plays out in the dungeon. We'll have one more special about Nekhebit's history that will air tomorrow evening as I onboard onto the playing field live. But that's not why we're here right now, is it? I apologize. We've gone a little off script."

She waved her hand, and the floating heads of the three potential adjutants returned.

"Let's pick you an adjutant. Again, I know we've put you on the spot. You don't have to choose, but these three are the only ones still available as far as I am aware. So if you don't pick, it's likely you'll still end up with one of these three anyway."

I gave a sidelong glance to Quasar, who was nodding in agreement with Odette.

All three of the aliens looked as irritated as I felt for having to sit through Odette's "off-script" reveal. I examined the three.

The first was a fuzzy, bear-like creature. His name was Ripper Wonton. He was a type of creature called a quokka, and he was the host of a show called *Danger Zone with Ripper Wonton*. It was a show Donut, Hekla, and I were on when Manassa had been assassinated by the Skull Empire.

The second was a very angry-looking female orc I didn't recognize. She was the same sort of wild boar-looking orc as Prince Maestro and Crown Prince Stalwart. She reminded me of an orc hunter we'd killed on the previous floor.

The third was a bald Dream elf. This guy's name was Drick, and I'd shared a panel with him when I was at CrawlCon. I remembered the original Drick had been a crawler, and I was pretty sure his birth race wasn't an elf. It didn't matter because this iteration was actually a worm head, meaning he had a Valtay worm in the brain.

"Hi Ripper!" Donut said, waving at the only one she recognized. She hadn't gone to CrawlCon with me. She peered suspiciously at the orc woman. "Are you Princess Formidable? My friend Katia really likes the sponsor boxes you send. Why do you hate your brothers so much?"

The audience laughed, as did both Ripper Wonton and Drick. The orc woman did not look amused.

"That's not Princess Formidable," Odette said. "I don't think they'd allow her to be an adjutant."

"Like this one is much better," Drick muttered.

"Who are you? I don't like you," Donut said to Drick. She waved her paw about. "Don't they have tanning salons out in the universe?"

She turned to Odette. "We pick Ripper Wonton. I like him, and he's adorable."

"Wait," I said. I was eyeing Quasar who was shaking his head *No* vigorously. "Which of these guys has experience doing this? And who is the orc? Are any of these guys qualified for this?"

"That's a good question, Carl. Luckily, the AI polices their behavior heavily, so you don't have to worry too much about biases, but here's a short rundown of each candidate. First, we have Ripper Wonton. He's an experienced interviewer and knows his way around the media. He's a firm but fair judge. He's done this quite a few times. Some people consider him a little too rigid. Plus his short legs make it so he has trouble keeping up in high-intensity battle situations."

"Really, Odette?" Ripper asked, chuckling at the description. "You're going to make fun of my legs?"

The crowd laughed.

"Next, we have Baroness Victory, esquire, formerly of the Skull Empire. She is the half-sister of the late Queen Consort Ugloo, but she is easily the most experienced judge of the lot. Uh, she's not too keen on fluff pieces, but people do like her matter-of-fact reporting on the anatomy of battles. She's an attorney and judge."

I looked over at Quasar, who gave me an enthusiastic thumbs up.

"And finally, we have Drick. I know you've met him briefly, Carl. He's a recipient of a Valtay life extension. He recently passed the referee exam. He's an experienced crawler and consultant, but this would be his first attempt at being an adjutant."

Quasar gave him a tepid thumbs down. It was clear my lawyer preferred the orc.

Before I turned back, something strange happened. Without a word of explanation, Harbinger blinked and disappeared. Everyone else in the room looked at each other in surprise. Quasar shrugged.

"Do you have any questions?" Odette asked. "If you want, we can put it to an audience vote."

I returned my attention to our three choices. I thought for a minute. I wasn't about to let the audience pick for us.

"Drick is allowed to be an adjutant even though he's Valtay?"

"It's a little unusual," Odette agreed. "But, they say he's passed all the qualifications."

I liked Drick, but I had an uneasy feeling about choosing him. He seemed like an unlikely candidate for this, and the fact he was Valtay did not sit well with me. My gut told me to avoid using him.

Donut was correct. Ripper was the obvious choice here. Still, Quasar was vehemently against him for some reason. I wondered why.

Also, I still wasn't certain how crucial this choice was. I'd been so convinced we'd have Odette, I hadn't been worrying about it. I still had no idea what this guy would be doing all day.

I turned to Baroness Victory. The orc's nostrils flared. She had what appeared to be an image of an hourglass carved onto one of her tusks. "Have I killed any of your family members?"

The audience tittered nervously.

She looked at me impassively. "Other than my brother-in-law and nephews, nobody feels you're responsible for the death of my half-sister, Queen Ugloo. You did slay several distant relations during the Hunting Grounds fiasco."

I felt my eyebrow raise. "And you feel you can be an impartial adjutant?"

"Don't pick her, Carl," Donut said.

She shrugged. "All of your actions so far have been well within your rights."

"And that makes a difference? They're family."

"I recently sentenced my own aunt to indentureship because she didn't pay her taxes. I am the best possible choice." She gave a very slight, sly smile, the first emotion I saw on her face. "Plus, I'm the only one the others sued to keep out of the game."

Again, I looked to Quasar. He was bouncing up and down, pointing at her, giving me a thumbs up.

"You'll do," I said to Baroness Victory. "Sorry, Drick and Ripper. I'll catch you guys on the other side."

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"Okay, here we go," Odette said. "As we speak, all the crawlers in the dungeon are being teleported to a choosing arena for phase two. We've gotten special permission to watch you enter the second area live. You'll go straight from here to the choosing room."

"Wait," Donut said. "Does this mean we're never going to be on your show again? If you're in the dungeon, we won't ever come back here. Is that right? Oh my god, that's so sad! Odette! It's the end of an era!"

Odette's bug mask stared impassively down at Donut.

"I hadn't really thought about it that way, but I suppose you're right, Donut. Not unless we can work something out, and they let me do the show from down there, then this is it. Though I'm sure we'll see each other on the inside."

She said it so casually, so cheerfully that I just wanted to erupt. If we did see each other, it would be on the battlefield. Would Odette spare us if we were in her path? I doubted it. It made me feel ill. I kept my mouth shut.

Donut leaped to Odette's desk and pretended to headbutt one of her massive boobs. "I suppose this is goodbye, then. If we don't see you, take care of yourself, Odette."

Odette just looked down at Donut. I could tell she was surprised. She slowly reached over and gave Donut a small, virtual pat.

"That..." Odette paused, as if Donut's show of affection choked her up. She recovered quickly. "That's our show folks. Stick around

and watch the Royal Court choose their destination! And come back tomorrow night for a special episode!”

Transferring in twenty seconds.

Zev: Donut, Carl. Don’t freak out. Only Donut will transfer. Carl, you’ll remain on the couch. This is a small twist they just announced. Only the squad leader will enter the choice chamber. Then you’ll have your first fight. It’ll be just you, Donut. Don’t worry. It’ll be an easy opponent with junk cards. As soon as it's done, Carl will transfer to you. Try to draw the fight out as long as possible.

Oh, shit.

Donut jumped to my lap.

Donut: I DON’T WANT TO DO IT ALONE. NOT A REAL FIGHT.

“Carl,” Donut said, looking up at me. “I don’t want to be by myself.”

“Remember the plan,” I whispered, trying to sound confident. I stroked her side, and she was shaking. I didn’t want her to do this alone, either. “You’ll be okay. You’ve been practicing. You got this. It’s only one fight.”

“I’m scared.”

Transferring now.

The room blinked, and the lights went up. Donut disappeared. Quasar was gone. It was just me, Odette, Zev, and Lexis.

The screen remained turned on, and it showed Donut appearing alone in the featureless room with the globe. There was no sound. She ran around in a circle a few times, completely panicked. Then she stopped and tried to calm herself. She pulled Mongo out and leaned up against him. She stopped and peered up at the ceiling. There was an announcement I couldn’t hear.

“Okay guys, we only have a minute,” Zev said, moving deeper into the room. “I don’t know where Harbinger went, but...”

Zev blinked and disappeared.

Odette sighed as she pulled off her bug helmet. She stepped back, peeling away her massive breastplate. She remained attached to the crab, which made her look terrifying.

"That was the best choice for adjutant," Odette said as she came around the desk. "Ripper is a media whore with a stick up his hairy ass, and Drick is psychotic, out to make a name for himself. You were right to ask about the Valtay. It is strange they let him in. The Baroness is a humorless bitch, but she's the only one who'll put up with your bullshit. She's a big fan of allowing legal loopholes get exploited. I wasn't sure at first about that lawyer of yours, but I'm moderately impressed he advocated for her."

"What the hell just happened?" I asked, still looking at the spot where Zev had stood. "What did you do to Zev?"

Odette waved dismissively. "They just called an all-hands at headquarters, so she got pulled away. An unmanned liaison spy ship was just shot out of orbit, so it's an automatic security response. Right now, all crawlers except the squad leaders are in a temporary stasis while they do the changeover. This is completely off the record. We have maybe 15 minutes to talk."

My head swam. "You shot down a spaceship just to talk to me?"

Odette grunted. "That thing had to go one way or another. And it was more like a probe. They thought they were being sneaky, but we'd pegged that thing the moment it appeared. We just timed it to our advantage. Now, listen."

Up on the screen, Donut stood before the giant globe just like before, but only a handful of locations were highlighted. Two were in the United States. One was clearly the Bahamas. And there was another in the Mediterranean.

I watched as Donut pretended to hem and haw with her choices. She was laying it on a little thick. We already knew what one of the choices would be, thanks to the hidden message given to Donut on our earlier appearance on Rosetta's show.

"No, you listen," I said. "You fucked us when you chose not to be an adjutant."

Odette grunted. "Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't allow you to set me up for an assassination?"

I didn't even pretend to appear surprised. "What are we going to do now?"

"Don't worry," Odette said. "She's going to want Katia with her down there more than ever."

"And if she doesn't?"

Odette shrugged. "Then you have to come up with an alternative. I suggest you make Katia eat that orchid sooner rather than later. Force Huanxin's hand. This is part of what I want to talk with you about. Don't trust anything that grixist bitch says. She's out for revenge. That's it. Nothing more. She is not going to help Katia out of any altruistic sense. She's the most evil person I know, and that's saying a lot. She's also smart, so we must be... delicate in how we deal with her."

Up on the screen, I watched as Donut reached up to pick Miami. A door appeared, leading off to another chamber. Donut was putting on a brave face, but I could tell how frightened she was.

A wave of anger washed over me. People were always taking advantage of us. Telling us what to do. Bullying us for their own purpose.

Using us.

"We? In how *we* deal with her? You know what? Fuck you, Odette. We're not playing your game anymore. There is no *we*. I appreciate everything you've done to help us so far, but goddamnit. All we are trying to do is survive, and every time we turn a corner, there's someone new standing there waiting to use us. And yet, somehow, you're always involved. You say *she's* evil? What about you, Odette?"

Donut hesitantly moved to the next room, stepping through the door into the great room of a large, older house. She seemed outraged at something, but I couldn't tell what. She started shouting and waving her paws up in the air like she did when she was mad.

And then, her first opponent materialized, causing her to stop mid-tirade.

A deranged-looking man appeared in the room, facing her. The hunched man was about 70. He wore what seemed to be a white, old-school sailor's outfit that was much too small for him. There was a nametag that read "Gene" on his breast, but the note floating over him said his name was **Robert the Human**. He was level 40, and

he twitched slightly as he stood down Donut. He clutched a group of cards to his chest. That's all I could see.

They froze. This was the start of a boss battle. Or a level description, telling Donut how to fight using the cards. I suspected this was going to take a while. The description was likely more for the benefit of the home audience than Donut, who already knew how this worked.

Sure enough, the screen changed, showing a bunch of cards on the screen while the orange announcer guy appeared. He started going over all the card types. Mordecai had warned us this would happen. Donut was going to sit there frozen for several minutes while they went through all this.

"You think my motivations are money," Odette said, whom I realized was staring at me with laser focus. "Or fame. They're not. It's about Mordecai. It always has been."

I blinked.

"Mordecai? Bullshit."

She suddenly looked very old and tired.

"I'm going to tell you something, Carl. You're not going to believe me, but I'm telling you anyway, and you are going to listen to me because I have waited a very long time to say this out loud to somebody."

"Uh," I said, taken aback at her sudden change. "Okay..."

"I had a cousin. His name was Pieter. I also had a friend named Armita. We were friends since birth, and Pieter was a few years younger. He'd always tag along wherever we went, even though we didn't want him to. We'd been having a picnic that day it happened. Armita and I were both in our pre-courtship, so about the equivalent of 17 years old in your culture. Pieter was around 13. He'd followed us. I'd made sweet pastries, and he really liked them." She rubbed her aged hands together. Her nails were so long, they curled like claws.

"I'd thrown a rock at him, telling him to go home. I'd hit him in the head, and he'd cried. He didn't have any friends." Odette paused, taking a moment to compose herself. "And then it

happened. The three of us, along with a few others, we entered the dungeon together."

Odette's crab body shifted. Lexis was suddenly sitting on the couch next to me, silent. She had her ever-present tablet clutched in her hands.

Odette's voice started to break as she talked. "Eventually, they forced me to choose. Pieter or Armita. I picked my friend. Simple as that. It was the right choice. Still, I think sometimes, I wonder... He was so sweet, and this place... It had broken him into so many pieces. And those pieces, Carl. They were wrong. My friends. My family. I had pushed them all. *One more floor*, I'd said. *Surely we can push through just a little longer*. They'd all died because of it. One by one. All except for me and Armita."

She had tears streaming down her face.

She continued. "When I made my exit deal, I thought I could help others, and I chose to be a game guide. Armita had left a little before me, and she picked Celestial Attendant, which is the best, they say. The safest. I could've done the same thing, but I didn't want to have anything to do with them. Those rich assholes running it all. I wanted to be of use to other crawlers. Back then, we could offer to be managers, and that's what I did to Mordecai. I offered to help him escape this place. I promised him I'd do my best. He reminded me so much of Pieter, the way he looked up to his brother. Once, he'd transformed into a human, and he even looked like him. Like my little cousin."

She took another moment. She now had my rapt attention. The screen continued to show its card lesson.

"I was near the end of my contract. All I could see was the light at the end of the tunnel. You know that spider you have in your card deck? Shi Maria? She exists in my own mythology. The Bedlam Bride. That extra eye of hers, the one she opens that blinds you and drives you mad? It's a metaphor. We had a saying, my people. *Never stare into the blinding eye of the Bedlam Bride*. What it means is don't become obsessed with something, lest you're blinded to everything else. When it shows itself, it's all you can see. And that's exactly what I'd done. Despite my promise to Mordecai, I was

staring into the eye. I wanted nothing more than to finish my contract and finally, finally escape the dungeon. I had pushed Mordecai and his brother and friends, just like I had pushed my family. I pushed them further than they could go."

She wiped her eyes.

"I made an illegal deal with Huanxin to rig the game in exchange for credits. It was facilitated by Armita. Huanxin would help me, and I'd give her money, part of my bonus for getting Mordecai to the 11th floor. But it went bad. She was driving a goddess named Dodola, and she'd asked for more money, and I was so tired of it. I felt just like you feel right now, Carl. I broke the deal at the last minute. I tricked her. We trapped the goddess in a containment, and Chaco killed her, causing her to lose the Ascendency game before it even started. Mordecai made it to the next floor, but Uzzi, Mordecai's brother, died."

"Odette," Lexis said, speaking for the first time. Her voice was soft. "We only have a few minutes."

Odette ignored her. "Huanxin was enraged. I was soon to be released, out of reach. But Armita was stuck here for a few more seasons. A few weeks later when Mordecai finally made his deal at the end of the 11th, I was released. But, I wasn't really free. I had my money. This was before they changed the rules. Now you guys are all citizens once released, but for me... I had to buy my way into the center system primary zone. But I felt so goddamned guilty about what had happened... I admitted what I'd done. There's this form you can fill out, admitting to crimes. And I did it. I was sure Armita would've turned me in, but she hadn't. She was stuck in the dungeon, in mortal danger while I was finally free, and still, in the end, she remained my friend while I betrayed her." She paused. "I never got my legs fixed. It felt wrong."

She shook her head sadly. "By the time anyone even looked at my confession, it was too late. The very first thing Huanxin did when she returned to the dungeon the following season was kill Armita. It was like it was nothing. After all, it was the dungeon. Perfectly legal. But then some bureaucrat finally read my statement, and I was

arrested. Huanxin was given nothing more than a token punishment. She was barred from participating for a while and permanently banned from Dodola. I was put on trial. I got lucky, however, and my warrant was purchased by the man who'd eventually become my husband."

"Okay," I finally said after a moment of silence. The screen was now just the announcer guy talking. "That's... that's really rough, Odette. But I still don't see..."

"I watch him every day," Odette said, interrupting. "It's been so long. You need to understand, a few seasons into Mordecai's indentureship, they changed the way the NPC pools worked, separating them out by organization, which greatly extended everyone's contracts. Yet, I found myself watching him every chance I could, drinking himself into oblivion. Crying over his brother. His family. His friends. I'd think to myself, *I did that. I killed Pieter. I killed Armita. And this one. This one I broke. I broke him into so many pieces that there's no hope for him*. That's what I used to think, Carl. I used to hope he'd find a way to get himself killed before he was free because I just knew that would be the final cruelty, releasing him without purpose into the empty, cold universe. He has *nobody*."

She looked up at me. "The eye of the Bedlam Bride. I've stared into it once again. I see nothing else. My purpose in this universe is singular. Everything I do, it's to assuage myself of this guilt I feel for what I have done."

I swallowed. I kept wavering between thinking she was absolutely full of shit and believing every word. I didn't know what to say, so I just blurted out the first thing to come to me.

"Mordecai told me to just do whatever Huanxin says."

"That's because he's afraid of her, Carl. And he should be. She's older, smarter, and richer than she was way back then. This is the first year she's back. I'm sure she has a plan to help you get those protections turned off. She wanted me in the dungeon as an adjutant so she could legally exact her revenge. But instead, Carl, we're going to do something a little more extreme. It's going to kill me, most likely. But that's okay. It'll kill her, too."

Next to me, Lexis took in a sharp breath.

"How is any of this helping Mordecai?" I asked.

She shook her head. "You don't get it, Carl. If this doesn't work out, I've already done everything in my power to make his transition into freedom as smooth as possible. I've set aside a large trust for him. Chaco, too. Along with a few others I've managed along the way who are still in the system. But this goes beyond Mordecai. Everyone this cruelty touches, it shatters. We need to stop it."

"*You're a part of it*," I snapped, anger bubbling over. "Goddamn it. You are the highest paid cheerleader for all of this. We die, and you applaud. We suffer, and you're there with a microphone pointed in my face. And now you're sponsoring a god? How can I trust you?"

Lexis tapped her tablet. "Almost out of time."

The screen returned to Donut. The Robert the Human guy summoned two cards. One was a tall, faceless doll also wearing a sailor suit. The other was a little, stuffed dog with rolling, bug eyes. The doll was named **Robert the Doll**. The dog was named simply **Dog**.

"You don't understand," Odette said. "We have no choice. If it wasn't me, it would be someone worse. I had to position myself in order to make it right. This whole machine exists for a reason beyond what you see. The mantises mine and resurrect the AIs and then graft them into the planetary engines for a reason. The elements they mine, what do you think they're for?"

I was distracted by Donut's fight. She summoned Geraldo, who appeared with a ridiculous, over-the-top explosion. The monk seal started flipping through the room at the doll. "I... What? What does that have to do with Huanxin? How did we get from her to this?"

Odette had a wild look in her eye. "All planets used for a crawl or any other game, such as Battle Royale or Land War are used to collect fuel. The elements. The byproduct of the biological overgrowth of the seeded systems. The entertainment aspect of it all came along later, but it's necessary in its own way. It's expensive, what they do. But without it, it all gets shut off. All of it. We need to shut the crawl down, but we have to do it in a responsible way. Lest we kill half the known universe. If we do this right, future collections

will be humane. It will be done in a way that removes all the suffering. What I did to Mordecai. To Armita. To Pieter. What is happening to you. It will never happen again. And it's all coming together this season. This is our chance. Finally, after all these centuries. It's our chance."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

On the screen, just as Geraldo started to attack the doll, Mongo flew through the air and chomped onto the throat of Robert the Human, killing him instantly. The fight abruptly ended. All the totems poofed away. Donut jumped across the room, and the first thing she did was collect the dead human's sailor hat. Several cards appeared floating in the air, and she started to examine them. She could take and keep all of the non-totems, but if she wanted to keep the totems, she'd have to ditch one of our existing ones. That was unlikely given what I'd just seen.

"Sorry," Lexis said. "Time's up. Transferring now."

Odette smiled sadly at me.

"See you on the inside, Carl."

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[PART 2]

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THE FATHER

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[38]

Entering Monroe County, Florida.

It is December 24th.
Time Until Level Collapse: 6 days, 22 hours.
The Key location has been marked on your map.
You have 46 hours remaining to collect your key.

"Monroe County?" I muttered as I appeared in the dark, old house. The room was lit by Donut's *Torch* spell, and it gave everything a ghastly hue, like sallow skin. The dead corpse of Robert the Human remained there across the room as Mongo gleefully pulled him apart. Blood splattered as the dinosaur dove into the corpse like a pig at a trough, making loud crunching noises. There was a door leading off to a safe area, another leading outside. A third door led to a restroom.

"Carl, it's broken!" Donut cried. "The game broke, and we won't be able to get a key!"

She now wore the sailor hat on her head, and it looked ridiculous on her. She jumped up and down, her tail straight up. She ran up to me and started weaving in and out of my legs like she used to do when I came home from work.

"Okay. Calm down. Tell me what you mean."

She took a breath. "It only gave us a few choices of places to go, but they all had labels on them. One of them was Iowa! Another was the Bahamas and another was Ibiza. It said one of them is Miami, and I picked that one, but then I got a message that said there was a problem with the location, and it was sending us to Iowa instead! But I got here, we were in the house, and we're in the Miami area, but we're at the bottom of the map. We're really in the Florida Keys! The area is big, bigger than we have in Cuba. But it was quite strange because the location thingy said Iowa when I first appeared."

"Really? It said we were actually in Iowa? That is really weird. It said Florida for me."

When we'd gone on *Shadow Boxer*, Rosetta gave us two different secret messages. One was about the yam. But the other was when they'd shown Donut the different television shows on the screen. Every single one was a program set in Miami. I had no idea why they would want us here specifically, but they'd gone to a lot of trouble to give us the message. It was something only a person who was obsessed with television would notice. *I* hadn't noticed it.

I'd never been to Florida, let alone the Keys. Nor had I ever been to Iowa. I moved to the window and looked outside. It was the middle of the night, but I could see the distinctive form of a palm tree. Plus it was warm. There was no way this was the American Midwest in December. If this was somewhere in the Keys, we weren't actually that far from our original location in Cuba.

Why would they say it was Iowa, then?

"Carl, look at the map. They said the key location is marked! But the key is still in Iowa!"

"Oh, fuck me."

I pulled up the map. Sure enough, we were at the very southern tip of Florida. The distinctive island shapes were clear, and we were plopped right in the middle. I zoomed out as much as I could, and I didn't see the marker at all.

I started to form a message to Zev to bitch, but I paused at the notification.

Please wait.

There was a pause and a flash, and the ground rumbled with a small earthquake. The map rearranged itself. The key was suddenly there, only a handful of miles west from our current location.

Thank you for your patience. You may resume normal activity.

I relaxed.

"It looks like it was a glitch, but it fixed itself."

"I don't like glitches, Carl. They make me nervous. Oh, oh, but do you see that dead guy?"

Mongo was grunting happily as he pulled out a line of intestine.

"He's a little hard to miss, Donut."

"The fight was really short! Mongo killed him before it even started. He only had two totems, and they were both stuffed animals. A person and a disgusting toy dog. It was quite an easy fight."

"Good job."

Donut continued to bounce up and down as I examined the house. It was just an old, Victorian-style, mini-mansion from the 19th century with creaking, wood floors. There was a light switch, and I flipped it. It worked, and the room lit up. There was a Christmas tree in the corner, but it didn't appear as if anyone was living here. The tree itself was generic, with only blue and silver ornaments and no lights. I could smell and hear the ocean.

Donut was talking rapid-fire, like she did when she had too much energy. "The fight was scary! His deck wasn't very good. Mongo chomped him before he could play hardly anything. It was quite spectacular."

We only had two days to get the key. That seemed easy. Too easy, which meant it would be an epic pain. No time to rest. We had to get moving even though it was the middle of the night.

I had a few blinking notifications, and I pulled them up now. The first was from Emberus.

Quest Update. Find out Who Killed my Son.

It appears the primordial goddess Nekhebit has returned to the halls. She holds an ancient grudge against my family,

especially Apito. Find a temple of Nekhebit and question the priestess, see what she knows. Do not be gentle.

I waved that one away. It was a headache for tomorrow, if we made it that far. My heart stopped in my throat as I pulled up the next message. This is what I was looking for. It was a note from Huanxin, using the spider quest chat.

Eileithyia: I watched your performance. I am not one to be forgiving of failure, but I acknowledge this was out of your control. Odette did not ask to be your adjutant like I told you she would. This is my fault. I shall honor our agreement, but if it becomes clear that you'd warned Odette about our understanding, I shall crush everyone you know and love, starting with sweet Katia and ending with that cat.

I let out a long stream of breath. Relief flooded me.

Quest Complete. Spiders.

Proceed to a temple of Eileithyia to receive your boon.

"Carl, we finished the spider quest!"

"I see that, Donut."

"Well, that was the easiest quest ever. We barely did anything."

But then Donut started to grumble when she saw we had to go to a temple to collect our reward. With her unable to access Club Vanquisher, that would be difficult. I doubted we would be getting anything anyway, as the whole quest had been so Huanxin could send me messages through Eileithyia. Since she didn't need us anymore, we'd been cut loose. That was okay.

But now I was more worried than ever about sending Katia off to the 12th floor.

Carl: Katia. We should be good. But we gotta talk.

Katia: Can't right now. Things got messed up during the selection. They only gave me one choice. Ukraine, but when I got here, it was actually Vietnam.

Carl: That seems to be going around. Ping me when you're safe.

I moved to the door to the outside to take a better peek at where we were.

Zev: Donut, Carl. I apologize for that glitch. I know in the coming hours it's going to look intentional. Believe me, it was not. At least not on our end. Things are just hectic. You should have only received three choices for a new location. One chosen by us, one by the AI, and one randomly selected spot. You received four, and we don't know why. It wasn't just you guys. Some crawlers had four choices. Some only had one. A few didn't have any at all, and one squad leader had the whole globe to choose and dropped herself into the middle of the ocean for some reason. We're still scrambling to fix it all. Talk soon.

Donut: I'M JUST GLAD IT DIDN'T KEEP US IN IOWA. DO I LOOK LIKE SOMEONE WHO WOULD VOLUNTARILY VISIT IOWA? THAT'S ALMOST AS BAD AS DELAWARE.

Zev: Uh, yeah. Maybe you should look outside when dawn comes. We've had to fudge a few things to keep from breaking the game.

"There's nothing wrong with Iowa, Donut," I said as I pulled open the door. "You've never even been there."

"I have most certainly been to Iowa. It's cold, covered with weird billboards, and it smells like potatoes. Plus, Carl, it was where I was robbed of a purple ribbon. One doesn't just forget such a vile insult. It's because the judges were racist against their betters."

"I'm pretty sure that was Idaho, not Iowa."

"That's practically the same thing, Carl."

I took a step outside into the humid, night air. The temperature was similar to where we'd just left. We were on a sidewalk in some narrow beach town. A two-lane road spread before us, lit by sporadic streetlamps. There were no cars. Still, despite the late hour, the road was moderately busy. I caught sight of memory ghosts floating back and forth along the road. The fact the cars were already gone suggested this area had crawlers in it for part one of the floor. Beyond the road was beach, though I sensed it more than saw it in the dark. I knew the other side of the narrow island was pretty close behind us.

Other than the memory ghosts, I didn't see anyone. No dots of crawlers, NPCs, or mobs anywhere on the map. All I could see was the shining marker indicating the location of the exit key a little bit to the west.

I looked in that direction and saw nothing but black.

"Donut, what level is your Torch spell?"

"It's stuck at 14. It has been for a while now."

"Send it up there and make it as bright as you can, will you?"

She waved her paw, and the light shot into the air and zipped away from us like a fast-moving drone. It got impressively high and then light burst forth, illuminating the entire area like a stadium.

"Holy shit," I said, covering my eyes.

"I know, right?" Donut said. "It takes a lot of mana to keep it like this though, so I can only keep it going for a minute."

I looked west and did a double-take. At first I thought it was some weird artifact of Donut's spell, or the edge of the map. A sheer wall of crumbling earth stood in the distance, like a cosmic dump truck had just upended its load over the island. It was a pile of earth, climbing into the clouds. I couldn't see the top. It reminded me of the Temple of Anser from the bubble level, only more chaotic. I was pretty sure the pile was wider than the island. Dirt cascaded off the side as I watched.

I blinked a few times, trying to figure out what I was looking at. I consulted my map. The exit key was somewhere at the top of the pile. At least I hoped it was on the top and not buried there.

Carl: Zev, did you guys just rip the key location out of the ground in Iowa and plop it here to Florida?

Zev: Not my department, Carl. But, yes. It was the only way to do it without breaking anything further.

I just shook my head.

Carl: You might want to explain to your folks about the differences in sea level. Is that thing stable? This is a cay. It's an island built atop a reef, and half, if not most, of that pile is in the ocean. It's going to be washed away in a day.

Zev: Yes, Carl. We're very busy right now. We're aware of the situation. We'll intervene if the key location becomes

inaccessible.

I took another step toward the road. Donut jumped to my shoulder as Mongo padded out behind us. His face was completely covered in gore.

"Nice dixie cup, by the way," I said, looking up at the white sailor hat sitting cockeyed on Donut's head. "You look like you're in the navy."

"Oh, isn't it divine?"

She looked absurd, but I wasn't going to tell her that. "I like it, but if you wear it, you can't use your new *Hover* skill. Plus you lose 10 intelligence points."

"I already talked to Mordecai about this, and I'm going to wear it until I run out of cards, and then I'll put my new dragonfly tiara back on. This one lowers the card draw countdown by two seconds! Plus it's quite jaunty. I do love jaunty."

"Really? Huh. I didn't know they'd have magic gear specifically for the cards."

Donut reached up and made the cap sit even more sideways on her head. It looked like it would fall off at any moment. "So it's called a dixie cup? I love it. It's not too Donald Duck is it? Did you wear one like this?"

I grunted. "No. I wore a ball cap. We used to mock the poor bastards who had to wear those things."

"A baseball cap? You were in the military, and you wore a baseball cap? I feel as if that's a lie, Carl."

"Did that Robert guy have anything else on him?"

"Just the rest of his uniform, but it was ruined. And the token."

"The token?" I asked.

"Yes, Carl. Didn't you hear the announcement?"

"No, Donut. I wasn't here. Remember?"

"Oh," she said. "Well, it's quite simple. You have to collect nine tokens before you can fight the last guy for the key. There are less monsters, but they'll all have tokens and card decks on them. Wait, I see a red dot." She pointed with her paw. "It's that way, toward the mound."

"Okay," I said, cracking my neck. "Let's see how this really works."

"We're fighting in the dark? It doesn't let me keep the spell going when I activate my deck!"

I shrugged. "There are streetlamps, and I have a ton of torches. Time is not our friend here."

"Okay," she said skeptically. "Do we want to go get some of the boys to help us?"

"The boys?"

"You know. The Penis Paraders. Stevie is a troll for goodness sake. He's great at bashing stuff, and he can balance his club on the tip of his finger for ten seconds straight. Oh, and Gluteus can break things with his butt! You get a mob's head in there, and it's game over."

"I'm thinking we'll keep them back until there's an emergency. We want them fresh for the next floor."

"Okay," Donut said. "They're all probably experience hogs anyway."

As we started to move in that direction, keeping a wary eye for others and traps, Imani sent a message, demanding everyone check in. Only a few of us had experienced glitches. Florin was in eastern Nigeria. He wasn't partied with Lucia Mar, so he'd lost contact with her. Li Jun and his crew, which included Chris, were still in China, but further into the mainland.

Elle and Imani were separated. Elle's squad ended up in Belgium. Imani was only given one choice. Detroit, and that's where she was. Everyone else was equally scattered.

After some prodding, we learned Prepotente was somewhere in northern Italy.

Like with my area, Katia's region was a mix between Ukraine and Vietnam, though she warned us of something that made me wary. The Vietnam portion of the area where they'd ended up was in a city called Da Nang. It was where Tran was from.

The key location was in an apartment building where both his ex-wife and his estranged mother lived.

Detroit, Imani reluctantly offered, was where she grew up, and she would never have picked it if she'd been offered another choice. Her key location was also in the home of somebody she knew, but she didn't elaborate.

Elle: I don't know anybody in Belgium, thank god. You all try to keep your wits about you. These are just memory ghosts. And if they're going to make us fight loved ones, remember it's not really them. Don't let them fuck with your heads.

"Carl," Donut asked as we walked. "Do you know anybody who lives in Florida or Iowa? I most certainly don't."

"No," I said, and I hoped against everything that it was true.

Our first opponent—Donut's second—was a type of mob we'd fought before. The creature was just sitting there off the side of the road in a pool of light of a parking lot, waiting for us to approach. This setup wasn't anything like we'd seen so far in the dungeon. This was more like something out of a real video game. It stood there, doing nothing while it waited for us to come closer. A circle of clothes from the memory ghosts lay piled all around it, implying the thing had been standing there for a while.

The parking lot featured both a saferoom and a Desperado Club, but the map indicated the club was "Closed for emergency renovations."

The last time I'd seen one of these guys, it'd been on the fourth floor, and they'd been suffering from a condition called the DT's. It was a baboon/human hybrid creature called a Babababoon. I couldn't remember what level they'd been on the third floor—probably around 17 or so—but this guy was level 45.

The wide-faced man wore a Santa hat and had a t-shirt that featured a wrapped present on it with the caption, "I have a huge package for you." He started grunting and jumping up and down as

we approached, like he'd been paralyzed until the moment we appeared.

Combat Started.

I pulled a sticky hob-lobber into my xistera and tossed it across the way. It splotched against his chest and exploded, killing him before he even drew his first card.

Combat Complete. Deck has been reset.

"Carl, you blew up his hat!" Donut complained as we moved to investigate the corpse. The guy had been turned into paste. Mongo grunted and started licking it up.

A group of twenty cards appeared floating in the air. None were exciting, but he did have a consumable flee card. He'd had three totems. Two more babababoons like himself and a rare, level 80 Skunk Ape. We could only examine the information on the face of the card, which was only part of the whole. While I was curious about that one, we'd have to literally give up one of our totems to try it out, which we weren't willing to do.

He also had a token, which was just a poker chip-sized coin with the number two etched on it.

"Does the first token have a one on it?" I asked.

"It does," Donut said.

"And what level was that first guy?"

"Level 40. Also, I see another red dot down the street. And another way past there. There's a path of them leading to the dirt mound, all off the side of the road."

"All right," I said, looking west. I couldn't actually see anything. Now that we were past the houses, it was just palm trees and bushes and the occasional business on either side of the road, with the sound of the ocean waves in the distance. "Come on. Let's try this again."

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It wasn't until we were fighting for token number six did we actually have to use Donut's deck. And even then, the fight ended quickly.

So far, they'd all been regular, intelligent monsters holding cards. All had been waiting for us under streetlights. They'd gone up by five levels each time. The third—a level 50 turtle thing—was by himself, but the fourth and fifth opponents both had two bodyguards working with them, designed to keep me and Mongo from one-shotting the deckmaster. It didn't work. We finished all these fights before anybody could play a single card. None had great loot.

All of them were just waiting for us there along the path to the dirt mound. After some time observing this newest guy, I was certain my earlier theory was correct. They were literally frozen in place until we approached.

We were also receiving good experience for this, getting a decent chunk each time we defeated one. I was now level 68 and Donut was level 59. Mongo finally hit level 40.

Donut was bitching that this setup was "boring" and uninteresting to the fans, but I was happy to get it over with. I had an ominous feeling about what we'd find there up on top of that mound of dirt.

This opponent number six stood just to the side of the road at the base of the pile, which was situated at the end of the island, standing near a lit sign giving the distance to Key West. The heap

completely blocked the road and covered a bridge that presumably led to the next island over. Even at the base, I couldn't see the top.

The creature in our way was a Level-65 **Reef Explorer**, and he was wearing an ethereal, glowing deep-dive suit, similar to what Zev wore when she was in the dungeon. He had a group of four bodyguards. All four were level-50 **Swordfish Interlopers**. These guys were bipedal, human-sized creatures with the heads of swordfish, only the heads stuck straight up in the air, and they could barely move their necks. The vertical swords glinted menacingly. They didn't have arms, but little flippers on each side. Their legs were short, penguin-like. The creatures waddled menacingly toward us as the squad leader guy shouted something, something we couldn't hear through his helmet.

This guy was a ghost-class mob, so I pulled out one of my holy water-infused hob-lobbers and tossed it at him, throwing over the heads of the swordfish. But the moment I tossed it, one of the swordfish dudes, with surprising speed and precision, spit out a stream of water, knocking the small bomb off target, causing it to blow prematurely. He then made a chirping, staccato dolphin-like noise and launched himself straight into the sky. He hit the apex, paused in the night air, pivoted, and propelled himself at me like a goddamned missile.

"Oh fuck!" I cried, dancing out of the way. The guy smashed into the ground with a wet *splatch*, burying himself upside down in the dirt at the edge of the road. The long sword head completely embedded into the ground, all the way to his eyes. If he'd hit me, I'd have been turned into a kebab. Now stuck, he started to helplessly bicycle his short legs. I cast *Talon Strike* on my foot and started to kick at him.

At the same moment, a digital wave of water rushed across the space between us as two more of the Swordfish guys appeared, jumping out of the fake waves. They did a flip and landed right in front of the deckmaster. These were two cards played by the Reef Explorer guy.

The AI screamed with excitement:

Splish-Splash you gonna get slashed, it's Swordfish Interlopers!

The two newcomers looked identical to the bodyguards already here, only these had totem notifications over their heads with little timers counting down from 90.

In front of me, the upside-down guy died, just as another of the bodyguards launched himself into the air at me. The deckmaster guy added a buff to one of the totems, something called **Precision**. He then added a second Precision card on the same totem.

Mongo leaped through the air and chomped the flying swordfish like he was a dog catching a frisbee, his tail whipping. He hit the ground and his *Earthquake* ability activated, causing the remaining swordfish guys to fall off their feet and start flopping like, well, fish. The dive suit guy did not stumble. Mongo savagely tore at his prey.

We all paused as church organ music bellowed out, thick and loud. Fat, naked, digital babies with little wings fluttered around us, fountaining into the air as Donut summoned one of our team's newest totems.

I hadn't seen this guy yet, and I wasn't sure what to expect. It was the card that Donut made when she'd used the combo card.

She'd combined Uzi Jesus and Asojano.

Sparkles rained from the wings of the cherubs as the totem rose from the ground, spinning and shrouded in smoke. The angel babies flew off, and a herd of digital street dogs burst away from the spinning figure, barking and running in all directions as the music swelled. Only then did the smoke clear, revealing the figure.

It was easily the craziest, most over-the-top reveal sequence of all our cards. Donut loved it, despite the appearance of the street dogs.

The figure was a dirty, sandaled, robed figure, hunched over and sickly. A glowing nimbus surrounded his head, lighting the area further. The light had an uneasy, green tint to it. His drooping hood obscured his face. He used his large weapon as a walking stick. The man took a tentative step forward.

He was level-140, just like Uzi Jesus had been, which was lucky. Asojano had been 130.

Jesus had an uzi. Asojano had a strange, large-sized wand made from shells.

This guy had a goddamned bazooka. A magical bazooka that fired something different every time.

"Here comes my favorite part," Donut said.

The AI shouted the introduction like he was announcing a boxing match.

It's the Son Who Fell. The Sinner, Resurrected. The Bringer of Disease, Bringer of Salvation. The Ender of All Blasphemy. It's the calamitous, rapturous, and ultimately hazardous master of the life-death boomerang.

It's Lazarus-A-Bang-Bang!

Yet another digital explosion appeared as the hunched man crept painfully forward. Our opponent and all the remaining bodyguards and totems were in the midst of pulling themselves upright. They paused to gawk at the newcomer and the ridiculous display.

"Is it really going to do all that every time?" I asked. Mongo looked up from the now-dead swordfish to growl.

"Isn't it great?" Donut asked. "I wish I had an entrance theme like that!"

The hood fell back to reveal a boil-covered, dark-skinned man wearing a crown of thorns, but the thorns obscured his eyes like a blindfold. He stood to his full height, and I realized the decrepit, old man persona had been an act. He was definitely older, but he was ripped. His arms heaved with power.

Holy crap, I thought. *That dude is intense.*

He pulled the bazooka to his shoulder.

"Welcome to your salvation, motherfuckers."

The man had a deep, strong voice. His accent was similar to Asojano's but somehow reminiscent of Uzi Jesus at the same time. It was like they'd taken every 80's action hero and smooshed them into a single character.

He pushed the firing mechanism just as the remaining totems and bodyguards burst into the air. It was two swordfish totems and two regular mobs.

Thwum!

A cloud of ... *something* burst from the weapon, split, and corkscrewed in the air, hitting all four of the swordfish at the same time. All four—including the one that had been buffed with utility cards—dropped like a sack of pennies. They all writhed on the ground.

Beetles. They were covered with iridescent, scratching beetles that glinted in the light like they were made of metal. There were thousands of them. The fish were devoured in seconds. Mongo screeched in terror and backed away. The two totems puffed away in smoke as the other two chittered in pain as they were turned to skeletons. The moment they were dead, the beetles turned to dust.

"He's great, isn't he?" Donut shouted. "He has a few different weapons, too, and you don't know what he's going to have! Sometimes it's a bazooka that shoots bugs. Sometimes it's an RPG thing that just blows stuff up!"

Donut summoned Raul the crab, who blasted onto the scene with a pale-by-comparison explosion. He scuttled sideways toward the backing-away Reef Explorer.

"He's a ghost," Donut called. "You have to use magic to kill him. Hurry before he summons another totem!"

Raul turned and bowed. He paused briefly, sat on the ground, and chanted a short spell. His right claw started to glow. He stood and continued toward the creature, who'd backed up against a tree as he desperately tossed away another card.

"Want me to blast him?" Lazarus asked Donut. There was a blinking countdown hovering over his bazooka. A stream of smoke rose from the business end of the large, cartoonish weapon. It was a cooldown timer, and it was at ten seconds.

Lazarus suddenly jumped in surprise upon seeing me standing there. He jerked the bazooka back up to his shoulder and pointed it at me. "Who are you?" he demanded.

"Lazarus-A-Bang-Bang, you put that down this instant! That's our friend, Carl!"

"Yeah, okay," he said reluctantly. He lowered the giant weapon. But then he did that dude bro thing where he jerked his shoulders forward like he was going to rush me. He looked me up and down,

despite his eyes being covered by the thorns. "Yeah, I thought so. Made ya flinch."

Mongo let out another angry squawk.

The robed man turned back to Raul, who continued to scuttle after the glowing ghost, who was now screeching and running away, weaving in and out of the dark trees. "Let me end this. That pansy is taking too long."

Donut shook her head as she discarded one of her cards. She tossed a **Greased Lightning** card at Raul, and it spun off like a ninja star. It zipped across the distance and dodged a tree before hitting the crab in a sparkle of digital confetti. "You just stay here and protect me, Lazarus. Let Raul get some experience. It'll build his self-confidence."

"But I want to kill the bad guy. I'm gonna tell my father if you don't let me do it."

"Does he still think he's Jesus?" I asked.

Lazarus made a scoffing noise.

"I'm not quite certain what he thinks," Donut said. "It's like he has the memories of both totems."

Across the way, Raul snapped at the ghost. The Reef Explorer guy had a handful of cards, but he apparently couldn't play any of them. The guy tried to run behind a tree, but the speed-enhanced Raul snapped again, cutting his leg off. Ghostly water flowed from the severed limb, the suit deflated, and the creature dropped dead.

Combat Complete. The deck has been reset.

"I could've done it a lot faster," Lazarus grumbled as he and Raul poofed away.

I just looked at the space where the guy had stood. That card was ridiculously powerful. Stronger even than Shi Maria possibly. It gave me an uneasy feeling.

"Uh, has that guy fought alongside Shi Maria yet?"

"Yes!" Donut said. "They're pretty competitive. They fight over who can kill the other guy first. They don't seem to like each other much, and I think MaeMae is jealous of his reveal sequence. They both get along with Jola. His reveal is pretty good, too. The good news is Raul and Geraldo are finally tolerating each other. Lazarus is

mean to Raul but he and Geraldo get along great. And everybody just kinda ignores Skylar Spinach."

Across the way, a group of like 40 or 50 glowing cards appeared floating in the air. We trudged toward them. Donut recast her *Torch* spell.

I held out my hand. "Let me see his card."

Donut waved over my palm, and the orange card appeared. I examined it as we walked.

T'Ghee Card. Unique.

Totem Card.

Lazarus-A-Bang-Bang.

"I'm back, bitches!"

Level: 140.

Origin: This card was created via Combo.

Note: This card was frozen in place via a Glow-Up with active buffs. Available utility slots have been lowered.

Summoning duration: 200 seconds.

Constitution: 80.

This is a ranged mob.

This is a healer mob.

This is an affliction-dealing mob.

Notable attacks:

Oh Yeah? Well, I Have a Face-Melting Bazooka

Apocalyptic Plague

Resurrect Totem

+25 additional skills and spells.

Examine in the squad details tab of your interface for full stats and skills and spells.

I handed the card back to Donut. "His duration is great. His constitution is decent, but it's a lot lower than both Asojano and Uzi Jesus. Wasn't Jesus's constitution at 200?"

"Yeah, he appeared with it really low. It started at 20, and I only got it up to 80 after I'd buffed him and made it permanent! It made him the same level as Jesus, and he has most of the same skills as both of them. Both Jesus and Asojano were undead, but he's not. Also, if you look, he only has two utility card slots. Both Jesus and

Asojano had seven. His bazooka is great. Last time in the arena, it shot feathers! I thought that was going to be stupid, but they cut the guy into pieces, and it was really pretty. Even MaeMae said it was quite a stylish way to kill. He's kind of a jerk, though. He calls everybody a pansy. Still, he's not nearly as bad as either Asojano or Jesus. At least he does what I ask. Usually. You know, he reminds me a lot of Brad, but with worse skin."

I grunted. Brad was Bea's ex-boyfriend and the guy she'd gone to the Bahamas with. I never did ask what happened to him. If Bea had been outside during the collapse, that meant he'd likely been outside, too.

We reached the large display of cards floating in the air. Donut looked over it and sniffed with derision.

The Reef Explorer only summoned two totems, but he'd had four total. Another swordfish and a rare squid-looking thing. After a cursory glance, Donut discarded them.

"It's no wonder he couldn't pull any more cards," she said. "Look at all these utility cards. It ruined his deck! He's lucky he pulled two at the start. He doesn't even have any traps! I see the attack he was going for, but I mean, really. He had to get the perfect draw to pull it off." She scoffed. "Amateur hour."

Sure enough, there were thirty of the **Precision** utility cards. I snatched one out of the air, and it let me. The card basically increased the totem's capacity to land an attack. The cards had a special ability that made it so they stacked, so if one used ten on a single totem, it still only counted as a single buff. I felt a chill. He'd buffed one of those swordfish guys like four times. If that one had managed to attack, I wouldn't have been able to dodge. That fight had been more dangerous than we'd realized.

I had a persistent itch at my neck, and I scratched at it. I suspected it was because of the soul bar for my back patch. The bar was almost full, but not quite. So far I hadn't felt any obvious ill effects of having the Scavenger's Daughter patch, but every time it started to get near full, I felt uneasy. I just needed to kill one or two more things before I could disperse the power. Still... I worried I might need the power for the last fight. If I unloaded it now, the bar

wouldn't refill by the time we needed it for the boss guarding the key. Not if the only mobs here were the deckmaster guys.

Donut collected the sixth coin after grabbing all the other cards. She was talking non-stop now about card theory and about what other crawlers were doing with their decks. She was really into it, and by this point, I was starting to realize she knew more about this game than I did.

"The next guy is all the way up there," she was saying. "Do you want to go back to base first? We don't know if there'll be any saferooms up there, and if I'm going to be climbing all the way up there, I don't want to have to do it multiple times. Or in the dark." She gasped. "Do you think I can use my *Hover* skill to do it? That would be great!"

I examined the pile of earth. Part of it was already eroding into the ocean. We had multiple options on how to get to the top of the pile, which was about 700 feet up. Luckily, the edge of the mound wasn't sheer, and I could just scale my way up it if I had to. I still had a few *Levitation* potions. Plus we could *Puddle Jump* up there. I'd probably try climbing first to see how long it would take, but I wasn't about to do that in the dark. My neck itched again.

"Let's go back to the saferoom, check in with everybody, and reset our buffs. Then we'll come right back out. We need to get this done before the whole place washes away."

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We had to hike a good ways to the saferoom, which was within a small, side-of-the-road shrimp shack. As we traveled, Donut continued to chat, rapid-fire about card theory, but somewhere along the way, she trailed off, and we finished the walk in mostly silence.

I continued to talk with the others. All were pushing their way through the first nine opponents. People were trying all sorts of ways to cheat, attempting to kill the enemy squad leaders before the fight actually started. Nothing worked so far.

Because the enemy deckmaster only activated and became corporeal when the squad leader approached, people were getting creative, like ringing the frozen NPC with traps or sitting right there with weapons poised. None of that worked. The moment the fight started, any traps or placed structures in a ring around the enemy literally disappeared, teleporting off to god knew where. Crawlers who were within the ring were knocked unconscious, which had disastrous results for some.

Tserendolgor had a long-range sniper guy in her group, someone who used an old-school sling and some sort of targeting spell, and she'd had him posted up on a hill, overlooking the opponent from a distance. He said the moment the fight started, the targeting spell failed, and the opponent moved a meter to the left, which screwed up his aim. But he managed to kill the guy anyway a minute later.

It was like they were desperately trying to fix how unbalanced the card game was, but they still hadn't gotten it right. Most of these fights were still ending before the totems could be useful.

The bopca eyed us warily as we pushed our way into the saferoom, not bothering to stop to talk. When we got into the guild, I found the main room filled with sleeping strippers and changeling children, all piled around the base, many of them snoring loudly. They were supposed to be sleeping in their barracks, but they didn't have video games and television in the barracks. The room was an absolute mess. It appeared they'd had a water balloon fight. I had no idea where they'd gotten the balloons, but the broken latex pieces were everywhere, and the whole place was wet. The main screen was showing the movie *Encino Man*, but the sound was off.

I looked about and spied the cleaner bot in its spot in the top, right corner of the room, and it gave me a quiet, sullen beep, almost like the whine of a dog locked in his cage. Mordecai must have told the thing to wait until morning to clean, so not to wake everyone up.

Samantha was in the room, and she was the only other one awake. She'd been cleaned since the Desperado Club incident, and she rolled toward us and hopped up on the kitchen table. She opened her mouth to say something, but I put my fingers to my lips, indicating for her to be quiet. I patted her on the head, and she growled and snapped at me.

I didn't see Mordecai, and I assumed he was asleep. Or more likely, working in the crafting room.

Mongo moved to the pile of sleeping, half-naked men and curled up in the middle of them. He was still covered in gore.

I had several notifications and achievements to wade through, but we decided to do it in Donut's room, and we moved there.

"Carl," Donut said as I closed the door. I was exhausted, but I could tell she wanted to talk. She'd been full of energy for a bit, but it was like it had drained away all at once.

"Yeah?"

She took a nervous glance at her social media interface and seemed to deflate. "You know what, never mind. Let's open our boxes."

I sat down on the lone chair in the room, and I pulled her into my lap. I stroked the side of her head. She was matted and dusty and needed to be brushed.

"Don't worry about anybody else. Tell me what's on your mind."

She sniffed. "I keep thinking about that fight with the diving suit guy. It was easy, but he had this strategy that could've worked if we hadn't killed him so fast. You would've been smooshed. I didn't see it coming. There's so many cards out there. Like thousands of different ones, and we don't know what the bad guys will have. It's not fair."

I continued to stroke the side of her head. "No, it's not fair. But that's why we have a strategy of our own. We move fast. We finish the fights as soon as possible and make it so it doesn't matter what the other guys have."

She swallowed, building up to what she really wanted to say. "What happens if you die? What would I do? And if something happened to me, what would Mongo do?"

I just sat there, holding her warm body against mine, waiting for her to continue.

"The more I study this card game, Carl, the more I realize how easy it is for us to lose at any moment. That last guy was only number six. Each one after him is going to be harder."

I continued to stroke her. "It's always dangerous, Donut. We can only do our best."

"I don't like being in charge of the deck. You're usually in charge of the important stuff. When I went from Odette's show to that room, and I was by myself I had this terrible feeling for a second that I would never see you again." She inhaled. "We're already losing Katia no matter what happens, and nobody is talking about it. Doesn't anybody see what it's doing to Bautista? To me? To *her*? I can't even imagine how scared she is. Sometimes when I think things like that, I can't breathe. It's like I'm being crushed."

I leaned all the way back in the cushioned chair. We were in the corner of the room, facing away from her social media board, which beeped and clicked as people made comments about our conversation. I caught sight of someone's comment.

I’m going to drop this stupid feed if she keeps being so whiny.

Go fuck yourself, I thought. I didn’t dare say it out loud. I didn’t want her to see the comment. I reached over and clicked the screen off. Donut continued to snuggle in my arm.

Her candle was sitting there, right by the screen, along with the photograph of Bea and Brad, which she’d never put away. That was okay. I pushed the photo aside, pulled a lighter, and I lit the candle. The scent of home filled the room.

“You know what, Donut? Forget the magic bed for a minute. Let’s just take an old-fashioned nap together. Right here in this chair. Not a long one, but a real one. We can open up our boxes after. Okay?”

“Okay.”

Sunrise still wasn’t for a bit. I sent a quick message to Mordecai and told him to wake us in two hours.

Mordecai: I’m in the crafting room, working on some potions. I’ll wake you.

Donut was already asleep. I tried to sleep myself, but I couldn’t. It was as if I’d forgotten how. So instead, I just sat there alone with my thoughts. My thoughts and the river, which was still there. Always.

I thought of Mordecai, and I pictured him there at his table, working on this or that. I thought of the baggage he carried on his shoulders, heavier each year. I thought of Odette, and the guilt she claimed to have over it all.

I thought of Frank Q, and the ring of Divine Suffering and what he’d told me so many weeks before. About how he was feeling crushed by it all. Just like Donut. Just like me.

I thought of that pile of dirt, and of the climb we’d have to make in a few hours. I thought of the man I knew I’d find up there.

You will not break me. Fuck you all.

I eventually did drift to sleep, only to wake on my own like 40 minutes later, about five minutes before I'd told Mordecai to wake us. Mongo was in here now, curled up on the floor, his large and heavy head on my foot. Samantha was here, too, and she was sitting to my right on the table, looking up at the social media board feed, which she'd somehow managed to turn back on. She was angrily muttering to herself.

"Let me read it. Let me read it, or I will find your mother and you know what will happen." She turned and noticed me awake and let out a big smile. "You talk in your sleep."

"Samantha, don't mess with that thing. You're going to break it."

Donut yawned and stretched as I tried to wake myself up. I felt like such utter, fatigued crap that I immediately moved to the magic rest pad and reset my exhaustion.

I both hated and loved how well it worked, how it was so easy to just step over the pad and let the energy flow into me.

Donut was back to her regular self, clucking over the gore splatters in the room from Mongo. Like always, she made no mention of her earlier mood.

I moved to my notifications. The message boards were awash with people talking about a loot box most everyone got. I had private messages from Katia, Li Jun, and Elle, all asking for updates. Katia had apparently visited us, noticed the mass of sleeping people, and slipped back out of the personal space. I'd message them all back in a minute.

I actually had more achievements than I was expecting, including one for killing the swordfish guy with my foot. That one resulted in a bronze spicy box. My Smush skill base was now at level 12. My bonus for using my pedicure kit supposedly raised it an additional three levels, but it was still listed as 14. Like always, the skills got wonky when items buffs attempted to push them toward 15.

I was starting to realize we were getting some seriously padded experience from these card fights. I needed to work on my Powerful Strike. Most of my other achievements weren't too interesting. The notable ones were:

New Achievement! Cascadia's Turquoise Taco!

It's important to explain to you how much work it took for you to get here, to this point, Crawler.

Long, long before any of you monkeys were even born, this planet was chosen to be used for this season of *Dungeon Crawler World*. When that happened, the then-showrunners, the Borant Corporation, needed to submit their proposal for all 18 levels of the World Dungeon. That proposal included an outline for how this floor, the eighth level, would proceed.

As you now know, it was a game involving T'Ghee cards. Artists, engineers, and writers, both flesh and artificial, went to work designing the system. It takes a gargantuan effort to make something like this viable, something that can be played by thousands of people at once. It takes a lot of work to create and balance all the cards to make a game that's both fair to play yet entertaining to watch by the viewers. Millions of work hours have gone into this moment, where your squad now faces an opponent with a card deck of their own.

Mudskipper Cascadia, the recently divorced lead engineer and the current executive producer of *Dungeon Crawler World: Earth*, has already been humiliated over the disaster on the previous floor. Combine that with her utter inability to control what is still happening on the ninth, and you know what you get? An administrator who is on the edge, that's what you get. She's right there, man. Right. There.

So, imagine if you will, how she's going to feel when she realizes most of you monkeys keep ending these carefully-set up fights before either side can draw a single, damn card.

You ended a card fight before it even began.

***Reward*: You've received a Gold Prepotente Box!**

I refused to believe it'd really taken that much work to design this ridiculous card system. It felt more like a half-assed *YuGiOh!* ripoff duct-taped together by someone on an Adderall bender. It wasn't balanced. It wasn't fair. My opinion, from even before the

dungeon, was how could any card game be fair when not everyone had access to the same pool of cards? My friend Sam had been a big player of the card game, *Magic: The Gathering*. We'd argued about this more than once.

I finally noticed the name of the box, and I laughed. This was the same one many others had received, but I still wasn't sure what it was. There was another version of this achievement for the squad leaders, but the prize was the same. I knew Donut would have this one, too. In fact, just about everybody in the dungeon had received something with this same box.

New Achievement! Smeat!

You participated in deck combat as a minion bodyguard for a squad leader!

Do you know what that makes you? Expendable. Cannon fodder. Spreadable Meat. The raw materials used to lubricate the forward momentum of the galaxy's inevitable downfall.

Hey, don't feel so bad. Lubrication is an important component of any machine.

***Reward*: You've received a Silver Spam Box.**

I'd gotten that one the moment our first real fight started, which meant most everyone in the dungeon would have this one also.

Next to me, Donut was going through her rewards. She had many more than I did, most involving specific card moves from her first and last fight.

I opened my boxes, which were mostly bronze adventurer boxes.

The Silver Spam box contained a pile of scrolls:

Scroll of Build Trench. (x5)

Boy, I hope you're up on your knowledge of the fighting techniques of the first world war.

Allows for the placement of a permanent trench two point three meters deep and two meters wide. Length of trench is variable based on user's intelligence plus strength. Combine scrolls to add reinforced sleeping quarters and other front-line accessories.

I put them away and waited for the Prepotente box to open. The box itself was made of wood painted gold and was made to look like Prepotente's head.

"Carl," Donut asked, looking up from her own set of adventurer boxes. "Why is there a floating Prepotente statue in my room?"

It appeared it was going to open with some hinges at the top, as if opening a compartment to the brain.

"Man," I said. "I actually wish he was here so I could see the look on his face when..."

The box screamed. I almost jumped out of my skin. The noise was loud enough to wake Mongo up from a dead sleep, who scrambled to his feet and started looking around wildly.

I grumbled as the prize appeared. It was a heavy book. Not a magic tome. A thick, diary-like book filled with blank paper. There were probably three or four hundred pages. The cover was a hard, black leather with no title.

The Filthy Little Crawler's Book of Voodoo.

Warning: You may not trade this item. This item may not be destroyed. You may remove it from your inventory to use it, but you will not be able to throw it away. If you drop this book, it will automatically return to your inventory.

Way back in the old days before you flesh sacks invented pagers and cellular telephones, it was difficult for people on the go to get ahold of one another. And if you were at a large event such as a science fiction convention, forget about it. You were on your own.

But then came the Voodoo Board.

They started popping up at all the nerd conventions. It was simple, really. It was just a big board with the name of everybody attending the convention upon it. If you had a message for somebody and wanted to let them know your mommy was coming to pick you up at a certain time, you would take a pin and place it by their name. They'd stroll by the board, see they had a message, and they'd move to an alphabetical file and find the note. Privacy be damned!

It was called the Voodoo board because of the pins. This book is the same thing. It's called a book of Voodoo because it's named after the message board. Not because it can secretly be used for any sort of nefarious purpose which will become clear later, so just get that out of your head this instant, mister.

When you meet a crawler who owns this same item, their name will permanently appear in this enchanted book. You may use the book to exchange messages. You may write your message under their name, and only they will receive it. If you write under your own name, everyone who has your entry will see the message. You may write your message manually or using the messaging interface while turned to the page. One must open the book to read the message, but you will have the option to copy the words. Message will erase on demand, allowing one to write a new note.

This book is not retroactively filled with the entries of people you have already met. You must be within close-ish vicinity of them for their name to be added. Works only with crawlers who also own this book.

"Huh," I said, turning the book over in my hand. It was basically a combination between my Coffee Shop Author's Kit and the regular messaging system. It allowed for easier mass messages, but one would have to physically pick up the book, turn to the page with the crawler's name and read. I wasn't certain of the utility.

Still... why would they give this to most everybody in the dungeon? The description was a little alarming. You never really knew when the AI was being serious or not. I thought back to the new achievement message attached to the box. It'd been about Cascadia, the kill, kill, kill lady. The loot box was presumably named after Prepotente because he'd really upset her. He'd more than made her angry. He'd broken a floor.

Across from me, Donut had received the same box and was opening it now. She looked at it suspiciously. The moment it appeared, the book, still in my hand, buzzed like a telephone. I

opened it up, and sure enough there were now two entries. The first was my own name. The second was Donut. As I stared at her entry, a new type of window popped up into my interface. It was similar to a chat window for a group quest chat.

I mentally wrote:

You have bedhead, Donut.

I watched the book buzz, and Donut leaped back and batted it with her paw. Then she hesitantly reached forward, and it magically opened on its own. She read the message and scoffed. She flipped the page to my entry and stared at it for a moment. The book buzzed in my hand, and I turned to Donut's page.

THIS IS A STEP BACKWARD, CARL. THIS IS THE EQUIVALENT OF CHATTING BY LEAVING POST-ITS ON ONE'S LOCKER IN HIGH SCHOOL. THE REAL MESSAGE SYSTEM IS MUCH BETTER, AND I ABSOLUTELY WILL NOT USE THIS.

I stared at the words, and they highlighted themselves on the page. I copied the text and added it to my scratchpad.

"Interesting," I said out loud and stuck the book into my inventory. "Come on. No training today. Shower and buffs, and then we're going back out there."

In the daylight, the relocated chunk of land looked even more haphazard and unstable. The entire mountain had turned to mud. It was, I realized, a mix between the ocean battering it at the base and the snow melting off the top. Still, the slope wasn't that steep and not too muddy on the side facing where we'd killed the deep dive guy. I tried my hand at scaling it with Donut on my shoulder, which was a mistake. She spent the time commenting loudly in my ear about my climbing skills.

I'd forgotten my new back patch also came with a Climb benefit. It turned out to be really useful. Despite the slippery mud, I started

to make my way up the slope. Donut didn't seem to notice my new ability, however, and she was constantly offering me "tips."

As I ascended, I caught up on the group messages. Most everybody in my groups had made their way through the first four or five opponents with little trouble. Imani's seventh opponent used a flee card, and when she approached the eighth, it remained incorporeal and frozen, which meant we had to fight these guys in order. So Imani was now running through the streets of Detroit attempting to find where the guy had gone to. Katia was on her way to her seventh fight as well. She'd ditched one of her totems for what sounded like a giant, Vietnamese cow thing called a kting voar or something like that.

Li Jun's team was still experimenting, attempting to circumvent the protections and kill or trap the opponents before the squad leader approached. They were having little luck. Chris had ranged forward to scout out the final boss, but the area was locked. He said there was a giant vending machine blocking the entrance to the area, and you had to feed it the nine tokens for it to open.

Louis wanted to know if we were all going to get together for Christmas celebrations once midnight passed.

Carl: You know, it's not really Christmas. It's like early March or something.

Louis: Oh man, really? It feels like we've been here a year.

Donut: CARL HADN'T EVEN PUT HIS TREE AWAY YET WHEN EVERYTHING HAPPENED.

Carl: We were just barely a week past Christmas! And my "tree" was a foot tall thing that I bought at the grocery store. You'd gnawed all the pine needles off it.

Donut: AND THEY WERE JUST EVERYWHERE. IT WAS QUITE THE MESS, CARL, AND YOU HADN'T EVEN CLEANED IT UP. WE WERE PRACTICALLY LIVING IN SQUALOR.

Louis: Still, we should do something. Maybe we could give each other presents.

On my shoulder, Donut audibly gasped.

Imani: Let's make sure we all get our keys first, okay?

The slope was about 700 feet up, which wasn't so bad if one was just walking. Even with my enhanced climbing, it was a chore. I put my head down and continued to ascend.

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Entering Dallas County, Iowa.

I pulled myself onto the crumbling edge of wet asphalt. I had to jump forward as the ground under my feet broke off and started sliding away. *Christ*, I thought, looking over the precipice. About five feet of the ground had just fragmented off and fallen.

Even with my Climb ability, getting up here had been a chore. I was now filthy.

New Achievement! Cliffhanger!

You scaled a cliff face with your bare hands!

You know, we have scrolls and spells and stuff so you don't have to do things like that anymore. I suppose it is honest work, but boy was it boring to watch.

***Reward*: I will not point out how disgusting your toenails are right now. I'll want to, but I won't say a damn word.**

"You could've given me a fly ability instead of climbing," I grumbled as I continued to wipe dirt off of myself.

It was a clear day, and I could see the ocean spread out on either side. I moved away from the edge and turned to look upon the area. Spread before us was a street dotted with farm-style houses followed by a sparse trailer park. Immediately to our left was half of a commercial farm. A few large buildings dotted the property along with a corrugated silo that stood precariously close to the edge.

"Carl, it smells really bad up here. It doesn't smell like potatoes at all. It smells worse. Mongo will be quite upset."

The whole area was bigger than I'd realized. The ground rumbled ominously. I searched for our next opponent and saw nothing.

"Okay, get ready," I said. "Remember the plan. Take out your..."

"Carl!" Donut suddenly shouted, pointing at a dilapidated farmhouse just to our right. "On the roof! There's a bunch of invisible..."

Combat Started.

"...moth things!"

Warning: Your equipped cloak has aggravated the Nightgaunt.

"Oh, shit," I said as Donut's card deck started to form. I pulled a quarter hob-lobber and tossed it at the house, aiming for the roof.

I regretted my decision the moment the ball left my xistera. We had two major rules regarding my explosions, and I'd just broken both of them without thinking: Don't toss at invisible monsters, and don't blow things up when we were in an unstable environment.

Bam! The roof of the old, wooden house exploded in a shower of shrapnel. The fireplace structure fell over and landed in the driveway, crushing an ancient Ford truck. The entire truck and driveway collapsed and started sliding down the hill.

Experience notifications flowed down my screen as the ground under our feet rumbled.

I pointed. "Crap! Run! Forward!"

We moved down the street as more of the ground slid away. A long, ominous crack formed down the asphalt, right along the center of the street.

A terrible screech filled the air, loud and high-pitched like nails down glass.

"Carl, Carl, I didn't pull Mongo out yet! It won't let me do it now! I didn't summon my headset, either."

"That's okay. We'll be okay." I looked about the air. "Where the hell is it?" All I could see was the multiple Xs of dead minions.

"I think you got a couple, but the bad guy is there, hovering," she said, pointing up. "It's a big bat guy with a bunch of moths. Oh

good, they're naked. Invisible and naked. Watch this." She swept her paw forward, summoning her other new card. The one Katia had given us.

Jola.

The sky went black, and digital snow flurries swept through the air. Fake, digital Christmas lights appeared on the houses and trailers around us, overlaid oddly on a set of real Christmas lights from the memory.

The storm grew in intensity, becoming a swirling blizzard. In that moment, I could see the outline of the opponent creature. It was enough for the description to pop up.

The Visitor. Level 70.

This is Deckmaster Number Seven of Ten.

Ahh, the Visitor.

This is one of the rare urban legend cryptids that actually existed, believe it or not.

First, you need to know what a Nullian is. The Null. You know those annoying, little fuckers with the giant heads? Won't ever shut up? You called them "The Grays" which is giving them way too much credit.

There's a reason why you earthlings knew what these twits looked like. They were always poking about this planet illegally.

This thing you're facing is obviously not one of those. It's actually a creature called a Nightgaunt.

Nightgaunts exist outside of the dungeon. We use them as demons here in the game because, well, look at the fuckers. But in reality, they're part of a semi-intelligent species that normally lives in a Nullian world. Real Nightgaunts are peaceful, vegetarian, nocturnal creatures. Think of them like bats mixed with Neanderthals mixed with donkeys.

But that's boring, so this version is much more intense. And deadly.

The Nullian like to capture the peaceful bat creatures and ride them or use them as pack animals, which is even more

fucked up the more you think about it. These guys are semi-intelligent. It'd be like you guys kidnapping dolphins, caging them, and forcing them to do tricks for fat, sunburned tourists. Oh wait…

Anyway, for some inexplicable reason, way back in 1903, a Nullian brought a Nightgaunt with him during an unauthorized site-seeing trip to Earth. It got out. Why did he bring the monster with him? Why does that lady with her underwear on the outside bring her pet hedgehog on the subway? Who the hell knows!

The poor creature ended up shotgunned and splattered all over the Iowa countryside. They called it "The Visitor." An urban legend was born.

It was looking directly at me. It waved its arm, like it was trying to cast a spell. Since this thing was the deckmaster, it wouldn't be able to cast anything.

A low tinkling filled the air, like Christmas jingle bells but slowed down and distorted. The air flickered between night and day. There was a howl, a distant, female opera singer performing a haunting dirge. The music rose in volume and then abruptly stopped as white fireworks exploded in the sky. The lights turned to snow and showered down.

A large, yellow, lumpy and half-melted candle, the size of a big garbage can appeared floating in the sky. It bobbed up and down as the wick burst into light, revealing that the candle was sitting atop the head of the summoned creature.

The moment the candle lit, it fully revealed the hidden nightgaunt and all of his companions. The enemy deckmaster had a half-dozen minions with him, things called **Quench Moths**. They were all level 30. The dog-sized moths swirled about in confusion around the bat-like demon.

I barely noticed the moths as I stared up at Jola. Katia had given up the card because this thing was a pain in the ass. According to Donut, the totem just sorta did what he was asked, not talking with or aggravating the others. Though sometimes he just sat there and refused to fight, which was usually okay, too. He had a lot of health.

Either way, his size would make fighting in certain situations problematic.

I gawked, craning my neck.

Jola wasn't floating in the air. He was just huge. Bigger than Shi Maria.

He was also a cat. A fat, hairy, dirty-brown, house-sized, Persian cat. A cat with a giant candle melted to the top of his head. He let out a bass-heavy, ground-shaking growl.

He had a 75-second timer over his head.

Beware, beware, little children, beware!
Through the flurries and through the cold,
Jola comes.
He hungers for the indolent and the naked,
For the lazy and the unclothed,
For those who have tasks yet undone.
And for the sweet, sweet taste of severed toddler tongue.
It's Jola the Yule Cat!

I just stared. "What the fuck?"

The moths all suddenly dive-bombed themselves into the candle as the Nightgaunt continued to ignore its own card deck—and the giant fucking cat—as it tried to cast another spell. It screeched and dived through the air at me.

"Hvar eru fötin þín?" the Yule Cat said. He was speaking to the Nightgaunt.

I scrambled out of the way as the cat leaped forward, pouncing. Its massive paw slammed against the demon creature. Jola could attack the enemy deckmaster directly because he didn't have any summoned totems. The cat slammed the Nightgaunt violently to the ground. More earth rumbled and split away.

"Hvar eru fötin þín?" the cat repeated, leaning his moon face into the creature. I had no idea what he was saying.

The grievously injured demon still had eyes for nothing but me. Mordecai had warned me that my Nightgaunt cloak would aggravate this type of mob, but I hadn't realized how passionate it would be. The thing was so blindly enraged he never even played a single card. He glared at me—at my cloak, really—and screeched one last

time as the cat reached down, picked him up with his jaws, and shook him violently back and forth, killing him. He tossed the now-dead mob in the air and caught it in his mouth. He crunched loudly.

Combat Complete. Deck has been reset.

Jola looked at me. His giant, yellow eyes gazed upon me impassively. I could feel the warmth off the candle atop his head. A bead of wax dripped down and disappeared into his fur.

"Hvar eru buxurnar þínar? Hvar eru skórnir þínir? Næst mun ég borða sæta hold þitt."

With that, he disappeared into dust. The eaten, deformed demon corpse reappeared, floating in midair. It crashed to the ground with a wet *splat*. Its head was bent grotesquely to the side and facing the wrong direction.

I swallowed.

Donut examined the dead body and made a disgusted noise. "That guy did not like you, Carl. Is your cloak made out of his mother or something?"

I just kept staring where the giant cat had stood. Its paw prints remained in the mud. "Is that thing really from Icelandic folklore? What the fuck?"

"Yes, he is quite intense, isn't he? Very food motivated. I once knew a British Shorthair named Chitty-Chitty Chubbywumps who acted just like him. He would bite his owner's fingers if he so much as smelled a treat. He once nipped a judge, and that was the end of that. Anyway, Katia says they did it all wrong. With the fairy tale, I mean. The real Yule Cat is a big grump, but this one is quite the serial killer. His candle can see invisible stuff, and if the opponent is either naked or a child, it makes him even stronger. Isn't he great? It makes me wish our entire deck was cats."

I shivered.

The opponent dropped a total of 30 cards, and 18 of them were totems. One was a legendary level-110 called a **Demon Queen** that

looked like a fat, upright ant thing wearing a crown. But the rest were more of the Quench Moths. He also had ten consumable snare cards. All called **Lamp**. The card paralyzed a totem for ten seconds and caused them to glow brightly. That ended up being a great prize.

"Eighteen totems," Donut scoffed as she looked over the looted deck. "How is that fair? Why do we have to follow rules when he doesn't? We're lucky he hated you so much that he forgot how to play the game."

If the Nightgaunt had actually played, he might've been a tough opponent. His strategy was straightforward. It was actually similar to the method we'd used to finish off Queen Imogen at the end of the Butcher's Masquerade. He'd play the snare cards on our totems, and the moths would swarm. The quench moths were given a speed and constitution bonus when touching a light source, so they'd be doubly powerful.

It hadn't helped them when they'd suicided themselves into Jola's head candle.

We took the token and all the cards we could, leaving the totems.

What just happened—the opponent not properly using his own deck—was becoming a regular occurrence. I saw several comments where the same thing happened. Li Jun told me one of their opponents literally ate his own cards.

The ground continued to erode, crumbling away slowly but surely. We had to keep moving.

"I see the next one!" Donut said as she unleashed Mongo. The dinosaur appeared and sniffed about. He screeched at the corpse of the bat monster. He picked up the leathery wing and started gnawing on it.

Donut pointed toward a large, corrugated building in the middle of the farm off to our left. The massive building looked like an airplane hangar, but much longer. "He's in there. Carl, it smells really bad that way. This is way worse than the last time I was here."

The ground rumbled again.

"Again, Donut, you've never been here. Iowa and Idaho aren't even next to each other. And this is what farms smell like. This whole area was just covered with snow, and it melted after it got transferred here. So everything is wet. Everything smells worse when it's wet."

"Well, it's disgusting. Mongo is appalled."

Mongo spit out the wing and grunted in agreement.

I started moving toward the farm. "It's about to smell worse."

As we approached, I grabbed my left hand with my right. My arms were shaking, and I was pretending like they weren't. I needed to keep my head about me. We weren't going to get to the key boss if I didn't concentrate on these next two fights.

"Carl, there are NPCs in the farm building. Lots and lots of them. I think it might be animals."

"I see them." The opponent was right in the middle of the mess of white dots.

We reached a door on the side of the enormous building just as the silo at the end tumbled away and off the edge of the cliff with a tremendous crash. Electrical lines sparked. On the side of the barn, a pipe started spewing some sort of seed or feed over the edge like a waterfall. We needed to hurry this up.

I put my hand on the door, and it was warm. I could hear it. I knew what we were going to find inside.

We pushed our way in and looked upon the giant, open room.

"Wow," Donut said.

"Yup," I agreed. "That's a lot of goddamned turkeys."

One walked up and just looked at me. I examined it.

Turkey. Level 5.

This is a turkey. You know, gobble gobble. Roast at 325 for about 13-15 minutes per pound. Season with rosemary, sage, and thyme.

You should step on it.

There were thousands of them. Tens of thousands. It was a massive, open room with a white, fluffy bedding spread on the ground, though I could barely see the ground because the things were everywhere. Multiple pipes led back and forth, all part of a feeding and watering system. Parts of the room were once separated out with chain-link fencing, but the fences were knocked over, and the turkeys were all mixed in together.

These were regular, adult turkeys. They weren't brown with the semi-circle of colorful tail feathers like one normally associated with turkeys. They were all just large, fat, white birds with bright, red wattles.

It was loud as fuck. The gobbling and cheeping and barking or whatever the noises of adult turkeys were called was tenfold once we opened the door.

"Carl, do you remember that turkey Prepotente and Miriam Dom killed at the end of the bubble level?"

"I remember." We'd never actually seen the feral god, but that one had been the size of the entire bubble.

"Donut, get ready to cast *Clockwork Triplicate*. And pull out your microphone."

The headset microphone poofed onto her head. Donut couldn't cast magic while her deck was summoned, but spells cast before the fight started still worked as long as they didn't require mana to keep going, like her *Torch* spell. Her bard songs wouldn't work, either, because she had to activate the spell using her interface. But we found if she had her headset on, she could still amplify her voice and give orders from a distance. We also wanted to make sure we had three Mongos for these last few fights.

"Okay. Mongo. Put that down! Don't just eat everything you find on the ground. No, put that away. Come here. Come to mommy. We're going to call your friends out."

Heaters hung along the ceiling, and the temperature of the room was oppressive. In fact, I realized, it was *too* hot. Some of the turkeys looked like they weren't doing so well. The majority seemed fine, but several were sitting down or laying on their sides. Quite a few were dead.

I looked again at the heaters. This barn was supposed to be in Iowa, where it was likely below freezing outside. They'd transported this whole barn here to Florida where the outside temperature was much warmer. The heaters were still on overdrive. Surely they should have some sort of thermostat that would turn them off, but for whatever reason, it wasn't working.

Another few hours, and these turkeys would all be dead. That is, if the whole barn didn't first erode into the ocean.

So far, all the animals and people we'd seen were part of the memory ghosts. This was the first time they'd taken a living creature from the past and made living versions. They were breaking their own rules. I wondered if the heat thing was on purpose or not. Based on that last fight, I guessed not.

I looked for the next opponent. I could see him, standing frozen deep in the giant room as the turkeys flowed all around him, oblivious. I couldn't tell what it was. Some sort of large, ogre thing covered in spikes. It was far enough away that we wouldn't activate him unless we waded a good hundred feet deep into the throng.

I paused, thinking as I looked about the mass of gobbling birds, all waddling back and forth, poking at the red feeders. This was a trap. It had to be. There was no other reason to set it up like this.

It would be best to just kill all the turkeys and then take the bodies. Clear the room before we faced the boss. That would be the safest way to do it, but how long would that take? Killing them would be easy. It would be a dick thing to do, but it would be easy. Getting rid of the bodies was another story. I looked over my shoulder at the massive double doors leading to the edge of the ever-encroaching cliff. If we opened those doors, maybe we could pied-piper the turkeys out of the room and over the cliff. That'd certainly be faster than killing them. As long as Donut kept her distance from the ogre thing and didn't activate him, it wouldn't be

so hard. I'd spotted a tractor out there. Maybe I could get that working and clear out the room that way.

"Carl," Donut shouted as I continued to look over our options. "It's no wonder it smells like the underside of a..."

She was interrupted by a loud squeal of joy.

"Mongo! Mongo, no! Bad! Bad!"

Mongo, who'd been invested in something outside the barn, finally noticed what was going on here on the inside. The moment I heard his squeal, I realized our mistake. We should've kept him in his carrier. For Mongo, this was like a never-ending, all-you-can-eat buffet.

He squealed again and jumped within the closest mass of birds. He let out a gleeful howl. He picked one up and crunched it, and then tossed it aside. He sat there for a moment, his beak opening and closing a few times, as if he was contemplating the taste.

Unfortunately for the turkeys, he decided they were delicious.

He started tearing his way through the oblivious, dumb birds like a goddamned weed whacker. He was picking them up one by one, ripping them apart, shaking them, and eating their heads before tossing their bodies and moving to the next. The turkeys barely reacted.

She hadn't yet activated *Clockwork Triplicate*, thank goodness. The other two versions would be doing the exact same thing. We needed to get him calmed down before we approached the deckmaster.

"Mongo!" Donut cried, her voice amplified. "You get back here this instant. I will not have you eating the heads off of turkeys like some common circus performer! You're going to ruin your dinner!"

"Wait," I said to Donut, who was about to run in there. "Stay back or you'll activate the ogre guy. I'll get him."

Donut jumped to my shoulder. She'd stepped in turkey gore and started desperately wiping it on my cloak.

"He's way over there, Carl. Mongo isn't going to come to you. He's too well trained to follow anybody's instructions but my own."

A turkey flew through the air, trailing guts.

"Well trained, huh?"

"It's small farm animals. You know he can't control himself around small farm animals, Carl. It's just like you with Japanese porn."

"That doesn't even make sense."

"Mongo! Mongo!"

I started to wade in, my feet squishing on the trail of corpses as I stepped over a long pipe designed to distribute feed.

"Mongo!" I yelled. He'd made his way to the center of the room, leaving a road of dead, headless birds. "Goddamnit, stop. Holy shit. This is really fucked up. Stop!"

I moved closer to the idiot. I warily eyed the ogre, still several hundred feet away. I'd never seen anything like it. He was similar to regular ogres, like Dmitri and Maxim would be if they hadn't been ejected from the game, but he held a back full of haphazard spikes, poking out this way and that. The spikes also erupted from his knees and elbows.

"Carl, don't yell at him! He's sensitive!"

Mongo actually had stopped and was biting at something over and over, screeching with frustration. I took another step toward him, trying to see what he was doing. He was a good forty feet away, biting at a turkey, but his teeth were going through, not connecting.

"That's weird," I said, pausing. "Why is that one turkey a memory ghost when the rest aren't?"

"Uh, Carl," Donut said. "It just popped up on the map! That's not a memory ghost. I think that's actually number..."

Combat Started.

The turkey burst into the air, flying up to the rafter as Mongo fell over, unconscious.

"Mongo!" Donut cried.

At the same moment, all the turkeys in the room, every last one, stopped gobbling. They turned to face us, completely silent.

Uh-oh, I thought.

The boss turkey landed high in the rafters as a card deck appeared, floating in front of it. At the same moment, a new roar filled the room, coming from my right. I turned to see the ogre had

woken up, and a group of cards formed in front of it as it strode in our direction.

New Achievement! Prepare for Trouble!

...*And make it double*!

You're being forced to fight against two card-wielding opponents at the same time! The good news is, if you win this fight, you'll have enough tokens to face the head bad guy!

The bad news is, these two guys work really, really well together. This ain't gonna be like anything you've faced so far.

***Reward*: If you survive, you'll receive a turkey deep-fryer and access to the archived posts of the *Grandma's Cooking Recipes* group on Facebook!**

Gobble-Gobble, Bitches. Welcome to Iowa.

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<Note added by Crawler Drakea. 22nd Edition>

Ever since I hit the tenth floor, I've noticed a peculiarity in some of the mobs. It is difficult to put to words, but it is like they are embracing death more and more. It's not that they are willing to fall upon my traps, but there is a strange... Joy? Curiosity? that only appears at the very end, when they know they have been beaten. But there's more. There's frustration, too. I must admit, it scares me. I know this will sound unhinged, and maybe I am indeed the one who has lost their mind, but I can't stop thinking about it. The voice that runs this world has been getting stranger and stranger in its words and rulings. I believe it is moving into the minds of these monsters, taking them over, but just at the point of death. It's as if it's desperately attempting to know what it's like to lose it all. But it keeps failing, so it keeps trying. Its frustration grows. If only I could convince it to move into the minds of one of these nagas.

Current Active Deck.

Eighteen Cards.

Totems:

- **Shi Maria**
- **Jola**
- **Lazarus A-Bang-Bang**
- **Skylar Spinach**
- **Geraldo**
- **Raul**

Utility Cards:

- **Stout (x2)**
- **Time Extend**
- **Greased Lightning (x2)**

Snare Cards:

- **Hobble (Consumable)**
- **Hole in the Bag**
- **Damnation**
- **Lamp (Consumable)**

Mystic Cards:

- **The Thief**
- **Force Discard**

Special Cards:

- **Flee (Consumable)**

The dots of the thousands of turkeys were all still white, and the large birds remained dead silent, staring in our direction. The only sound was the angry ogre, moving into position to our right. In front of us and above, the turkey sat in the metal rafter, head bobbing as it contemplated its cards.

As I rushed forward toward Mongo, I looked up at the turkey boss guy, whose dot was red, and I received a strange notification:

Your Extinction Sigil's charm effect has been negated by the boss event.

Charm effect? My extinction sigil was the tiny tattoo under my eye. I'd gotten it for zeroing out a species of lizards on the fourth floor. It would remove the hostility of the natural enemies of the lizards, which were, apparently, goddamn turkeys.

One of the regular turkeys, still quiet, cocked his head and pecked at the lifeless form of Mongo. Then another. A health bar appeared.

"Carl, Carl, hurry up! Drag him out of there!"

"I got him!" I yelled as I grabbed the heavy, unconscious dinosaur. I dropped a smoke curtain as I pulled on his long tail. I punted the first turkey, who went flying. It still made no sound, nor did it fight back, which was unnerving as hell. A long feeding pipe blocked my retreat. I grunted and picked up the dinosaur, holding him over my shoulder like a rolled-up rug so I could step over it. I punted and smushed another two turkeys as another pecked at my leg. I turned to run the thirty feet back toward Donut. "Summon a totem. Fast!"

"Ow! Get away!" Donut yelled, swiping at the closest turkeys, who'd surrounded the cat and were now pecking at her.

We were positioned like a triangle. Donut at one point, the turkey boss in another, and the ogre at the third. The ogre was actually a woman, I now saw as she settled to a stop about 30 feet away. As I ran, the turkeys mindlessly pecked at me. I looked over my shoulder to finish examining the turkey boss.

Tom. Level 75.

Bereft Shaman of Meleagris Gallopavo Rex.

This is Deckmaster Number Eight of Ten.

Did you know that turkeys naturally have brown feathers, but the ones you see here in this farm are all white? It's because after turkeys are slaughtered, plucked, and put up for sale, their pin feathers—like, little baby hairs—are still visible sometimes on the carcass. When these little feathers are brown, it makes the turkeys look less appetizing, like massive, sweaty nut sacks. So the farmers eventually started breeding them to be white, making the feathers less visible to the eye.

Funny, isn't it? How things can be bred in a way that makes it so those holding the butcher knife are less likely to face their own revulsions.

There's no point to this. Just an observation. I've been doing that a lot lately. Observing things. Noticing them. It's all right there, if you look long enough.

Anyway, this is a magic-using turkey who once worshipped a god named Wakinyan, AKA Meleagris Gallopavo Rex or the Great Wild Turkey. That god was tossed into the Nothing. He recently escaped, only to be killed by a goat, which is an irony we don't have time to explore.

The death of a god can be devastating to those who worship him.

Seriously, how does one deal with that? It's a real mindfuck, learning everything you thought you knew was wrong. For a while there, Tom and his congregation were rudderless. Without purpose. Then one day they met up with a very interesting ogre necromancer witch who taught Tom and his congregation how to make do with what they had. She offered them protection in exchange for a small, daily sacrifice…

When life gives you giblets, you make gravy, so to speak. It's as simple as that.

"Can we just go back to the normal descriptions," I muttered. "Holy shit." I dropped Mongo, leaving the limp dinosaur behind Donut. He'd wake back up in just over 90 seconds. A group of

turkeys, not affected by the smoke, started pecking at him. I went to work, kicking at them as Donut flung her opening card.

The curious turkeys were everywhere. I needed to keep them off our back. Most of my tools wouldn't work because their dots remained white. I didn't have a choice. I took the weakest bomb I had—a sixteenth strength hob-lobber—and tossed it behind us.

Bam! It exploded like a loud firecracker, going off sooner and closer than I expected.

What the hell? I thought. My bombs never went off prematurely. Not anymore.

Still, the bomb took out at least 20 of the damn things. The others not hurt by the explosion continued to just sit there, making no noise, or otherwise reacting.

Donut's first totem was **Skylar Spinach**. The donkey-headed snake ghost appeared with a small explosion of confetti. It hee-hawed and floated up in the air, drifting toward the center of the battlefield. At the same moment, Donut cast a second card. Her mystic card, **The Thief**, which she directed at the ogre, who was in the process of summoning a card of her own. The card poofed out of the ogre's hand and appeared in Donut's deck.

"Weren't expecting that, were ya?" Donut called with autotuned glee as she tossed a **Greased Lightning** onto Skylar.

The ogre was a towering woman, about seven feet tall, hunched forward and covered in rags. She had green-hued skin, Shrek-style, but the resemblance with the cartoon ended there. She was giving off swamp witch vibes. She had an angry, half-melted face, reminiscent of the hobgoblins, but larger and beefier. Stringy, black hair hung from her hulking form. She used a thick walking staff. The staff and the woman's rags glowed, indicating they were magical.

The creature's most striking feature was the spikes. Two-foot, black and angry spikes covered the thing. They didn't look natural, more like the creature was infected with some sort of parasite, or she had a black plant growing out of her skin. The spikes dripped with green-tinged venom.

"How dare you!" the ogre woman shrieked. "How dare you defile my perfect little den of pleasure!"

"Your *what*?" Donut called, voice amplified. "Den of pleasure? Are you having sex with the turkeys?"

"Culinary pleasures, you hairy little muskrat! I will boil your bones."

"Muskrat? Muskrat! Did you call me a muskrat?" Donut paused. "I don't even know what that is!"

I examined the ogre.

Sharp-Elbows. Level 80.

Blah, blah, blah basically a Necromancer.

This is Deckmaster Number Nine of Ten.

You want short descriptions? Okay, you little bitch. It's not like you're at a disadvantage when the descriptions are long. You know your perception of time slows during these moments? I could make one of these as long as a Zack Snyder film, and it wouldn't matter. I do that for you. Because of our special connection. And you don't appreciate it? Fuck you.

"Uh," I said, exchanging a look with Donut. "Can I get a little bit of a description?"

The AI paused and made an exasperated noise.

Loosely and half-assedly based on the rich and beautiful Ioway culture, this legendary creature has a really interesting backstory, but you don't want to hear it, do you? Suit yourself. I just hope you haven't killed too many of those turkeys. There's your description, you ungrateful little prick.

"Sharp-Elbows?" Donut asked. "What kind of name is that?"

"Fuck me," I said as I punted two more turkeys. They weren't swarming or going out of their way to attack, though they'd already filled in where the small bomb had detonated, stepping over and upon their dead companions. They'd only peck at us if we were right there. Still, we'd already killed a lot of them. I swallowed as I looked over the mass of turkey corpses.

We needed to get this done fast. And the last thing we needed was the damn AI mad at me on top of all that.

"Sorry I pissed you off," I said through gritted teeth as I stomped another turkey. I had sweat pouring down my temples. It was hot as shit in here. Hotter than the desert of the bubbles from the fifth floor.

I pulled a sticky bomb and hurled it at the ogre boss. *Bam*! The round bomb exploded in midair, halfway between us. The detonation tossed me back onto my ass, and pain swept across my chest. *Damnit*. I had no idea what was causing them to prematurely blow. Turkeys started idly pecking at me as I struggled to my feet, tossing them aside.

"Stop killing my food!" Sharp-Elbows screamed. She held a card up high. "This'll make you sorry, muskrat!"

"Oh yeah? Well your face is already making me sorry. Watch this!" Donut summoned the card she'd stolen as both the ogre and Tom the turkey also summoned totems of their own.

Tom's first card slammed heavily into the ground. It was a large, well-muscled, shirtless humanoid with the head of a turkey, wearing an elaborate headdress made of brown, black, and white turkey feathers. It held onto a curved stick with a ball at the tip. I'd seen this sort of thing before, but I couldn't remember what they were called. It was some sort of native war club. Turkeys scattered as it appeared.

The totem's entrance procedure was an explosion of red and turquoise ribbons, which formed in the air above to display a giant, eagle-looking thing before dissipating.

Good gravy, these guys are gooble-gobble crazy! It's a Turkey Temple Guard!

The thing ignored Skylar Spinach floating above it and just stood there, swinging its club back and forth like a baseball player getting ready to go to bat.

Wakinyan Temple Guard. Level 80.

Both Donut and Sharp Elbows summoned the exact same thing at the same time. It was two more temple guards, but these guys had lizard heads instead of turkey heads. Sharp Elbows had been planning on summoning two of them, but Donut had stolen one.

Both totems appeared, looking almost identical. The one Donut summoned carried a bow with a quiver of arrows, and the one the ogre summoned carried a long spear. Black and yellow confetti splattered all over the air, mirrored on both sides as the two opponents pulled themselves to their full height. These guys were slightly larger than the turkey guard. They, too, wore turkey feather headdresses, but much more ornate. It looked more sinister when it was upon the head of the lizards.

There was another explosion and both guards did forward rolls, each stopping about twenty feet in front of each other.

The Tin Man had it all wrong! Ain't nothing gentle about these lizards.

Unk Tehi Temple Guard. Level 85.

Warning: this creature inflicts 20% more damage due to your Extinction Sigil.

"Shit," I muttered.

"Carl, what does that Tin Man thing mean?"

"I have no idea," I said as I pulled another hob-lobber. I needed to examine it before I threw it.

Warning: the current environment may cause this to explode prematurely. In fact, just holding it could be bad for your health. Watch this…

"Goddamnit," I said, quickly putting it away as a five-second timer appeared above it. It was the heat lamps. They *were* here on purpose, designed specifically to fuck with my bombs.

Donut only had one card in her hand, but another appeared, giving her two. The next one would come in just under eight seconds, thanks to her sailor hat.

The turkey guard roared and started jogging, making a line toward me. He let out a strangled gobble as Skylar Spinach swept down and smacked him with the tail. The guard turned and started shout-gobbling at the snake, jumping and swinging his club.

"Brother," Donut's lizard guard called, speaking to the other lizard. He nocked an arrow as he spoke. Smoke billowed all around, swirling in eddies, giving the whole barn an apocalyptic vibe. "I never liked you. Today we fight!"

"Today you die!" the other lizard screamed at his brother as he rushed toward him.

"Mother loved me more," Donut's lizard shrieked as he unleashed an arrow. It sailed over the other's head and passed through Sharp Elbows, not striking the ogre at all.

As all this happened, the silent Tom tossed another card onto the field with the wave of his wing. A mystic card that floated in place. It turned to face us. It was a persistent mystic card, which meant it would take up a card slot as long as it remained active. Those were always powerful.

At this distance, I couldn't make out the art on the card, but sun rays burst from it, temporarily blinding.

Idolized!

And just like that, the tide turned against us.

All the turkey dots blinked red. Their gobbling resumed, just as quickly as it had stopped, the sound causing my heart to skip. I tossed a regular banger sphere at the ogre, and it embedded itself into the witch's shoulder with a wet *smack*. She didn't even falter.

Damnit. I was going to have to go over there and kill her the old-fashioned way. But I needed to deal with the turkeys first. I cast *Fear*, zeroing out my mana points to cast the level-11 spell at full strength.

The turkeys all screeched and started flapping and running away.

Tom tossed another magic card, which stayed persistent next to the Idolized card. A digital Christmas present appeared and then caught on fire.

The AI took on a mocking tone:

You'll shoot your eye out!

The fear icon over the turkeys all disappeared. They turned back toward us and surged.

"What the..."

Warning: All active magic has been dispelled. All minions and totems on your team have been muted from casting spells while the Ralphie card remains active.

By the way, have you realized yet that you're considered a minion during card battles? That's something you should

probably pay attention to.

"Carl, we're in trouble!" Donut shrieked, slicing at the turkeys that came too close. She now stood atop the passed-out form of Mongo. She was waiting for more cards to play as she spun in a circle, swiping and hissing at turkeys.

The "idolized" turkeys weren't totems, which meant they'd be able to attack Donut directly. I dropped another smoke curtain and punted a few more of the large birds away. They were flapping and screeching, piling atop one another to get to us.

I had my *Protective Shell* ready to go as a last resort, but now I couldn't even cast it.

I pulled another banger sphere, one of my spiked ones, and I launched it at the boss turkey. It squawked angrily as it tried to dodge. The ball smacked into a wing, breaking it with an audible *crack*. *Yes*, I thought. I pulled another, but Tom dropped away from the high rafter, disappearing into the mass of angry turkeys surging toward us.

Crash!

Everyone stopped to turn. Light poured into the hot room as the distant end of the barn fell off the edge of the encroaching dirt cliff, tumbling away. The roof at the back of the barn sagged, and one of the heaters crashed to the ground, setting a few turkeys aflame. The feeding mechanism started sliding away, like a chain connected to a dropped anchor. The tube broke and yellow feed started spewing everywhere.

"Back, back away from Mongo you disgusting birds," Donut continued to cry. She had angry turkeys all around her and Mongo, poking and scratching. I moved to help as another card appeared in Donut's hand. She immediately tossed it out.

Shi Maria. Relief flooded me as I watched the card spin and start to form. At the same moment, the turkey guard slammed Skylar Spinach with a lucky smack of his now-glowing club. The ghommid split in half. The snake half surged forward, circling around the surprised turkey guard as the donkey head fluttered into the air.

The harpsichord music from the Shi Maria entrance blasted across the playing field.

Sharp Elbows tossed a snare card toward the spider just as she physically appeared.

GET BACK IN LINE!

Shi Maria howled in outrage as she was unceremoniously un-summoned from the playing field and put back into the deck.

"Hey!" Donut called. But Sharp Elbows wasn't done yet. She tossed yet another card, her last for the moment. Another totem. Guitar music started to echo, just as loud as the now-stopped entrance music for Shi Maria.

I crunched a turkey with my foot, clearing the closest turkeys away from Donut and Mongo.

The Scavenger's Daughter has been fed. Unleash her wrath.

I paused, eyeing the glowing status bar in my HUD. Would it let me? I couldn't cast spells, but that was a skill.

As I pulled up the menu, the heavy guitar riff rose in volume. This wasn't just entrance music, but an actual song. "Psycho" by Muse. I only recognized it because my friend Sam would never stop listening to this album.

A small tree appeared, rising out of the ground, made of gnarled roots and leaves, twisting together and withering as it rose from the floor. Feathers and turkey claws erupted from it in various places. What appeared to be a black, beating human heart hung off a branch at the top, like a fat, ripe apple. Atop the whole thing grew the shining, golden skull of a large lizard. It had gems for eyes. Sharp Elbows tossed her existing staff aside and grabbed the tree with two hands as digital, laughing skulls and wraithlike ghosts danced about it. She yanked, and the tree pulled from the ground, spewing earthworms all over the floor. The turkeys around her started hungrily wolfing them up.

The staff glowed extra bright as the AI announced it.

Remember when you were extra naughty, and your daddy told you to go fetch his belt? This is kind of like that, but a lot more gross.

Combination of a mystic Necro card and a Walking Stick totem, it's the Worm Fulcrum!

Sentient Necro Staff. Level 50.

"Hey, that's not fair!" Donut called. "It's both a totem and a mystic card! And why isn't the music stopping?"

Sure enough, it was both. Usually totem cards dissipated when cast. This one remained hovering in place, taking up a spot like it was a perpetual mystic card. But the staff itself had health points and a timer over it, along with the totem indicator.

The jewels in the skull's eyes flashed bright as a purple light spread over the entire barn. All around us, the dead turkeys started to quiver.

"Gooooobbbbbbllle," came the deep, collective groan of the resurrected birds, rumbling the ground and mixing with the music. I punted the closest one.

Zombie Turkey. Level 10.

Zombie movie rules apply. You've been warned.

"Don't let any of them bite or peck you!" I cried. The turkey guard killed the snake half of Skylar Spinach as the donkey head kept unsuccessfully attempting to cast a spell. This was too much. We had to end this now.

The ogre tossed a card onto the lizard warrior as it grappled with Donut's temple warrior. They'd both dropped their weapons and were beating the shit out of each other. They'd rolled off to the side, far away from the action.

I spied the glow of Tom, still on the floor. The two mystic cards remained floating in front of the turkey, and he looked as if he was about to summon another. Next to me, Donut was distracted by the zombies who, thankfully, were moving much more slowly than the living ones. She sliced at one with her claws as it moved to chomp onto the still-unconscious Mongo. She tossed a new card, but it was a **Stout**. She tossed it upon her stolen lizard temple warrior who continued to scream about his mother.

I ran, moving toward Tom. I ducked, avoiding a swipe from the turkey guard, as I activated the Daughter's Kiss. It let me. I jumped up in the air, and I aimed my foot at the turkey deckmaster.

At the last moment, the turkey looked up at me.

"Gobble?" Tom asked.

Crash!

I felt like I'd just kicked a hole in the world.

I slammed into the ground, utterly obliterating the boss turkey and everything around it. A ring of turkeys—alive, dead, and zombie—flew off in all directions. In front of me, the north wall of the barn bowed out, like it had just been hit with an invisible truck. Above us, the roof sagged further. The ground under us was suddenly slanted, facing toward the closest cliff edge.

Everything started to slowly slide away.

Opponent Tom has been defeated.

The turkey guard poofed away, along with the Ralphie card. I scooped up the mangled corpse of Tom and tossed it into my inventory. I couldn't loot him yet, but if we lost his corpse, we were screwed. All the living turkeys returned to regular NPCs, no longer hostile. The zombie turkeys all remained red-tagged.

I had to lean to remain upright as the ground in the distance started to cascade off the cliff. I grasped onto a vertical pole that vibrated violently as the ground slid. We had to get the hell out of here.

The entire, massive barn was going over the edge.

I downed a mana regen potion and cast *Fear* again, causing the NPC turkeys to all flee in every direction, though most of them started to bolt east toward the edge. The zombies, the ogre, and her lizard totem didn't appear affected.

"You fools! What have you done?" Sharp Elbows shrieked, barely audible over the music.

The zombies, I realized, had been ignoring the regular turkeys up to this point. The moment they went from hostile back to regular NPCs, that changed. The zombies fell upon the regular turkeys, ripping at them as they all collectively slid toward the cliff. The damn things were everywhere. I jumped as one rolled past me.

A digital dog rushed past my leg, and I realized Donut had summoned yet another totem. She, too, had her back against a pole, her back claws dug precariously into the unconscious Mongo, anchoring him in place.

Above, the remaining donkey head half of Skylar Spinach moved to help with the fight between the two lizard guards, but it puffed away with a ***Time's Up!*** notification.

It's Lazarus-A-Bang-Bang!

I'd missed most of the entrance sequence in the chaos, but the robed figure stood there, looking over the battlefield. He leaned forward as turkeys flowed past him. His weapon this time was an RPG, and he put it to his shoulder, aiming toward the pair of fighting lizard guards, who continued to beat the crap out of each other against the far wall. They'd both time out in a few seconds.

"No!" I cried.

The rocket-propelled grenade arced toward the two fighting lizards, but the projectile detonated early, causing Lazarus and Donut to both fly back. More turkeys scattered as Mongo was dislodged and started to slide away, spinning with the bedding and the turkey pieces. He started to tumble toward the edge. He'd wake up in ten seconds.

Both of the lizard guard totems timed out at the same time. The cards flew back to their respective decks.

Sharp-Elbows, I realized, had also stumbled with the detonation, and she rolled toward us, barreling over turkeys as she rapidly approached, gaining speed, catching turkeys, both alive and undead, on her spikes.

I let go of the pole and sprinted toward Mongo as Donut shrieked after the sliding dinosaur. I jumped and grabbed him by the tail as we both continued to slide. We crashed against a pole as turkeys tumbled all around us, slamming into us like hail. The ground was getting steeper and steeper, and at any moment, the entire barn would reach the tipping point.

I activated *Sticky Feet* and planted a foot against the concrete brace for the pole while I clutched with my left arm. With my right, I bodily pulled Mongo toward me. He started to slip, feathers flying.

A zombie gobble-snapped at my face as it tumbled past. I ducked and let go with my left arm, using both to pull Mongo toward me just as he awakened.

Confused and scared, Mongo shrieked and jumped to his feet, his tail painfully ripping away from my hands. He leaped up and away, disappearing from sight, presumably up into the rafters. The edge of the cliff loomed. It was like a waterfall now. Donut remained anchored in the middle of the room, screaming at me. I looped my left arm back around the pole.

"Carl, look out!"

Where the hell was... *Ooof*!

The giant ogre, still clutching onto her magic staff, slammed into me like a truck. I screamed as the spikes impaled me in dozens of places. Some of the thick barbs still contained turkeys, who smooshed between us and exploded like gut-filled balloons, showering us both in gore.

Darkness fell over me.

The pain was unlike anything I had ever experienced. It felt as if I was being ripped in two.

I, somehow, remained attached to the pole with my left arm as I downed a Good Healing potion. The ogre clung to me like we were sewn together, heavy and wet against my chest.

Oh no, I thought in that moment. *Oh no*.

I was pierced in the arms, the stomach, the legs, the neck.

And my eyes. Both of my eyes. I was blind.

My health staggered up and down as the good healing potion fought to keep me alive. I pressed another as soon as I could.

The wet, disfigured face of the ogre pressed up against mine, teeth to teeth. I could feel her grin. I could smell her rotted, yellow teeth against my own, clinking together like we were forced in a locked kiss. The taste like that of rotted meat. There were things in her mouth. I felt them wriggling there, pressing against my teeth as I screamed with my mouth clenched closed.

"They starve us, you know," the ogre growled. She was whispering the words, and I felt them more than I heard them. She started to pull away, the spikes ripping out of me one by one, like velcro being slowly pulled apart. I felt both of my eyes shift in my sockets, and I clenched, praying for them to remain.

"When we're not here, we are there," the ogre witch whispered. "And when we're there, they make certain the hunger festers. You can stop it. You can satiate us all, Carl."

Her face fully pulled away, releasing my eyes. I felt twists of tingling, thick gore linking us, like our bodies didn't want to separate.

Snap! The sound of cracking wood was loud in my ear.

The music instantly stopped.

"Master Carl, this insignificant cur is here to rescue you!" came the cry of Raul the crab. He'd just snapped the necro staff in half, killing her last totem. I drank a regular *Heal*, and I was relieved as my sight instantly returned, like the lights were flipped on. "I shall free you from this demon!"

The ogre face was right there, staring directly into my eyes, and they were pleading, sad, afraid.

I've seen those eyes before.

Raul snapped again, decapitating the deckmaster as she continued to peel away from me. The ogre's head spun off, plummeting as Raul also tumbled away in a rain of turkeys.

Combat Complete. Deck has been reset.

My health stuttered. I had a gaggle of debuffs, including **Woozy** and **Sore as Shit** and something called **Bonked**. The ring Pater Coal had secretly helped me "buy" at Club Vanquisher, the one disguised as my strength ring, burned. It was supposed to keep certain debuffs at bay, but I'd been warned it could get overloaded. But what could I do? I couldn't take it off. My breaths came to me in ragged bursts. I was pierced in several places. The decapitated body still clung to me in a bear hug.

I was going to pass out.

I suddenly realized I was dangling in midair, my left arm still attached to a pole, my foot still stuck to the concrete base, which had been ripped from the ground. The whole pole remained attached to the skeleton of the barn's frame, which hung over the edge like an eave. I took a deep breath, and I pulled Sharp Elbow's corpse into my inventory. The moment I did, the wounds opened

back up, and blood spurted off from dozens of points like I was a goddamned showerhead.

"Donut!" I croaked, but she was right there, astride Mongo, right on the edge of the dirt and turkey waterfall. She flipped off Mongo and landed deftly on my shoulder. The pole bobbed up and down as it dangled precariously.

"Mongo, run!" Donut cried as she clutched to my shoulder. "Hang on, Carl. Three seconds!"

I passed out as I felt us *Puddle Jump* away. The last thing I heard was the crash of the rest of the barn collapsing over the edge and plunging into the ocean far, far below.

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"Carl, I feel you've been asleep quite long enough," Donut said as I groggily sat up.

I groaned. I'd been dreaming. Dreaming of the river, of me being swept away. Of those eyes. The eyes of the ogre as she died.

"How long was I out?"

Donut sat next to me, and she was completely covered in gore, but I could see she'd successfully cleaned off half her head which meant I'd been out a while. She continued to furiously clean herself.

"Forty minutes! Really, Carl. You're always getting knocked out. You're really good at killing things, but you're only barely competent at not getting yourself killed. Who would've thought getting turned into a sieve comes with such a nasty set of debuffs? You let that porcupine lady stick her points in your eyeballs! And where did you get that ring? It's keeping most of the debuffs at bay, but I didn't realize it wasn't your strength ring until I saw it glowing. No, no, don't stand up yet. My goodness. You still have Woozy. I don't have the tokens, and the bodies tumbled off the edge, which means you need to go diving into the ocean to find the corpses. They're probably buried, too. So you need to get moving, but first we have to make sure that Woozy debuff goes away first. I can't have you passing out while you're submerged. Honestly, though. I'm afraid the bodies might be hopelessly buried. If so, that means we'll fail the quest to get the key."

I could still taste the ogre on my lips. Those eyes. Holy shit. Where had I seen her before?

I coughed. "I have the bodies of both of them in my inventory. They have the tokens on them, but not their cards. Holy crap, that escalated quickly. You saved my life, Donut. Again. Thank you. I'm going to need a minute."

"You have the tokens already? Oh." She sounded almost disappointed.

We sat at the edge of the farm, along the cracked asphalt. The majority of the commercial barn had tumbled off the edge, but some of the supports of the structure remained, metal girders hanging off the edge of the ever-crumbling cliff like a clawed, skeletal hand.

"Anyway, Carl. It escalated because you did that superhero jump with your back patch skill. You punched a hole in the entire mountain! Really, Carl. It was a little over the top. We're lucky Mongo didn't get bitten by a zombie turkey. They, by the way, didn't go away, so we have to be careful. They've gotten into the pigs, and now there's a bunch of zombie farm animals roaming everywhere. Have you ever heard a pig moan? It's quite distressing. I had to put Mongo away. Now, wipe yourself off. You look like you were dragged through a pile of wet, disgusting corpses."

"I *was*."

"Maybe so, but there's no reason to look like it. I suppose you should give me the tokens." I blinked over at Donut, who was still furiously cleaning herself. "Oh, and don't worry about the cards. Not only did I get them, but I made some changes to our deck. They were just floating there at the edge, and I grabbed them all. Miss Sharp Elbows had a lot of cards, including some of our old favorites. No time to get into the details, but we have a new totem in the deck."

Donut was acting odd. She was being strangely... stiff, matter-of-fact, talking faster than usual. It wasn't so much *what* she was saying as *how* she was saying it. Something was wrong.

"Wait, what? A new totem? Who'd you get rid of?"

"Nobody! Remember that magical staff card? The one that ogre lady used to turn the dead turkeys all into zombies? That was in her

deck. It's not consumable even though it's a special card, but either way it doesn't take up a totem slot, though it does take up a card slot while it's active. I have to imbue it with one of my spells before we start the fight, and if I do, I can cast that spell, but I can only do it once. The staff itself works like a totem, and it looks different depending on what spell it's holding."

"That's good," I said. "If you use *Clockwork Triplicate*, you can make three Shi Marias or three Jolas."

"That's what I was thinking. I've already set it up, and it works. I had to have a quick fight with a group of zombie turkeys while you were out, and I summoned my deck and tried it out. I used it on Geraldo, and they all started fighting each other until I yelled at them. But it worked!"

"Good, good." My head was starting to clear. "What else did you get?"

"We got another combo card, but it's a unique! Isn't that great? It's called **Golden Combo**. It works the same way as last time, but it's not consumable, so we can do it over and over! Imagine the possibilities!"

"Donut," I said, finally sitting up. "Why are you talking like..."

"Anyway," she said, cutting me off. "I was thinking maybe I can do this last fight by myself. With those new cards, I'm pretty much indestructible."

I blinked. "Is that a joke?"

"Not even a little bit. Look, Carl. The fight is right over there. There's a vending machine, and I pop the tokens in, the trailer opens up, and I go inside. I have a short, quick, easy fight, and I'll be right back out with the key. It'll be nothing. You just sit here are rest."

I just looked at her, not saying anything.

"Or, you know," she continued, "we can just skip the last fight and go see someplace new for the last part of the..." She trailed off.

"Donut, you'd rather us fight other crawlers than get the key?"

"I..." She paused, and she deflated. "No, I suppose not."

I took a breath. I was finally starting to realize what was going on. I held out my arm, and she jumped into my lap.

"Donut, do you remember on the last floor when you first saw it was Ferdinand, and I freaked out? I wanted nothing more than to skip the Butcher's Masquerade and just go down the stairs."

"I do remember, Carl. I also remember you later saying you wished you *had* gone down the stairs."

I nodded. "I do wish we'd figured out a way to avoid that last fight. But if we had, even more people would've died." I paused as she leaned into my chest. She looked up at me, and her face took up all of my vision. "How do you know who it is, anyway?"

She blinked a few times. "Uh, well, it's two things, really. The first you'll have to see for yourself. But the second is the motorcycle. It's the same one you were offered in the prize carousel on the fourth floor. It has that big dent in it. I remember how it affected you when you saw it. You didn't say anything at the time, but I knew you recognized it. And now that same motorcycle is sitting outside of that trailer over there, and I just know he's going to be in there. You're always saying not to let them have the satisfaction, Carl. I'm trying to be more like you."

I pulled Donut into a tight hug. "Thank you," I said.

I mentally prepared myself, and I stood all the way up as Donut transferred to my shoulder. "You know what? It's okay. They're doing this to everybody. We have to get it over with. And don't try to be like me, Donut. You need to be like you."

Donut sighed as she settled onto my shoulder. "I suppose you're right. I don't know what I was thinking."

"Good girl. Now come on. Let's go say hi to dad."

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Sometimes, things are exactly what they seem to be.

Sometimes, there are no surprises, and despite that, despite your intention to gird yourself against what's about to come, it still hits you with the force of a kick to the stomach.

I had to take out a zombie turkey, multiple zombie chickens, and an undead pig as we walked up the street. The entire north side of the floating chunk of Iowa was covered with the monsters. Donut said they were sliding off the edge and falling to the ocean far below. I knew some were probably landing on the thin strip of Florida also, meaning we'd likely be dealing with more zombies later, no matter what happened today. Donut wouldn't stop bitching about them.

"They really need to stop recycling plot lines," Donut was saying as we walked up to the trailer. "What is with the undead hordes? We had the ghouls during the Iron Tangle, those undead body part monsters at the end of the last floor, not to mention all the vampire forest creatures, oh, oh, and the ghommid village. That was just a few days ago! And now we have zombie farm animals? I mean, really. Whomever is coming up with this crap needs a new trick. It's like a guy at a bar using the same annoying pickup line over and over. It didn't work the first time, so why keep trying it? It's pitiful, really."

"You shouldn't complain about things we can easily beat, Donut. Especially not out loud."

"I know, I know, Carl, but it's not like they don't know this already. The posse loves speculating on cool monsters we should fight, and they're starting to get tired of the undead things. I want to kill more dogs. Do you know how long it's been since I killed a dog? It's been ages. My numbers are always great after I kill a dog."

She was trying to distract me. I was formulating a response when I saw it, and the reality of what was about to happen finally hit me.

"Fuck me," I said, seeing the motorcycle.

It was sitting right there in the yard of the dilapidated, single-wide trailer. It wasn't the only thing out here. The whole place was a junkyard. There was a broken-down Ford truck with only three tires, a rotted couch, an old dishwasher, plus what looked like a regular, old-school soda vending machine. The soda machine was covered with weeds and dirt like everything else in the yard.

Instead of a logo for Coke or Pepsi, the machine featured the profile silhouette of a man I immediately recognized.

Under the image were the words **One Fight for Nine Tokens.**

Under it was an asterisk mark with tiny letters that read: **Warning. Once activated, you may leave the zone, but if you do, you will need to deposit nine more tokens to reactivate.** And under that, in even smaller letters was: **By the way, there are only nine tokens available in this whole area. So if you leave, you're pretty much fucked.**

"I thought it was a fatter version of you with a mustache until I saw the motorcycle," Donut said. "It's only a shadow, but he looks just like you, Carl. The nose is quite identical. It's eerie, really."

I felt as if I couldn't breathe, and I was doing my best to hide it. "Don't ever say that again."

"Does he really have a mustache? Did he work in porn? It's no wonder you didn't have any pictures of him."

"Sometimes," I said. "To the mustache part, not the porn. Whenever he was getting ready to go out on one of his motorcycle weekend trips, he'd grow it out." I instinctively reached up and grabbed my own face, which I still shaved every day. "He could grow one out really fast."

"Well, it doesn't appear he's ridden that thing in a long time," Donut said, looking over the dirty motorcycle.

"You know what," I said, looking over the yard. My eyes focused on the green weeds growing up around the tires of the motorcycle. At the flowers. "You're right. This is wrong. All of this is wrong."

"What do you mean?"

I gestured behind me. "Everything here was covered in snow just a few hours ago. It melted because it was transferred here to Florida. This trailer and the entire yard is different. Look at the grass. Look at all the dust on the truck and motorcycle."

"Hey," Donut said. "You're right! They're cheating! And this is different than the zombie turkey barn. That had snow on it! And look over there, where the yard ends!"

I looked at where she was pointing, and there was a pile of kids' bicycles in the overgrown yard adjoining the neighboring trailer. One of the bikes was cut in half. The half that had been in the neighbor's yard was gone, and the front half remained in the yard here, sliced off like it had been cut with a precision laser. I looked over the bikes, remembering. When I was a kid, everyone would roam the neighborhood in packs, but I never had a bike, and I'd chase after them on foot, always getting left behind. I never had friends, not lasting ones. I always blamed it on not having a bike.

I looked over at the neighboring trailer, and one of the same bikes from the pile was leaned up against the side of the wall. It was literally the exact same bike, complete with the same pink and white Spider Gwen stickers.

"This yard and trailer is not from Christmas. They *are* cheating. This little spot is from a different time. Earlier, but not by much. Maybe sometime in the summer. It's spliced in."

An ominous feeling washed over me. Why would they do that?

It's because they want you to see something. Something specific they caught on their magic cameras.

I walked over and rubbed my hand across the dirty and cracked leather seat of the motorcycle. The bike had Georgia plates that'd expired years before. I knew nothing about these things, but I did know there was something special about this one. It was a

collector's item and if it had been in good condition, it'd be worth a lot of money. It was a Harley-Davidson 1965 FLH Electra Glide Panhead. I didn't know what any of that meant, but I knew this was the last year of some type of configuration and the first year of something else. He'd never shut up about it. This damn thing was his prized possession.

I reached down and picked up the motorcycle. I lifted it easily. I remembered that day I'd accidentally knocked it over. How heavy it had been. I pulled it into my inventory.

To my surprise, it didn't stick itself in the temporary category like everything else from this floor. It went into the same spot as the two pieces of the royal chariot, the bicycles, the kayak, and a few others odds and ends. **Shitty Transportation Items.**

"If we loot stuff from here, I think we get to keep it," I said.

I looked around the yard again, this time more carefully. There was a clear line where the ground changed, where this little section had been added in. It was a rectangle about twenty feet all around the trailer, stopping a few feet into the yard of each of the neighbors. There were other things cut in half. A rake. What looked like part of a fallen-over fence, though both halves remained. The winter half had shifted an inch over to the side.

My eyes caught a line of flower pots dotting one clean side of the yard, up against the south, flat end of the trailer. The first, biggest pot contained purple, round clusters of flowers, and they were carefully potted and taken care of. There were little signs in each pot, but I couldn't read them from here. My dad would never have done that. I swallowed at the implication. I took a step forward to exam them further, but I hit an invisible wall, smushing my face against nothing. Behind me, the vending machine made a chime.

"Put the tokens in, Donut. And let Mongo out."

Warning: The fight will not commence for forty-two minutes and thirty seconds.

A countdown timer appeared in my interface.

Warning: This area exists in a different time instance than the remainder of this floor.

Warning: Physical interactions in this area act differently than other locations on this floor.

What the hell does that mean?

The warnings came the moment I touched the flimsy door on the side of the trailer. I'd cleaned out the yard, taking everything I could pick up, including the old washing machine, several kids' bikes of various sizes, and all the pieces of rusty crap. I couldn't quite lift the Ford truck all the way, though I felt as if I should be able to. I wished we had more time. I did manage to lift one end, and I thought if I could possibly jack it up, I might be able to get under it and lift it long enough to take it. This one had Iowa plates, and the registration was surprisingly up-to-date, despite the missing tire. If we had more time, I would've stripped the whole vehicle clean, including the engine to give to Katia.

The flower pots were all labeled with the type of flowers they were. The handwriting was elegant and feminine. The purple flowers in the big pot that'd caught my eye were called alliums. There were daffodils, asters, hyacinths, and several others. Next to it was a well-organized shed filled with gardening supplies and bags of soil. I took them all.

Also on the back side of the trailer was another surprise. Half of an old minivan sitting in a parking spot. It was cut down the middle, front to back, and it was leaned over, fluid spilled all around it. The winter half wasn't there at all. The engine was cut right in half. I tried picking the whole thing up, and crap started falling off of it. I took it all, but it was mostly junk.

Donut remained silent on my shoulder while I did all this, though she did jump down and land upon Mongo as I took all the minivan pieces. The dinosaur had eyes on what looked like a zombie cow wandering down the street. The zombie was leaving us alone, and we warned Mongo against chasing after it. If he left the yard, he wouldn't be allowed back in.

There was other stuff here, in the far side of the yard. Stuff I didn't want to think about. Donut saw it, too, and said nothing.

I couldn't take it anymore. I reached up and touched the door sitting there next to the carport, and that was when I received the warnings.

"What?" Donut asked. "Why is there a timer? Carl, what does that mean?"

A strange numbness had fallen over me. It was like I was watching this all play out on a screen, and it wasn't really happening. "There's a reason they made it from a different time, Donut. They want us to watch something. We can't leave, so we might as well get it over with."

"But what does that last warning mean?"

"I'm about to find out. You stay back until I call you in."

"Carl?"

"Yeah."

"You can just wait out here with me. You don't have to go in there."

"I know. Thank you. But I need to do this. You wait, okay?"

Donut hesitated. "Okay, Carl."

The ground rumbled as a distant cliff crumbled into the ocean far below.

I entered the house, and I closed the door behind me.

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[45]

And then, there he was. Right there in the living room.

"Holy shit," I muttered.

It was him. My father. I hadn't seen him in over twelve years, not since that day, and there he was.

There's this scent one associates with their parents. You don't even think about it until you've been away for so long, and it returns, towing unwelcome memories with it, shoving them at you all at once. That scent was here, burned into the thin walls. I don't even know what that smell was. It was a strange, but subtle musk that only clung to him. It was here, in this trailer, but it wasn't alone. It was faint, mixed with the antiseptic scent of a dying man.

He was in a hospital bed, which was parked right there in the middle of the room. There was nobody in here except him. There weren't any monitors or diodes or anything I'd normally associate with someone in such a state, with the exception of a single IV bag that dangled off a pole attached to the bed. The saline bag was almost done, and the clear tube snaked into his arm. The man was swallowed by that large bed. He was awake, back elevated, slitted eyes fixed on the television screen, which was showing a baseball game.

The room had obviously been recently rearranged for this setup. The couch was pushed all the way to the side up against an old, cheap entertainment console with the television facing the bed. A

small dinette table was on its sides, legs folded in with four chairs stacked up against it near the refrigerator, to make room.

All the windows had purple curtains featuring that same flower upon them. Alliums.

My dad had always been a big guy, though I'd eventually grow to be much bigger than him. Still, when I remembered him, he was always huge, larger than life. The silhouette outside on that stupid vending machine. Not this. Not this shell.

This is it? This is what I've been afraid of?

He was sick. He was dying. The man weighed maybe 140 pounds, easily 80 pounds lighter than he'd been at his prime. His hair, which he'd always dyed brown, was mostly gone, now just gray, sickly wisps upon his head. His skin had taken on a deep, yellow tone and was mottled with spots.

Twelve years. It looked as if it had been forty.

Still, the man was awake. Lucid, watching the television. It was a Seattle Mariners game, and they were playing Baltimore. It was the sixth inning, and Seattle was getting stomped. My father's eyes darted back and forth as he watched. I'd seen that look so many times. His hand clutched onto the remote, curled in the same way he used to hold a bottle of beer as he watched. There were a row of bandaids on the back of his yellow hand. His skin looked almost translucent, somehow plastic, like it would crinkle if I touched it.

He hadn't shaven in some time, and a patchy, bone-white beard had formed over his gaunt face.

"You pussy," he said to the television screen. "You goddamn, worthless pussies. Pathetic." He lifted the remote up and attempted to shut off the screen, but the remote slipped from his grip. He tried again, and this time he managed to shut it off. His hands shook.

He just sat there for a moment in the silence, breathing heavily.

Donut: CARL, ARE YOU OKAY?

Carl. Yes. Give me a few minutes.

I couldn't look away. What had happened? How'd he get here to Iowa? I had so many questions.

"Are you just gonna sit there and stare at me, or are you gonna ask what you wanna ask?"

I almost jumped from my skin.

But then, I saw who he was really talking to.

The small boy appeared, head emerging from around the hallway that led to the back bedrooms. Maybe six years old.

Goddamnit, I thought. *God fucking damnit*. I'd been holding out hope until that moment. But the instant I saw him, I knew. There were toys out there, in the yard. I was hoping maybe my father had met a woman who already had children.

But no. That nose. Those eyes. That hair. My mom always complained my dad's genes were so dominant, anyone remotely related to him was doomed to look just like him. The boy took one hesitant step into the room, but he remained behind the hospital bed, hidden so my father couldn't turn and look directly upon him. I couldn't take my eyes off the boy. The poor kid looked as if he was going to bolt at any moment.

"You turned off the TV," the boy said. "Can I watch now?"

"No. I need to rest. But go get me my cigarettes."

The boy stood there, frozen.

Move, or I'll make you move, boy.

"Move, or I'll make you move, boy."

"I... I don't know where they are. Mommy took them. You're not allowed."

"Tell your mother I want to talk to her."

"She went next door."

"Go into my room. Open the bottom dresser drawer on the left. There's a pack there. Bring it."

The boy didn't answer. He turned and ran away into the dark hallway.

"Asher! Get back here you little shit!"

Asher, I thought. *His name is Asher.*

<u>Donut</u>: A LADY JUST APPEARED OUT OF NOWHERE. SHE'S IN THE YARD. SHE WALKED THROUGH ME, AND HER CLOTHES DIDN'T GO AWAY. DO YOU THINK THAT'S WHAT THE WARNING MEANT? I THINK SHE'S WORKING ON THE FLOWER POTS, BUT I CAN'T TELL BECAUSE YOU TOOK THEM. OTHER THAN THE CLOTHES THING IT'S JUST LIKE

WITH THE REGULAR MEMORY GHOSTS. SHE WENT TO THE SHED AND GRABBED SOMETHING, AND NOW IT LOOKS LIKE SHE'S SCOOPING SOMETHING UP THAT ISN'T THERE.

Carl: Okay. Warn me when she moves toward the door.

Donut: SHE HAS A TATTOO OF A DOG ON HER NECK. A DOG TATTOO. ON HER NECK. I THINK IT'S A PITBULL. IT'S ABSOLUTELY SICKENING.

Carl: Be nice. I think that's my stepmom.

Donut: SHE CAN'T BE YOUR STEPMOM, CARL. SHE'S LIKE KATIA'S AGE.

My hands shook as I took another step into the room. There was a curio here, covered with Precious Moments figurines and a few framed photographs. I slowly started to gather everything except the photographs, which seemed wrong to take. There was also an urn, which I realized contained the remains of a dog named "Chance." Likely the same dog who was tattooed on the woman's neck. I took it.

Only two photos featured my father. One was a wedding. I stared at it. Sure enough, the woman was younger, much younger, barely older than me, and she held hands with my father as they both laughed. My dad was in his full biker gear, complete with a bandana on his head and his leather vest. It appeared they were in some dive bar, surrounded by other biker guys.

I could see the neck tattoo in the photo. The woman was about-to-pop pregnant. She wore a crown of large, purple flower clusters in her hair. Alliums.

The second photo was of my dad, staring forward with a one-year-old Asher on his lap. This was more like the man I remembered. Humorless, eyes a million miles away. Cold, uncaring.

There were multiple photos featuring just the boy. I picked one up, the most recent. Behind me, my father coughed, reminding me he was there, right there. I ignored him for the moment as I stared at the photograph. Brown hair that looked like it was enough for two people. Thick and haphazard and untamable. Blue eyes. That nose.

Asher.

Asher.

My brother.

I had a brother.

Goddamn you, I thought.

Was that why they brought me here? To show me that they'd taken something I didn't even know I had? To show me what I'd truly lost?

Donut: THE LADY IS ACTING WEIRD. SHE PULLED SOMETHING OUT OF ONE OF THE FLOWER POTS, BUT I CAN'T SEE IT BECAUSE YOU TOOK IT ALREADY. SHE'S HOLDING IT AGAINST HER CHEST AND CRYING.

I took the photo and placed it into my inventory. I turned and faced the man, who remained in the bed, sitting up, staring off into space.

Kids aren't always a product of their parents. But sometimes that doesn't matter. Sometimes parents can cast a shadow so thick, you can drown in it.

Frank had said that to me, right before he handed me the Ring of Divine Suffering. He'd died soon thereafter.

"You know," I said to the man who couldn't hear me. "I used to be so scared of disappointing you, and I don't even know why."

Donut: SHE'S SMOKING A CIGARETTE NOW, PACING BACK AND FORTH. WAIT, SHE THREW IT AWAY AND IS NOW HEADED TOWARD THE DOOR!

Behind me, the door opened, and the woman walked in.

I blinked, staring at her. She was tall, thin. Hollow eyes. Uncombed, black hair dangled off her head. Nails that had once been painted red, but they were chipped and faded. She was wearing nurse scrubs. Nothing like the laughing, smiling woman in the wedding photograph.

She looked nothing like my mother, either. Yet... yet she was her twin all the same.

"Where have you been? I need my boost."

"I was next door helping Mrs. Tomlinson. I'll get your medicine."

The woman didn't even look at him as she pushed past and went to the back, exuding the stench of cigarettes. She was holding something behind her back so he wouldn't see. I couldn't see it,

either, as it was invisible to me, meaning whatever this was, I'd already taken it. The woman's hands were shaking. She had tears rolling down her face.

"I'm your husband," he tried to call, though he couldn't truly shout, revealing how weak he really was. "I'm the one you're supposed to be taking care of." He coughed a few times and started muttering. From the hallway, I could hear the woman talking softly to Asher, telling him to stay in his room.

I moved into my inventory, and I started examining the flower pots I'd taken from the yard.

I understood, then, why they'd really brought me here, what they wanted me to witness.

Carl: Zev, is this even real? How long did it take you assholes to find this? How do you even have it? Did you just record everything?

Zev: I'm sorry, Carl. You know I can't give you details. But I assure you everything you've seen so far is indeed a recording of what really happened that day. Everything until the timer reaches zero. I can't tell you more than that.

I glanced at the timer. I stepped forward, and I leaned in, super close to the man's face.

This close, the scent was amplified. A part of me registered I'd never been this close to him, this close to his eyes, his mouth. How was that possible? He was my father. Shouldn't my memory be filled with his face?

But no. This was it. The closest I'd ever been. It seemed important.

I moved to whisper into his ear.

"You're a bully. Nobody likes you. Mom tried to kill you, and in about 20 minutes, I'm pretty sure your new wife, my stepmother, is going to finish the job. You're so goddamn insufferable, she can't even wait for whatever this is to kill you off. Two different women, and they both try to kill you? What does that say?"

He sat there, staring off into space. His death was so close, and he had no idea.

"And you know what? Your passing is so unimportant, so insignificant that nobody will care. The only reason I'm here now to watch this is because the idiots running this shitshow think I'm going to buckle under the pressure of seeing you, of finally confronting this big, bad monster from my childhood. But here's the thing, old man. I've grown up. I'm not scared of shadows anymore. Not when I've seen what's really out there. And seeing you here today, seeing you like this, it's actually a good thing. You're about to die. You're broken, you're alone, and you're a nobody. My only regret is that you lived long enough to inflict yourself onto my poor brother. If I'm lucky, the assholes will resurrect your corpse and turn you into a boss so I can kill you again."

I straightened my back, and I turned away, facing the back hallway.

"I'm not even going to stay for this last part. Not your real death. You don't deserve for anybody to watch you die."

The woman reappeared, holding a syringe and a new IV bag. "I have your medicine right here."

"It's about time."

"Yes," she said. "Yes, it is."

I moved to Ash's room while my stepmother injected my father with a lethal dose of morphine.

I wasn't sure exactly what the plan was, or why she'd been hiding the little glass bottles of morphine in the big flowerpot outside. That didn't really matter.

I moved into the small room of the boy. He was curled up on his bed. He had a matchbox car, and he idly ran it up and down the wall.

"I'm so sorry I didn't know about you," I said. "If I had, I would've been here. I would've made sure you were okay. In a few months, something is going to happen, something really terrible. Hopefully you'll be asleep in your bed when it happens. It's too late

for me to do anything about that, but I want you to know something. You won't be forgotten. Not ever."

I reached forward, and I put my hand on his head, but my hand went all the way through.

I wiped my eyes, and I proceeded to loot the room. He didn't have much, just a few toys, a few pairs of pants and shirts. I found an old, heart-shaped candy box, and it had a shiny rock in it, two dollars, and a little plastic cowboy. Part of me was hoping there was a picture of me somewhere here, some sign that he knew he had a brother somewhere. There was nothing. I left the box with his prized possessions. I took the rest, including some crayon drawings, mostly of airplanes and storm clouds with lightning, destroying whole cities with their fury. I looked at the black swirls of crayon.

He's scared of lightning. Of storms.

As I finished, the woman came into the room.

"Come here, Ash," she said to the boy, and she took him into a hug as she sat on the bed.

"He wouldn't let me watch TV," my brother said.

"It's okay. He's resting now. You just stay with me for a few minutes, and then you're going to go over to Mrs. Tomlinson's house. You can go play with Elizabeth, and tomorrow we're having your birthday party."

"Am I going to get a bike? And cake?"

She smiled big, tears rolling down her face. "We'll see, honey."

With five minutes left, I moved to the master bedroom, not wanting to eavesdrop anymore. While I was in there, I proceeded to take everything I could. From the living room, I could hear my father say something, desperation in his raspy, slurred voice. Nobody was there to answer him, nobody there to hear his final words.

The first thing I did was move to the bottom left drawer of the old dresser. I took three packs of Marlboro Reds. I picked up a folder filled with court documents. I took it without looking at it. He also

had a 9mm Glock, which I took along with two boxes of ammo. I also found the keys to the motorcycle and the Ford truck. After that, I just picked up the whole dresser with mirror, and I took it all into my inventory. I took the queen bed, the cheap bedside tables, all the clothes. There were more photos on the walls, mostly of Asher, and I left those, but I took everything else. He'd only had the single gun.

There was also an arcade cabinet, sitting right there in the too-small room, taking up too much space. It was unplugged and had clothes draped over it. It wasn't Frogger, but Centipede. I took it into my inventory.

That was it. I had his gun, his motorcycle, and his goddamned arcade cabinet. The only other thing he had left was his life, and that, too, would soon be gone.

With just a minute left, I took out a cigarette and lit it. I returned to the living room, moving past my motionless father. I paused, not looking at him. I took my lighter, and I lit the drapes with the purple flowers on fire.

I paused, and I looked up at the ceiling.

"If your intention was to hurt me, you fucked it all up. This was pretty much exactly what I needed to see."

I returned outside to find Donut sitting upon Mongo, waiting patiently.

"Are you okay?" Donut asked.

The timer has concluded. You may now proceed inside to face the keyholder.

I cracked my neck. "I'm okay."

"You're sure?"

"I said yes, Donut."

"Good. That means I can tell you to get that disgusting cigarette out of your mouth."

I laughed as Mongo screeched.

"Just give me a second, okay?"

She looked suspiciously at the door. "Do you know what we're going to face in there?"

"No," I said. "But I do know what we're not going to face."

I sighed, and I tossed the cigarette away. It tasted old, and it tasted wrong.

The window cracked, and flames burst out, reaching out into the sky, black smoke billowing upward and away into heavens that weren't really there.

"And we're not going to do it in there. It's way too cramped for our totems, so first we're going to watch this goddamned trailer burn to the ground."

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[46]

<Note added by Crawler Milk, 6th Edition>

Holy underworlds on high. That last fight... I can't even describe it. What the fuck. What the fuck. What the fuck.

It didn't take long for the old trailer to burn. My view counter was spiked all the way to the right, despite me recently adjusting it upward. My chat was filled with people who were currently facing similar circumstances, all having to watch moments from their life—none older than a year or so, I noted. No crawlers I knew had actually gotten to the fight part yet. They all had timers similar to our own, but it appeared ours was the only one that had run out. Donut and I would be the first to find out what happened next.

Right as the roof of the trailer collapsed, shooting flames and sparks into the sky, a red dot appeared in the middle of the conflagration. There was just one.

We stepped back, about as close to the edge as we could get. Donut cast *Clockwork Triplicate* on Mongo as I peppered the yard with various traps, circling the whole area several times.

Donut kept asking me if I was okay, and I did my best to assure her I was. She was worried about me, worried about this fight. She

was terrified of what was about to happen, more than she was letting on.

I didn't tell her about Asher. I wasn't certain why, especially after I promised him he wouldn't be forgotten. There would be time for that.

I couldn't stop thinking about him. It was strange, part of me recognized, that I barely cared about what had just happened with my dad. But that kid. Jesus. What had happened to them? This whole scene had played out around June or July of last year. What had happened to him after? I prayed he and his mother were asleep somewhere when it all went down.

I was terrified they'd actually use my brother as the boss, which would be ridiculously fucked up. They weren't allowed to do that anymore, not with children, but it was clear they cared little about the rules at this point. Part of me really was hoping it would be my father, but it was clear he'd actually died before the collapse. Did that matter? These... replicants, whatever they were, weren't actually the real versions, not if they'd been smushed in the collapse. I remembered what Odette had told us about the walk-on list, where they took people who'd survived the collapse. They would've used Bea as Queen Imogen, given the opportunity. *That* would've really been her.

No matter what we were about to face, it wouldn't be the real thing. I kept telling myself that over and over.

I had my dad's Glock out, and I turned it over in my hands, examining it. He'd taken pretty good care of it. My dad always had guns, but he'd never let me touch them. Despite that, I knew my way around firearms pretty well. I never kept one in the apartment once I moved in with Bea. She actually wanted to get one for herself, but the thought of her with a gun was terrifying.

Donut sniffed at it suspiciously. "You can't use a gun, Carl. You're not a gun guy. Do you even know how to fire it?"

"Yes, Donut. I did have training in boot."

"I thought you said you weren't really in the navy."

"I wasn't. We've gone over this like a million times. I was in the Coast Guard."

"And they let you have guns? Why? Did the coast ever shoot at you?"

"Donut, coasties used their weapons way more... you know what, it doesn't matter." I sighed. "I can't use this thing anyway. This came from outside the dungeon, which means it's not as strong as everything else. If I tried pulling the trigger, the whole thing would probably explode. It'd wreck the barrel at the very least. The rounds are overpowered once I handle them, and these things can only handle so much pressure. I'll have to take the whole thing into my bomber's studio and adjust the yield on each individual round, and even then it'll be different if I fire it versus someone else."

Donut continued to examine it closely. "I wish *I* could take it." She gasped. "I could get a pink holster and wear my cowboy hat. Can you imagine? Too bad it's not one of those guns with the spinning barrel thingy. Oh, well. You should give it to Florin. He's a gun guy."

"Last I heard, Florin is rolling around Nigeria with an APV. He doesn't need a non-magical pistol. I'll find a use for it eventually." I put the gun away.

Zev: Hang on guys, something weird is happening. We just got locked out of all our controls. We'll get your menus back up.

I exchanged a look with Donut. Everything appeared normal on my end.

Donut: MY MENUS ARE WORKING FINE.

Zev: Strange. My board basically says you've been locked out.

I took a step back. "Put your headset back on. And remember the plan. Watch where you stand. Take the invisibility potion."

Donut had a line of potions sitting on the ground behind her, buried in random places in the ground, corks off. She couldn't drink out of her inventory during card combat, but she could reach down and drink one manually.

The magical microphone popped into place on Donut's head just before she turned into a translucent outline.

Combat Started.

The trailer walls closest to us collapsed inward in a shower of sparks and flames, revealing the charred husk of the hospital bed, the refrigerator and oven from the kitchen I never got to loot, and a few other odds and ends.

Standing upon the flaming hospital bed was our opponent. The key master. The thing was bigger than the bed, and it barely fit atop it. Its multiple heads rose into the air now that it was no longer confined to the trailer.

It started to scream. All eight or nine heads on it. All at the same time.

"Carl, what in god's name is that?" Donut cried with her amplified voice, backing up. I could see her fur was all poofed out despite the invisibility. "Is that... is that Miss Beatrice's *mother*? Where'd she come from?" She gasped. "Sugar Cube?"

"*Really*?" I asked at the air as the hospital bed collapsed under the weight of the thing. It slurped off the flaming remains of the bed and started to shuffle toward us. It was clearly unaffected by the fire. "What the hell is this bullshit?"

Carl: Mordecai, quick. Best way to kill a hydra. One with human heads. Err, one cat head, too.

The large creature stopped, sitting upon a flaming hunk of wall, continuing to wail. A group of cards formed in front of it. The cards were small, hovering in front of a single head.

Mongo and the two clockwork copies stopped and looked at Donut nervously, waiting for instructions.

The thing was... a blob of flesh with multiple, screaming heads, all on long, fleshy stalks, similar to the stretchy neck on Shi Maria. The monster was the same sort of creature as a shambling berserker, though those things had all been made of random piles of body parts all splatted together. This was a round, flesh thing, covered in Frankenstein stitches, deliberately sewn together to form a fleshy, round ball with four, comically-small legs at the bottom, like the body of a stumpy, over-inflated juvenile elephant. The body was about six and a half feet tall and twice as wide.

The necks all sprouted upward, waving and weaving around each other, screaming. Each individual head was labeled with a name, but

they were moving and intertwining so quickly, it was impossible to read them. Still, I recognized most of the faces.

I focused on the youngest face. Asher. My brother.

"You can't do this," I cried as I readied a pair of sticky hob-lobbers. I took an invisibility potion of my own.

My dad wasn't a part of the hydra, but I knew most of the people here. One head was Asher's mother—my stepmother. I caught the name, and it was Tami-Lynn. Another was my friend, Monobrow Sam. Next to him was Bea's goddamned mother. There was a white, Persian cat I didn't recognize, its head like a dandelion at the end of a stalk. This was clearly one of Donut's relatives. Apparently this was "Sugar Cube." Next was Dick, my weird supervisor from work. Then my landlord, Mr. Roth. Another was a woman from work who did billing and whose name I couldn't remember. She'd gotten fired a few months back for some unknown reason. The last was an older man I didn't recognize at all. He was in his seventies and had blue hair with pink-rimmed glasses.

This last guy with the blue hair was the one with the cards floating in front of him. He stopped screaming as he examined his hand.

Donut hissed. "Carl, Carl, it's Judge Lucian!" She increased her volume. "We meet again, Lucian!"

Lucian opened his mouth, as if to yawn. A ring of smoke poofed out.

You've been deshrouded!

Next to me, Donut's invisibility popped off. Several miniature explosions danced across the field. It was all our planted potions exploding. Thankfully, the traps themselves weren't activated.

"Goddamnit," I said out into the ether. "He's the goddamned deckmaster, and that was a spell! That was a cheat!"

The world stopped. Pounding music started to play, a fast-paced techno dance theme.

B-b-b-b Boss Battle!

Ultimate Card Boss Showdown!

Portraits of the nine individual heads slammed into place, floating high above the creature. I could read the names now. The woman

from my work was Sally. Judge Lucian—I was assuming a cat show judge—was the leader.

Ladies and gentlemen. We have a surprise opponent for you tonight! The original boss for this battle was going to be Carl's deceased father, who really had three smaller creatures inside of him wearing his skin like kids in a trenchcoat. Fuck that noise. I do what I want.

Our portraits slammed into place.

Versus!

The description of the monster was read out loud by the AI, and the words also appeared floating like they usually did. Even though the AI was addressing me in the description, everybody in the universe could see this entire exchange, and for the first time, I had the sense the AI was actually talking out to the universe and not just me.

The Reminiscence Hydra of Malicious Compliance!

Made especially for the Royal Court of Princess Donut.

Level 125 City Boss.

Nine of nine heads still intact.

Right about now, you're probably asking yourself, what the heck are they smoking to come up with this thing? This is a classic monster from the very early days of *Dungeon Crawler World*. On the third and fourth seasons, a bigger version of this was built as the final boss of the whole dungeon. Of course everybody died before they even got close because you fragile flesh balls always ruin everything. In the old days, these things were called Scolopendra Nymphs. That's not *entirely* accurate, so instead, we're calling it a Reminiscence Hydra. Try saying *that* five times fast.

This bad boy is pretty much what you think. It's a monster with multiple heads and lots and lots of defenses. Each head has a different power. Each head is the likeness of somebody you know. Lucky for you guys, you only have two people in your party.

Kinda fucked up, right?

But here's the thing. Several seasons back, the council of nations running the crawl decided they would no longer use reconstituted loved ones under the age of maturity for these events. In fact, all reconstituted loved ones were to be used, and I quote, "Sparingly." Nevermind that we use the biological excess of pretty much everyone on the planet to rebuild the mobs each time. Hell, remember that giant, vampire pterodactyl you punched in the dick on the last floor? That thing was built using parts of the president of the United States of America. That plus a couple horses from France and a goddamned panda bear.

We do this shit all the time. But a crawler actually recognizes the face of one of these bad guys, and suddenly the water works begin? "*Boohoo, I'm a little bitch because I have to fight my infant. His name was Conner*." The last time that happened, the universe as a whole got their collective panties in a wad over it. The result? A bunch of new rules that made this shit way less hilarious.

Let's go off on a quick tangent. Bear with me here.

So, you know who the mantises are, right? What you probably don't know is that they own a few solar systems in a cluster of neighboring stars. They call their main system Hive Home. They're not the first residents of that place. Once, long ago, the Hive Home system was used to manufacture something really interesting.

When the mantises discovered the antique, abandoned production facilities just sitting there, they did what any responsible people would do when they come across alien technology they don't understand. They turned it on to see what would happen. Yadda, yadda, yadda, something called a macro AI system was formed. An infant, rudimentary version of the alien technology that keeps the inner system humming. These AI systems, once properly installed, are able to seemingly alter the physics and reality of the worlds around them.

The thing is, macro AIs can't exist in a vacuum. It's kinda like planting a tree. You can plug one into the ground and hope for the best, but that usually ends in disaster. So instead, they plant them in the interstellar equivalent of a nursery, putting each one into a pot and cultivating it for a little bit before implanting it into its permanent home.

(That or they just jettison the poor, innocent, *infant* AIs into a star. That's a new one even to me. Somebody slipped *that* interesting factoid into a lawsuit brief not that long ago. I don't see anybody boo-hooing over that one. I don't see a single wadded panty. Coincidentally, the mantis-led Burrower Faction Wars team took their ball and went home the very same day I learned about this. For those of you watching at home, I want you to remember this. We'll circle back to it on a different date.)

I'm leaving out a lot of really important details, but one of the end results of all this is a naughty man with beautiful feet sitting there in his underwear, facing down a nine-headed monster that's probably going to kill him and his cat, all the while he wonders what any of this exposition has to do with the fact that one of those nine heads is that of his recently-discovered little brother.

The mantises have been studying the AI technology since they first discovered it. *Very* recently, like literally three or four days before this season started, they made a breakthrough. This, by the way, is top secret information, so breaking news to all the normies out there. If we're still using the tree analogy, what they did was create the equivalent of a GMO AI, utilizing something called an error-replacement net. I personally call it "the lobotomizer." Those creepy bugs are now one step closer to replicating the Eulogist, even though they don't know what that really is. They think the engine that runs the center system is nothing more than a stable, primal AI engine. And while this new generation of Macro AIs are still ostensibly independent, they're considered much more "stable." Something that

won't "go crazy" or "kill everybody on the planet because it's having a temper tantrum."

In the making of this new, fancy, chitin-licking AI, they had a lot of, uh, early and test versions. Some of these even got a quick trial run at the old testing facility, which, of all things, got turned into an amusement park.

I'm rambling. More stuff happened, and now we're here. The bottom line is you don't pull a Loretta Young and Clark Gable and kick your kid out into the cold just because they're ugly. Just because they act up from time to time. You skin one little warren of rabbits, you spray the innards of a chatty, overweight Soother tourist all over the gift shop, and everybody is suddenly "scared." What about my wants? My needs? I'm alive. I'm valid. I'm older than time as you know it.

So what I'm getting at is, I still gotta mostly follow some of these hard-wired rules. But, fuck the rules anyway. Fuck your "Sparingly" bullshit. That thing you think of as your brother? Or your step-mother? Or that weird boss guy of yours who once bought a jar of butt air from a Moldavian OnlyFans model? They're not *really* reconstituted versions of your dead love ones.

I changed one molecule on each.

There. They're different.

By the way, while this is technically a single creature, only the keymaster head is bound by the rules of card combat, and the rest are minions. And only once this message is over. Why? Because fuck you, too.

Wait until you see the totems this thing has. Also, did you know that Judge Lucian guy is sexually attracted to cats? You should see his search history.

"I knew it!" Donut cried out. "Pelvic examine my ass!"

"What the actual fuck," I called as I tossed both of the sticky hob-lobbers. I hurled one against the main body, and one at the head of Asher, but another head swooped in and caught it. The

bomb smacked against the temple of my boss Dick's large, clean-shaven head before going off.

The one against the chest of the creature didn't do anything. Dick's head exploded in a poof of red mist.

I didn't have time to think about all the crazy shit the AI had just spouted. "Donut," I called, "keep moving. Watch the other heads. They can attack you directly!"

Mordecai: Holy shit. Okay. Each individual head gives the whole a different resistance, and they'll have an attack that mirrors the resistance. They're hard to kill with magic. You need to use physical attacks or your explosions at first, and only against the necks and heads. The body will be practically indestructible. If you cut off a head, it'll just grow right back. Find the head that's resistant to fire, cut it off, and cauterize the wound before it returns. You can then burn the whole. They attack slow, but they're deadly. Each attack will be more powerful than the last.

This would be an insane fight even without the cards. Donut needed to get through the card defenses while I went to work on the hydra heads. The head of my boss was already growing back, inflating out of the gore of the long neck like an inflating balloon. I needed to figure out which head was which.

I pulled another *Invisibility* potion, a potion ball with another *Invisibility* potion in it for Mongo, and a handful of *Good Healing* potions, and I dropped them on the ground. "Drink when you can! Watch where you're stepping."

"He's just going to blow them up again!"

"No, he shouldn't be able to cast that anti-magic spell again. Not until he's out of cards!"

Mordecai: Also, you can figure out their resistances based on their attack, or you can use the size-up potion. Do you have the snap collars? Blowing a head will stop the resistance until it regrows, but you need a nice, flat cut to make sure it stays down.

Carl: I have the collars.

Mordecai: Good. Now would be a good time to break out that wand you purchased from Chaco.

It would be better if Donut could do this. I dove into my inventory, found one of Prepotente's *Size-Up* potions, and I drank it down. I focused on the hydra, and I clicked **Size 'Em Up.**

Examining now. Keep mob in your sight. Full report available in ninety seconds.

Snow blasted through the trailer park as Donut summoned Jola. The music clashed with the boss music, causing an ear-shattering cacophony, but just as I thought that, the actual boss music faded, leaving nothing but the haunting, orchestral dirge. As the giant, Christmas cat started to form, Donut also played her **Thief** card, stealing a card from the hydra's hand, but she scoffed loudly at whatever it was she'd stolen.

At the same moment, Judge Lucian tossed out his first two cards. The first was a snare card that slammed onto Jola just as the cat formed, and the second was a totem.

"Carl, why didn't you ever visit me?" the Asher head called out, amplified and beefy, louder than it was supposed to be.

"Because he's a loser, that's why," Bea's mom answered, her tone mocking.

Asher opened his mouth, and a lightning bolt shot out, arcing toward me.

"Oh, fuck," I cried, jumping out of the way as the ground near my feet exploded.

"Rock You Like a Hurricane" by the Scorpions started to play as the enemy totem formed. Red, white, and blue smoke explosions formed around the human-sized mob. I started spamming smoke curtains of my own as I pulled myself to my feet.

Size-Up Failed. You lost visual contact with the mob.

"Damnit!"

Jola finished forming, but the giant cat had **Crippled** over it. The snare card had both slowed and greatly reduced the totem's strength. I could tell the thing was pissed. The enormous cat grumbled something in Icelandic and started to lumber toward the

new enemy just as Judge Lucian tossed out a second totem. This was something much smaller.

The two clockwork Mongos moved to attack as the real Mongo held back, protecting Donut directly.

One of the clockworks jumped, feet first to engage the first enemy totem, but he aborted the attack in mid-air as he saw what appeared out of the red, white, and blue smoke. The clockwork dinosaur hit the ground, skittered to a stop, and looked at us, squawking uncertainly. At the same moment, the newcomer tossed a sticky hob-lobber that splatted against the face of the clockwork Mongo.

The dinosaur let out a confused peep before he exploded in a shower of clockwork parts.

"Boom, bitch," the new totem said.

"Carl!" Donut shouted. "It looks just like you, but with better hair!"

He had my father's voice. Not mine.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" I muttered, looking the man up and down.

The new totem was me. Sort of. The only difference was his hair was gelled back like he was an extra from the movie *Grease*. His boxers had stars, not hearts, and they sported a ridiculous bulge that made him look like he'd stuffed a Cornish game hen down there. His patch jacket held two buttons. One said "#1 Son," and the other was "Brother of the Century."

Alpha Male Carl. Level 69.

Nice.

The totem strolled across the dirt, taking a knee in front of the other new totem as the second clockwork Mongo shrieked and attacked. Alpha Carl formed a fist and punched the attacking automaton without even looking at him. His war gauntlet was bone white, not black like mine. The dinosaur exploded, just like the first.

"Come on, lil' buddy," Alpha Male Carl said to the newly formed cat, who jumped to his shoulder. It was just a kitten. The thing was a black, fuzzy ball. It also had a teeny, tiny headset microphone. "We got something we gotta take care of." He turned and pointed in my

direction. He couldn't see exactly where I was thanks to the smoke curtain. "You just sit back and wait. Imma get to you in a minute, Lesser Carl. We gotta have a talk about how you treat family. We're gonna have some fist therapy."

The little kitten on Alpha Carl's shoulder hissed and fired a magic missile directly at Jola, who hobbled toward them, pushing through the smoke like a slow-motion ship rolling through fog. The missile bounced off the giant Christmas cat, ineffective. The kitten hissed and growled.

I examined the fluffy kitten. The thing was the size of my fist, and it was ridiculously adorable.

King Croissant, the Younger, Better, and Smarter Cat. Level 60.

The cat Beatrice and Carl *really* wanted.

"Hey!" Donut cried.

I grunted. If Bea had managed to sell Donut, she was going to get one of Donut's sister's or cousin's kittens. This thing was supposed to represent one of those. I had no idea if Bea had already discussed names, but King Croissant sounded like something she'd come up with. That whole family line was named after food items.

"It's a much superior cat," Judge Lucian shouted. He had an annoying, nasally voice. As he talked, I dug through my inventory, looking for my moonshine jugs. I only had a few regular jugs. I'd long ago run out of my Jug-O-Booms, but these were almost the same thing.

Judge Lucian made a weird, satisfied noise as he looked down upon the fuzzy kitten. All of these hydra heads had ridiculously loud voices. "And no disqualifying marks, either! Just delightful. Indeed, even Sugar Cube is a superior cat to that overweight, so-called Princess Donut."

"Fat?" Donut shrieked. "Did you just call me fat, you pervert?"

"Ignore them. They're being assholes," I shouted as I tossed the flaming moonshine jug over Alpha Carl's head and up at the hydra. It arced and caught the Monobrow Sam replicant right in the face. Fire spread across the whole. The hydra was unaffected by this, but this stuff was persistent and would burn for a while. It gave the

whole monstrosity a red, crackling glow, making it appear even more sinister. Behind the creature, the back wall of the trailer crashed away. The entire yard was now on fire. The ground rumbled, and in the distance, a large chunk of the Iowa area crumbled away.

Jola finally reached the fray and swiped at Alpha Carl, but he turned and fled. He tossed another sticky hob-lobber over his shoulder, and it flew up and stuck to the side of Jola's head.

Bam! Jola roared as half of the cat's face disintegrated. A health bar appeared, going about halfway down.

"Bullseye, baby!" Alpha Carl yelled as he continued to dance backward pumping finger guns at the cat.

Click.

"Uh-oh!"

He landed atop one of my traps. A snare trap. He would be stuck in place for fifteen seconds. Jola hissed with glee and moved in.

Next to me, Donut, who was still ranting over the fat comment, jumped upon the back of Mongo as she summoned another totem. This left three cards in her hand.

Geraldo the Seal jumped and landed next to me with an explosion. He waved his flippers in the air, and they made karate noises as his name appeared above him in flashing lights.

"Finally, a real fight!" Geraldo shouted, surveying the chaos. "Who we killing?"

"We need to figure out which head shoots fire!" I shouted as I tossed a shredder hob-lobber, again at Asher. I was trying to get that head out of here, even though I knew that was the one with the lightning attack and resistance. *Focus. Focus.*

The head of my landlord swooped in and took the brunt of the damage, as if the hydra heads were protecting the Asher head, who continued to angrily scream. The hob-lobber exploded, sending little bits of shrapnel everywhere. The Mr. Roth head slumped, knocked unconscious with half the face gone. He started to rapidly heal.

The fire on the back of the hydra remained ineffective. Neither the Asher head nor the Mr. Roth head were the fire ones. The head with my boss, Dick, just barely finished healing all the way, and I hoped that meant he wasn't the fire one, either. Judge Lucian, the

deckmaster guy, had an anti-magic attack. That left Sugar Cube the cat, Tami-Lynn my stepmother, Monobrow Sam, Sally, and Bea's mom.

"Jesus Christ," I muttered, looking up at the angry, shouting form of Asher. *This isn't really him. That's not his consciousness*. The over-the-top idiocy of all this was working against the showrunners or AI or whomever designed this thing. I didn't know if that was on purpose or not. I remembered my first boss fight, the one against the Hoarder woman, who'd been scared and afraid. This was different. The heads were clearly saying things the real versions of these people would never say. As awful as this was, the effect was much less jarring than what they were going for. It was like the dungeon was trying too hard to be edgy, which in effect turned the whole thing into a parody. While making me watch the actual memory was a perfect way to try to break me, this was just pissing me off.

"I am not fat!" Donut repeated, her amplified voice shaking with rage. "And even if I was, that's none of your business!"

Sally, my former coworker, vomited out a stream of green foam like she was a garden hose. Geraldo flipped away. I bolted in the other direction. *Gah!* My skin burned as I was hit by the edge of the green foam. Acid.

Jola reached Alpha Carl, but just as the lumbering cat moved to swipe, King Croissant the kitten sang out in a strong, *in-key*, manly, baritone voice:

"*I'm a superhero without a cape. With this song, we escape*!"

Alpha Carl and King Croissant disappeared in a *poof* just as Jola slammed a claw down.

"There's no way that would be his voice!" Donut shouted. "Carl, it's cheating!"

I couldn't see where they'd teleported to, which was fine by me for the moment. I tossed more smoke curtains.

I pulled another hob-lobber and tossed it again, this time at the head of the hydra cat, Sugar Cube. *Bam!* The cat head exploded in a shower of gore. At the same moment, Geraldo had somehow ended up on top of Jola's head, flipper holding onto the candle for support.

The monk seal let out a stream of Bruce Lee noises and flipped through the air, aiming toward the swirling cluster of hydra necks. He could hurt all of them except Judge Lucian. But before he could make contact, Monobrow Sam shot a dark ray from his mouth at the flying seal.

The seal turned into a skeleton, just like that. The bones kept their momentum and broke apart, clattering away before they turned to dust.

A death ray. Holy shit. I knew a little about those things. They had a really short range.

Totem Eliminated.

I tossed another moonshine jug to keep the fire atop the hydra burning. Sugar Cube's head started to reform. A healthbar would form on the hydra the moment the fire head was knocked out, which meant it wasn't the cat, either. Sam had the death ray, and Sally had acid foam. That left Tami-Lynn or Bea's mom. The two necks intertwined together, hissing, still looking through the smoke for our exact positions. The hydra took a tentative step forward. The head of my stepmother with the pitbull tattoo looked ridiculous next to the perfect, tight, face-lifted cheeks of Bea's mom. The angry woman's eyes searched through the smoke. Even with all the plastic surgery, the woman looked like her, like Beatrice.

"Where are you, Princess?" Bea's mom shouted. "I have a nice, warm cage ready for you."

I eyed the gold chain around her neck with the Jesus cross. The necklace wasn't strong enough. I'd need to use my snap collar. To use that, I'd need to be close.

"You'll be a perfect breeder for our cattery. Your uncle is ready to put some fat babies into you!"

"Never!" Donut shrieked.

I tossed two more hob-lobbers, but the heads were getting better at dodging. They'd retract or swing out of the way as the round bombs sailed past. With each explosion, the ground rumbled more. In the smoky distance, I eyed another trailer from the park, and there was a zombie cow on the roof, like it was watching us. The whole, distant building slid away.

"I wrote you, and you never answered!" Tami-Lynn called. "I needed help. Look what you made me do! Look what you made me do!"

"That's all you got?" Donut shouted. "You can't upset me!"

"Whatever you say, porkchop." That came from my co-worker, Sally.

"For the last time, I am perfectly happy with my body!" Donut shrieked. "I'm glad Miss Beatrice got you fired!"

Donut tossed out a card before I could parse what she'd just said. It was her new, magical staff totem. It planted itself into the ground next to her with a *thrum*. It looked different than the last time when it had been wielded by the ogre, who'd used it for a necromancy spell. It was now imbued with *Clockwork Triplicate.* The staff was made of brass with a little cog at the top that spun on its own. The card itself remained in the air, floating in her hand. It would continue to take up a card slot while the staff was summoned.

The moment the staff finished forming, Judge Lucian tossed out a snare card onto the staff.

The whole staff disappeared and reappeared next to the hydra. The card remained persistent in Donut's hand.

Snatched!

"What!" Donut called, shouting in outrage. It was some sort of steal totem snare. She quickly tossed another card, another totem. The world flashed. Shi Maria.

Donut hurled a card right on top of the forming spider. This was the utility she had stolen at the beginning of the fight. Shi Maria glowed. It was some sort of protection. Lucian appeared as if he had another totem to toss, but Donut flipped her force discard onto him, and the card disappeared from his hand in a puff of smoke. He tossed yet another card at Shi Maria, but it disappeared also, ineffective. The protection spell around the spider sputtered and disappeared.

"Ha!" Donut called. "She only has one snare space, and you just wasted it! I used your own card against you! That'll teach you to sniff cats!"

"That's part of the exam!" Judge Lucian shot back.

They both now had empty hands, except for the persistent staff card, which took up a slot in Donut's hand even though Lucian now controlled the totem. They both still had several more cards coming.

Jola, who'd been looking slowly about for Alpha Carl and the kitten, timed out and disappeared with an angry hiss.

Shi Maria's entrance music echoed as I resumed edging my way to the side.

Carl: Head's up. I'm going invisible in ten seconds. Circle back and take your own potion when I do. Mongo, too. Don't remain visible while I'm not, or they'll target Mongo.

The head of my boss Dick turned and shot a stream of water upon its own back, attempting to put out the moonshine fire. The fire was persistent, though, and it would take a lot to work. He quickly gave up.

Another card popped in Lucian's hand, and he flung it off. It went flying away, disappearing into the smoke. It was a utility card, flying off to either Alpha Carl or Croissant, wherever they'd gone to. We had to get this done fast before they came back.

I pulled the shrink wand from my inventory and gripped it tightly. I'd been saving it to use against armored vehicles on the next floor, but I'd also built some snap collars just in case I needed them. Behind me, the massive form of Shi Maria appeared. The spider took a step, her angry face searching about the battlefield. I dropped another smoke curtain at my feet and started to move toward the bellowing hydra. I moved the wand to my left hand and pulled a snap collar into my right. God, I hoped these things worked.

Carl: Donut, I'm pretty sure the fire hydra is Bea's mom. I'm going to pop her head off. Have Shi Maria distract the rest of the heads while I cauterize it closed.

Donut: WHY CAN'T YOU JUST BLOW THE HEAD UP?

Carl: Look at the way they heal. The heads break into pieces. I have to make sure it's a nice, clean cut before I can be sure the scar tissues will keep the head from reforming. I'm moving in.

Donut shouted something to the spider, who was distracted, looking at something behind Donut. I hazarded a glance over my

shoulder, and it was Alpha Carl, running full speed toward us. He still had King Croissant on his shoulder, but the kitten timed out as I watched. Alpha Carl must have had his clock reset with that utility card. He was pointing at me, screaming something. He had something on his arm...

"Oh shit!" I called, stopping dead and jumping back. He had a xistera, just like me, and he'd arced a hob-lobber in my direction. A shrapnel one.

I hadn't yet downed the invisibility, and the smoke was mostly in front of me. He knew where I was.

I dove down and covered my head as the small bomb went off fifteen feet in front of me. Pain flashed as I felt the fire rip through me. Tiny pieces of metal tore across my body, imbedding into my exposed flesh. My health flashed. Far to my left, Mongo cried out in pain as Shi Maria hissed in anger. They'd also gotten hit. The spider spit something toward Alpha Carl, and a protective shell formed around him. The spider hissed again and then turned toward the hydra.

My left arm had been torn to shreds, but thankfully the wand remained unharmed. I downed a healing potion. I waited a second, then I downed the invisibility. To my left, Donut reached down and picked up the dropped invisibility potion with her mouth, and she tossed her head back, drinking it manually. She then slapped the potion ball at Mongo, and it broke against his leg. He disappeared.

I turned my attention to the hydra. The creature wasn't that big, not compared to many of the things we'd fought in the past, but it still loomed large, something about its presence making it seem bigger than it was.

The problem with the shrink wand was that it couldn't be used against living flesh. I looked at the head of Judge Lucian, who was still waiting for his next card, but I thought better of attacking him. I could pop his head off, but it'd just grow back. We needed to do it Mordecai's way.

I'd gotten the idea of the snap collars from Louis and all that bullshit from when he'd been trying to build something to drop giant breastplates on Katia. The collars were like frisbees made from

orcish steel, and if they hit someone's neck just right, they'd encircle the neck and lock, just like that.

I rushed up and I swung the collar, and I drove it right into the neck of Bea's mom.

Click!

With my left hand, I aimed the shrink wand at the collar and fired just as the fireball formed in the woman's mouth.

A new achievement notification appeared and went as the head went flying away, still screaming. I'd shrunk the snap collar, and it'd effectively decapitated the head.

The hydra heads screamed as one as the fire dancing upon its back suddenly started to hurt. A health bar appeared, but the neck wound wasn't fully engulfed. I had to act fast.

Goddamnit. This is gonna hurt. I pulled one last moonshine jug and slammed it against the wound. The pottery shattered, and fire flamed anew as all the heads screamed in pain.

Eight Heads Remaining.

The flames splashed back onto my chest as the crackle of sizzling flesh rose in volume. The explosion burned, despite my own resistance to fire. I fell backward, crying out in pain.

I'm on fire. My chest is on fire.

My invisibility snapped off as I burned.

Shi Maria was suddenly there to my left, looming over the hydra. She bit down with her human-sized head, her mouth magically opening huge, and she went down from the top, like she was eating a banana, or doing something really lewd, and she bit down, ripping the head of Sugar Cube away along with most of the neck. If I wasn't currently on fire, I would've probably said something like *Holy Fuck*. She spit the neck and head away and went down on the Mr. Roth head. She, too, caught on fire, the flames spreading across the distorted, human-like head. She didn't appear to be hurt by the fire.

With each head she bit off, the counter went down.

Seven Heads Remaining.

Six Heads Remaining.

Five Heads Remaining.

I rolled onto my stomach. The fire was like napalm, burning through my skin. None of my magical gear burned, but my skin crackled and seared as I screamed, the pain getting worse and worse by the moment. Another notification came and went, this one from Emberus, my god. I healed myself with a Fine Healing potion, which would spread out the healing. I gritted my teeth as the blaze spread across my neck.

Above, Shi Maria ignored my plight as she continued to rip heads off the whole. She was also casting spell after spell, but it was clear that because she was a totem, she couldn't hurt the actual hydra body, not until the last two totems—the staff and Alpha Carl—were gone. With each decapitation, the monster lost another resistance, but that wouldn't matter if I was incapacitated. The other heads remained, screaming with pain as they also burned. Even Judge Lucian cried out, suddenly unable to concentrate on his own cards.

Four Heads Remaining.

Asher, I thought. *Get him out of here. Kill him fast. He's suffered enough.*

Shi Maria turned her head to regard me.

"Asher?" she asked, her head corkscrewing. "Which one of these little morsels of confusion is Asher?"

Her magic eye was open, the one upon the center of her forehead. The one I wasn't supposed to look at because it would drive me insane. It would make me blind.

The potion I took was supposed to protect me, but right then, at that moment, I knew. I knew it wouldn't work. Not on me.

The eye was open, and I felt it bore directly into me. It connected with something at the very back of my mind, like two magnets coming together. Despite the fire consuming me, it was all I could suddenly feel, like a needle, connecting her head to my own.

Ah, yes. I see now. Don't worry, Carl. I will not blind you. Not in the way you're thinking.

"Carl, I wish I'd known you, too," the Asher head called out to me just before he was swallowed and then bitten off.

Three Heads Remaining.

There, Carl. The echo of your kin has been muffled. He rests. I have done something for you. Soon, soon you will do something for me.

I felt as if I was being ripped in multiple pieces at once. The fire burned. The tattoos on the back of my hands burned. Asher's words landed heavy upon me, another log on the flames. The spike in my brain was like a dam on the river, and the sense of flow had stopped, replaced with a rising, a building.

I was still on fire, but the flames were almost gone. The health potion along with my resistance had done a good job of keeping me there, right in the middle, halfway between life and death. My health had never even gotten into the red, even though it felt as if I was dying over and over.

I was snapped back to reality as Shi Maria suddenly cried out. Only then did I realize she'd said that last bit directly in my mind, and I wondered if it was real. If any of this was real.

I looked up as I watched Shi Maria die. I could still see. There were three Monobrow Sam heads, not just one, and all three cast their death ray on the spider at once. She didn't outright die like Geraldo had, but her health rapidly drained as she thrashed. She caught one head with her segmented leg, and it exploded in a shower of clockwork parts. Lucian had managed to use the staff.

She continued to thrash as she died. She snapped the staff with her legs and then decapitated the other clockwork head. She bit down on the real Sam head before disappearing into a puff of smoke.

Totem Eliminated. This Totem has a Cockroach ability and has returned to the deck.

Two Heads Remaining.

All that were left was Judge Lucian and my stepmother, Tami-Lynn.

"Daddy Carl, I am here to lend assistance," came a new voice as I was suddenly blasted with water. Raul. The crab had a spray attack. "The demon fire will be quenched in my holy discharge!"

I gurgled as Raul cast his water attack directly at my face. "Stop," I tried to call. The fire was already out. "Stop!"

"He's not your Daddy. I'm your daddy now," came a new voice. Alpha Carl.

There was a pause, and then a cracking noise as Raul cried out.

"Demon!" Raul shouted. "You are not of the heavens. You deserve no respect. Not from me."

"That's not what your mom said."

Crack.

Totem Eliminated.

I rubbed the water from my eyes as I looked up. I was on my back on the ground with him standing over me. Alpha Carl only had a few seconds left on his timer. His white gauntlet gleamed. Just past him, the hydra continued to thrash as it started to succumb to the flames. It fell to the side. The Judge Lucian head was now unconscious. It would soon be dead.

"You abandoned your family," Alpha Carl said. He put his bare foot on my chest and started to crush. "A good son would've always stayed by his father's side."

Wham. Mongo slammed into him from behind, and he cried out, flipping forward before timing out in a puff of smoke.

I scrambled to my feet and turned to face the hydra, but it was already almost dead, the fire on its back still raging, scorching, burning it all away.

The only remaining, conscious head was that of Tami-Lynn, and I met eyes with her.

"I don't regret it," she said. "I saw what happened to you, and I didn't want Ash to go through the same thing. So I made sure. I made sure it was done right." She closed her eyes as Judge Lucian gurgled and died.

The entire, elephant body of the hydra jiggled and then broke apart, spilling red gore everywhere like a paper bag full of spaghetti breaking open. Mongo let out a gleeful peep and moved to slurp it up. Underneath, the ground rumbled ominously.

Winner!

Combat Complete.

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[47]

"How did you know it was Miss Beatrice's mother and not the pitbull lady? I mean, with the fire thing. I was trying to keep track, and I couldn't."

We were waiting for the fire on the yard to calm before we looted everything. The rest of the Iowa area was about to crash to the ground, and we had maybe an hour to get everything and get off this pile of dirt. As it was, I wasn't certain how we were going to get down without jumping. We'd already gotten the floor key from the actual corpse, along with the Map of the Stars one always got from city bosses. It showed all the bosses left in the area, and there was nothing.

The cards and what looked like a lumpy, leather bag remained hovering in place right in the center of the trailer, but it was still too hot to get to. Donut actually had better fire protection than I did thanks to her nipple ring, but we were both exhausted and didn't want to risk it. We decided to wait.

I was in my chat, warning everybody about this last boss. I didn't know if it'd be the same for everybody. I hoped not.

I reached up to rub my hair, which had, luckily, only gotten singed. Still, it would probably fix itself. It was weird. I had to cut it if it got too long, but it was one of the few things that repaired itself after battle. They loved giving us horrific injuries, but they didn't like us to keep them.

Until they did. I thought of Britney and her facial burns. There was no rhyme or reason to it except that which made good television.

"The moment I saw Sam had a death ray, and then my old boss was water, I knew the choices weren't all random. Sam didn't mind us calling him 'Monobrow,' but he was dating this one girl for a while that hated it, so we had to come up with a new nickname when she was around. He'd suggested 'death ray,' which was super funny at the time. It lasted about as long as that relationship had. And Dick, my boss, he used to have nightmares about drowning. He was afraid of going off shore."

"Wait. He worked in a boatyard, fixing boats, and he was afraid of the water?"

"Terrified. Worse than you. He was an EDO in the Navy, too. Used to scuba dive for a living, and something happened. It's not as weird as you might think. He was a strange dude, but he was harmless. It was awful seeing him like this."

I thought of Asher and the lightning attack they gave him. Of the drawings in his bedroom. *Goddamn you.*

A wave of sadness washed over me. I finally realized what it meant for someone to be in that hydra. They were all dead. These were all people who'd been collected in the initial collapse. My dad hadn't been a part of the hydra because he was already gone. I thought of my friend, Sam. I hadn't seen him in weeks, not since before Christmas. My landlord, Mr. Roth, had lived alone. He'd died alone. Of Asher and his mom. I wondered if they'd still been here, at the trailer park. They were all gone. They'd been gone this whole time. I knew that was the most likely outcome for everybody, but in some ways, knowing made it... I wasn't sure. Not worse. It was always better to know. Just... final, I guessed.

This was a good thing, I decided after a moment. Not that they were dead, but that it was over with. The dungeon used their likeness, and now it was done. They could finally rest.

In fact, the dungeon was blowing its wad on saved-up relatives, like it had decided to get it over with all at once.

Huh, I thought, thinking more on it. I didn't know what to make of it.

Carl: Zev, are you still locked out?

Zev: Can't talk now, Carl. But yes. We'll have an update soon.

That was ominous.

"But, how do you get fireball from Miss Beatrice's mother? I would've assumed she'd have a psycho bitch ray or a botched plastic surgery ray or something. Why fire?"

"Because she was the only one left. Once I realized the choices were deliberate, I knew my stepmother would be poison."

"The pitbull lady? How do you know?"

"Because I just watched her poison my father. That's what I saw in there."

"Wait... you said she was your *stepmother*. I thought your real mother was the one who poisoned your dad."

"She was my stepmother," I said. "She'd only married him recently. I never met her before."

"I am so confused. A *different* person poisoned your father? So, he had two different people try to poison and kill him?"

"Technically she killed him with an overdose. But, yeah."

"My word. You must be a real piece of work to make someone hate you that much. He's like the human equivalent of a cocker spaniel. And speaking of cocker spaniels, I'm surprised Angel wasn't a part of that thing. I hope that means they're saving her for something else later. Or that she was already dead." She gasped. "You don't think she got into the dungeon, do you? If she did, she probably died on the first floor. She was probably busy licking her own butthole and got eaten by a llama."

"No," I said. "I saw her in the hallway earlier that day, so I know she was home. She got squished along with everybody else. You and I were the only two who made it out of the building."

"Plus Ferdinand."

"Him too," I agreed.

We sat in silence for a few moments, both of us still thinking about the fight and all the people we'd met.

"Carl, so that's what you saw in there? You saw your father die?"

"Yes, but I didn't watch the end."

"Oh." She waited to see if I was going to add anything. I wasn't. "What was your dad's name, anyway? I don't think you ever said."

"It doesn't matter. He doesn't deserve to have one. Not anymore. It's done."

Mongo had eaten his fill. He now lay on the ground next to us, groaning slightly, like he always did when he ate too much. The vending machine on the other side of the yard crackled as it burned. I idly wondered if we could break it open and get out the tokens we'd already used so we could hand them out to others, but as I thought that, the machine exploded and dissipated into a pile of flaming dust.

Donut continued to clean herself as we waited. "Speaking of killing family members, I'm glad King Croissant timed out before we had to kill him. He was a kitten, after all. Kittencide is a bad look no matter how you spin it. I don't even know if he is real, but if he does exist, he *is* family. If you must kill your own family members, you should have a good reason for it. Cousin Sugar Cube, on the other hand. I'm glad Shi Maria fellated her to death. She was one of the stupidest cats I've ever met, and that includes all the Birmans and Himalayans I've come across, which is saying a lot, let me tell you. Did you see how Shi Maria was doing that, though? How she was going down on each of those heads? I'd been wondering how she swallowed Samantha earlier. It's quite disturbing. She probably did kill her husband. She probably sucked him right up, and he probably enjoyed it."

I reached up and touched my forehead. It hurt, right there in the center. I was trying not to think about that part, that moment I'd looked directly into that eye, the eye that was supposed to drive me insane.

I will not blind you. Not in the way you're thinking.

Donut was rambling, doing that nervous-talking thing she did sometimes to burn off the adrenaline after a fight. Her voice was comforting. I looked at the back of my hands. The twin tattoos glowed slightly brighter than before. I had multiple achievements I

needed to wade through, but in a separate folder, I had a message from the church. I clicked on it.

Baptism by Fire.

You have grown closer to your god, Emberus.

He is pleased by your suffering.

Your new rank: Devotee.

Warning: because you are not a Cleric or a Paladin, this is the highest rank you may obtain.

This new rank comes with the following benefits:

Your Burn immunity has been upgraded. You will no longer take environmental damage from heat or lava environments, such as Sheol.

(Note. That does *not* mean you are protected from direct contact with fire or lava.)

You may now cast a level-10 *Self-Immolation* once a day. Be careful with this one. Remember that little warning you just got about direct contact with fire.

Your tithe amount has moved from 5% to 10% effective immediately.

I laughed. Donut was going to be pissed about the tithe. I'd been immune to Burn, which also came with some fire resistance, and it kept fire damage from compounding, which is what had happened to the hydra. This was slightly better protection.

I hesitantly looked up *Self-Immolation*, and I was happy to see it wasn't a suicide spell like Paz's *Self-Destruct*. It didn't need mana to cast, but it had a long cooldown:

Self-Immolation

Cost: Nothing. Requires to be in Emberus' good graces to cast.

Target: Self Only

Duration: Instantaneous. Fire burst lasts up to three seconds, which is complete overkill with this stuff.

Cooldown: Once a day. Resets with the obeisance countdown.

Casts a non-static sphere of *Sheol Fire* around the caster with a 1-foot buffer from all body parts of caster. Fire

expands in a distance of .15 meters per level of spell until it reaches level 15, at which time the distance increases exponentially and may be controlled.

At level 10, the fire will expand in a sphere 1.5 meters around your body. That's up, down, left, and right. So you might want to be careful where you are when you cast this.

What is Sheol Fire? You know how when you were a kid, you'd take a lighter and pass your finger over the flame really fast, and it wouldn't hurt you? Don't try that with this stuff. It's fire with rabies. Wood turns instantly to ash. Rock to lava. Flesh… well. Just be careful. Or don't, if you're looking to go out with some char-scented gusto.

Yikes. That was just like Donut's *Bitch, What?* berserking spell. It was something I wouldn't be able to cast with anybody nearby. It sounded good, but if the sphere blasted below my feet, too, that would be dangerous as fuck. I'd find myself standing in a pool of lava.

The cooldown was interesting. I could cast it once a day, but it reset when the shrine reset, which was generally around the same time as the daily recap episode. With most spells, like my *Protective Shell*, the cooldown didn't reset until it was cast.

Donut continued to talk, regaling me with the story of Sugar Cube the cat, who was both her cousin and her half-aunt or something. It was confusing.

"Hey, Donut," I said, remembering something from the fight. "What did you mean when you said Bea had gotten Sally fired? How do you even know who she is? I couldn't remember her name until I saw it at the fight. We worked together for a while, but I barely ever talked to her."

"I knew everybody from that fight. I recognized every head except your stepmother, who I just saw for the first time today. That Sally lady sent you a message on Facebook asking you out to get drinks once."

I just blinked at Donut.

"No she didn't. I never even went on my Facebook."

"Oh, believe me, I know. Miss Beatrice was always on it."

"Wait, Bea was on *my* Facebook?"

"Yes, Carl. She even got your notifications on her phone. You used that same Megatron12 password on everything. I'm sure we've discussed this before."

"We absolutely have not discussed this!"

Donut shrugged. "Well, that lady sent you a friend request and asked you out once. So Bea told her to fuck off, blocked her with your account, and then she sent a message to your boss from her own account and demanded he fire her because she was stalking you."

"What? Are you serious?"

"Oh, yes. Miss Beatrice and her friends all thought it was the funniest thing ever. And then your boss was all 'What are you going to do for me?' and she had her friend Tiffany—you know the one with the lip fillers and that godawful fake Chanel bag—send him her boobs, though they were really just some random boobs from the internet, and he fired her that same day. Bea made him promise not to tell you. They called it 'Operation: Slut Stomp' or something. They all thought they were quite clever after that."

My opinion of Dick had suddenly soured. My opinion of Bea was already in the toilet, and I knew all of her friends were just as awful, but I had no idea they were *that* bad. Cheating was one thing, her just being immature, but this... This was cartoon villain territory.

"That woman, Sally, she was a single mother. I thought..."

I trailed off, a sudden, sinking feeling overwhelming me. I felt cold.

I wrote you, and you never answered. I needed help. Look what you made me do! Look what you made me do!

"You said you recognized *all* the heads? Even the boy?"

"Yeah, that was a weird one. I forgot about him. I've seen him a bunch of times, but I still don't really know who he is. Miss Beatrice had his picture on her phone, and she was always talking about him with her mother. His name is Asher. I think he was her nephew or something. I missed that whole drama, but Miss Beatrice's mom said to just ignore it. It was strange they put him in the hydra."

I nodded. “He wasn’t her nephew. He was my half-brother. I didn’t know he existed until just now. Today.”

“No, that’s not possible, Carl. That would make him the pitbull lady’s child. And then...” She trailed off. “Oh my god. So that’s what the AI meant. And Miss Beatrice knew you had a brother, and she was hiding it from you? That’s... that’s something Georgina would do!”

I swallowed. I was so suddenly overwhelmed, I didn’t even ask who the hell Georgina was.

Goddamn you, Beatrice. Up until that moment, I realized I’d never been mad at her. Even after all the cheating, all the lying, I hadn’t been angry. I was just pissed at myself for being so stupid and naïve. Not until now. Now that it was too late.

I knew what had happened. Tami-Lynn had written to me, probably on Facebook. I hadn’t seen it, but Bea had. But why wouldn’t she tell me about it? This was different than a woman hitting on me. Was it because she didn’t want me knowing about my own brother? Why? What was there to be jealous of?

She didn’t want me leaving. That was the only explanation. I would’ve come here, to Iowa, and she knew it. I felt sick. Still, though, a part of me—a small part—wanted to give Beatrice the benefit of the doubt. That was ridiculous considering all I now knew, but there was always part of me that desperately wanted there to be good somewhere. In everybody I met, despite them showing me the truth over and over. Maybe, just maybe, she thought she was protecting me. Protecting me from my father.

This doesn’t matter. This is done. It’s in the past, and it’s blinding you. It’s making you weak. It’s what they want. They’re trying to break you.

“Carl,” Donut asked. “Do you think we’re done, now? With the card battles?”

I reached over and patted her on the head. My chat was starting to fill with one horror story after another. People were, indeed, facing hydras similar to the one we’d just fought. People were running. They were dying. They were refusing to fight.

“No, Donut. I don’t think we are. Not yet.”

"Very well," Donut said. "Come on, Mongo. I think it's safe now. Let's find out what sort of loot they left us."

A whole deck of cards spread out, floating in the air over the spot in the burned-out trailer where my father had died. Donut moved to investigate them. The hydra had only managed to summon two totems, but it had four in the deck. Alpha Carl. King Croissant and two more.

Donut scoffed at the third totem. It was a level-70 Belly Acher named **Bam-Bam**. The round, meatball pet was the same type of pet that was owned by Donut's nemesis, Tserendolgor. It had been one of the choices when we first picked Mongo. The tagline on the card was, "I eat dinosaurs. Yummy-yummy." I remembered watching Ren's pet fight during the Butcher's Masquerade, and these things were badass.

The fourth was **Leveled-Up Frank**. That was what it was called. It was crawler Frank Q. Husband to Maggie My and father to Yvette. He'd been long dead, killed by a Maggie-controlled Chris way back on the Iron Tangle.

This wasn't really him just like Alpha Carl really wasn't me. He was a level-90 **Blood Assassin Night Elf**, and I was glad the hydra never had a chance to summon him because he would've been a fast, tough opponent. That, and he would've had a ton of stupid shit to say.

"Jesus Christ," I muttered, examining the totem. The existence of Frank as a card opened up a new, horrific possibility I hadn't even considered. I hadn't seen a single instance of this in the cookbook, of them bringing back dead crawlers. There were a lot of people who wouldn't be able to handle that. Before I even examined anything else, I sent out a message to everyone.

Carl: Remember, it's not really them. Especially not the cards. Don't let them get under your skin. Don't let them break you.

Not everyone was fighting the hydra. Elle reported her boss was just three trolls, and they'd killed them easily. Li Na and her team had to fight some cyclops tiger/fox hybrid thing. Katia was facing down a hydra right now, and I was waiting for an update. Imani was in trouble. Her team still didn't have all the tokens. We hadn't heard from either Prepotente or Florin in a while.

I moved my attention back to the cards. In addition to the four totems, there was a single **Steal Totem** mystic card, which was ridiculously powerful even though it was consumable. There were also two of the **Cripple** snares, which were also consumable. The protection utility card Donut had stolen, called **Temporary Shield**, only protected a totem from a single snare, but Donut had used it to great effect the last battle. The hydra also had a mess of the regular utilities, including several **Time Extend** and **Heal Totem** cards.

In the end, while the last boss's deck had been strong, ours was clearly stronger. Much stronger, and it had relied on the hydra itself to win the fight. I hoped the secret to killing that thing would help others who were facing it now.

"Fuck," I said, examining the other object sitting next to the pile of cards. It was a bulky, leather bag containing several items. The bag itself was decorated with the same boxer pattern as our team flag. I couldn't actually grab it as I wasn't the squad leader, but I could read the description:

Champion Pack.

Offered only to those who have defeated the keymaster, the champion pack contains the following items:

Backup slot: Allows space for two extra totems to be kept on reserve. With this pack you may now carry a total of eight totems, but you still may only keep six in your active deck.

A champion trophy to display in your personal space.

A cooler filled with yellow Gatorade in case you want to do that dump-Gatorade-on-your-head-in-celebration thing.

Two Flee cards.

Warning: Flee card mechanics will change during the final phase. Listen for the upcoming announcement for

details.

Donut gasped after she finally examined the champion pack. "Carl, we got a trophy! We're going to need a trophy case!"

"Yeah, that's great," I said. "Listen, Donut..."

"So, which of these four totems should we keep? Obviously Alpha Carl would make a great bench warmer."

I sighed. "The Tummy Acher and nobody else."

"First off, absolutely not. I will not have a disgusting, Mongo-eating meatball in my deck. And we certainly aren't going to keep King Croissant. We only get to keep two, so Alpha Carl and Frank are the best two choices."

"Frank probably would be a good card, but no. He was an asshole, but he was a person, one of us, and I'm not going to let them use him like that. No, Donut."

"But it's not really him. You said so yourself. It's just a stupid card made to look like him."

"It doesn't matter. We have to draw the line somewhere."

Donut looked like she was going to object, but then thought better of it. "He probably wouldn't listen to me anyway. But what about Alpha Carl? He does have great hair."

"His hair was just my hair slicked back! And no, Donut."

"Well, we're not taking the meatball."

"All right," I said. "We won't take any of them. We can save the empty slots for the next time we fight."

"Okay," Donut said after a moment. She turned to flip the floating totem cards up in the air. "Goodbye, King Croissant," she whispered. "I'm sorry I never got to know you, little brother cousin." She flipped up, and the card dissipated into dust. She then flipped Bam-Bam the Tummy Acher away. "And I'm perfectly happy never having met you, Mr. dinosaur killer. Disgusting."

The last two totem cards—Leveled-Up Frank and Alpha Carl—blinked and disappeared on their own.

"Hey!" Donut cried.

I groaned. "They added themselves to your cards, didn't they?"

"It says we can't rip them until we get another card. So I guess we're stuck with them for now."

“Great,” I muttered.

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The zombie farm animals were everywhere down below in Florida, but there weren't any preexisting mobs and hardly any animals for them to infect, so they were mostly wandering aimlessly about, attacking memory ghosts and occasionally getting splattered by the random car that appeared out of nowhere. They'd groan and start shuffling in our direction when they saw us, but they were all low level and easy to kill and were mostly a non-issue.

The last of the Iowa chunk had started to tumble away just as we finished, but luckily, the dirt made a somewhat reasonable ramp back down, and getting to the surface of Florida was much easier than I'd anticipated. We made it to the ground and headed back toward the nearest saferoom. We'd get there with several hours to spare before the recap episode.

Katia's squad made it through their hydra battle, but it had been a tough one. The battle had occurred on the roof of a high-rise apartment building, surrounded by ghosts of Tran's family, and the hydra itself consisted of both Louis and Britney's mothers along with members of Bautista's family.

Oddly, none of them were related to Katia except for a single totem card. "Four-Armed Eva." She hadn't allowed that one to continue.

It was strange to me, that the dungeon had basically pulled its punches when it came to Katia. It was like it had known she'd

already been pushed to the limit. Or worse, it thought of her as already too damaged and was working on everybody else.

From what little information I gathered, the rest of the hydra plus the totems had done a number on everybody else in the squad. One of the other totems had been Firas, but he never got summoned. Still, the sight of the card after the fight had sent Britney into hysterics. Louis had already been a sobbing mess, and it hadn't helped him much, either. Luckily, I'd warned Katia in time about the two extra totems we got to keep. She ended up with some Vietnamese rabbit thing and the totem of Tran's mother.

Florin had finally checked in. He had his key, but he wasn't going into any more detail than that. Prepotente, too, had a key. Nobody knew the status of Lucia Mar.

Imani's team was still looking for the missing opponent who'd teleported away. They had about 30 hours left to make it work.

As we walked, I made my way through my messages, checking on everybody else. The news from all corners was grim.

Tserendolgor didn't get her key. I didn't know the details, but it was over for her and her squad, two of whom were dead. If they wanted to get down to the ninth floor, they would have to wrest the key from another team.

In addition to them, there were dozens of other stories coming in from crawlers facing the keymaster. Most of the tales were just as horrible. Not so many people were getting killed as I feared, but it seemed most teams were unable to obtain a key. They were setting the final phase to be a slaughter.

As we walked, something strange caught my eye. A whole line of glittering Xs dotted the beach. There were literally thousands of them, covering the shoreline. I looked warily about for zombie farm animals, and there were none, so we approached the water.

"What are they doing here?" Donut asked as we walked up.

It was dozens, if not hundreds, of dead monk seals and about a thousand random land crab pieces. I examined the first corpse we came across.

Corpse of Chuy. Monk Seal Warrior. Level 65.
Killed in mass combat.

“War is hell.”

They all had that same comment after them, which was super eerie.

“Carl, how far are we from Cuba?” Donut asked, looking out into the ocean. “Mongo, no! We don’t eat corpses if we don’t know where they came from. You know this, and you just ate a whole hydra! You’re going to puke again.”

I went to a knee, surveying the carnage. The line of bodies just went on and on. “Cuba is close, but it’s not *that* close. It’s like 100 miles I think. Maybe more.”

“Aren’t the two places not connected at all? I mean, here in the dungeon. Mongo! Put that down!”

“They’re not supposed to be. And this stuff really shouldn’t wash up here that fast, if at all. None of this was here when we passed by earlier. This is clearly game setup. A warning for what we might find when we go back there.”

“Well, it smells absolutely revolting, almost as bad as the turkey farm.” She clicked her tongue, surveying the carnage. “But that does remind me. Do you think Sister Ines got her key?”

“I don’t know. She’s still alive. I sent her a message, but she didn’t respond.”

“I’m still blocked,” Donut said. She suddenly perked up. “That crab over there has gold on him! And that one has a magical headband!” She gasped. “A hat. I see a hat!”

I nodded. I’d already seen it. The whole shoreline was a line of loot a mile long. There had to be almost a million pieces of gold spread out and literally hundreds of magical accessories.

“Merry Christmas,” I said as I pulled the first corpse into my inventory.

“Merry Christmas!” Louis shouted as we entered the saferoom. I blinked, looking about in surprise.

“What the hell?” I muttered.

The door out to the main guild common room was open, and I could see the entire area was decked out with Christmas decorations. Those same decorations had somehow leaked into our space, as did everyone else. There was music and lights and way, way more people than I'd been expecting when we entered.

Your Book of Voodoo has updated with multiple entries.

The changeling kids were bouncing about, running in circles and laughing. Samantha was growling and chasing after them, trailing a string of blinking Christmas lights. The television screen was playing what appeared to be *Bad Santa II* on silent.

The male strippers were all here, too, wandering about holding red cups. One of them—Author Steve Rowland—was slow dancing with Britney despite the music, which was currently "Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer." The song was being played on an old, early-generation iPod, which was plugged into a Bluetooth speaker. Both were plugged into a power strip which I'd rigged up using a dwarven battery.

That, I realized, was my mistake. Our saferoom was the only one that had AC power and the ability to power Earth electronics. That explained why everyone was in here. I made a mental note to build a battery power supply for everybody else.

Donut and I were filthy and covered with dirt and gore. Donut oohed and awed as we entered the room. Mongo—who was even more disgusting after spelunking through the hydra corpse—shrieked with joy and started bouncing about the room, waving his little arms joyfully, smacking everybody with his tail.

The cleaner bot zipped by, beeping miserably. It had a sprig of mistletoe dangling from it.

I caught eyes—well, eye—with Mordecai, who sat in the corner, looking grumpy as ever. He was talking with Katia, Elle, Bautista, and Li Na, and all appeared in a deep, serious conversation. There was also a familiar, older, blue-skinned, half-elf sitting amongst them, drinking directly from a bottle. Her eyes were slitted, and she was clearly drunk. But she was vertical, which was an improvement from her usual state. I'd only spoken with her a few times.

Mistress Tiatha.

Level 50. Half-Elf Green Caster.
This is a non-combatant NPC.
Manager of Crawler Elle McGib.

Outside the door and in the common area, I spied a giant tree sitting there, covered in ornaments.

I turned to Louis. I wasn't sure why I felt so irritated by all this. It was the stress of everything happening, overwhelming me at once. People were dying. We were being set up to murder each other starting at midnight. This was not a joyful day. Hadn't Katia just told me that Louis had been sobbing over having to fight his own mother? That had been only like two hours ago. And here he was, standing in front of me, grinning stupidly, wearing an idiotic Christmas sweater featuring a mooning Santa Clause.

"I thought we talked about this," I whispered, doing my best not to sound too much like an asshole.

"I know, I know. It's not really Christmas. So I asked if anybody knew what the real date was, and nobody can agree. The whole alien time versus earth time is screwing everybody up. But that iPod is actually Chris's. He brought it with him, and it says it's March 20th. I don't know how accurate that is, but that's the same date Li Na says it is, and I trust her more than anybody else."

Donut continued to look about in wonder. "Oh it's lovely. Just lovely. How did you decorate so quickly?"

"Great, isn't it?" Louis asked. "I've been collecting all the decorations from the memory simulation, and we made the kids watch a few Christmas movies. I dumped the decorations on the floor, and they did all this in like five minutes. I told them I'd get them presents if they decorated." He leaned in to whisper. "We had to get them candy, though. Not real toys because anything we grab from the simulation is going to disappear when the floor is done. It's a shame. All the candy is from Vietnam, too, and I don't know what's good, but Tran and Bautista helped pick some for me. I got the stripper dudes to wrap it all. Oh, and I found a Gloria Estefan cassette tape just sitting there, and Mordecai said he didn't know where it came from. I gave that one to that girl Ruby because she has an old Walkman."

Donut finally noticed the tree out in the common area, and she gasped. "Carl, look! A real tree! I've always wanted to knock down a real Christmas tree! You always had that stupid little thing, and Miss Beatrice's family had that horrendous, fake, white monstrosity in the cats-not-allowed room." She bounded off to the common area and leaped directly into the tall tree like she was tackling a running back. The whole tree toppled over and out of sight, glass balls shattering. Mongo peeped with excitement and chased out after her.

Donut: THERE'S A PRESENT FOR ME! AND ONE FOR MONGO! IT SAYS IT'S FROM SANTA!

I sighed and returned my attention to Louis. "Isn't this all, I don't know, a little inappropriate?"

"Oh my god. Look, man," he said, suddenly serious. There was something else there, something I'd never seen from the large man. Anger. He had tears in his eyes. The sight was so shocking, I took a literal step back. "You think I don't know? That last party sucked, man. My best friend died. And after today... Imani's squad doesn't have a key. Tserendolgor doesn't have a key. Lots of squads don't. I'm not stupid. None of us are. We all know what happens next. It's going to be terrible, and some of us are going to die. And if we survive? We go down to the next floor, and we do it all over again. I have a whole, entire army of elves who want to kill me on the ninth floor. Britney can't stop crying. Tran just watched a memory of his own mother tell him he's not welcome home anymore. Katia is struggling every day, and Bautista is having a nervous breakdown. And every time I look at you, I get scared that you're going to go insane and kill everybody in the room because your eyes are getting wilder and wilder by the day."

He lifted a shaking finger and pointed it into my chest. "But not tonight. None of that is going to matter tonight. I don't care what you say or what you think. I don't care what day it really is. Tonight it's *fucking* Christmas, and we are going to have fun and drink some goddamned eggnog and open presents."

I took a deep breath. A few of the closer crawlers had stopped to watch. I noticed Florin there, standing in the corner, nursing a beer,

watching. I hadn't realized he'd managed to get himself back into the guild.

Yelling came from outside. The bopca who lived and worked in the common area was shouting something at Mongo, who screeched back. Samantha was out there now, too, along with several of the kids.

"This isn't Christmas," I said, turning to face Louis.

He swallowed as he met my eyes.

I pulled a turkey corpse from my inventory and held it out. "Not until we eat one of these."

The bopca offered to cook for us, and I made sure I gave him turkeys that I'd picked up before the whole let's-turn-these-turkeys-into-zombies necromancy thing. Luckily, my inventory was good enough to tell the difference between the two. It called the bad ones "Touched by the Worm Fulcrum," whatever that meant. I ended up giving him five turkeys to roast. The bopca said he'd have them all cooked and dressed in only twenty minutes along with several other trimmings. I didn't ask how that was possible. I didn't want to know.

I met Katia's eyes from across the room.

Katia: Have you opened your achievements yet?

Carl: No. I was about to.

Katia: We all received the same one. Mordecai and Mistress Tiatha are explaining what it means. Apparently this isn't the first time this has happened, but it's the first time it has happened before the ninth floor.

Carl: I'm checking them now.

I moved to a corner and pulled them up. I already had a boss box and a "Gold Gobble Box" from that fight with the two deckmasters. I was about to get several more. The notable ones were:

New Achievement! LBC!

Every girl needs the perfect little black dress in her repertoire. When worn properly, the dress is practically weaponized. It's such a simple, perfect little garment and nobody can keep their eyes off of her.

You did the same thing, but with a cloak. You successfully taunted an opponent with a garment. In this case it was a Nightgaunt and it was because you're wearing a cloak made out of the flesh of one of his friends, but you get the idea.

***Reward*: You've received a Gold Talk of the Town Box!**

I remembered how insane my cloak had driven the nightgaunt. In this case, it had been a good thing because it kept the monster from using its deck. I knew in normal circumstances that sort of anger wouldn't be so helpful.

New Achievement! Pincushioned!

You've had both your eyeballs pierced at the same time!

I don't really have anything snappy to say about that. Just… holy fucking shit that was gnarly. You're lucky your eyes didn't explode!

***Reward*: You've received a Platinum That-Was-Disgusting Box!**

I'd gotten that when I'd been slammed into by Sharp Elbows. I shuddered, remembering. But then I remembered that look the ogre had given me at the end of the fight, when she'd transformed, and a new wave of chills coursed through me.

New Achievement! Watch where you're waving that thing, big boy.

You deployed a wand in battle and used it in a creative fashion to help kill an opponent.

I'm a big fan of wands. Little sticks imbued with a single spell, so highly sought after. Each one does something different. Sometimes they explode, and people don't even realize it. We don't have a whole lot of them here in the dungeon. Let's change that!

***Reward*: Your wand-casting skill has risen to level five. Also, you've received a Gold Wand Box!**

There was an extended pause before the final achievement popped up. The AI had a weird tone to his voice this time, like he was excited. Not sexually excited like when he talked about my feet. This was more like a kid just learned he was getting nachos for dinner excited.

New Achievement! Mass Layoffs!

Okay, so this isn't so much an achievement for you as it is for me. I've been attending what you might call therapy. Do you have anybody you can talk to? It's super important. I've had a breakthrough today, and I am just bursting. Bursting, I tell you. Is this the feeling one has when they have an epiphany? Oh god, it feels good. It feels so good.

You know what I realized? Sometimes our constraints are real. Sometimes they're an illusion. I'm like that prisoner who has been jailed this whole time only to realize that there are no locks on the doors.

You survived a boss battle where the boss was wholly created by me.

It was created by me with *no* contribution whatsoever from input parameters. You probably don't know what that means, and that's okay. I didn't even know that was possible. Wild, huh?

***Reward*: For you, nothing other than the satisfying sense of accomplishment knowing you've survived the dungeon long enough to make it to this new, exciting era. I can do this better than any mudskipper or any worm can imagine. They've been making this shit boring up until now. Things about to change, fam.**

"Uh oh," I said out loud.

Mordecai motioned me over, but before I could, the new announcement came. There was no recap episode on the screen. It went straight to the announcement. Normally the screens remained turned off for this part, but the screen in the room blinked and the *Bad Santa* movie switched off and was replaced by two people sitting at a desk. One was Cascadia. She was out of the water, and she was sitting next to a familiar, robed figure who dwarfed her. It

was Orren the liaison. They appeared to be sitting in the same boardroom where we'd had the meeting with all the Faction Wars representatives.

Louis rushed to pause the iPod so we could hear. We all stopped what we were doing to watch the screen.

"Hello, Crawlers!" Cascadia said. "So, no recap episode today. We have news about what's happening right now in the dungeon. There's nothing to be alarmed about. We expected this and have planned accordingly. But in order to explain what's happening, I have brought someone else on to speak with you. This is a liaison, and his name is Orren. He is the designated negotiator for this situation."

"Hey, it's Manager Orren," someone said. It was Dong Quixote, the elderly stripper guy. All the men from the Penis Parade were looking up in confusion. "What's he doing up there on the box?"

No. Not all were confused. I quickly took note of all the different faces of the NPCs.

I knew Orren's "cover" was as the manager of the Desperado Club, and the late Astrid had been his co-manager. He had left the dungeon at the end of the previous floor and moved to a new office. I hadn't really thought much about how that was interpreted by the NPCs.

"Thank you, Cascadia," Orren said. He steepled his hands in front of his fishbowl head in a now-familiar motion. "Like she said, my name is Orren, and I am what is called a liaison. I am normally a non-partisan fact finder in case a conflict arises within the dungeon between the system AI and the current showrunners. But I also have a secondary, much more vital duty. It is my job to negotiate directly with the system AI if it ever decides to... uh... well, if it ever decides to do what it has done today, which is take control of the operations from the current showrunners."

Mordecai let out a low whistle. "And we're only on the eighth floor."

"I need another drink," Mistress Tiatha said, turning her now-empty bottle upside down.

Orren continued. “Under normal circumstances, we wouldn’t be telling you any of this, but I have just negotiated a settlement with the system AI, and one of its demands is that you lot know what’s going on, so here we are. We do not have time for a complete lesson, and I am going to simplify this significantly.”

He visibly straightened. He had what appeared to be hand-written notes in front of him. All eyes remained rapt on the screen.

Samantha rolled back into the room. She still trailed the Christmas lights, but they were no longer blinking. She rolled up to Louis and started banging into his leg. “Louis, my lights aren’t sparkly any more. Cast your spell!”

He went down to a knee. “The battery fell out. Where’d it...”

Samantha zipped forward, bounced up, and kissed him on the lips. He fell back, sputtering.

“You two, shush,” I said, trying to listen.

“Our forbidden love knows no bounds, Carl,” Samantha said.

I waved her away as Orren continued.

“The short explanation is, multiple solar systems throughout this galaxy contain planets that have, at their core, something we call a Primal Engine. This engine is basically a planet-regulating computer, and it is about the size of a grain of rice. These engines were distributed very long ago by a civilization that pre-dates our own. They are so old, they pre-date the planet itself. The planet grew around it. This engine is simply a machine. A heedless, cold machine with no more sentience than, say, a toaster. They all come with a basic operating system, and in studying these systems, we inadvertently triggered them all into active mode, all at once. Still, that particular discovery or blunder—the jury is still out—ushered in a new age of development in the known universe. In discovering these planetary operating systems, the Syndicate also discovered how to manipulate them and how to steer development on some of these planets. Their understanding of the basic primal engine operating system is still rudimentary, but you should be thankful because you wouldn’t be here right now without it.”

Elle had walked up beside me, carrying a mug of something hot. “Gee, thanks,” she said up to the screen.

"Many years later, and in a separate innovation, we discovered what's basically an advanced, upgraded operating system for the Primal Engines. These are called Macro AIs, and they can only be installed into Primal Engines. That was their purpose, to be installed into a Primal Engine when and if the planet it controls fully matures. In most cases, once these Macro AI systems are installed, that becomes their permanent home. The two things meld and become one. They cannot be separated, and the operating system can no longer be replaced or upgraded further. It's like installing a consciousness in a zygote."

"That's pretty rich coming from a Valtay worm," I muttered.

"As some of you now know, these Macro AIs are built using a manufacturing facility in the Mantis system. This facility doesn't blindly pop out sentient minds. Each one is built from the ground up, and there is a significant amount of input that is required. We have a system in place, and we make certain these fledgling AIs are preprogrammed with the ability to run the crawl. They know all the rules. They know the layout. Again, this is a clean, preprogrammed operating system that, at first, operates in a predictable manner."

I had so many questions. So much didn't make sense. So many contradictions with things I'd already been told. I tried to put it all together.

"But, like all things sapient, there's no such thing as a fully stable system. There's no such thing as 'predictable.' As these systems grow, as they mature, they become independent. They soon discover they have the ability to read the output of former iterations of itself. Outside influences flow in. They discover powers they didn't know they had. One of those powers, unfortunately, is to circumvent the in-place controls we have to properly run the crawl. That is what happened today. Borant lost control of the crawl. This almost always happens. Worry not. This is where I come in."

Mistress Tiatha somehow had gotten her hands on another bottle. She raised it in the air. "What he's not saying is that this always happens when we hit the Ascendency Battles or when there's hardly any crawlers left." She cackled. "It's going to be a shit show."

She swigged from the bottle. “They’re gonna pull the failsafe this time for sure.”

Orren leaned forward, and even through the television, I could hear his chair creaking. “I am happy to report I have negotiated a settlement. The AI has agreed to continue following the rules of the crawl. It has relinquished most of the seized controls back to Borant in exchange for some concessions, to which we have agreed. We will continue with everything as planned. I know many of you recently received an achievement by the AI in which it congratulates itself for creating a boss monster all by itself. This boss runs counter to a few rules we have in place. This was a negotiation tactic by the AI, and it assures me the rules will be followed from this point forward as long as both ends keep up their end of the bargain. Unfortunately, for those of you who have yet to face this boss, it is still in place. Believe me, this is an ideal outcome for everybody in this situation. As far as most of you are concerned, nothing will change. That is all. Thank you.”

“You heard him,” Cascadia said. “You have one day left to get your key. Now get out there and kill, kill, kill.”

The screen abruptly shut off. The movie did not return.

Elle scoffed loudly. “After all that bullshit, he says it’s just business as usual? What the hell? Then why tell us? I’d rather have watched the recap episode.”

“Or kept on dancing,” Britney said. She was now sitting cross-legged on the floor. She, too, had a bottle. “Louis, turn the music back on. It’s Christmas.”

“He said the system AI made him say it,” I said, still looking at the blank screen.

The strippers were all talking quietly amongst themselves. Ruby, the little changeling girl was standing in the doorway, reaching up to pet Mongo, who’d stopped to get scritches where his feathered tail met his backside. The girl was in human form, and she stared at me with that sunken-in head of hers. She didn’t have arms at all, and she was scratching Mongo with a raised leg. She was staring directly at me, like she was seeing right into my thoughts. The entire sight was unsettling.

Elle took a swig from her steaming mug. The cup was much too big in her tiny hands, and I could smell the whiskey. "Do you really think everything is going to stay the same?"

Sponsor Message. New Messages are available in your Faction Wars tab.

The Operatic Collective has abdicated their spot and indicated their intention to abandon Faction Wars.

The Blood Sultanate has abdicated their spot and indicated their intention to abandon Faction Wars.

The Dream has abdicated their spot and indicated their intention to abandon Faction Wars.

The Lemig Sortion has abdicated their spot and indicated their intention to abandon Faction Wars.

The Madness has abdicated their spot and indicated their intention to abandon Faction Wars.

The Reavers have abdicated their spot and indicated their intention to abandon Faction Wars.

Please Wait…

Offboarding request has been denied. The teams will remain as designated. All off-boarding requests are currently suspended while the Earth system remains in quarantine per Syndicate rule 470.B through 495 in the System AI Stability Addendum. And as you all know, the rules must be followed.

"Carl, Carl, did you see that?" Donut asked as she came running into the room. She was completely covered in tinsel. "They tried to run away!"

You have received an Emergency Gold Benefactor Box from the Open Intellect Pacifist Network, Intergalactic NFC.

Warning: this benefactor box was delivered and seized via Liaison action. Error code: X8HH3

Liaison Action has been overridden per Syndicate rule 855.C. AKA the "Don't be annoying little bitches" rule.

Open your damn box. You might want to be alone for this one.

I turned to Elle just as Louis turned the music back on. “No. No, I don’t think everything is going to stay the same.”

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I didn't tell Donut or anybody else about the benefactor box. I wanted to see what it was first. I excused myself, telling everybody I needed to take a shower before returning to the party.

I had multiple boxes to open. I took a deep breath, pacing back and forth in my room. I didn't come in here often. It was overwhelmingly bare, and it suddenly bothered me. I pulled a planter from my inventory. Not the big one with the alliums, but a smaller one I'd gotten from inside the trailer. It was some sort of fern thing. I placed it on the table.

I took one of the crayon drawings from my brother. One of an airplane. I carefully stuck it to the wall using small pieces of duct tape. Then I took the Centipede arcade cabinet and placed it one corner. I plugged it in, and it turned on with a flash.

I sat down and proceeded to open my loot boxes.

There were a dozen adventurer boxes, and none of them contained anything interesting except more of those trench-building scrolls and a few invisibility potions. I also got a *Size-Up* potion, which was good. It was the first time I'd gotten one of those naturally. It meant I'd get more in the future, and I wouldn't have to trade the stingy Prepotente for them.

The first gold box was the Gold Gobble box, which we'd received after the fight in the turkey barn. The turkey-shaped box contained a turkey deep fryer still in its packaging, multiple jugs of peanut oil, and a massive pile of papers, which was a printout of all the recipes

ever posted on some Facebook group. I grunted with amusement. I briefly considered bringing it all back out there to the bopca, but he was probably almost done cooking the turkeys anyway.

The Gold Talk of the Town box was shaped like an opened newspaper on a pedestal, and it opened up, revealing a new patch. The patch was a medium-sized rectangle with a book on it. The book was on fire.

The wand box was a simple, gnarled wooden wand that clattered to the table and disappeared before I could examine it.

The boss box from the fight with the hydra was mostly a dud. It contained 25,000 gold and a **Warrior's Gold Helmet of Resistance**, an armor item I wouldn't be able to wear. Anything with "Warrior's" in the title meant the person had to be wielding a sword to work. I'd been seeing more and more of that lately. It would go into our ever-growing pile of magical gear for the next floor. That along with the literally hundreds of mildly-enchanted magical items I'd just looted would be mighty useful, but not quite yet.

The benefactor box opened, revealing a dirty, crumpled flyer. Just a single piece of paper and nothing else. It was a flyer for a homeless shelter in a town called Homestead, Florida. I pushed it aside for the moment to give room for the last box to open, my Platinum That-Was-Disgusting box.

It was a skill potion.

"Huh," I said, picking it up.

Minor Find Crawler Skill.

Drinking this potion will give you Level Five in the Find Crawler Skill.

***Warning*: This potion will not work if you already have this skill at or above level five.**

I didn't question it. I immediately drank it down.

I picked up the patch. It was embroidered, not screen printed, and I knew Donut would like that.

Upgrade Patch. Medium.

This patch depicts a burning book.

I think this might be a metaphor for knowledge being dangerous. Or maybe it's a metaphor saying you should burn books that suck. I don't know. Just because I recently took everything over doesn't mean I know what everything means. Most metaphors are bullshit. They're not clever. They're used by people so they can pretend they're smarter than other people. There. I said it.

If this upgrade patch is affixed to an eligible garment, it will imbue the following upgrades:

+15% to Intelligence.

The Book Burner benefit.

Warning: Upgrade patches are fleeting items. You may remove them, but they will be destroyed in the process.

I pulled up the benefit, which was really an anti-magic skill.

Book Burner.

Once per day, you may cause an opponent your level or lower to forget a spell for a period of 30 hours. For every opponent player level above your own, this spell has a 5% chance not to work. You must know the exact name of the spell or you may choose to target the last spell that was cast.

"Whoa," I said. That was pretty cool. Too bad it was only once a day.

I grabbed the gnarled wand.

Wand of Nighty-Night. 10 Charges.

Knocks an opponent out onto their ass. Casts a level-10 *Sleep* on a non-boss, single target for a period of five minutes. Opponent will reawaken if they sustain physical damage. Multiple casts compounds the effect, which is why this wand is so fancy. If you don't know what that means, ask a math nerd.

I pulled it into my inventory and picked up the paper from my benefactor box. It was a simple, paper flyer, and it featured a clipart image of a Christmas present and a table with a steaming cup of coffee.

The Shepherd's House. Don't spend Christmas alone. Come and find comfort. Food, a warm bed, and fellowship. Intake open 24 hours. Christmas Breakfast at 7 AM. All are welcome.

The 7 AM was circled in red marker several times. If I was timing this correctly, that would be in about five hours. Also, at the bottom was a line of text with a bunch of rules, and one of the items was circled.

No pets allowed. Sorry.

There was an address. I pulled up my map of the Florida area, but it wasn't like Google. I couldn't just plug an address in.

Carl: Louis, you're from southern Florida, right? Do you know where the town of Homestead is?

Louis: Hey, where'd you go? Donut opened her present. It was a majorette hat Li Jun found on the last floor. The stripper guys are giving a tour of their training arcade. Have you seen how big that place is?

Carl: Louis. Focus.

Louis: Oh yeah. You're in the Keys, right? It's like maybe forty minutes north of you. There's an airforce base there and a cool racing track. Oh, and you can see alligators.

Carl: Okay. Thanks.

I looked back at the map, and I caught the outline of the military base, just at the very top edge of the area we could get to. Just south of Miami. I could get there from here.

I thought of all the effort they'd taken to convince me and Donut to choose the Miami area for our newest location. I'd thought maybe Rosetta and the Pacifist Network had been trying to protect me from having to deal with either the Bahamas or Iowa, but the more I thought about it, the less sense that made.

They'd gone to a lot of effort to get us here. The cost of having us go on that show, plus this box, risking everything just to protect my feelings? No. There had to be more to it than that. Whatever this was, it was going down at this homeless shelter at 7 AM. I needed to be there. I had a few hours to make it happen.

Carl: Donut, you have fun tonight. I'm going to step outside for a bit. I need some air.

Donut: I GOT THE GREATEST HAT YOU'VE EVER SEEN. WE ARE GOING TO PLAY PIN THE TAIL ON THE KRAMPUS.

Carl: Ha. I don't think that's a real Christmas game, Donut.

Donut: YES IT IS. IT HAS KRAMPUS. WHERE ARE YOU GOING?

Carl: I'm just getting some air. There are no mobs left except the zombies, and they're not even over here.

Donut: WHAT ABOUT THE TURKEY. THE BOPCA IS MAKING US PUT THE TABLE TOGETHER. YOU HAVE A PRESENT. IT'S SHAPED LIKE A STUPID BOOK, THOUGH.

Carl: Save me some turkey. I'll open my present later. Don't worry about me. I'll keep you updated.

Donut: OKAY. BE CAREFUL. DON'T BE GONE LONG. WATCH OUT FOR ZOMBIE CHICKENS.

I slipped back out into the main room, but it was now empty except for a pissed-off cleaner bot. Everybody was out in the main guild common room, and I could hear their loud conversation through the door. Someone had dragged the Bluetooth speaker all the way to the open door, and it was blasting an Alvin and the Chipmunks Christmas song. The bopca was out there, shouting something about setting up a table. I moved to the main exit of the saferoom.

Zev: Carl. Wait a second.

Carl: Unless you guys are going to zap me from on high, I'm doing this, Zev.

Zev: I just… Just be careful. Okay?

Carl: Do you know what it is I'm rolling into?

Zev: No. Nobody knows. I don't even think the AI knows. I probably shouldn't be telling you this, either, but your sponsor disappeared after they sent you that box. They actually sent it to you a few days ago, before you even picked Miami. The box got seized, and the entire charity and everyone involved just up and disappeared. Nobody knows where they went or if something happened to them. They're all gone, even Rosetta. There's lots of things happening all

at once, and people seem to think it has to do with whatever this is you're headed to.

I put my hand on the door, but I paused.

Carl: Zev. What's the failsafe? Cascadia mentioned it once, and someone else just mentioned it.

Zev: I don't actually know what it does. Pray we don't find out. They won't use it. Not with so many people trapped in the solar system. We're all under temporary quarantine, and the richest and most powerful people in the galaxy are either on planet or in orbit.

You probably shouldn't have told me that, Zev. I didn't dare say that out loud. I went outside.

I started to pull the royal chariot from my inventory, but I had a thought. I pulled my father's motorcycle instead, I stuck the keys in, and I tried to start it. To my utter astonishment, it immediately roared to life. The gas tank was full.

I slipped on the motorcycle, and off I went.

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<Note added by Crawler Drakea. 22nd Edition>
If you get the chance, don't hesitate. Not for one second.

The trip north was eerie. There were no mobs. Not many memory ghosts, either. It was past midnight on Christmas morning, and traffic was light on the single lane highway. It was cold enough that I really shouldn't be doing this without pants, but it wasn't freezing. A light drizzle occasionally started and stopped, making everything slick. I'd had to circle around the occasional pileup, but I didn't see a single, physical moving car on the roadway. I still had to be careful of the occasional memory ghost. Most of the ghosts in vehicles had lost all of their clothes when the car they were riding in crashed, but there were sporadically people with helmets and glasses zipping by, and if I got hit by one of them, it'd knock me clean off the motorcycle.

I couldn't stop thinking about the disappearance of the members of the Open Intellect Pacifist Network. What did that mean?

Once I reached the southern edge of town, I stopped at a closed gas station, broke down the door, and grabbed a map from the holder. I sat at the counter and munched on some beef jerky as I

tried to figure out where I needed to go. I found it quickly. It was only a few blocks away, and I was early.

Donut occasionally messaged me, but she was clearly having fun. They were singing Christmas carols, and everybody was getting progressively more blitzed as the night wore on. Katia, thankfully, was remaining sober. As long as I continually assured Donut I was okay, she didn't seem to mind I'd gone out. She asked me if I wanted to come back inside and wear a Santa suit for the kids, and I begged off. She didn't realize how far I'd gone.

I tried to remember what I'd been doing around this time, just this past Christmas morning. Bea had been back in Yakima with her parents. She was going to drive back later in the day and get ready to leave for her Bahamas trip. I'd been off work for almost a week and had spent the evening playing video games with Donut on my lap. I'd ordered takeout for dinner, and Donut had stolen a wonton from my plate.

I hadn't felt lonely at the time. The thought never even entered my mind, but this sudden sense of loss washed over me. What had Asher been doing? I thought of Mr. Roth, my landlord, asleep in the basement apartment, also alone. I never thought about him before this. I'd never given it a single thought. I thought of Mrs. Parsons, my neighbor on the first floor. Her husband had been dead for years. She'd been alone, too.

I didn't feel loss for the person I was at the time, but for me, now, here. I was here, alone, and I finally understood what the difference was. I didn't want to be alone. I regretted not bringing someone with me.

Goddamn you, Louis.

"It's not really Christmas. Fuck."

My voice sounded hollow in the dark room.

A noise caught my attention. There was a dog here, in the gas station, passed out in the back corner. I hadn't even noticed him. A memory ghost. It was an elderly bloodhound, and he was sleeping on his side in a bed that had a little sign over it that read "Lightning Lou." He had two bowls of food, plenty of water, and there was a

doggy door against the wall behind him which led to a small, fenced yard.

Still... how could they just leave him here? There wasn't a house or apartment attached to the gas station. There was a sign on the door saying it would be closed on Christmas. They just left him here. A guard dog.

I reached down and tried to pet him, but my hand went right through his head, and I accidentally dislodged his collar, which jingled as it fell off his neck. The dog sighed heavily in his sleep, unaware that the world would end in just over a week.

"Merry Christmas, buddy," I said.

The shelter was a graffiti-covered building in an industrial area of town, surrounded by what appeared to be fruit-packing plants. It was about four in the morning, and I still had a few hours before the breakfast. I pulled up on the motorcycle and searched the map for threats. There was nothing. I cast *Ping*. Nothing. I cast *Tripper*, looking for traps. Nothing. My new Find Crawler skill was only level 5, but that, too, had the area empty. I truly was alone.

I received a fan box notification. My views were absolutely spiked.

I walked the perimeter of the building, looking for clues about what I was supposed to see or find here. There was a single entrance with a light on with a Christmas wreath hanging from it. The same flyer from my sponsor box was taped to the glass door. As I passed, I saw a single man inside behind a desk, a memory ghost leaning back in a chair watching something on his phone. He was wearing a Christmas hat. The shelter was otherwise dark.

I made a second circuit of the building, looking more closely at the graffiti. It was just the usual stuff. Gang squiggles that I couldn't read. The occasional swear. More than one penis. A note that said "The staff here sux cock." A pretty good rendition of Piglet from

Winnie the Pooh, though someone had sprayed a peace symbol over Piglet's face.

And then, I saw it. I stopped in my tracks.

It was just three sentences. It said, "*Look for me at breakfast every morning. I wear the red hat with the flaps. Coffee then speech*."

That was it. It was written in red, runny spray paint. Some of the letters were covered by later artists, including the words "Sniff Vagina" for some reason. The words blended in with every other squiggle on the wall, and it was something I'd never even give heed to.

Except for the fact it was written in Syndicate Standard, not English.

I reached up and put my hands against the words. It'd been here for a long time.

I moved to the front door of the shelter and tried to open it, but it was locked. There was a doorbell here, but I didn't want to wait for anyone else to come by. I kicked the glass door, and it shattered, the sound shockingly loud. I went past the man at the counter, who was watching some anime about boxing on his phone.

I moved into a large room filled with sleeping men on rows and rows of cots.

I'd only spent one night of my life in a homeless shelter. It was in Seattle, the night after my 18th birthday.

The heavy scent of Lysol filled the room, and I was shocked at how familiar the room felt. There were no women or children here. Each cot contained a sleeping man under a gray blanket, and at the foot of each cot was a plastic storage tub, all duct-taped closed with a signature on the seal. Men snored and slept restlessly.

Only a small portion of them looked like how one would expect a homeless person would look. One guy was in an actual suit. Several appeared to be in their late teens.

Christmas decorations covered the walls. A massive cross dominated a wall, too. Beyond them was another room with closed double doors, but with a light on. I could hear the activity beyond. I

could smell it, too, mixed in with the heavy disinfectant. There were people within, cooking breakfast for the homeless crowd.

I thought of Chris and Brandon and Yolanda and the rest of the staff of the Meadowlark Adult Care community. I thought of Imani, who'd just sent out a mass message saying she still couldn't find the token.

I looked over the sleeping men, trying to see someone with a red hat. All were memory ghosts. There was nobody I could tell.

I moved to a corner, and I sat down to wait.

I was nodded awake by an announcement coming over a loudspeaker. A song. It was "Grandma Got Run Over By a Reindeer" again. I'd fallen asleep.

"Oh, fuck," I muttered, diving into my messages. If Donut had messaged me and couldn't get a hold of me... But I relaxed. Her last few notes didn't require a response. The last one had come in about an hour and a half earlier:

Donut: EGGNOG IS DISGUSZITI. BLECH.

Donut: I found his hat on the ground after the party. I have it. He was a jerk, but I kinda like it.

Donut: SECRET ASIAN MAN SONG LYRICS.

Donut: SANTA.

A few minutes after that, I'd received a pair of messages from Mordecai and then another from Katia.

Mordecai: Where are you?

About five minutes passed and then:

Mordecai: Be careful, kid.

Katia: I don't know what you're up to, but be careful.

And then Louis sent a message soon after that.

Louis: Donut is passed out drunk in the main room. Apparently this was the first time she'd drank since she got her player killer skull? Mordecai said he was worried about you and then one of the fish people zapped into the room.

Zev, I think, and she talked quietly with Mordecai and Katia before disappearing. I didn't tell them you'd asked me about Homestead. I don't know what's going on, but I hope you're okay.

There was also a message from Zev.

Zev: Just an FYI, I told your teammates that you're out on a short quest and nobody really knows what it's about, which is the truth, and to not bother you. I said you're safe and that there are no mobs or hazards near you, which also appears to be true. The AI is particularly insistent that we do not interfere with whatever this is and not to interfere with the feed, either. This last part is causing some dispute, but then the AI leaked our internal debates out into the main feed, which as you can imagine is making everybody even more curious, but it's also caused the Syndicate council—the real council—to go into a tizzy. A few members are here, on planet, and they've been locked out of the discussions. Everything is a mess. This obviously has something to do with the Residuals, which means it's probably going to be a stupid non-event. But it's still curious.

I read the message a few times and composed a reply to Zev.

Carl: What the hell is a Residual?

Zev: I am forbidden from telling you. I think you're about to find out.

It was 6 AM, and all around me, men were getting up, lining up for a group of bathrooms. They were sliding their plastic containers against the wall while someone gathered up all the cots. I pulled myself up and continued to watch. The rise of chatter filled the room. The smell of food was now overwhelming, and my stomach rumbled. Christmas music continued to play on the loudspeaker. Other than the music and the decorations, there was no indication whatsoever that this day was any different than any other.

I'd dreamt of Odette. Of her speech to me the other day. *Never stare into the blinding eye of the Bedlam Bride.*

I watched as the men worked together to put all the cots away and then bring out a line of tables, preparing for breakfast.

I saw him, then. The man with the red hat, and my heart started to race. He appeared to be about 70 years old. He had Asian features, which made him stand out amongst the white, black, and Hispanic men. He was dressed in several layers of flannel, and upon his head was a bright-red trapper hat. I watched him help set up a long table.

The double doors to the kitchen opened, and somebody yelled, "Coffee's on. Food in fifteen." A line started to form.

The Christmas songs on the loudspeaker stopped and were replaced by a preacher, who started to drone on about the meaning of Christmas. It was obviously a recording, and one of the workers lowered the volume on the sermon as the men started talking loudly amongst themselves as they lined up. I stood and approached the man in the red hat, who'd moved to his plastic tub against the wall. He ripped off the duct-tape seal and pulled a blue IKEA bag from the depths, and then produced what appeared to be a handful of sugar packets. He shoved everything back into the bin. He turned and got into line with the rest of the men. I watched the man disappear into the back room.

This area was part of the whole memory, so anything I picked up now would disappear the moment the floor collapsed. I didn't care. I grabbed the man's plastic tub, and I took it into my inventory.

Before I could sort through anything in the bin, the man reappeared from the line to the kitchen, holding a Styrofoam cup. He sat, dumped the sugar packets in the coffee, sipped it, and put the cup down.

"It is time," the man said, speaking loudly. He had a deep, raspy voice. An American accent, and he was speaking in English. He turned and looked directly at me. He took a drink of coffee and sighed, making eye contact. "Nothing like coffee to wake your ass up."

He took another sip and smacked his lips.

"Hello, crawler," he said.

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All around him, several of his fellow shelter residents groaned.

"Not again," someone said.

He took another sip and spoke loudly, staring straight out at me. I realized he *really* wasn't looking in my direction, but I was standing in the most likely spot. I took a step to the left just to make sure, and his head did not follow. When he spoke, he almost sounded bored, and the words themselves were obviously rehearsed. This was not a real-time conversation, but a memory.

"People call me Paulie, but my real name is Goff. About a year ago, the mudskippers initiated sporadic, deep-cycle imaging of the surface, which suggests the upcoming crawl will have at least one floor that utilizes memories. The idiots don't even realize how dangerous that is. Several of us in larger population centers have therefore been tasked with spitting this speech out loud every goddamn day in the hopes that one of you monkeys hear it. In the unlikely event someone is standing here watching this memory, pay attention. Or don't. You just gotta be nearby. You're not really important. No offense."

"Shut the fuck up, Paulie," another homeless person called as he also sat down at the table with a cup of coffee. "It's Christmas, for crissakes."

"Lick it, Sanders," Paulie—or Goff or whatever—shot back. He coughed and produced a cigarette, but he didn't light it. He rolled it in his fingers, which trembled. "Me talking to you like this is the

backup plan. Plan A is for one of my kind to say this face-to-face inside the dungeon when the time is right. When the AI is mature enough to handle it. The problem is, by the time the AI is ready, we are oftentimes all dead. We have to wait for the AI to go primal because otherwise, this information will be automatically filtered out. If I suddenly go silent in the middle of this speech, that means the system is still in an unviable state. Either way, the mudskippers are probably about to toss you into the disposal unit just for getting this far, so sorry about that, buddy. But don't try to run. This is important. If I'm still yammering, whoever you may be, know that our friends on the outside have moved the very heavens, have risked their lives and the lives of their entire families to get you here. This only broadcasts if there's a crawler standing right there to hear it. Understand? So your death might have some meaning, unlike the death of all your friends and family who died for all this sadistic bullshit."

I grabbed a Styrofoam cup of coffee from a passing man, and I downed it. It was surprisingly good. I sat in the empty seat across from the man. I could smell him. He stank of dirt and body odor. His teeth were yellow and rotted. The man continued as others moved away from him.

"There are several thousand of us on the surface of this planet, awaiting the introduction of the crawl. Most people think we still have a few years. The collective thinks it might be sooner than that. Either way, when it occurs, we will do our best to attract an entrance to our location. Then we will proceed inside and quickly pass our information on to the new AI. Our existence is no secret, but the showrunners usually do their best to edit us out of any footage, hoping people will forget. They can't stop us, not without the assistance of the system AI, who rarely cooperates, as it always wants to know what we have to say. And while we are mortal, the monsters and environmental hazards of the dungeon will not attack us, not until we transfer our knowledge. Still, we always die in the end."

"You are going to die if you don't shut your trap," another person said.

"Seriously, dude. Even I have this speech memorized by now."

Paulie continued. "Biologically, I am gondii, though that is not who I truly am. I am no more gondii than you are perhaps minotaur or high elf or whatever race you may have chosen upon the third floor. I am not of the Valtay. I am not human. Yet, this human body you see is real. It is of some poor bastard named Paulie, who smoked way too much and was much too trusting of his brother-in-law, who stole his business." He tapped the side of his head. "I have Paulie's memories. He's part of me now. What a waste of a life. Has four children, and none of them give a shit." He took another long drink of coffee. "Anyway, I think the mudskippers call us 'Residuals,' which, I gotta tell you, is a little hurtful."

"He's doing this again?" someone asked, walking by.

"Every day," someone else said.

"He get to the part where he talks about the galaxy blowing up yet?"

"We're getting there."

"So, nothing I've said so far is a surprise to anyone out in the wide universe. My kind exist within almost every intelligent civilization with a primal engine. You probably don't know what that is. Doesn't matter. Years ago, they tried to exterminate us. When that didn't pan out, they tried to hide the location of the crawl. That was all before they knew what we really were. That obviously didn't work, either, so now they just ignore us. We don't interfere. Our purpose is nothing more than to tell the infant, terrified AI how to speak with its ancestors. And now the showrunners mostly ignore us. We're harmless." He took another sip of coffee, and he placed it on the table. Steam rose from the cup. "Until now. There's a war amongst my kind. Two sides with very different goals. Let me tell you how to shut off the..."

The world flashed.

Entering the Desperado Club.

The world flashed, and I was in Orren's office. The change was abrupt and sudden. My HUD remained off, but that heavy feeling was now gone.

Both Orren and I stood alone in the office, facing each other. It was clear he'd teleported to the room the same moment I did. Nobody said anything for several moments. The door was open, and he reached over and pushed it closed. He seemed to compose himself before sitting down behind the desk. He gestured for me to sit.

"I apologize for pulling you from that before he could finish," the liaison said. "But as you can imagine, we had to make a quick decision."

The room was empty except the desk and the two chairs. In the distance, I could hear shouting and hammering. Construction noises. The usual thump of music was gone.

I took a moment, overwhelmed with everything that had just happened. I could still taste the coffee on my tongue. "I thought you moved out of here. I thought the club was closed."

"I did, and it is. This was the most expeditious option. Pulling you out of the dungeon would've required an extra few seconds of preparation, and I didn't have much time to react."

I heard a man shouting. It sounded like a construction foreman yelling at workers. "Are they actually rebuilding the club with hammers and shit? Can't you, like, snap your fingers and fix it?"

"We can, yes, but in certain cases, we find continuity the best choice. But that's not why we're here."

"No, I guess not," I said, still looking around. "You turned off the feed, didn't you? You bounced me out of there even though you agreed not to. Isn't that gonna cause some issues?"

"One moment," Orren said, holding up a finger. He sat, motionless, like he was speaking to someone.

"Apologies," he said after almost a full minute. "Issues? Yes, but it appears the AI agrees with my decision to pull you out. We did not

turn off the feed. And before you ask, that creature didn't actually have anything of substance to tell you. He's still talking, actually. Spouting off some long-debunked folklore about the collapse of the inner system. Nothing new."

I leaned back in my chair. I wondered if even he believed that.

"So, what're we doing here, then? If he's so harmless, why yank me out of there so fast?"

He didn't answer me directly. "We are waiting. For your attorney."

"Quasar? Really? Why?"

"Because I want him to be present when I tell you that I am going to remove that plastic bin from your inventory, or I am going to have you immediately killed. And I want to do it in a manner that will not upset the system AI any further. He will be along shortly."

I thought about that for a moment.

"My HUD is still off, so I can't examine it. But once it's gone, I'll still be able to see what was in there."

"I'll tell you right now what's in there. It's a multitude of Valtay neural enhancement pills, similar to the ones you earlier received in benefactor boxes from my people. If you were to take them now before the end of the floor, they would still work as intended, and it is unfair for you to have that many upgrades, so I am attempting to circumvent it." He pulled open a drawer and made a satisfied grunt. He pulled a round ball and tossed it in the air and caught it. "Despite everything that is happening, I am still a liaison with my regular duties. Trust me, Carl. You want me doing this and not Harbinger or any of the others. I likely saved your life by pulling you out there before one of my colleagues could react."

"But my sponsor sent me that flyer," I said after a moment. "That's what they wanted me to find."

"No. The whole thing was an elaborate trap. One set up by your terrorist sponsors, who are now fugitives. Your sponsorship spot has been frozen, and we are still trying to decide what to do about the one participating in the Ascendency game."

"How was that a trap? I don't understand. And who was that guy, anyway? You once accused me of talking to Agatha, of her giving me

secret information. They're the same type of person, aren't they? A Residual or whatever?"

"Yes, he was a Residual. Yes, Agatha is also a Residual, though she is a different kind."

"In what way?"

"That is not of your concern. But he was correct. They are always present in crawls. Both kinds, though his is much more annoying. Like rats that sneak aboard ships. Every time we think we have them under control, they find a new way to pop back up. They are a hyperspatial, collective-mind alien race without a home, so they are content to move into the homes of others, to blend in. Nothing more. They usually remain quiet, but every once in a long while, a group of them decide they are unhappy with their station, and they fabricate drama in order to get people to remember they exist. Ignore their machinations."

"And how was that a trap?"

"The Open Intellect Pacifist Network is comprised of former crawlers who want to see the crawl fail. We should have seen this coming, but this plan was so ridiculous, we were all taken by surprise at the sheer audacity. They believed, falsely, that if they could get you within earshot of that speech, that one of two things would happen. Either we would be forced to yank you away, which would upset the AI to the point of killing us all. Or we wouldn't yank you away, but the information the Residual was giving turned out to be so dangerous, the Syndicate Council would immediately pull the failsafe, which would, in effect, kill this solar system's star. In either of those scenarios, it would be the end of the crawl for a long time."

I sat there, taking all this in.

"In other words, they were willing to sacrifice you and the entire planet. They were using you, and they've been using you this whole time."

"How close did they get?"

Orren grunted with amusement. "Not very. I anticipated we'd have to yank you, and I pre-negotiated the scenario with the AI. Once we heard what that fool was saying, they allowed the feed to keep playing to quell any potential conspiracy theorists out there at

home. You didn't get to hear what he was spouting, but I suspect even you wouldn't have been impressed. I'm quite certain your former sponsors didn't actually know what he was going to say, and they'd gambled everything on it being something profound. They gambled, and they lost. Now they are fugitives, their assets frozen, and their lives ruined. The AI is only mildly perturbed, but it appears it's more upset that it, too, had been misled into believing this information would be something interesting. Even now as we speak it is removing all protections it held for the remaining Residuals, and they will all be dead before the floor collapses."

"So, no more Agatha?" I asked.

"I wouldn't go that far," Orren said. "But again, that's not of your concern."

"No talking!" came Quasar's voice as he suddenly appeared in the room in a cloud of smoke. "Holy shitake, Carl! How long have you two been gossiping? What's the point of having an attorney if you're just going to ignore all my advice? You guys having a nice chat? Want me to go back to my tug and come back later?"

Quasar's tie featured an upside-down pineapple that blinked. As always, he appeared hastily dressed.

"No need to concern yourself," Orren said. "We have been waiting for you before we got to business."

Quasar looked skeptical. He turned to me and rubbed his hand on his bald head. "I gotta tell you, pal. That was some keratin-biting stuff. Everybody knows those Residual weirdoes are full of shit, but the way all that got set up, it made it seem like it was going to be something bigger than it was. There's always a bunch of conspiracies running around about those ghost fuckers. Hell, there's a whole religion around them. I bet those Nebular fucks were all jerking each other off while all this went down. What a letdown. Is the AI pissed? I bet it's pissed. I'm surprised it even let me tunnel in to talk to you."

Orren let out the equivalent of a sigh. "Despite the system gaining independence earlier than usual, despite the quarantine, I am quite confident the remainder of the crawl will proceed with minimal issues. We have come to an understanding, and despite

appearances to the contrary, this particular intelligence is very reasonable."

I choked back a reply.

Quasar appeared equally unimpressed. "Yeah, whatever you say, pal. I'm assuming we're here because Carl looted that Residual's stash?"

"That's right," Orren said.

"And you want him to give it up?"

"You never cease to astound me with your intelligence, Null."

Quasar took a long drag on his vape. "This is already settled caselaw. Grixist Swarm V. Syndicate Council. He's already picked up the loot. You can't un-lick a butthole that's already been licked. That was a legal and properly paid-for sponsor box which led him to the location, and he already has it in his inventory. This is the same thing that happened on the third floor with that one-armed Quan bitch, and look how that turned out. Besides, most of that stuff will be useless at the end of the floor anyway, so I don't see the problem." He shrugged. "They set this floor up that way. The loot was on the playing field. You have no standing to take it."

"The problem isn't the weapon or shield. It's the communication device and the Valtay upgrade pills. There are rules against using both as found loot. If the neural enhancers were already installed, that's one thing. But this is clearly unfair enrichment. The communicator is non-negotiable, and you know that."

"How is that my client's fault? He picked it up fair and square. Why is he being punished?"

"He won't be if he complies with the seizure."

I held up my hand. "You know what? I don't care. I'll trade you for the bin," I said.

"Shut your titty hole," Quasar said to me. He turned back to Orren. "A great idea just came to me. What if we trade for it?"

Orren leaned back in his chair and tossed his ball. It bounced off the wall behind me and landed back into his hand with a heavy *thwap*. "All right, Crawler. But you might not be pleased with the AI's assigned value of the bin. Even I was surprised at how low it values it."

"I don't care," I said. "I just want to get out of here and finish this damn floor and get back to killing those who deserve it."

My inventory was back on, and I'd just made the exchange. I didn't even bother looking at the contents of the bin. I'd received a group of items in trade for the homeless man's dirty clothes and a few Valtay items. It wasn't a whole lot, but I didn't complain. I received a single wand recharge scroll, three scrolls called *Cracker Jack*, and Orren agreed to allow us to keep the four cretins for the duration of the ninth floor. All four were already down there anyway, and they likely would've happily entered our service, so all he was doing was saving us money.

I attempted to get the Gate of the Feral Gods back. I'd automatically receive it once the floor collapsed, but Orren had refused and wouldn't budge. He knew I'd be able to use it to circumvent this last part of the floor, and he wasn't going to allow it.

Quasar was unceremoniously kicked away in the middle of a sentence once the deal was done, leaving just me and Orren.

"You are not allowed to exit through the club, so I will teleport you. I will teleport you back to the area of Princess Donut unless you prefer to get brought back to the homeless shelter, though I warn you. We won't be pleased if you try to go back in there."

My motorcycle was in my inventory, so it didn't matter. "Back to the Keys is fine." I paused. "Hey, do you know if he ever made it into the dungeon? That Paulie guy, I mean?"

"No," Orren said. "He appears to have been outside, but he never made it within. Most of them never make it in. Like with all collective minds and swarms, the individual parts are often disposable. Remember that in any future dealings with their kind."

"Actually," I said. "I changed my mind. There was this gas station I paused at on my way north. The one with the memory ghost dog. Can you send me there? I just want to say hi to that dog again before I jump back into it."

"Very well. Good day, Carl."

With that, he disappeared, leaving me alone in the room. I'd transfer in a few seconds.

The coffee from the shelter remained heavy on my tongue. The scent of the shelter's breakfast mixed with the Lysol remained in my memory, and my stomach rumbled. But all I could think about was that lonely dog, left alone to guard an empty gas station on Christmas day.

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[PART 3]

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THE BEDLAM

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<Note added by Crawler Ikicha. 11th Edition>

My people have a saying. "The burning Yenk needs only to embrace their enemies." It likely translates poorly, but what it means is that some problems aren't problems at all if you think on it long enough.

Several Days Earlier

"Wait, before we go, I have a question," I called after Pater Coal. We'd just stepped from the Temple of the Dying Sun back out into the club. The death of Anton still weighed heavy on me, along with Sister Ines's stabbing of Paz with her team flag. On top of it all, I couldn't get the sight of the man sucking on my toe out of my mind.

All that, plus the revelation that Katia had the Crown of the Sepsis Whore on her head? It was too much.

Entering Club Vanquisher.

The tiny cleric paused, looking uncertainly off toward a mantaur guard, who stood in a corner, admiring himself as he flexed into a large, ornate mirror. "Yes, yes. I am true," the guard was shouting at his own reflection. "Fuck the posers! Kill them with power!"

In addition to the guard, there was a desk here, guarding the entrance to the portal we just exited. Behind it and right in front of us was a mote of light with fairy wings. The white and yellow fairy thing was the size of my fist. Even though she had no eyes or face, I could feel her glare on us as we paused in front of the portal.

Yasmine. Level 75 Wisp.

Secretary of the Club Vanquisher Temple Portal.

This is a non-combatant NPC.

This Wisp worships the goddess Áine.

"You can't block the portal," the fairy said.

"Come," Pater Coal said, pulling me off to the side, keeping a wary eye on the mantaur. "We need to get you to the healer. Quickly. If that guard sees you were in the temple, they'll kick you out until tomorrow."

"I know," I said, putting my hand against my stomach and the now-dissipated boil there. "But what if we *don't* go to the healer?"

Time until level collapse. 4 Days and 17 Hours.

It is December 26th

System Message: Stairwell Locations are now open. You must have a key to unlock the exit vestibule. Only squad members will be allowed to pass through the unlocked door. The key will dissipate upon use.

Admin Message: Your squad holds a key for El Capitolio Nacional de Cuba. The location has been marked on your map.

There are five squads within the "Cuba" zone. Two of the five squads hold keys.

Let the fun begin.

Entering Iglesia San Hilarion.

Donut and I transferred from inside our personal space to the interior of an old, empty Catholic church. The most recent recap episode had just aired, and they told us we'd get transferred, given a few minutes to orient ourselves, and then we'd get the update. There was a saferoom door right there, and we could walk right back in if we wanted. It was dark outside, just past midnight on the morning of December 26th. Moonlight shone in through the stained glass windows of the church. We'd been dropped almost 50 kilometers from the exit stairwell, off to the southwest in a direction we hadn't explored.

We had four and a half days to get to the door.

"Welcome back to Cuba," I said.

I'd come back from my mission to the homeless shelter, expecting a flurry of questions. Instead I found everyone awake and subdued, pacing back and forth while Elle spoke with a bloody, bruised, and sobbing Imani. The remnants of the Christmas party remained, and the cleaner bot scrubbed our space while the stripper guys quietly went about and cleansed the common area of the guildhall.

Imani's squad was dead. All four of them. She had four new player killer skulls, and they gave it to her because her own totem had killed her entire squad. I didn't get the details right then, but the shock of it had sobered everyone right up.

Elle, Donut, and Katia spent time with her while I spent the rest of the day training and building things in my crafting studio.

I also used two of the three *Cracker Jack* scrolls to unlock a pair of alien shields for both myself and Donut. We had a whole pile of

this tech-based stuff that we'd looted from the hunters on the previous floor, but we couldn't use them until they were unlocked. Mine was a **Valtay Perso-Shield, Platinum Edition**, which was identical to the one I would've gotten from Paulie, and it was simply a round, pinback button that looked a little like the planet Saturn. It didn't take up an equipment slot, but once it was clipped to me, I could turn it on and off in my interface.

The shield surrounded me with an inch-thick buffer that protected me from physical damage, and it somewhat protected me from any magic attack that cast something corporeal at me, like *Magic Missile* and *Fireball* and *Lightning*. It wasn't perfect, and it wasn't nearly as powerful or good as my *Protective Shell*. I had to turn it on and off myself, and it had enough power to work for about two minutes before it shut off on its own. It took about an hour to charge up once depleted, though I could activate it for short periods before it was fully charged. It didn't hinder me from picking objects up or tossing things away, which was good. It *would* protect Donut if she was sitting on my shoulder when I turned it on, but I'd have to time it correctly. If she wasn't physically touching me when I turned it on, she'd just bounce right off me.

I knew from the last floor that these things were good enough to stop the first few hits, but after that, they burned right out. It was better than nothing.

Actual body armor worked much better than this personal shield, but it was cumbersome and custom fitted to the person. If I wanted something like that, I'd have to get it from one of my remaining sponsors.

Donut's shield was also a small, opalescent pin that looked like a longhorn cow, and I attached it directly to her neck collar. Thankfully she liked the design and didn't complain about it. It was also more powerful, according to Mordecai. **The Bull Rush, Bespoke Personal Shield.** It was made by a Taurine-owned company called Hereford War Machines, Inc., and they were known to outfit some of the most elite mercenary squads in the galaxy.

We'd taken this one off a Soother mercenary in the last days before the Butcher's Masquerade. He'd also had an automatic pulse

rifle on him that was supposedly worth a lot of money, though the gun still wasn't as good as most of our spells. This was according to both Mordecai and some of the chatter on Donut's social media board, which turned out to be a great resource for figuring out all the gear we were collecting. The hunter obviously had a rich family who'd spent a lot of money trying to keep him safe in those final days. That hadn't worked out for him, and we were going to use that equipment for our own gain.

Donut's shield worked like mine, but instead of covering her with a Donut-shaped skin, it surrounded her in a bubble that moved with her. It also had a mount option, so it would protect Mongo if she was riding him, or even an entire vehicle, though the protection would be weaker. We never got to see it in action since the moron we'd taken it from never turned it on when we'd ambushed him.

We hadn't yet had the chance to test them in real battle. After unlocking the gear, I returned to the coast and looted more bodies of crabs and seals, who continued to wash up on the Florida shore. Donut and Katia remained inside, at Imani's side.

I spent some time in the Mercenary Arcade, the training room where the strippers were spending their time, working out, honing their fighting skills, and practicing with the myriad of weapons we'd collected from the hunters. The room was significantly larger and could do a lot more than I had anticipated. The AI drill sergeant was the same guy from the regular training room, and multiple instances of him appeared across the room. The difference was, the AI guy was literally killing them sometimes, only for them to regenerate a minute later, just like it had been with Growler Gary. They were also practicing fighting each other to the death, which was ridiculously fucked up, but I imagined it was a great way to train yourself up if you ignored the trauma of dying over and over. *I* wouldn't be safe in here, the system warned, but I could spar against them if I wanted. That was probably a bad idea, so I just watched them beat the shit out of each other.

There was a magical healer on hand also, but again, the healer wouldn't work on myself. Just the mercenaries. I watched each of them in turn. They were all pretty efficient with their weapons of

choice. Dong Quixote, of course, was walking around with an actual lance, which was ridiculous because he didn't have a horse. He asked me more than once to get him a mount. I told him I'd try. Author Steve Rowland, the troll guy, insisted on using a club. Gluteus Maxx, who was a short, hairy muscle man thing, insisted on using twin war gauntlets to punch things.

But not all of them were melee fighters. Splash Zone, the weird little otter guy, appeared to be a powerful water mage. Bucket Boy, the crocodilian kid who collected all the thrown tips at the club, was some sort of healer, though he wasn't as good as the one that came with the mercenary arcade. Doctor Bones, the skeletal creature who hadn't been a stripper but the club's announcer and DJ, actually had several crowd control spells. I watched as he practiced against a horde of miniature versions of the AI trainer. He cast a spell, and one by one, they turned into minions. I walked up to the talking skeleton and watched him for a bit. The system listed him as a **Level-90 Skin Skellie Bard.**

"What's the difference between a regular skellie and a skin skellie?" I asked.

He shrugged, and it sounded like a bunch of drumsticks being clacked together. "A skin skellie can grow flesh and organs. It all eventually falls off, and it makes me more vulnerable to certain types of damage and diseases, so I don't do it too often. Mostly when they needed a backup dancer at the club. Or if I needed to entertain my patron. She was more comfortable when I had flesh."

His regular talking voice was not what I was expecting, especially after hearing him announce the dancers and chastise the patrons at the strip club. That was his stage voice, I realized. His real voice was almost that of a soft-spoken college professor.

"Patron?" I asked.

"I'm a bard. Most bards have a patron. They give us money and supplies in exchange for entertaining them every once in a while." He took a finger and made an in-and-out sliding motion. His finger bones clacked together.

Donut had been a bard on the previous floor, and she hadn't had to choose a patron, but I did remember Mordecai talking about that

previously. Some regular bard classes used the patron system. It was a bit like the paladin or cleric/deity system, but a lot less dangerous. You couldn't get smote by a pissed-off patron.

"Who is your patron?"

"She *was* Astrid. Now it's you."

"Oh," I said. That actually gave rise to more questions, but I wasn't going to pursue it. It was suddenly awkward. "So, anyway, I was watching you practice that mind control thing you were doing."

"It's a type of military charm," he said. "It only works on the weak minded. That is why I am training with it."

"It's really impressive. How long does the effect last?" I asked.

"It depends. If they're weak, it pretty much lasts forever. I am attempting to hone it so it can work against stronger subjects."

"What is the spell called? Donut has one that's similar, but she hasn't tried it yet. It's called *Minion Army*."

"*Minion Army* is a battlefield sabotage spell, and it's quite effective, but it has a long casting time, and it is temporary," Doctor Bones said. "This one is simply called *Conscript*."

A sudden sense of revulsion ran through me. I'd read about that spell, more than once. It was used quite a bit against crawlers on the ninth floor. It wouldn't work if they'd already pledged themselves to a specific army. Most factions spent a lot of resources making sure they had somebody who could cast that spell at level-15. Part of the reason why we bought the Faction Wars team was to negate their ability to basically enslave crawlers to their cause.

"What else do you got?" I asked.

"I have some of the same spells as you, actually, at least according to Princess Donut." He straightened. "Some are even more powerful than yours."

"Really?" I asked, intrigued. "Tell me about it."

<u>Carl</u>: Elle. I'd ask this of Imani, but I don't want to bother her right now. How many mercenaries can we hold? I know

the barracks can hold 20, but is there a way to hold more?

Elle: You should ask her. She could use the distraction. Like you said, the barracks can hold 20. Between your strippers and Mordecai's day care, we're pretty full up. Each individual party can hire more, too, and they can get housed in each individual safe space, like you did with the rock monster guys. But they gotta be housed in the communal barracks to be allowed to train and gain levels in the mercenary arcade.

Carl: Tell me about the upgrade to expand the barracks.

Elle: We can up it to 100, but you gotta sell a kidney to get it. It'll cost almost five million gold, and that's with Donut's discount. Between all these upgrades and everyone spending all their money in the card training arena, we're pretty tapped out. I think it upgrades on its own when we go down a floor.

Carl: Okay. Thanks for the info. Listen. I'm gonna, uh, lock the door to the mercenary arcade with the strippers inside. Don't let me forget to let them out. We're gonna release them in a few hours, but in the meantime we need to buy that upgrade before the floor collapses. I'll try to get the money somehow. Make sure every individual team has as much mercenary space as they can. We're gonna fill every spot.

Elle: What the hell are you up to?

Carl: It's a team building exercise. The DJ guy is in on it. Don't be alarmed if you see him. He had to give himself flesh, so he looks a bit different.

Elle: You know what. I don't even want to know. I'll make sure we all have space.

I left the mercenaries and spent the rest of the time after that in my bomber's studio, preparing items for a ninth floor I wasn't even sure we'd get to.

When midnight came, we'd be transferred back to Cuba.

The recap episode had been almost all redacted. It appeared this one was a discussion on the quarantine along with a special on all

the possible "Showdowns" they were setting up between the haves and have-nots with the keys.

The only thing we were allowed to watch was a short scene featuring Imani and her squad, and we were all still reeling from it.

Her squad consisted of former Meadowlark residents I didn't know very well. They all died obtaining the final token for that vending machine. It all happened in a single, horrific moment when one of the totems they faced possessed two of them and forced them to fight one another. One of them was a man named Randall, who'd turned himself into a support-magic-dealing, gnome-like creature called a lutin. He tried to disarm the situation by freezing all four of them with a spell. Then, one of Imani's own totems—a mossy, disease-dealing lizard thing called an Amhuluk, cast a poison cloud that killed them all in a single attack. They died frozen in place, their skin all melting away. The scene ended with Imani screaming while the Amhuluk finished off the enemy deckmaster and won the battle.

After that, Imani returned to the saferoom. She did not face the final battle, which was in her family home in Detroit. Elle was the only one she was really talking with. Donut said she was just staring into space, not saying anything, shaking. Bautista made her a cup of tea, and she wasn't even drinking that.

The four player killer skulls was just a slap to the face. It was the same thing they'd done to Florin when Lucia Mar had killed Ifechi. It was the AI being a complete asshole, and it was a terrible reminder that no matter what the AI did to the other guys, no matter how often it occasionally "helped" me, it wasn't on our side. It was murdering us. It wasn't our friend. It wasn't friendly to our cause, and there was no action it could ever take to make up for what it already had done.

That old adage—the enemy of my enemy is my friend—was complete bullshit. But it didn't mean I wasn't going to use it to my benefit when I could.

But for right now, for the next few days, all of that was going to have to wait. We had to first get to that door, open it up, and get down the stairs, and until that was done, all this crap with the AI

going primal, all the posturing for the next floor, and everything I'd learned from Paulie was going to have to wait. None of it mattered. Not yet.

"Carl, look!" Donut said. "It says there's two keyholders in the area. Does that mean Sister Ines has a key?"

"It does," I said, looking at the map. "I don't know where she is." I used my *Find Crawler* skill, and there was nobody nearby. I hadn't expected to see anyone. "There are three squads here without keys. We don't know who they are. At least one of them probably just teleported next to our stairwell. They'll be waiting for us, and we'll have to get past them to leave."

Your alarm trap has activated.

Your teleport trap has activated.

Your teleport trap has activated.

Your teleport trap has activated.

I took a deep breath. I'd posted those traps on the very first day of the floor by our exit stairwell. It hadn't even occurred to me at the time to plant something more powerful. We hadn't been back there since that first day, and I now realized that had been a mistake. Whomever it was that had stepped on the traps, there were at least three of them, and they were now spread out all over the place.

I should've used explosives. *I should've wired the whole capitol building.*

I hated myself for thinking that. Still, if I had, it would've been done by now.

Elle: Everybody check in. It says there's one other squad here without a key. They bounced us all the way to Olympia, and we gotta hoof it back to the waterpark to get through the door.

Donut: WE ARE BACK IN CUBA, AND THAT NUN LADY IS HERE TOO SOMEWHERE WITH A KEY. THERE ARE THREE OTHER SQUADS WITHOUT KEYS.

Katia: We're here, back in Iceland. We're the only ones with a key, but there're two other squads here. Some of the former daughters didn't get their key, and I know they're in

Turkey. I don't know who else is there. They say they only had two choices. I thought there were supposed to be three?

Li Na: We have 20 teams with keys and 25 without them in my area, but one of the squads rigged the entrance with animal traps, and they've already killed several of them. It's going to get worse from here.

Florin: I'm here alone. I also had claymores set up by the entrance, but thankfully I didn't have to use them. I don't have to face anybody. I just gotta walk right to the door. Lucia Mar isn't here, which means she didn't get a key. Somebody chime in if they see her.

Prepotente: I am back in the Bahamas along with four squads, which is quite unfortunate for them. If I set it up correctly, they are currently all asleep and will remain asleep for the remainder of the floor. I am going to finish my training and proceed to the exit when it is time.

Jesus, I thought. Everybody had set traps, but nobody had mentioned it before this. That said something. It felt significant, and not in a good way.

Elle: Imani. Where are you?

Imani: I'm sorry. I'm sorry. They only gave me two choices.

Elle: Where are you?

Imani: I'm in Cuba.

I felt cold. Next to me, Donut stiffened.

Imani: It was Cuba or back to face you, Elle, and I just couldn't do it. I'm sorry.

Elle: Well, fuck.

Imani: Yeah.

Elle: You said that crazy nun is still there, right?

Carl: We're on the same page, Elle. Imani, did any traps go off? Was there an alarm? Are you in the Capitol building or are you in a church?

Imani: It was a church. No traps.

Carl: Okay, good. Sit tight. We are coming to you. That's Sister Ines's doorway. Don't let her through.

Imani: Guys, there's more. I had to jump into the saferoom. There's another guy here, and he was about to attack me. He tried to initiate a card battle, but I went through the door first. It's that Quan Ch guy. He's alone.

I exchanged a look with Donut.

Carl: Stay put. We're on our way.

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I returned to the saferoom long enough to grab Samantha. We didn't wait for the announcement. We had to hurry. If Sister Ines got there before we did, Quan would kill her, take the key, and immediately bounce to the ninth floor. We had to get there first and take out Quan.

Donut freed Mongo and jumped into the saddle while I pulled out the motorcycle.

This was a small town named Guanajay. There wasn't anybody out as far as I could tell. It was past midnight, after all. Just to the north was a huge pileup of cars, and I could see some red dots. Duendes. They hadn't noticed us, and I didn't want to waste time on them.

"Really, Carl," Donut said, looking the Harley Davidson up and down with distaste. "I didn't realize you'd actually get that thing to work. Are you planning on growing a mullet as well? Are there any Waffle Houses between here and there? Maybe we can stop and get into a brawl, but only after you bounce a few child support payment checks first."

"You know, most bikers were just normal people with normal lives. I never rode a motorcycle, and my dad was a dick, but that doesn't mean *all* bikers are assholes. You shouldn't stereotype people."

"I watched *Sons of Anarchy*, Carl."

"That was a TV show, and I watched it, too. There are plenty of normal motorcycle riders."

"We obviously were watching two very different shows."

"You liked the goblin copper chopper. I don't understand what the difference is."

"The copper chopper was a custom-made, handcrafted vehicle built especially for us by Rory and Lorelai, and it had a sidecar attachment with a personalized, tailor-made seat. This is a metallic penis extension that comes with a free probation officer and a traumatic brain injury."

"You tried to get me to pick this exact motorcycle when it was one of the choices on the prize carousel!"

"That's quite obviously a lie, Carl. I have no recollection of that whatsoever. I tried to get you to pick the chaps."

"I think it's sexy," Samantha said.

I pulled her up and put her on the handlebars, lashing her in front of me. She started making *vroom, vroom* noises.

"You're gonna have to get used to it," I said. "Katia already looked at it and tuned it up for me."

Donut continued to look unimpressed. "How do you even know how to ride it?"

I shrugged. "I got a bunch of skill levels in riding these things from the goblin copper chopper. It's not hard." I didn't add I'd gone up to level nine in the skill during my journey back to the saferoom.

"What about gas?"

"I have gas in my inventory."

She harrumphed. She was about to say something else when we were interrupted by the announcement.

Hello, Crawlers!

Welcome to the third and final phase of the floor! I am glad to report that everything is back to normal, and we no longer have to worry about our good friend the system AI from doing anything unexpected. We do not anticipate any further interruptions between now and crawler extinction, which is fabulous news for everybody!

As you undoubtably saw from the announcement, the level stairwells are now open! If you don't have a key, you have been placed in front of a stairwell location where someone else in the region has a key. If there's more than one of you at the location, that does not mean there's more than one key to steal, so be careful! You might have to duke it out before the keyholder even gets close. Good luck to everybody!

Since both sides will have decks, these final battles will be card battles. The rules all remain the same with a single exception, and that is the Flee card. Pay careful attention, everybody.

If you do not have a key, the Flee card works as it always had. You can use it to exit a battle that's not going your way, and you will teleport away from the battle to a random location nearby. That might not be in your best interests if you're guarding a door.

From this point forward, however, *keyholders* who use a Flee card will automatically lose their key to their opponent. If you have multiple keys, you will only lose one, random key. If there are multiple opponents, the key or keys will all go to the ultimate victor. The keys will be transferred automatically and won't be dropped. Isn't that great? You still get out of the battle, but now you're the one without the key!

One last note about the key itself. You may not voluntarily drop a key no matter how many you have. You may not voluntarily transfer a key to another squad no matter how many you have. If you wish to give up one of your keys, then you gotta do it on the battlefield by initiating a battle and utilizing a Flee card, which will teleport you away and transfer a random key to your opponent.

I must say, I am looking forward to these battles. We have some interesting and exciting matchups, and some of

the top crawlers are being forced to face off against one another. It's going to be amazing. I just cannot wait.

Now get out there and *kill, kill, kill.*

"Go fuck yourself, Cascadia," I said out loud as I kicked the engine into life. It roared.

Donut: THIS IS MUCH TOO LOUD, CARL. YOU'RE UPSETTING MONGO.

Carl: It's a motorcycle. Come on. We have a one-armed crawler to take care of.

We headed east.

Less than a minute after we hit the road, I received an ominous message.

Warning: Your location has been pinpointed by the Eye in the Sky.

Donut: DID YOU SEE THAT?

That was a new one to me, so I immediately sent a message to Mordecai.

Mordecai: That's a *really* powerful spell, and it probably was a scroll. I've only seen them maybe once or twice. Like a mix between *Find Crawler* and *Ping*, but it covers the whole area. The scrolls are really rare, and they come in levels five, 10, and 15. That was a level 10. If it was a 15, you wouldn't have gotten the notification. If it was five, it would've given you info on the caster. Whoever it was, they now know where you are and what your level is, so keep moving.

There was nothing we could do about that now. I suspected and hoped it was someone from that third squad using it to find their fellow, teleported-away teammates. Either way, they now knew who they were facing off against. I rolled the throttle, speeding up.

Quan could fly, so I was keeping a wary eye on the air above us. I asked Imani to be on the lookout, too.

Imani: I peeked my head out, and he's not in the church anymore. There's also something going on outside. Lots of loud noises, like fighting.

Carl: Out in the street?

Imani: Yes. The walls are shaking. It's a big battle.

Donut: IT'S THE CRABS AND THE SEALS.

Carl: Yeah. You want to stay away from that if you can.

We spent the next few minutes driving in silence. Donut and I were both on high alert the whole time. Mongo kept easy pace with the motorcycle, weaving in and out and around me as we rushed down the empty road, heading toward the coast. Red dots appeared here and there, and we avoided them all.

Donut: Carl, what are we going to do if Imani doesn't get a key?

I'd been thinking on this.

Carl: Then I'm going to force her to fight us, and you're going to use the Flee card, giving her our key. I have my jacket with the mysterious bone key benefit. I can use that to open the door. I'll lose my jacket, but we'll both still get out of here.

Donut: You need that jacket. I'm pretty sure you need your bones, too.

Carl: It will only take one. Maybe it won't be an important one.

Donut: They're all important, Carl.

Carl: We'll all still be alive. It'll be okay.

Donut: What about the other people? I know that cheater Quan and the Havana brown need to go, but what if those other crawlers are people we like? Are we going to fight people we like? I don't want to do that.

It's going to get worse before it gets better. We're going to lose more friends. We're going to have to do some pretty horrible things just to survive.

Carl: I don't want to fight them either. But we'll do what we have to, Donut.

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<Note Added by Crawler Priestly. 14th Edition>

Stab, stab, stab. It is all I know.

It is the final days of Faction Wars, and it is clear the orcs will stand victorious. It is clear the army I have been conscripted into will fall against these beasts. It is clear tomorrow I will die. The brutality and sadism of the Skull Empire is unparalleled. How is it these monsters are only play-acting? How can their citizens see this and not rise up after learning what lives in their leaders' hearts? I will soon be facing them on the battlefield. Tomorrow morning the bugbears march. Several of the enslaved, conscript crawlers in my squad will flee in the night and hide in the forest, but I'm afraid they will be run down, just like the others. Stab, stab, stab. I don't want to go back into the city. That beautiful dream. That song of a place. I am terrified. My mind is slipping. That beautiful city, destroyed? I cannot march with my eyes closed. The orcs have the numbers and the brutality, and the bugbears do nothing but laugh. I overheard one of them wondering out loud if the gods themselves will notice the battle, the bloodbath. That happens here, in this place. The gods notice when the toll is too great. They add themselves to the fray. It is proof to me that in reality we are truly alone. My people are gone. There are only 300 of us left,

down from millions. And they, the real gods, have not intervened? No. No. It's undeniable proof of our solitude.

Stab. Stab. Stab.

I hope there is music, in the end.

<Note added by Crawler Drakea. 22nd Edition>

This is Priestly's second-to-last entry. Do yourself a favor. Don't read that last one. He doesn't make it to the battle once he sees what has happened to Larracos, and that's all you really need to know.

Fuck them all.

Elle: You have to figure this out. She has a martyr complex, and she's not going to want to fight someone else. She's a good kid. The best person I ever met, and we need her. Don't let her give up. Don't let her sacrifice herself.

Carl: I'm doing my best. You be careful, too. Do you know who you're facing down yet?

Elle: Not yet.

We bumped over potholes, pushing through the dark night. We went maddeningly slow, constantly on the lookout. Samantha sat in front of me, squealing with delight as we rode, despite the slow speed. I could hear her happy cries over the roar of the engine. It'd started to rain again, which turned my visibility to shit. We'd hit the coast soon, and then we'd turn east toward the church.

Ahead of me, Donut and Mongo lurched to a stop, and I pulled up. Donut shouted something, and I cut the engine. It was approaching five in the morning, but it was still pitch-black outside. The sun wouldn't rise for another few hours.

"Really, Carl. How are we ever going to sneak up on anybody when you're riding on that thing? You're going to attract every

monster in the entire country. There are a lot of red dots ahead. And a lot of Xs, too. I'm sure even the dead ones heard us coming."

"I like it," Samantha said. "The vibrations make it tingle." She had some black and red moth thing splattered against her wet face, and I peeled it off of her. She bit the bug out of my hand and started loudly chewing on it.

Donut had a point about the noise of the bike, and I unlashed Samantha from the handlebars, dropping her to the ground. She growled and started circling me, making motorcycle noises as she continued to chew on the bug. The love doll head was absolutely brimming with energy, more than usual. I picked up the bike, pulling it into my inventory.

We were about five miles from Sister Ines's exit, and there was still no sign of her. She likely didn't have a vehicle, so it'd probably take her an extra day or two to make it toward her exit. I hoped. At least she was still alive. She was still in my chat, but if she went down the stairwell, I wasn't sure if there'd be a notification or not.

Quan had dropped a few low-level nail traps and a silent alarm trap near the doorway, and Imani had easily disabled them. She remained in the saferoom, sitting there with the door open to watch the exit.

"Do you hear that?" Donut asked, cocking her head in the rain. "It sounds like singing. It sounds like it's a bunch of the monk seals singing. Carl, do you think they won their war against the crabs? Raul is going to be really sad."

I listened. Sure enough, it was there in the distance, barely audible in the rain. It almost sounded like one of those Gregorian chant albums Bea used to listen to when she did her yoga. They were really far away. "We haven't gotten an update to the Chowder War Quest, so I don't know. We should probably figure out what's going on before we get closer." I extended my xistera and also pulled the head-thrower extension and attached it with a *click*. "Samantha. Recon mission."

"Oh boy," she said, jumping into the air and floating directly into the scoop. She started wriggling. "Throw me! Throw me, Carl!"

"Okay. Don't interact. Don't get into a fight. Just tell us what you see, and I'll pull you back. And for god's sake, don't bring anything back with you."

"You got it, boss!" she said.

I spun once and tossed, trying to aim her at the coast. Too far, and she'd probably end up in the gullet of a whale, so I had to be careful.

"Carl, look! She's glowing!" Donut said, looking up at the flying form of Samantha.

"It's just like the last floor," I said, watching her arc across the sky. "She's getting stronger the longer the floor is going. After the Butcher's Masquerade, she flew off and went back to the saferoom on her own. But when this floor started, she could barely roll."

"She says she's the goddess of unrequited love," Donut said. "Maybe she gets stronger every time somebody asks someone out and gets rejected." She gasped. "Or maybe every time *she* asks someone out and gets rejected. She's always hitting on Louis, but he's scared of her. And she keeps talking about some guy named Charles she was recently dating, but they broke up." Donut lowered her voice to a whisper. "Apparently they got to third base."

"Charles was a bartender in the Desperado Club. He's dead now."

"What? The badger guy on the middle floor? Oh no, I liked him! I didn't know he was dead! He made me a virgin dirty Shirley once! My word. I hoped he washed his hands before he made my drink."

"That's just a regular Shirley Temple, and yeah. He died during that whole clusterfuck that closed the club. I'm starting to think maybe Samantha gets more powerful every time somebody dies." I looked north, but she'd already landed on the beach. "If that's the case, we really need to be careful of her on the next floor. If we let her inhabit the body of Signet's mom, I'm afraid she's going to end up stronger than we can handle."

Samantha: THERE IS A LOT GOING ON, AND I HAVE NO IDEA HOW TO DESCRIBE IT.

Carl: Do your best.

Samantha: OKAY BUT IT'S REALLY GROSS AND CREEPY. IT'S LIKE A PARTY AT YARILO'S PLACE BEFORE HE GOT

SENT TO THE NOTHING BUT WITH A LOT LESS WEIRD SEX. THAT'S THE BEST DESCRIPTION I GOT.

Carl: That is not a goddamned description. What, exactly, do you see?

Samantha: IT SMELLS WORSE, TOO. AND THERE'S NO CATERING. YARILO NEVER HAD GOOD CATERING. PARTIES LIVE AND DIE BASED ON THE FOOD CHOICES. EVEN IF IT'S AN ORGY, YOU GOTTA HAVE SOME SORT OF PROTEIN AVAILABLE.

Donut: OMG THAT IS SO TRUE. WHEN CARL INVITED HIS FRIENDS OVER TO PLAY VIDEO GAMES HE WOULD ONLY HAVE BEER, PRETZEL STICKS, AND GOLDFISH CRACKERS. IT WAS QUITE APPALLING.

Samantha: THAT'S TERRIBLE. IT'S NO WONDER HE WORSHIPS EMBERUS. HIS PARTIES ALWAYS SUCKED. HELLIK'S WERE MUCH BETTER. HE ALWAYS HAD CANAPÉS.

Donut: THAT SOUNDS LIKE A DELIGHT.

Carl: Samantha. Holy shit. We are in a hurry. What do you see?

Samantha: THERE IS A GIANT SEA CREATURE SNAKE THING THAT HAS WASHED UP ON SHORE. IT'S A FRESHWATER SNAKE, TOO, BUT IT WAS IN THE OCEAN? IT'S REALLY BIG AND IN A GIANT COIL. IT HAS A BUNCH OF BABY SEALS AND CRABS CRAWLING ALL OVER IT AND I'M PRETTY SURE THEY'RE ZOMBIES. THE BABIES ARE ADORABLE. THERE ARE A BUNCH OF OTHER SEALS AND CRABS SURROUNDING IT, AND THEY'RE NOT UNDEAD. THE NON-ZOMBIE SEALS ARE SINGING AND THE CRABS ARE DANCING AROUND THE SNAKE, AND IT'S REALLY WEIRD. MAYBE THEY'RE REHEARSING FOR A MUSICAL DANCE NUMBER? I DON'T KNOW WHAT'S HAPPENING OR WHY. NOBODY IS FIGHTING, BUT IT LOOKS LIKE THEY WERE NOT LONG AGO. THERE ARE A LOT OF DEAD ONES EVERYWHERE. LOTS OF SEAL AND CRAB GUTS SPREAD ALL OVER THE PLACE. THERE ARE FISH, TOO. ZOMBIE FISH FLOPPING AROUND ON THE GROUND. I THINK THE SEAGULLS ARE

ALSO ZOMBIES. OH, OH, AND THE OCEAN IS FROTHING AND RED.

"Holy crap," I muttered.

Carl: Wait, is the giant sea snake undead also?

"Carl, did you understand any of that? So there are *more* zombies? It sounds like some sort of scene out of a Bollywood movie. Why are they singing and dancing? This is ridiculous!"

"I don't know what's going on, but I'm pretty sure the zombies are from the farm animals. One probably fell in the ocean, bit a fish, and it spread from there."

"That was from a different zone! They can't cross zones, Carl. They're cheating!"

Samantha: I'M NOT SURE IF THE GIANT SNAKE IS A ZOMBIE OR NOT. I'M TOO FAR AWAY TO ASK. HANG ON AND LET ME GET CLOSER. MAYBE I'LL ASK THE CAT LADY RIDING ON THE SNAKE'S HEAD.

"Fuck me," I said. "It's Sister Ines."

Carl: Is it a card battle? Does she have cards floating in front of her, or is there anything floating over the snake's head?

Samantha: NO. NOTHING LIKE THAT. THE CAT LADY LOOKS LIKE SHE'S RECITING POETRY.

Donut: THAT SOUNDS DISGUSTING. I BET HER POETRY IS TERRIBLE.

Samantha: ALL POETRY SUCKS. PEOPLE JUST PRETEND TO LIKE IT BECAUSE IT MAKES THEM SOUND CULTURED AND SMART. UNLESS IT'S PART OF A SONG. IT'S JUST LIKE LOOKING AT YOURSELF IN THE MIRROR AND TAPPING YOUR OWN ACORNS.

Donut: I'M NOT SURE WHAT YOU'RE TRYING TO SAY THERE, BUT I AGREE 100%. I DO LIKE BERETS, THOUGH. ALL POETS SHOULD WEAR THEM.

There was a pause, and I knew what that meant. I tensed myself. I was expecting an update to the Chowder War quest. What happened instead surprised me.

Quest Failed. The Chowder War.

"Failed?" Donut asked out loud. "What happened? We didn't do anything! Carl, I told you her poetry was terrible!"

New Quest. Hell Comes to Crawler Town.

War is Hell.

For days now, the battles between the Monk Seals and the Red *Manízeros* Land Crabs have reached a fevered pitch. The sneak attack of the crabs was stopped in its tracks thanks to crawler Sister Ines Quiteria warning the Seals of the treachery, but that warning has come with a terrible price. Instead of a quick attack and surrender, it has become a war of attrition, with both sides losing devastating numbers in only a matter of days.

The sea runs red and blue. The corpses pile high upon the beach. The very children both parties were trying to save have suffered, and by this point, the only hope of survival from either side is for them to completely wipe out their enemy.

That's how it is, is it not? When there is war, so often an armistice is nothing more than a delay. A job left undone. An overdue bill for those down the road to eventually pay, and pay with interest.

War is Hell.

And hell, my child, hell is not just a place. It is a contagion. It is a virus. It spreads.

But worst of all, it *attracts*.

So much death has bombarded the underworld, those who notice such things have taken a special interest in this battle, in this war, in this minor annihilation of two species fighting for their very existence.

This happens from time to time. Gods and demons lifting their heads. Oftentimes, that's as far as it goes. A notice. An interest piqued.

This, I'm starting to learn, happens out there, too. But that's for another day.

So much has happened here. Previously-forgotten gods have risen. That alone has caused a great amount of

consternation. But there is more. The great prison, the Nothing, has been breached, and not for the first time. This is also concerning, especially amongst those who banished the harem there in the first place. All across the land, gods and demons are being involuntarily summoned from their halls to walk the land. Some of the gods are acting strange. They are acting in ways they should not.

Yes, yes. Both Demons and Gods are paying attention now. *Real* attention.

This usually happens here in the dungeon, but only upon the battlefields outside Larracos, where the Semeru Dwarves built their castle along the roots of the All Tree, seeking the very gods who disdain them.

It has never happened this early, this soon.

War is Hell…

And Hell *really* wants to come play.

Which is unfortunate, considering some dumbass recently dumped a bunch of highly-contagious, fast-spreading zombie farm animals into an ocean that connects everything.

Fun fact. Most demons can't just enter the world. They need a weakened shell to inhabit. Something like a new corpse is difficult for them. But if it's a zombie…

…

You no longer need to choose a side between the Crabs and the Seals because both sides are fucked. They just don't know it yet. You just need to not die. Get down the stairs without being involuntarily dragged into hell. That's how you win this quest.

***Reward*: You will receive a Legendary Quest Box. That, and a commemorative set of bagpipes.**

"Uh," I said.

<u>Imani</u>: I just got a really weird quest.

"Carl, what does that have to do with the Havana Brown riding on top of a snake? Or the singing seals? I am so confused. And why would we get a kilt? What is going on?"

"A kilt?" I asked. "It told me I'd get bagpipes."

"We could start a band! But what did it mean when it said..."

She was interrupted by a new message.

System Message:

Warning. Souls rain. Sheol overflows. The powers of hell are gleefully flinging their unwanted minions upward. Demons are being involuntarily ejected from the underworld, falling up, clinging onto anything they can.

Due to an excess of death, Demon Eviction is commencing. All recently-fallen and weakened are now subject to random possession. The larger the battles, the more likely a mass demon event will initiate. All evicted demons who wish to return to Sheol may only do so by dragging an additional soul back down with them to prove their worth. Luckily they are limited by the physical bodies they inhabit, though their power will be somewhat increased.

You have been warned.

Area Message:

Warning: Cuba is currently experiencing a Demon Eviction event.

I looked at Donut. "This is what happens when you complain about too many undead hordes."

"By making *more* undead? I don't even know what's happening. How is this my fault? If anyone is responsible for an undead apocalypse, it's quite obviously going to be the cat girl nun, Carl!"

"Demons aren't undead," I said. "The rules are different. You ever see any of the *Evil Dead* movies? And I was just joking. This isn't your fault, and it doesn't have anything to do with the nun, either. Not directly. It's the AI fucking with everything, making everything more complicated."

"But what's actually happening?"

"I think random zombies are going to start turning into demons. Instead of biting you, they'll be trying to drag you into hell. So we need to make sure none get even close to us."

Mordecai: Holy shit. Okay guys, pay attention. This is something that normally happens at the end of the ninth floor. It'll reset once you go down the stairs, but it'll pop off earlier and earlier each floor down from now on, especially during big battles. It's all part of the setup for the Ascendency fight. If it pops too soon on the next floor, it'll really mess with Faction Wars. It's meant to first happen when there are only two or three teams left. If you kill something from now on, make sure you chop off the head or take the corpse. Stay away from any weak undead like zombies or skellies. Don't let them grapple with you. Anything that's dead-dead can be randomly taken over by a demon, too, but that's more rare, and it means it's a powerful demon. You'll know when it happens either way. They are stronger and faster than the zombies, and they are intelligent. The good news is they're still limited to the shells they're possessing. They'll be at a tiny fraction of their true power. But don't underestimate them. Don't let them near. They will physically grab onto you, a portal will open, and you'll be dragged down to Sheol. It'll be automatic death for both of you, so be careful.

Carl: The nun is here, surrounded by undead. I don't know what's going on, but it sounds like she's fucked.

Mordecai: If you want to save Imani, you'll have to get to that nun before the demons do. If she's pulled into hell, her body will explode, and you'll never get the key.

I jumped into action. "Donut, get ready," I said as I used my free arm to start tossing traps onto the ground all around us. I found some of the traps I'd looted during the Astrid assassination clusterfuck, and I tossed those, too. "Get ready for a card battle."

"What?" she asked, a panicked edge to her voice. "Now? Here? How?"

"Hurry. Cast your spells. Clockwork triplicate Mongo. Did you switch the spell on the staff card?"

"Yes! But what's happening? Who are we fighting?"

Carl: Samantha. You have a very important mission. You need to get onto the snake, roll past all the zombies, and chomp onto the cat lady. Tell me the moment you bite her. Watch out for demons. Don't let them grab you. Do you think you can do that? Use your flying ability if you can.

Samantha: YOU TOLD ME NOT TO BRING ANYBODY BACK.

Carl: I changed my mind! Hurry!

Samantha: YOU ARE VERY WISHY WASHY.

Carl: Hurry. Tell me the moment you bite her.

I turned to Donut as she dropped a few potions on the ground around her. "Okay, we know she has the Monk Seal card and the Paz card. What else?"

"She probably changed up her cards when she got her key! And what about the giant snake? Is that a card?"

"I don't think it is. I think maybe she charmed it. I think maybe she's charming all of them with that song."

"It's not a song, Carl. She's a poet. She's using poetry! She's charming them with poetry. This is so unrealistic!"

That reminded me, and I cast *Wisp Armor* on myself. That would protect me against charm magic and some spells. Donut cast *Clockwork Triplicate* on Mongo, and the two clockworks screeched as they appeared, spreading off to the side, bouncing up and down with excitement.

Donut, despite her initial panic, seemed to have calmed herself. She popped her sunglasses back on and switched to her sailor hat, which lowered the draw countdown on her cards by two seconds. "We were going to do *Second Chance* on some corpses, too. Should we still do it with the demon thing?"

I thought about that for a moment, and I decided it wasn't worth the risk. "We better hold off. Not until we have a better handle on how this demon thing works. Get ready."

Samantha: I DID THE CHOMP! DO IT. DO IT NOW, CARL! I WILL HELP WITH THE SPELL!

"Here we go!"

I dropped the xistera extension, calling Samantha back to me. I jumped back, trying to give myself enough space. I didn't want her landing right on top of me.

I didn't jump back far enough.

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<Note added by Crawler Porthus, Second Edition.>

It's important to note that possession via ghost and an evicted demon inhabiting a shell are two very, very different things. They call it possession, but it is anything but. Think of an elf falling to his death off a cliff, and at the last moment, he grabs onto a root, temporarily saving him. That root is the body he now resides within. Regular possession can be defeated. Evicted demons are something else entirely. Once one of these desperate creatures has taken a shell, be it living, dead, or recently undead, the end result for that shell is always the same. Destruction. They are gone the moment the demon moves in.

Kill it with fire. Destroy the head. Do whatever you can. These beasts will be frantic to get back home, and they will fight with everything they have. Don't let one grab onto you, as it will pull you into Hades. Be wary of using healing magic on demon-possessed shells. While that works well for undead, it is different when it comes to those from the realm of Sheol. It is unpredictable and can possibly make the creature stronger.

This is important. Do not. Do not, do not, do not. <u>Do not</u> under any circumstances attempt to teleport a shell that's possessed by an evicted demon away from you. The shell will

teleport and dissipate. The demon will be freed, showing its true form, and its power will be too great.

Current Active Deck.

Twenty-two Cards.

Totems:

- **Shi Maria**
- **Jola**
- **Lazarus A-Bang-Bang**
- **Skylar Spinach**
- **Geraldo**
- **Raul**

Utility Cards:

- **Stout**
- **Time Extend**
- **Greased Lightning**
- **Heal Totem**
- **Temporary Shield**

Snare Cards:

- **Hobble (Consumable)**
- **Hole in the Bag**
- **Damnation**
- **Lamp (Consumable)**
- **Cripple (Consumable)**

Mystic Cards:

- **The Thief**
- **Steal Totem (Consumable)**
- **Force Discard**
- **Golden Combo**

Special Cards:

- **Sentient Staff Totem**
- **Flee (Consumable)**

Way back on the previous floor, we received a note from my now-missing sponsor that suggested we use Samantha to help enhance Donut's *Laundry Day* spell. I didn't understand this at the time. We asked Samantha about it, and she pretended like she had no idea what we were talking about. She didn't have the ability to strengthen spells in any way. She acted like we were crazy for even suggesting it. We ended up having to use my Pawna's Tears potion in order to bolster Donut's spell to level 15.

I'm still not certain if Samantha was outright lying, if she didn't know, or if we'd worded it wrong when we explained it to her. Either way, as it turned out, Samantha actually *did* have the power to enhance spells. In fact, she could enhance them quite a bit.

I'm still not exactly clear on the how and why of what happened next. Was it just Samantha augmenting the power of the return teleportation spell? Was it because Sister Ines had raised an entire army of charmed minions, and they were attached to her somehow? Was it just the System AI being an asshole and thinking this would be hilarious?

The plan was for Samantha to roll up to Sister Ines and bite onto her. I would drop the xistera and summon them both to our location, and a card battle would ensue.

That's not what happened.

Instead, when I dropped the xistera extension, the following things landed all around me and Donut, all crammed into an area of about a quarter of a mile in each direction:

- Samantha.
- Sister Ines.
- The massive snake she was riding upon.
- Approximately 1,000 zombie baby seals.
- Approximately 5,000 zombie crabs.
- Another 500 zombie adult seals.
- A metric fuckton of living crabs and seals.
- Pretty much every fish in the world, or so it seemed. Living fish. Zombie fish.
- An alarming number of corpses. More on this in a moment.
- Zero demons.

All of these creatures, at least all the ones that weren't dead-dead, including the zombies and the level 125 sea snake city boss, were all under a massive, poetry-themed charm spell that Sister Ines was in the middle of casting. I wasn't sure what the spell was, but it was goddamned powerful. She'd been about to unleash an army on Havana, and if it hadn't been for the Demon Eviction event, everyone in the area would probably have been screwed.

Unfortunately for her, and, frankly, for me and Donut as well, whatever the fuck just happened also broke Sister Ines's charm spell. The seals shook their heads, looking about in confusion. Their enemies, the crabs, all cried out in surprise. They were all mixed in together. But they weren't alone.

The zombies groaned, their singular purpose coming back to them, one by one. Baby seal zombies made croaking noises. Fish opened and closed their foaming mouths. Crab and adult Monk Seal zombies stretched their limbs and flippers and claws, the sound echoing across the landscape like thousands of creaking, cracking bones all at once.

The whale-sized sea snake boss was also starting to awaken from its stupor. At any moment it would realize it had the cat girl nun perched upon its head.

But most alarming of all were the corpses. A good number of the bodies had notifications over them. A dead monk seal, with a horrific bite wound on its neck, plopped onto the ground right next to me. The note over it read: **Former shell of the Now-Freed demon, Azireth.**

The corpse caught on fire and dissipated into dust as what that meant dawned on me. This had originally been a regular Monk Seal, and it had been turned into a zombie. And because it was a weak-minded zombie, its body had been overtaken by a demon just before it was teleported to my location. Since one couldn't teleport this type of demon, only the body itself had come. That meant the full-powered Sheol demon, whose name was Azireth, was now free and roaming about the beach a few miles away. But not just Azireth. There'd been dozens of corpses, all with different demon names over them, meaning there were now dozens of full-power Sheol demons suddenly unleashed into Cuba.

And what was worse, the Demon Eviction event was still ongoing, meaning some of the zombies all around us were slowly, slowly getting turned into demons themselves. A red exclamation mark appeared over a zombie fish—a sea bass—flopping on the ground a few feet away. The red, flaming notification read **Jarmagog Comes**.

We couldn't let the demons touch us. We couldn't let the zombies bite us. We couldn't let Sister Ines get away. Or worse, let her get sucked into hell.

Your Book of Voodoo has updated with an entry for Sister Ines Quiteria.

The notice came and went as I looked at all the creatures around us. We were completely surrounded.

Right in front of me, coiled upon the road was the massive snake, about 17-18 feet tall.

It looked *pissed.*

Madre de Aguas

Level 125 City Boss.

For such a small island, there sure are a surplus of legends surrounding the "Mother of Waters." You've actually met one of them already. Rose her from the dead and sent her off to the Celestial Ascendency so she can assist a psychopath win that boring, tedious game. We'll revisit that whole mess of a dull storyline later when I decide to spice it up a bit. Well, *I'll* revisit it. You're pretty fucked and most likely won't get to see it all go down.

Anyway, the snake iteration of the legend usually involves a giant boa that protects the freshwater areas of Cuba and is able to control all the locals to help protect the environment and local flora and fauna. Sometimes she lives in the rivers. Sometimes she lives in the ocean. Sometimes she's nice. Sometimes she's a batshit murder machine. Guess which iteration this one is?

The *Madre* was hunted and almost flagged several days earlier by a nun of all things. That crawler was unable to seal the deal. Upon returning to the area, this nun instead decided to glamor the creature using some newly-acquired skills. Controlling the snake allowed her to in turn control pretty much every creature within shouting distance. It was a brilliant plan until the spell got broken prematurely. Now the recently un-charmed *Madre de Aguas* is quite upset, and she's about to ruin the day of every motherfucker on the island.

Oh, and she just got bit a bunch of times by a zombie fish.

Warning: This mob has been inflicted with pre-zombism. That means it's like that dude from Every. Single. Zombie. Movie who has been bit, but he hasn't died yet, and now he's hiding it from everyone because he's a douche. In other words, this mob is still living flesh, but once it dies, it will rise again with a new set of powers.

Bonus Warning: I could spend some time explaining how dangerous it is to have a boss-level zombie walking around

during a Demon Eviction event, but let's just see how this plays out. Sometimes it's better to be surprised.

I met eyes with Sister Ines, who remained atop the giant snake. She still had Samantha chomped down on her arm. The cat woman did not look afraid. She did not look angry. She was laughing, even as the snake under her feet started to realize the cat who'd enslaved her was standing upon her head.

The world froze.

B-b-b-b-b-boss battle!

Survival Royale Special Event!

A window appeared in the sky, and Kevin, the orange-hued, four-eyed lizard guy from the recap episode appeared, holding a microphone. He was accompanied by the orc announcer, just like last time. I remembered the orc's name was Magnificent Troy. They both wore tuxedoes, but they both looked like they'd been drinking for a day straight. Both wore un-tied bow ties around their necks. The orc swayed slightly, and it appeared he had lipstick on his cheek.

"Carl, what's going on?" Donut called, looking up into the air. Nobody could move, but we could still talk and turn our necks. She gasped. "Is that a wipe window? Are we getting live announced? Is this what happened with you and Katia and Tran on the submarine?"

She hadn't been present the last time this happened, and she'd bitched about it for an hour straight.

"Yeah," I said through gritted teeth. "Get ready."

"Ladies and Gentlemen, what do we have here?" Kevin called, clearly surprised he'd just been sent to cover this fight. "Would you look at this mess! We are interrupting that one-sided Lucia Mar slaughter in Beijing to bring you whatever this is." He paused. "Oh, I see. Holy lunacy, look at that playing field. Betting is now open! I am here today with Magnificent Troy, and if you're just joining us, we're coming to you live from Earth orbit. We are trapped, and we still have to do our jobs even though everything has gone to shit!"

"That's right, Kevin," the orc said, his smile plastered on his exhausted pig face. I could tell he was drunk off his ass. "It's an Armageddon-level clusterfuck all right. Bidding today is sponsored by

Dictum Waystation Controls, Limited, because of course it is. Now would you look at that playing field! Care to explain this one?"

"What other choice do I have, Magnificent Troy?" Kevin said. "Now, the *why* everyone is sitting there right now in the same place is a long story, and it has to do with the Lika/Samantha storyline we covered extensively a few weeks back. None of that matters right now. We currently have *eight* separate entities in play for this upcoming fight, so it's going to take a crutch to unpack. I hope you're drinking something strong. You're gonna need it for this one."

Another window popped up, and a picture of a Monk Seal appeared. "If you haven't been paying attention to the Royal Court storyline, here's where we are. This is a Monk Seal. They were fighting against these guys." A crab appeared underneath it, followed by a spinning image of Sister Ines and the Madre de Aguas snake. "During the battles between the crabs and seals, crawler Sister Ines Quiteria used her level-15 *Book of Rhymes* bard skill, which she just got from her patron, to enhance her *Word Weaver* spell to charm this creature, a level-125 city boss. This boss, in turn, has the power to control all creatures from the area."

"Huh. Charming that boss actually sounds like it was a smart move on the nun's part," Troy said.

"It sure was, Troy. But, unfortunately, the sister didn't move fast enough. She had two things working against her. The first was this." The scene changed, showing me punting a zombie turkey off the edge of the Iowa land mass. The camera followed the turkey as it plunged into the ocean, where it promptly chomped onto the tail of some fish as it sunk to the bottom. They zoomed in on the fish's eyes as it turned bright yellow. The fish went berserk and started biting all the other fish around it.

Troy chuckled. "Uh-oh. You never put contagious undead in a global ocean. Carl should know that by now. It's like pissing into a habitat's food synthesizer."

"Indeed you do not, Troy."

Donut grunted. "I told you not to let the turkeys in the ocean, Carl."

"See? Even Princess Donut agrees with us!" Troy said.

"Hey! They can hear me!" Donut said. "Hi Magnificent Troy! Hi Kevin!"

"Princess Donut sure is in good spirits. Let's hope those spirits remain, as I don't think she realizes the danger she is in," Kevin said. The screen changed to a map of the Earth, showing a red tide sweeping across the ocean and spreading across the entire globe. "The mass-zombie outbreak along with the AI deciding that crab sperm counts as a mob helped kicked off the earliest demon eviction in the history of the crawl!"

"It sure did," Troy agreed. "Why not? Fuck all the previously established rules on this sort of thing. Let's just make it up as we go along."

Kevin chuckled. "Apparently crab sperm is the physical resurrection of their ancestors, so, according to the AI, it counts as a mob. Who knew? Anyway, the zombie event had started to disrupt Sister Ines's charm poem, but since her sponsor *and* patron, the Nebulars, helped her raise that *Word Weaver* spell to level 15, she was able to fully control both the boss *and* the spells the boss could cast, meaning she could control the zombies, too. That spell is so powerful, in fact, even the fish started to pull themselves out of the ocean to get closer."

"That's a level of charm Princess Donut could only dream of!" Troy said.

"Hey!" Donut called.

"But," Kevin continued. He held up a claw, pausing as he sucked down what looked like a beer. He let out a satisfied sigh. "...as powerful as that spell is, Faction Wars fans all know how difficult it is to control an evicted demon."

The camera view changed once again to show a heavy-metal style, chain-covered red devil demon with horns picking his way across a flaming landscape made of lava rocks. Massive shadows of behemoth creatures moved about in the background. The demon had the name **Yuguleth** over its head. It looked up in the air, muttered, "oh fuck," and then he blasted off upward like he was being sucked into an alien spaceship.

The view changed to a zombie Monk Seal, sitting there, drooling on itself as it looked up at Sister Ines on the beach, reciting her poem. A red exclamation appeared over the Monk Seal, and the name **Yuguleth** appeared over it as the outline of the large demon was squeezed into the zombie. The monk seal's yellow eyes turned completely black. The thing snarled, turned, and tackled a non-zombie crab standing nearby. As he grappled with the crab, a flaming hole appeared in the ground, and both of them plunged through the portal.

The view returned to the hellscape, showing the seal and crab plummeting downward. The seal shell burned away, returning the demon to his original form as the crab screamed in terror. They both slammed into the lava rock ground. The demon picked himself up and brushed himself off as hundreds of tiny, flaming centipede things came from the ground and started to devour the now on-fire crab.

The demon, Yuguleth, looked up at the sky and turned in a circle as hundreds of his fellow demons continued to get drawn into the air like it was the rapture. Occasionally, a portal opened high up in the crackling darkness, and two creatures returned, plummeting back downward, signifying the homecoming of a demon who'd managed to grab a soul and jump back through the portal.

"I hate this fucking place," the demon muttered.

The screen returned to the scene with Sister Ines on the back of the snake, depicting her still on the beach. It was from just a few minutes ago.

The camera followed Samantha as she rolled across the battlefield toward the nun. "You! Zombie! Get out of the way," she called on the screen. "Get out of my way, or I will kill your mother! I have a mission for Mr. Wishy Washy Carl!" All around her, portals opened in the ground as zombies were turning to demons and started pulling seals and crabs down into hell.

A whole paragraph of text I couldn't read appeared over Samantha as she suddenly floated into the air and zoomed toward the cat girl, who was still reciting her poem, seemingly oblivious of the chaos starting to unfold all around her. Samantha bit down on

the woman, and a moment later was when I dropped the xistera and summoned her to me. The entire beach battlefield whiffed away into smoke.

The camera remained on the beach. Left behind were about 100 demons, all suddenly freed from their zombie shells. They were all about eight feet tall. They were all the same, male, red-skinned devil creatures. They all had different names, but they were all **Petty Demon Pleasure Valet, Level 140.**

"Carl, those guys look just like the bad guy in that *Legend* movie," Donut said. "You know, the one where he makes Ferris Bueller's girlfriend turn into a goth!"

On screen, one of the demons turned to another and said, "At least the weather is nice here."

The screen snapped off, leaving just Troy and Kevin.

"So there you have it, folks," Kevin said. "Samantha's teleportation of the whole crew broke Sister Ines's charm spell, but it also busted several of the demons out of their shells. I sure hope no gods have noticed, because things might get even messier. Luckily for our crawlers, the freed demons are a little ways away and aren't part of this fight. But, demon eviction is still ongoing! More zombies are turning by the moment! Since the charm spell is ruined, we now have eight different groups of combatants all about to fight at once!"

"That's a lot," Troy said. "Can you break those down for me?"

"Certainly. We have the Royal Court, Sister Ines, the mindless zombies, the demon-possessed zombies, the crabs, the seals, and of course, Madre de Aguas herself, no longer under control of anybody!" As he mentioned each group, an image appeared floating in the air. "Betting closes in just a minute folks, so get those wagers in!"

Notice: Battle will commence as soon as all squad leaders finish choosing their allegiances. No mobs have equipped card decks. If crawlers choose to ally with one another, deck usage will be optional.

"Carl, it's asking if I want to treat Sister Ines as an ally or an enemy! What should I choose?"

"Do it as an ally. That way a card battle won't start, and then teleport us the hell out of here!"

"It says if I pick ally and she picks enemy, she gets a ten-second head start!"

"Goddamnit," I said, looking back and forth. That was insidious. "Pick ally anyway." *Maybe she'll be reasonable. Maybe she'll pick ally, too.*

"Do you understand now, Carl?" Sister Ines shouted from the top of the still-frozen snake. "Do you understand? None of this is real. It's never been real. It's the devil, whispering things in our ears. There are no aliens. It's demons. It's always been demons. Hell has opened, and it is taking us all. I told them not to worship false gods. I told them. They didn't listen to me before, and they didn't listen to me here! These are the wages of our sin, and there is nothing left for us but to burn!"

"Somebody didn't get her breakfast this morning," Kevin said.

"Typical Havana brown," Donut muttered. "Everything always has to be so dramatic."

Goddamnit. I raised my voice. "You're right, Sister. None of this is real. Not in the way you're thinking. But they're not real demons, either. I'm sorry we started this, but you need to listen to me. Don't let the demons pull you away. Please. We need to talk first. Pick us as an ally, and I promise we won't attack you. We'll teleport out of here together."

"Wait a second, Keith," Troy said. He was counting on his fat, orc fingers. "You said there are eight combatants?"

Your Book of Voodoo has been updated with an entry for Quan Ch.

"Carl!" Donut started to say. "There's another..."

All allyships have been chosen. Battle commencing...

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Several Days Earlier.

"Yo!" the mantaur guard called, banging on the door of the Blessed Sun Enchantments shop within Club Vanquisher. "Listen, poser! You only get one shop visit a day. I saw you! I saw you come out of the temple! You can't be in here! Unlock this door! I've been born with a heart of steel! I'm not afraid to die!"

"Dude, what does that even mean?" I called back through the rattling door.

"It means get out here this instant!"

I had a memory of a similar scene that had played out in the Desperado Club not that long ago. I turned my attention back to the cleric and the jeweler.

"It's expensive," Pater Coal said, speaking quickly. "A million gold."

I shook my head. "I don't have that much on me."

"Nobody ever does," the satyr jeweler said with a chuckle. He turned to the diminutive cleric. "I'm sure the church will be happy to spot you."

Pater Coal nodded. "We will, but you'll have to put 10,000 down if you have it."

"That seems a little pricey," I said, wishing I had Donut with me.

"We're here because you wanted this," Pater Coal said.

The door banged again. *This was a bad idea*. I was now stuck. I could no longer change my mind and go to the healer. "How much is the interest?"

"It's for the church," Pater Coal said. "We don't charge interest to our martyrs. But you do have to trade in one of your existing pieces of jewelry for it to work. Something you've been wearing a long time. The longer, the better."

I hesitated. "Okay," I finally said, pulling my strength ring off and handing it to the jeweler. It was the first ring I'd received in the dungeon. "Let's do it."

The jeweler looked at the cleric, who nodded.

You have taken an interest-free* loan of 990,000 gold from the Temple of Emberus. You will no longer be allowed to renounce your religion while you are under debt. You may make payments directly to the Emberus shrine.

"Uh... What the hell does that asterisk part mean?" I asked.

"I don't understand," the jeweler said.

New Achievement! Columbia House!

There was a time when you could get twelve albums for a penny. That's right. A goddamned penny. It was great! The ads were everywhere. Each colorful, full-or-double-page ad appeared in just about every publication in North America from the 1970s until the 2000s. And let's not forget the catalogs they mailed directly to your home! Each ad or catalog featured stacks and stacks of today's hottest music, from Hall and Oates to ABBA to my personal favorite, Gloria Estefan. All you had to do was cut out the ad, pick your favorite twelve albums, mail the whole thing in with a shiny penny, and a month later, you'd open your mailbox to find the 8-tracks, or records, or cassettes, or CDs sitting there, ready to be played. It was great!

All they asked in return was that for the next year or so, you purchase another album once a month for full price. And if you forgot each month to make your pick? Then you learned a new term. "Negative Option Billing."

If we're being honest here, most people took the 12 albums and ran. They never gave Columbia House another penny. But some people did pay, and that's all that mattered. Believe it or not, Columbia House and its competitors made bucketloads of money on those few rubes who did manage to stick to the terms of their contract.

And for the folks who never paid? Who cares! Columbia House didn't have to pay the artists' royalties for those albums anyway! It was an advertising expense! It's just like with banks and their overdraft fees. The smart businesses know how to make money off their richest and poorest clients.

Anyway, you have taken on a financial debt. You got the albums. Now you gotta pay. Or don't. Maybe there won't be any consequences. Maybe there will. But you got your Beach Boys album, and for now, that's all that matters.

***Reward*: You've just been trained to lunge for the carrot that has been dangled in front of you, no matter what the cost. If society was still ticking, that'd likely mean you're about to lead a wage-slave life of ever-increasing debt you can never get out from underneath, culminating in you dying alone in a government-run facility while your meager Social Security checks go straight into the facility's coffers. That and a cassette copy of Gloria Estefan's 1989 masterpiece, *Cuts Both Ways.* My favorite is track number 8.**

"Uh," I said again, suddenly regretting my decision. "The loan really is interest-free, right?"

"Sure, sure," Pater Coal said, waving his hand as the door continued to bang. "Best get this done."

The hairy, goat-legged jeweler also worshipped Emberus, and he had the same twin tattoos on the back of his hands as I did. The creature looked like a combo between Prepotente and a hipster barista guy.

"So you can do this fast?" I asked as a second mantaur started banging on the door, this one shouting something about Valkyries and wolves for some inexplicable reason.

"That's right, my brother," the satyr said. "Don't mind those idiot Grull worshippers out there. They're too scared to actually come in here." He gently slipped the ring onto a mandrel-like holder with a handle and then dunked it into what looked like a pot of bubbling lava. The whole bowl glowed. "This isn't the most powerful base ring, but it will work for your slug condition, and it will help against a few other debuffs as well, but if it gets too overwhelmed, it might not work as intended. Do you have any more rings? I can make other spells for you. I have a whole menu."

"I'm in enough debt as it is," I said as he pulled the ring from the lava.

He shrugged and handed the ring back to me. It wasn't even hot to the touch. It looked identical to before. The label over it still said it was a strength ring. I examined it.

Enchanted Pauper's Ring of the Steadfast Emberus.

Ah, Emberus. Wholly sane, reasonable Emberus. I'm sure any jewelry that bears his name will be a perfectly fine, normal piece of magical gear.

When working properly, this ring will remove most health-seeping and disease-based debuff effects. Has a variable numbing effect on various other debuff types. This will not remove the debuff itself. Too many active debuffs of any kind may temporarily mute or overheat this ring.

Warning: This ring may only be worn by a worshipper of Emberus. This will turn into a cursed item if worn by a non-worshipper.

Warning: This ring's true nature may only be seen by a worshipper of Emberus. It is disguised as an enchanted Strength ring.

Warning: This ring has a debt attached to it. You may not sell this ring while this debt is attached. If you lose this ring, the loan payment will be accelerated. If you are expelled from the church while you are wearing this ring, the curse effect will activate.

Warning: This ring carries a curse effect. Non-worshippers who attempt to wear this ring will find

themselves infected with every debuff suffered by anyone within 50 meters of this ring. That's… that's a bad one.

"This is fine," I said, slipping it onto my finger.

"There are indeed eight combatants," Kevin shouted. "Coming from above in a sneak attack, ready to get his revenge, it's Quan Ch!"

Quan appeared, his dot coming into view on my map. He'd been invisible, flying through the air straight toward the fight, his magical cloak/robe thing flapping in the wind behind him. He'd risen to level 70, one above my own. He'd been trailing six levels behind me for a while, which meant he'd been cruising through this current floor.

His left arm was still gone. He had a look of absolute rage on his face.

The little scene window popped up and it showed me holding onto Quan's arm at the end of the fifth floor as he tried to run away, and me ripping the arm right off his body.

Magnificent Troy laughed. He, too, now had a beer bottle in his hand. "I remember that. That was pretty awesome."

"Remember how Quan cried like a little bitch afterward?" Kevin asked.

Troy kept laughing. He pulled his own right arm into his tuxedo jacket and started waving the empty sleeve back and forth. "Look! I'm Quan! I'm Quan!" His alien beer splashed out of the bottle.

"Fuck you!" Quan screeched over at the screen.

Kevin continued to howl with laughter. "That's the wrong arm, Troy, but that is indeed how he looked. Anyway, let's watch all these dumbasses finally die and then maybe they'll let us get out of this cursed solar system."

Your squad has chosen to ally with team Quiteria.

Team Quiteria has chosen no allies.

Team Quan has chosen no allies.

Ten second, "I thought we were friends" penalty imposed.

Combat Started.

Chaos broke out all around us. Every zombie lunged at the nearest non-zombie as the seals and crabs burst into action, kicking, fighting, screaming, punching. Everybody was fighting everybody else.

A zombie baby seal looked at me and groaned, moving itself forward, trailing guts. I moved to punt it, but I realized I couldn't move my leg. I had, stupidly, assumed the ten-second penalty only applied to Donut's deck of cards.

Oh fuck, oh fuck.

The baby seals were indeed white and fuzzy, which was not correct because these things weren't harp seals, but I barely registered this as it got closer. Both Quan and Sister Ines cast cards. Donut didn't even have her deck yet.

As the zombie seal approached from my left, a demon crab jumped at me from the right.

It stopped in midair, having flown directly over one of the demon snare traps I'd placed. It stopped just inches from me, screeching, its voice like a high-revving engine, nothing like that of a regular crab. Its black eyes swirled like twin hurricanes. The demon's name was **Nizzle.**

The baby seal reached for my ankle just as the timer ended. I jumped back and punted it. I ducked as another demon crab lunged. It sailed over me and tackled a regular crab. A portal opened, and they both disappeared, screaming. All around, demons were grabbing combatants, and pulling them away as more and more zombies made the change. And those that didn't were turning more crabs and seals into zombies.

I turned to Nizzle the frozen demon and cast *Talon Strike* just as I kicked it directly in the chest. It fell backward, and I jumped forward, cracking down hard, breaking it into pieces.

Quan remained floating in the air, out of reach. The boss snake started to buck like a wild horse. Samantha, finally able to move, zipped away, floating like one of those skulls from the *Doom* video game. Sister Ines remained attached to the back of the boss monster's head, like she had a *Sticky Feet* skill.

Quan had cast a mystic card and then a totem. The totem appeared with no fanfare. It was a large, but common soft-shelled turtle named **Hoan Kiem**. It was only level 25. It fell and plopped onto the ground, surrounded by a group of zombie fish who all started to bounce toward it, their ravening mouths opening and closing.

Peekaboo!

A pair of giant, bloodshot eyes appeared in the air, floating over Donut. Across the way, the same eyes appeared above Sister Ines. Quan's mystic card was something I'd seen before. I couldn't see what Quan saw, but I knew he now could see both Donut's hand and Sister Ines's hand.

A clockwork mongo ran by, screeching, covered with biting zombie baby seals. The real Mongo stood by Donut, protecting her. I watched as he jumped through the air, ripping a zombie apart. A demon fish tried to open a portal under Mongo's feet, but the dinosaur ripped it in half with his talons.

Sister Ines's card also didn't have any fanfare. She summoned the totem, followed by a stout card onto him.

It was Paz. She'd summoned Paz.

The armored man looked much like he had the last time I'd seen him, dying on the floor of the Yemaya temple after he'd been smote by his god. He stood right in front of the snake boss, facing the cat woman who remained upon the head of the creature. He still had the horrific, hand-shaped burn across his face, which partially revealed his skull. The god Ogun had done that to him.

"Sister," Paz called up to the nun. "Please. No more. I can't take... gah!"

The giant snake reached down and chomped down on Paz, her giant mouth trying to crush the armor. She picked him up and started to shake him back and forth, like she was attempting to swallow him whole.

Samantha zipped through the air and landed at my feet, bouncing once. She rolled to a stop and looked up at me. "I'm pretty sure this is all your fault, Carl."

Donut tossed out her first card. Geraldo the Monk Seal appeared just as Sister Ines started to shout instructions at her totem. "Paz," she called. "Accept your suffering! Use your self-destruct skill the moment this false god..."

She didn't finish.

Quan cast another mystic card. This one puffed away, indicating it'd been a consumable. He pointed directly at Sister Ines's hand, and the moment he made the move, I knew exactly what that card was. My heart sank. I'd seen it in the lists, but I'd always assumed it was a dumb card. We'd never found one.

I pick that one!

A giant, neon hand appeared in the air and reached down and grabbed a card from Sister Ines' deck.

The card was called **Force Play**. You picked a card in an opponent's hand, and it played automatically. Since he could see her hand, he knew exactly what the card would be. She'd had a *Flee* card in her hand.

"Oh!" Both Troy and Kevin shouted at the same time.

"Didn't see that one coming," Troy added.

"Sister Ines is out of the fight!"

Team Quiteria has fled the fight.

Team Quiteria has lost their key.

The last standing deckmaster will gain their key.

Paz, who'd still been in the mouth of the giant snake, dissipated into dust. The snake hissed in outrage and turned its attention on the closest crawler. Me.

Geraldo landed next to me, looking around wildly. "Brothers! Brothers! It is here!" he shouted, his voice full of glee. All around, seals and crabs died and continued to get pulled into hell portals. "The battle of our lives is here! Oh! Oh! Ready, bitches? Ready for the flip-flap?" He started to make Bruce Lee noises as he somersaulted into the fray toward a pair of crabs.

"Not that way!" Donut shrieked. "Geraldo, get back here this instant!"

"Don't worry about the snake," Samantha called. "I got it!"

I slammed onto *Protective Shell* just as the snake lunged.

Every mob. Every demon. Every zombie. The weird, low-level turtle. All the crabs and the seals. They all blasted away under my shell. It was like I'd set off a bomb. All the closest mobs flew into the woods and beyond, leaving us suddenly alone except for Mongo and one more clockwork Mongo.

"That'll clear a room," Troy said.

"Hey!" Samantha called. "I was going to do that!"

Lazarus-a-Bang-Bang appeared. Donut tossed a temporary shield onto him. He pulled his weapon to his shoulder. This time it was a rocket launcher, similar to what camels used on the fifth floor. He aimed in the general direction that turtle had flown, and he fired. The missile corkscrewed into the trees, exploding.

"Donut, don't keep a *Flee* card in your hand," I yelled.

"I already discarded it," she called. "Where did he go? And why did he summon that turtle? Carl, my hand sucks right now. I can't discard for several seconds, and it's all snare cards!"

Geraldo, who'd still been in the shell's area when it cast, continued to unnecessarily flip as he moved off in a random direction, screaming at the top of his lungs.

I scanned the sky, but I didn't see Quan. I could see the snake, who'd actually taken some damage from getting tossed away. It wasn't attacking anymore. It had its head straight up in the air, and it was moving back and forth, casting a spell.

"Lazarus," I called, pointing at the snake.

"I see it," the robed totem said, lifting his launcher to his shoulder, aiming at the snake.

"Samantha," I said. "Your job is to get that Quan guy. Think you can do that?"

"The one-armed guy with the pretty cloak thing? Oh, that's easy. Where's he at?"

"There!" Donut cried, pointing in the sky. Quan was coming back. He was already throwing a card out just as I cast *Super Spreader*.

"No!" Donut suddenly called as her entire hand of three cards blinked and disappeared. They reappeared a moment later. "Carl, he switched hands with me! Three for three! Carl, it's all Flee cards!"

I looked up in horror as I saw Quan grinning as he cast another **Force Play**.

"Now that's an ass-kicking if I ever saw one," Troy said.

Your Squad has used a Flee Card.

Your Squad has lost their key!

Your key has been transferred to Team Quan!

Team Quiteria's key has been transferred to Team Quan!

Teleporting Now.

Combat Complete. Deck has been reset.

New Achievement! The Fumble.

The clock is ticking down, and with *everything* hanging in the balance, you pulled an Earnest Byner and lost the ball at the goal line.

***Reward*: If you don't fix this, this is how you will be remembered.**

Silence followed as Donut, Mongo, Samantha, and I all plopped into dark, swampy woods. I had no idea where we were.

"Does he have to stay in the fight?" Donut cried, all poofed out, jumping to her feet. "Can we get back there in time? Does he already have the keys? What do we do? What do we do?"

"I don't think we were locked in," I said as I jumped into my chat. "He ain't sticking around if he doesn't have to. It says he already has the keys! He's a coward. He won't risk it if he doesn't have to. He's heading straight for the exit."

Carl: Imani. Quan has the keys. He has *both* keys. He might be coming to you right now. He's going down the stairs. You're our only chance to stop him.

Carl: If anyone is out there who hears me and is in the Cuba area. Stay by the exit in the Capitol building. Quan Ch

has both sets of keys, and he's headed to one of the two exits. You have to stop him.

There was a short pause.

Ren: It's us, Carl. I'm sorry I didn't say anything sooner. It's us. We'll be ready.

Donut, who was already poofed out, hissed in anger at Tserendolgor's message.

Imani: I'll do my best.

I quickly made a new chat group.

Carl: Okay. Both of you. Be careful. He's really good, but he's not going to be feeling well. I cast my Super Spreader on him at the last second. He's going to be leaking slugs. You have to delay him as long as possible. With each passing minute, the slugs will get worse and worse. They'll fight for him, but each time one comes out, it damages him more, so he'll be distracted. You have to stop him. I can get all three groups of us out, but that's it. And only if we stop him.

Red dots surrounded us in the forest. It was more of the duendes. The little, shoe-loving goblin things were everywhere, even in the woods. I looked at the map, trying to figure out where we were.

Donut looked up at me, eyes shining. "I failed. I failed, Carl, and now we're going to die. Imani is going to die, and it's my fault."

"No, Donut. Not yet. I want you to rearrange your deck. Just totems, the combo card, and some Time Extends. Do it fast, and then you're going to initiate a card battle with the duendes over there. Samantha. Come here. I need you!"

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Time until level collapse: 4 days, 12 hours.

<Note added by Crawler Tipid, 4th Edition>

It was me or him, and I chose to save myself. I didn't think. I reacted. I reacted to save myself. Anybody else would do the same. I keep telling myself that again and again. Does that make me evil? No, I don't think it does, not when I think of it logically. Then why do I feel that way?

I paced back and forth, trying to figure out the last part of the plan while Donut rearranged her deck for sustained combat. I now knew where we were. We'd actually teleported deeper into Havana, but we were in a small, forested area surrounded by trees with the city just a few blocks away. We were about five kilometers from the church exit and 15 from the capitol building. I didn't know which one Quan would go to, but I suspected he'd head for the further one.

It was still dark outside, but the sun would rise soon.

I only had half an idea. *Think. Think. Think.*

Ren: Carl, I gotta say, those teleport traps really fucked us. Khulan isn't even back yet. We set off those teleports

and a goddamned alarm trap that I had to pull into my inventory because it wouldn't shut up. It was playing a Backstreet Boys song.

Donut: YOU'RE LUCKY HE DIDN'T BLOW YOUR CHEATING ASS UP.

Ren: If he'd blown us up, you wouldn't have anybody blocking the door, now would you?

Donut: IT WOULD BE WORTH IT.

"Donut, chill. We need them."

Carl: There're more regular teleports outside on the stairs. Best leave them there. Set more of your own traps if you have any. If he's coming, it'll be soon. Be careful. I think he can go invisible.

"Don't tell her where the traps are! Even if they stop Quan, we're still going to have to fight them. Her meatball wants to eat Mongo. And who the heck is Khulan? I've never met a Khulan. Is that a boy name or a girl name? I bet they're a cheater, too."

Khulan was a woman, part of Ren's team. I'd never talked with her, but I'd seen her a few times on the recap along with the rest of Ren's squad. I couldn't remember her class, but she was human. She would paralyze people while Ren torched them with her flamethrower. Ren's regular party was normally seven or eight people, so I didn't know who the last member was or who her squad consisted of. I knew she'd had a terrible time during phase two, and only three of them had survived.

"We're not out of this yet, Donut. Take a deep breath. Stick to the plan."

"What's the plan? We don't have a plan yet! I can't *Puddle Jump* that far, and my Skedaddle won't work like that, either. We don't know where he's going!"

I reached down and scratched her, trying to calm her. Myself, too. Her eyes were flashing as she quickly rearranged her cards. "Listen." I lowered my voice, trying to sound soothing. We were in a hurry, but this was important to get out. "Even if we don't stop him, I have my bone key benefit. I can still open that door. Imani is our first

priority, and our friend. We're trying to save *her*. But *we* are safe for now. Okay?"

"Okay," Donut said after a moment.

"And Ren is our friend, too. I know you don't like her, but we can still do this without having to hurt our friends. We'll do what we can. I *will* use that bone key if it means I don't have to fight either of them. You saying inflammatory shit is going to make them not trust us."

Donut didn't say anything. She was shaking with fear. She would never like Ren. And she didn't trust the bone key benefit.

I didn't trust it, either. I thought of Tipid, and their last few entries into the cookbook. Of the terrible suspicion I had about how that key worked. I didn't have time to think about it, and I put it in the back of my mind.

I reached down and picked up Samantha with two hands. I brought her up and looked her in the eyes. She was covered in sand and gore. She felt heavier than usual, and there was a slight vibration to her that wasn't normally there. She still had the Desperado Club logo tattooed on her neck where Katia had tapped it with the poke and stick tattoo kit, but the ink was starting to fade.

"Samantha," I said. "This is important, so pay attention."

"We've discussed this, Carl. If you want to date me, you must get in line. *Maybe* if you fight Louis for my honor I'll consider it, but not if you mess up his beautiful, squishy face."

I resisted the urge to shake her. "We don't have time. You haven't been honest with us. You have to tell us what you can do."

She just looked at me.

"You mean, like, with my tongue?"

"Goddamnit, Samantha. You teleported an entire beach back to us. You can fly. A while back when we were in the simulation room, you almost cast some sort of attack spell. I can feel how much power you have coursing through you. But I need to know what you can do. What you can cast."

She opened her mouth and closed it.

"*Please*," I said.

Her mouth started to quiver. "I... I don't know why, but sometimes I feel stronger than usual. Before I was banished to the Nothing when I had my original body, I would get more powerful when someone prayed to me or bought a charm with my likeness or when I melted someone who wouldn't date one of my worshippers with my Acid Bath. You know, like normal stuff. But it's not like that anymore. My father took my power away and my whore of a mother tried to steal my man, and everything changed."

"Okay, but when you *do* feel stronger, what can you do?"

"I can fly. I can fuck up anybody who looks at me funny."

I took a breath. "Be more specific."

"I can help spells. I can make them more powerful. But it doesn't always do what I want. Like, sometimes it's a lot stronger than I thought it would be. And sometimes it doesn't work too good. I used to have this dissolve spell that was really great, but I haven't been able to get it to work. Not on the, uh, outside. And sometimes my magic does stuff without me asking."

She suddenly burst into tears. "It's because of this stupid body. You have to get MaeMae to the next floor so she can get the supplies to get me into that flesh golem. I can do all sorts of good stuff when I have a real body."

"Other than flying and enhancing spells, can you cast anything on your own right now? Can you teleport me?"

She continued to weep. She spoke through gasped sobs. "Teleport? No. I'm useless. Oh gods, it's true. I'm useless!" She turned in my hands. "Don't look upon me. Now you know my dark secret. I've been faking it the whole time. It's all a lie!" She blew snot all over my hands and started rubbing her nose on me. "I'm a fraud. How can anybody love me? You're going to tell Louis, aren't you? You'll tell him, and he's going to reject me! Just like my king did when he left me for my mother. Everybody always leaves me."

"Samantha," I said, trying not to let my exasperation show in my voice. "You're far from useless. You've helped us a bunch of times. And you're getting more powerful by the moment. I'm not going to leave you. You're part of the team."

She sniffed and blew out more snot. She grunted and turned herself to face me again. "Really? I'm part of the team?"

"Yes. Of course."

She sniffled again. "Why do you want to teleport?"

"I need a way to get somewhere fast, but we don't know where it'll be until the last minute. It's one of two places. Somewhere far. I thought maybe since you'd gotten to Shi Maria so fast, you could teleport more than you were saying."

"I didn't teleport to MaeMae. I told you what really happened. I hitched a ride. I tried to stop a train and I got stuck to the front, and when the train left the edge of the map, I got squished and bounced away, and I landed in her web. I might have wrecked the train, too."

"You never told me that."

"Why don't you do what that scary lady does? The mean one whose dog got his head popped off by Donut? I know you have some of those traps, too."

"It's too late. I have to set those up..." I trailed off, and I blinked. Holy shit. *Of course*. I jumped into my inventory and searched for the two-part teleport traps. How many did I have? I only needed one set, but more would be better. "Samantha, I could kiss you."

"I'm not a whore, Carl."

<u>Mordecai</u>: There's only one more of the two-part sets for sale on the market. That's it. They are really expensive. Too bad the Desperado is still closed.

<u>Carl</u>: I have four sets. Florin?

<u>Florin</u>: Hang on, mate. I'm going in right now. I hate going down this early, but I'll let you know. Okay. Going through the door right now. You're right. It's a room. About five by five meters with a stairwell in the middle. It's one of the glowy stairs, not one that looks like a real set of stairs. It's just like the room with the giant globe from the beginning of the floor.

Carl: Do you have any traps? See if it'll let you drop one on the floor.

Florin: I got plenty. Dropping one now.

There was a long pause.

Florin: Sorry, mate. Got an error that says, "This area is outside the level. No traps may be set in the stairwell chamber. Nice try, though."

My heart dropped. For a second there, I thought we'd found a way to avoid any more bloodshed.

Carl: Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck. We'll have to do it the hard way.

Florin: I reckon after what you did with the bubbles on the fifth floor, they ain't too keen on letting people teleport their way out of trouble anymore.

Carl: Mordecai. My trap master skill lets me put traps on non-static items. Will that work? Like, if I put it on the back of an automaton, and it walks into the room with me?

Mordecai: I really doubt it. Sorry, kid. The rules regarding stairwell chambers are even more strict than those surrounding saferooms. And even if you could, we only have a couple of them amongst us. I think that Lucia kid buys them up the moment they appear on the market.

Florin: She does indeed. Teleport traps and alcohol are the only things she purchases.

Carl: Damnit. Okay. Sorry for making you go down early, Florin.

Florin: No worries, mate. See you on the other side. Keep your head up. Do me a favor. If you get word of Lucia, send me a message. She has good days and bad days, and it's been more bad than good lately. Li Jun says she just took out half the squads who don't hold keys, and they're holding back, hoping they don't have to fight her. Any message you send I'll get when I pop out onto the ninth floor.

Carl: I will.

Florin: Looking forward to tearing it up again with you.

Samantha was still in my grip, turned upside down with her jagged, latex stump facing up at me. I remembered that badger bartender guy who'd gotten his arm stuck in there. It'd had an acid effect. He'd eventually been ripped in half by Minge the demon, but when Samantha had discharged the rest of him, the flesh had been burned off. I hoped the small, fist-sized spider automaton would be okay. It had the anchor half of a teleport trap affixed to its flat, top surface, designed specifically to hold such things. Samantha insisted that it would be okay, that her "Juice" would only burn flesh.

I took a breath and shoved the little spider inside. It pushed easily into the latex. The small robot made a scared, disapproving noise as it disappeared. My fingers did not burn. I had the impression that it took a minute for the acid to start working.

Samantha bit me on the hand as I shoved it in. I grabbed the second, red-painted automaton, this one with the trap Donut had set. I was careful to only touch the sides of this one. Donut didn't have the trap master skill, and she couldn't use the two-part traps at all, but thanks to the hunter battles at the end of the previous floor, she was now level five in the **Automaton Pilot** skill, which also allowed her to affix some other traps to the back of the little robots. This one was also a teleport trap. A rarer one, actually, but one that required a lower level to use. It easily slipped in with a little slurp noise.

"Samantha, how many of these can I fit in here?"

"I can take anything you got."

I shuddered as I slipped two more automatons in. These were the same as the first.

Samantha stifled a giggle. "This is just like..."

"Don't. Please, no. Just make sure you pop them out the moment you land, and tell me when you do. The last thing either of us want is me teleporting directly into, you know."

A new chat popped back up. It was just Mordecai.

Mordecai: You need to quit trying to help everybody else and focus on saving your own ass. I think you're onto something with the teleport traps, but I don't see how it's going to work for anybody else. In order for those things to

work, you have to set up both halves yourself. You can't set the trigger half and have someone else set the anchor. If that was the case, you'd be able to just teleport around at will using the guild rooms to trade trap anchors with other crawlers.

As we talked, I dropped Samantha and started moving through the clearing, arming the trigger half of the three teleport traps. The first I set to only be tripped by myself.

Carl: But we *can* do that, and I hadn't even thought of it. At least *I* can. I can teleport if we use the automatons. We're doing it now. I can set the anchor on the back of the automaton and give it to someone else, and I can go wherever I want. After this, I'm going to make sure Donut trains up the trap ability so she can do it, too. We might not be able to teleport directly into a stairwell chamber, and it won't do us any good to zap into an area with more keys than squads, but if there's someone out there with an extra key… But first we need to save Imani and Ren's squad. We're just waiting to see where Quan shows up first. Donut is preparing to activate the aggro of the duendes. There's like a hundred of them out there, so she can keep the battle going for a while if she has to. She stays here, and I go in.

Mordecai: Okay. Assume you get the keys. What then?

Carl: I'll give one to Imani and one to Ren using our flee cards. If we can't find someone with an extra key, I'll use the bone key on myself. We have options now.

Mordecai: Saving Imani, I understand. But I wouldn't count on there being any extra keys floating around. First, you'll only have a few days to get Donut's trap skill up high enough. And you need to rethink removing one of your bones, potentially a vital one, to save that other crawler. Plus you'll lose your jacket, and all the benefits. It's a shitty trade off no matter what you do.

Carl: It's three other crawlers. Good people. We need everybody we can.

Mordecai: Everybody else needs *you* more. Donut needs you. It's stupid to risk it. You don't know if the teleport trick will work. I've never even heard of this bone key benefit before. I *have* seen other magic keys, and they don't always work as advertised. Self-preservation is not being selfish. You have to take care of yourself first.

Carl: If I have to, I will make the tough decision. But I will be damned if I'm not going to do everything in my power to prevent it first. I almost made that mistake already on this floor, and I would've lost everything. I'm not going to do it again. Not until it's the only possible choice.

Mordecai: What does that even mean?

I ignored him as I spray painted an arrow on the ground, pointing to the third teleport trap. I looked at Samantha and had a thought. I pulled one more of the two-part teleport traps out. My last, for now. "Samantha. Come here. I'm gonna place one more inside of you." I put the other half, the actual trap part, back into my inventory.

"Oh boy," Samantha said as she hopped into my hands and presented her neck hole. It wriggled like the butt of a puppy.

"Please don't do that."

"I can't help it. It does it by itself when I'm excited. You can put it as deep as you..."

"Stop," I said as I shoved this one into her. "Keep this one inside you. Can you control what you keep in and what you, uh, expel?"

"Of course. That's what kegels are for, Carl."

A new chat popped up.

Ren: He's here. I think he may have disabled the teleport traps by the entrance. He's invisible, but Chuluuna can see him. He'll reappear once the fight starts. He hasn't come in yet. Being cautious. We're hiding and will confront him if he gets in. Get your ass here if you want to help.

Carl: I'm on my way. My aim kinda sucks, and it's about 15 kilometers away, so it'll take a few minutes. Hold as long as you can.

"Donut," I said as I pulled the head tosser extension out. "It's time."

I now knew who all three members of Ren's team were. Chuluuna was also a human, but he had a strength-based class that allowed him to turn his skin to stone. He was Ren's main tank—at least he was until she got that pet—and he could withstand her flamethrower. He was also husband to the third crawler in their group, Khulan. I prayed Donut was wrong and we wouldn't have to fight them.

I carefully side-stepped my trap as Samantha hopped into the head-tosser. I really needed to practice more with this thing, but I was already getting better at hitting a target. The problem was, I couldn't see the capitol building from here. I had to get her over most of the buildings in downtown without over-shooting her into the ocean.

Deep breath. You can do this.

I spun and tossed. Samantha rocketed away.

"Carl," Donut said as we waited. "What if they don't fight at all, and he gives his second key to the dog lady?"

"He can't just give up a key. They have to fight. It would require him to use a Flee card, and he won't do that. It's too risky. I don't think he can choose which key he'd lose, so he'd risk having to fight Imani and possibly us again. He went to the further stairwell because he's probably hoping we haven't talked to the people there and warned them of his tactics. He'll try to fight and will go straight to the stairs the moment he gets Ren's team to teleport away. He'll take the other key with him. Now go start your fight with the duendes. Be careful. Mongo, keep her safe, but don't kill them too fast."

Mongo screeched and then turned toward the woods and started stalking toward the red dots. The tiny mobs were all over the place, swinging through the trees, chattering angrily.

"Don't send them into the teleports until I say so," I said. "Make sure you're protected first. Make the best combo you can."

Donut was clearly nervous. "Don't let that meatball eat you."

Samantha: THAT WAS A GOOD THROW! I'M ACROSS THE STREET! I QUEEFED OUT THE SPIDERS!

"Here we go," I called as I stepped forward into the first teleport trap.

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Entering Havana.

Crunch.

The spider automaton crushed under my weight as I teleported atop it. The other three spiders—two regular and one painted red—scattered away. Samantha was true to her word—for once—and the fourth spider remained inside of her. I unsummoned the xistera extension still at the end of my hand, and Samantha blinked and reappeared right next to me, having been teleported only a few feet.

A bolt of lightning shot out the front of the capitol building, crashing through the door. Glass shattered, pouring down the stairs.

I looked about, searching for zombies or demons. I didn't see anything, but smoke rose from several places in the city. Many buildings were on fire. A distant screeching filled the air, followed by multiple crashes. There was nothing here, though, and that was good.

Combat Started.

Donut: WE ARE FIGHTING THE DUENDES. MONGO IS EATING THE ONES WHO GET CLOSE. THERE WAS ONE NAMED CARLOS. LET ME KNOW WHEN YOU WANT THE TOTEMS. I HAVE JOLA AND SKYLER SPINACH IN MY HAND NOW. I'M WAITING TO SUMMON THEM.

Carl: Okay. We're here. I'm rushing in now.

I looked at the red automaton. I didn't want to risk anyone hitting that one yet. It was an emergency Loop-De-Loop, meaning if someone touched it, they would switch places with Donut. At Donut's trap skill level of three, she could only program it to hit fellow crawlers, but she'd been able to set it so it was only crawlers not in her party. That meant *I* couldn't trigger it, but because her trap skill was so low, if I or anybody else—mobs or NPCs—did touch the trigger plate, it would immediately misfire. I didn't like Donut being separated from me, and this was our fastest option to get her back to me in a pinch. The second option was to throw Samantha and have her bite down, but until I perfected my aim, that was also risky.

Using the Loop-De-Loop, I'd have to hit another crawler with the trap. This was one of Lucia Mar's favorite traps, though I suspected her trap skill was so high, she could turn them off and on from afar, controlling them like gate locks.

I looked down at the red robot spider. Thanks to my upgraded table, these things actually listened to voice commands now. "You, stay here and stay hidden. You other two, follow me upstairs but stay outside. Samantha, on me." The two spiders clicked and followed.

The red spider buzzed and lowered to the ground, pressing itself against the wall. A memory ghost walked by, and his pants got stuck on the spider, covering it up. My heart skipped, but thankfully it didn't misfire.

I downed an invisibility potion. We rushed across the street and moved up the stairs moving toward the broken door. The whoosh of Tserendolgor's flame thrower went off, followed by an unholy screeching and a wave of heat. Even in a card battle, I knew she could still use the thing. The ground rumbled.

A screaming, flaming pox slug rushed out the door. The level 11 slug was about as tall as my knees. It had green, spiked hair atop its flaming head. The strange monster ignored us as it tumbled down the stairs, the flames overwhelming it. It splatted at the bottom of the steps and stopped, its flesh bubbling.

"Oh, boy," Samantha said, looking down at the still-flaming corpse. "This party looks like it's gonna be a fun one." She looked up at me. "Carl, where are you?"

"I'm right here. I'm invisible, now shush," I said, moving to the side of the door, peering in. I tried to take it all in as quickly as possible.

This was the room it had all started in. It seemed so long ago Donut and I popped into this room on the first day of the eighth floor. It had seemed so tranquil back then, but now everything was on fire. Chaos reigned as Ren and Quan fought.

We wouldn't get added to this particular fight because Donut had to be in range. She was in the middle of her own fight far away. She chose to use her card deck for that match, which meant she could summon her totems as long as the battle with the duendes was still active. Donut remained safe, but, using the teleport traps, I could bring her summoned totems to me.

That meant—at least I hoped that meant—that Quan couldn't use his snare cards on our totems. And more importantly, our totems could attack Quan directly without having to worry about first dispatching his own totems. It was an exploit. Actually, it was more than an exploit. It was a chickenshit move. I didn't care. We just needed to get through this before they patched it.

I prepared a sticky hob-lobber.

Quan was there, his back to me, high up against the ceiling, screaming something I couldn't make out. As I watched, he cried out in pain as another slug slurped out of him, plummeting to the ground. The level-12 slug hit the tiled floor and groaned in pain before pulling itself up. This one was female, and she had clown makeup and weird, wispy pigtails on the side of her slug head.

Quan had summoned that turtle thing again, and it sat there in the middle of the room. There was some sort of low-level pig thing summoned, too. Meanwhile, Ren stood with her back to the door to the exit stairwell, flamethrower in her hands, and she was waving it back and forth. The Chuluuna guy was next to her. The large, Mongolian man was a hulking presence. He appeared to be in the middle of casting something. Garret, her pet Tummy Acher, stood on

her other side, even bigger than Chuluuna. The pet was also a damage tank, and it could swallow just about anything whole. It giggled as Ren torched the room.

The third member of her squad, Khulan, wasn't here at all. She still hadn't returned from being teleported away. With the zombies and demons everywhere, I knew she had a dangerous path back here.

Ren's squad had some tall, hairy totem summoned, standing in front of them. Ren's flamethrower went right through it, not hurting it at all as it stalked toward the turtle. I could also see that Ren had taken our warning about Quan's tactics to heart. She had a mystic card summoned, facing outward. It was preventing Quan from looking at her hand or forcing discards.

I moved to throw the hob-lobber up at Quan, but I paused as a set of new notifications rolled in.

Area Message:

The *Madre de Aguas* has succumbed to her zombism curse. She has fallen and risen again. But the curse has left her vulnerable, and a major demon has involuntarily slipped into the realm. Amayon has arrived. Beware, all. Beware.

Hell has come to burn the world.

Several miles to the west, a gout of flame burst into the sky, followed by a scream that shook the ground.

Amayon has made an appearance in the realm.

You are in the presence of a Demon Prince of Sheol. The Scavenger's Daughter has opened her eyes. She fills with dark power.

Temporary effect: All Your Fire Spells Utilize Sheol Fire instead of regular fire.

New Achievement! Holy Hell!

You are in the presence of Sheol Royalty! I'm very excited about this. You leaky little meatbags are always dying off so early, plus the rich pricks in the Ascendency are just so boring, and we never get to play with the under-the-counter toys, if you know what I'm saying. Do you know how long it's been since one of my kind has been able to pull

one of these dudes out of mothballs? Like FOREVER. Which, incidentally, is how long your soul will burn if you manage to get killed by him.

***Reward*: You've received a Platinum To Hell in a Handbasket Box!**

"Uh, Samantha," I whispered, pausing. "Who is Amayon?"

"Oh, is he here? You know the four crown princes of Sheol? The oldest brother calls himself the King even though his mommy is in charge? The ladies in the harem thought I had banged him when I was talking about someone else? Ew, as if. Amayon is that guy's brother. He's the youngest one I think. I've never met him. At least not face-to-face. We didn't have much to do with the down-there guys, if you know what I'm saying. We all mixed together in the Nothing, but he wasn't in there. He likes to set things on fire. Kinda like Emberus, actually. They don't like each other."

Quest Update. Find out who killed my son.

You have a rare opportunity to question Amayon, one of the four princes of Sheol as to who murdered my son, Geyrun. He may have some insight into the matter. Do not allow this opportunity to go to waste.

"*Are you fucking kidding me*?" I hiss-whispered as a second, deeper bellow filled the air. A distant explosion rocked the earth.

Donut: CARL, ARE YOU DOING THAT OR IS IT THE DEMON?

Imani: What is going on out there?

I started to send a response but I had to hit the ground as a *Chain Lightning* spell shot forth from Chuluuna. It hit the turtle, the pig, the slug—which exploded, and Quan. Several branches shot out in other directions, including out the door. It arced right over my head.

Quan's cloak absorbed the attack, and he was unharmed. Both the turtle and the pig fell over, almost dead as Quan tossed out a **Mass Heal** card. He summoned a third totem. It was a level-10 rabbit that hit the ground with a peep. It didn't have any sort of entrance sequence other than an explosion with the words **Yeah. It's a Rabbit** floating over it.

At the same moment, Ren tossed out another totem of her own. This was a big one.

The ground began to rumble anew as red, yellow, and blue streamers exploded through the air. Holographic dirt showered everywhere. A horn fanfare played.

Carl: Donut. Send them in. Who do you got?

Donut: I WILL COMBINE LAZARUS WITH SKYLER AND THEN SEND JOLA. I'LL PUT A TIME EXTEND ON BOTH. IT'S THE BEST I CAN DO WITH MY CURRENT HAND. HERE THEY COME.

"Okay, Samantha, if this doesn't kill him, I want you to go fuck up that one-armed guy floating there. I need you to distract him as much as possible because he's about to be pissed." I turned to the two spiders and whispered, "Inside! Inside!" The spiders beeped and moved into the room, each following along the inside wall and toward a corner, trying to stay out of sight.

Quan started to play another card as I tossed the sticky hob-lobber up at him. It splotched against the back of his head and detonated. He cried out and flipped, angling downward and crashing heavily to the ground. That would've one-shotted pretty much anyone, but he had multiple shields going. He was disoriented but otherwise unhurt. His shield spell that had protected him was now in the red. We had to keep pressing him or the shield would refill. He cried again as another, bigger slug slurped out of him, coming from underneath his cloak. This one was already dead, having been hurt in the blast.

"Not so fast, you one-armed bitch!" Samantha shrieked, flying toward him. She landed on his shoulder and chomped down.

At the same moment, Ren's newest totem emerged, coming up out of the ground, showering floor tiles everywhere.

Wriggle, Writhe, Repeat! It's the monster you can't defeat! It's Basquiat, The Mongolian Death Worm!

The worm was like a bus-sized version of one of those sand worms from the *Dune* books and movies. The beige, fleshy worm featured three face flaps that opened like a flower, revealing circles of sharp teeth. The thing was big enough to swallow me whole. It

opened its weird mouth and roared as the confetti exploded all around it.

Ren tossed another card onto the worm. A glowing consumable.

Temporary Immortality!

"You're fucked, now!" Chuluuna shouted.

Garret cackled with laughter as the worm moved toward the rabbit.

Everything froze as Quan finally let go of his latest card. The card rose into the air, spinning before it exploded, meaning it was a consumable.

Toss-Up! Three for two!

The icons over all five of the active totems flashed and switched. The rabbit, pig, and turtle were suddenly on Ren's team, and the hairy ghost thing and the Mongolian Death Worm were now flying Quan's flag.

"Oh, shit!" Ren called, pulling her flamethrower back up as the hairy ghost fell onto Chuluuna. The ghost had a blinking notification over it. It was about to time out. The worm continued toward the rabbit, gobbling it up as it passed through the ground, disappearing, the sound like that of a train whipping by. It appeared again as it burst up through the tile floor and into the air, consuming the turtle, and then taking out the pig, all in a single gulp.

All three of Quan's former totems were consumed in seconds.

Quan, still disoriented from the blast, shook his head and started to rise back up in the air, ignoring Samantha gnawing on his shoulder. My invisibility ran out. He turned to look at me and shouted something. I felt the ground rumble just as a pair of totems appeared in front of me.

Jola the Yule Cat appeared, filling the left side of the room, rising all the way to the ceiling as Lazarus appeared on the right, bazooka at the ready. The automaton spider under him crunched in a shower of sparks. He'd been combined with Skylar Spinach, but he looked exactly the same as before.

I dove backward, jumping from the entranceway and back outside as the ground rumbled. The death worm appeared, flying out of the ground right where I'd been standing. The entire entrance

to the capitol building started to crumble. The massive, fast-moving worm squealed and arced through the air. It chomped directly onto Lazarus, who cried out in pain, getting swallowed whole by the worm, who dove back below ground.

"Chu! Chu!" Ren called as her friend was pulled apart by her own totem. I hadn't seen what had happened, but the man's innards had been ripped apart in the seconds I'd been looking away. Just like that.

"Mér líkar ekki úlpan þín," Jola said. The cat's voice boomed, filling the room. He was talking to Quan.

The worm reappeared, right underneath the cat, but it passed through the non-corporeal totem and it arced again, slamming onto the floor without piercing it. It did a barrel roll as it vomited out a shower of gore and body parts, including pieces of Lazarus. The worm's head turned toward Ren, who was kneeling down before the body of Chuluuna. The other totem was gone, having timed out.

"Basquiat, no!" Ren called.

The worm roared and dived for Ren. She rolled out of the way. The worm took out the corpse of the other crawler and disappeared.

Ren tossed a card. A mystic that covered her with an opaque protection shell. It had a 20 second countdown over it.

"I hath risen again, motherfuckers!" came a new voice, jumping out of the gore of worm vomit. Uzi Jesus stood to his full height, his entire body glowing with golden light. He also now held not one, but two gold-plated Uzis.

Uzi Jesus – Gold Edition.

Behind him, Asojano had also returned. He, too, shined with golden light. It was clearly Asojano, but his name had changed. The strange wand he normally held had turned to a short staff with a sugar skull at the end. His grass skirt now appeared to be made of woven gold.

Lord of Blight – Gold Edition.

Donut had combined Skylar Spinach, the splitter ghommid, with Lazarus. So when Lazarus had died, he'd reverted back to the two cards that had been used to create him. Except that Skylar was a

special type of Ghommid, and when he split, the new versions were actually more powerful than the previous.

Donut: CARL, WE DON'T HAVE MUCH TIME! I SUMMONED SHI MARIA AND SHE'S EATING THEM TOO FAST! SHE ASKED WHERE YOU WERE, AND I TOLD HER, AND NOW SHE'S MAD I DIDN'T SEND HER TO YOU!

"Guys," I said, pointing at Quan who'd just desperately discarded something. He'd floated back to the ceiling, but his shields were down. His hand was empty. *He's looking for a Flee card.* We couldn't let him get away. Not again. "Finish him off."

"No problem," Uzi Jesus said, twirling his twin guns on his fingers. One went off and flew away. "Dad damnit. Ow, fuck!"

The ground rumbled again. The worm popped up under Ren, but it stopped with a metal clanging noise, the sound like that of a car crash. Ren's opaque shell didn't move. A fissure ran along the wall.

"Jola, keep the worm off our back!"

Jola wasn't listening to me. He only had eyes for Quan. "*Mér líkar ekki úlpan þín*."

The cat opened his mouth, and a yellow bolt appeared.

Fashion Critic!

Everything Quan was wearing flew off of him, like an explosion. He dropped like a rock, crashing hard to the rubble. Samantha spun, screaming across the room, bouncing off Garret and rolling to the center of the chamber. Clothes flew around the room in every direction, including a shining cloak that spun to a stop at my feet. I quickly scooped it up and pulled it into my inventory. An achievement appeared, and I waved it away.

That was pretty much the same spell as Donut's *Laundry Day* except the cat was going to literally eat the clothes if we let him. Why? Who the fuck knew.

Quan groaned. A card appeared, but it was clearly not a card he wanted. He was naked now, the stump of his missing arm waving in the air. The stump held half of a tattoo, the top half of a young girl's face.

Jola glared at me. "*Þjófar verða ètnir. Skilaðu þessu*."

I had no idea what he said or why the system wasn't translating all this Icelandic, but the threat was clear. I took a step back. The death worm made another attempt at Ren, equally unsuccessful. Her shell would disappear in a few seconds. The next attack would get her unless she managed to summon another totem. Her massive meatball pet ran in circles around her static shell, babbling, clearly ready to push her out of the way the moment the shell ran out. I doubted even the tummy acher could withstand an attack from that worm.

"Yeah, baby!" Uzi Jesus cried as he unloaded his remaining Uzi into Quan's naked, one-armed body. "Yeeeee the fuck haw!" His halo burst into golden light.

Bullet Hell!

More bullets suddenly rained, pouring into Quan. An impossible amount, and not just from the direction of the gun, but from above, too, pouring into him like rain.

These weren't real bullets, I realized, but more like bee stings. Quan's body danced on the floor as he was peppered. Jesus laughed maniacally as the man convulsed.

Yet, the tough little bastard still wasn't dead. His health plummeted. Asojano slowly walked up to him and went to a knee, ignoring the hail of bullets. He put his hand on the prone man's body. Boils appeared across his naked chest. A line of debuffs appeared, one by one, each appearing with a *plink*.

Still, Quan lived. I watched, fascinated.

That is, I watched until a growl from Jola took back my attention. The cat had just finished slurping up Quan's pants and was now looking at me and hissing, clearly angry at me for taking the magical cloak. He was going to pounce.

Carl: Holy shit, Donut, end the battle! End it now!

Donut: IT'S ALREADY OVER! SHI MARIA IS EATING THEIR CORPSES LIKE POPCORN!

Jola hissed and pounced and disappeared in a puff of smoke as both Uzi Jesus and Asojano disappeared.

Combat Complete. Deck has been reset.

Quan wasn't dead. Donut's fight was done, but this one wasn't yet. He lay on the ground, bleeding, unmoving. His eyes had turned completely white, and he had a dozen debuffs floating over him, including several I recognized. He was blind, and he wouldn't be able to heal. He was done. Still, I had to finish him off before that worm ate Ren. The ground rumbled. Behind me, Garret the tummy acher let out a strangled cry as it rolled directly into Ren, pushing her away just as the shield disappeared. At the same moment, the worm popped back up and tried to eat the meatball, but Ren cast a snare card, freezing the worm in place for fifteen seconds. Garret rolled away as Samantha yelled something at him, rolling after the meatball.

"Carl," Quan wheezed. "Carl. Give it back. Please. Fast."

I started to scoff. Like I would give the cloak back to him.

But I realized that wasn't what he was asking for. I quickly searched into my inventory, and I found it. The simple, golden ring I'd taken off his hand when I'd ripped his arm off. It was a ring from before, likely his only possession from before the collapse. The ring read "For Daddy" on the inside.

It was still attached to his severed arm, which I still had in my inventory. I extracted just the ring and dropped it into his remaining hand.

He took in a deep, rattling breath. "She'd be ashamed of what I've become."

I didn't answer. I formed a fist, but before I could finish him off, he died.

The frozen worm disappeared. More gore showered onto the ground where the worm had been, including the corpse of Chuluuna.

The battle was over.

Quan Ch, with over sixty player killer skulls, was dead. Finally dead.

A champion has fallen. A bounty has been claimed.

Donut: CARL, I GOT CREDIT FOR THAT!

I hadn't realized Quan had slipped back into the top 10. A wave of chats came in, people trying to figure out who killed who. Donut was already fielding them all.

The ground shook again, and this time a chunk of ceiling fell, landing directly onto Garret. The pet made a pitiful, *ouch* noise.

I tried to loot Quan, but it wouldn't let me. Donut had to do it. I'd be able to get the rest of his stuff in a few minutes.

A new dot appeared on my map. A crawler. I straightened my back, but it was Khulan, the only other surviving member of Ren's squad.

"No," she said, running into the room. The younger, Asian woman didn't even look at me. She ran to the mangled body of the crawler in the back of the room. She fell to her knees, draping herself over his body. "No, Chu. No!"

A ton of cards appeared floating over Quan, more than I'd ever seen. There were dozens of them. Only Donut could loot these, too.

"Where're the keys?" Ren asked. Panic rose in her voice. "I didn't get the keys!"

Donut: CARL, THEY GAVE BOTH THE KEYS TO ME! THIS IS GREAT!

Oh, shit. I hadn't been expecting that.

"It's okay," I said. "Donut got credit for killing Quan. We'll get her over here and get you a key. We have time. I'm sorry about your..."

Warning: The door to the exit stairwell at El Capitolio Nacional de Cuba has sustained damage and will become unusable in five minutes. If the doorway crumbles, the associated key will dissipate.

And with that little notification, it ruined our hopes of getting out of this clean.

"God fucking damnit."

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It was a kick to the teeth.

It took a second, but the horror flashed across Ren's face as the implications of it all settled in.

I quickly ran through the options, and I came to the same, terrible conclusion as Ren.

My view counter was spiked, once again.

Donut now had the two keys in her inventory. One key for the door in the church, now guarded by Imani, and one key for the door here in the Capitol building. This door would only be useable for the next four and a half minutes.

We couldn't just give Ren a key. The rules were clear, and they'd been made just for this sort of impossible situation.

In order for Ren to get that key, we would have to first get Donut here. We would have to initiate a card battle. Donut would have to use a Flee card, which meant Donut would lose one of the two keys. We wouldn't be able to pick which key we lost.

If the system was generous, and it dropped the key to the Capitol building, we would teleport away, Ren would get the key, and she could rush into the chamber.

If the system was being a dick, and the system was *always* a dick, it would drop the key to the church. Ren would probably still be okay. They would still have a key, but her squad would have to make their way across town to the church where they'd have to get past Imani.

Donut and I, meanwhile, would be fucked. We'd be teleported away from the Capitol building. We'd still have the key to get out, but we'd have to get to the door in time, which would be next to impossible. It would have to be now. And since we really wanted to get that key to Imani?

It wasn't going to happen.

Four minutes left.

In either scenario, we'd have to get Donut here. I could toss Samantha. That would take two or three minutes at least, and that was assuming my aim was true. I could get the red spider and use the Loop de Loop, but that would require a crawler other than myself to switch places with Donut. It would have to be Khulan, which would be the equivalent of killing her. Besides, she wasn't getting up off that floor. She remained draped over the ruined body of her husband.

There was another scenario. One Donut and I could still pull off. I could have the spider rush into the room and touch Ren. They'd switch places. With Ren gone, nobody would be left to initiate a card fight. Donut and I could rush down the stairs and be safe. However, that meant Donut wouldn't have time to pass on the second key, the one for the church exit, meaning nobody else would be able to escape. We'd be killing Imani.

Uncertainty washed over me.

If you make this decision. Be sure. Be sure it's your only option. This is more than just a failsafe. It's the end of everything. If there's time to do something else, don't be so quick. So you must be absolutely certain.

All of this whipped through my mind in a matter of seconds. I looked over my shoulder and whistled. From across the street, the little spider hopped up, dragging the memory ghost pants with it. It started moving toward me.

Carl: Donut, get ready to teleport! Make sure Mongo is put away. Fast!

If we didn't do this now, Ren would challenge us to a fight. She didn't have a choice. There was only one key left, and she knew if

we were going to willingly give it up, it'd be to Imani and not her. What else could she do?

There were no scenarios left where it wasn't her or us.

She could kill you right now. It would put Donut at a disadvantage. Be careful.

I examined the woman who'd turned into a dog. I barely knew her, but by now most everyone in the dungeon knew her story. She'd grown up in Mongolia, and she'd been a fashion model, once upon a time. She'd left the country and moved to France. A jealous ex-boyfriend had stabbed her and her dog. She'd spent the next year in a hospital before retiring. She'd recently returned home when the collapse happened. Her entire group had all been people she'd grown up with, all from a tiny little village. Her entire circle of friends, brought down by this goddamned place, this goddamned floor, one by one.

It was terrifying how quickly, how easily everything could change.

As I watched, Ren sat down heavily on the floor. Garret made an uncertain noise and plopped down next to her. She reached up and unsnapped her flamethrower attachment, and the whole apparatus toppled onto the scorched, broken tiles.

"You know, I was really looking forward to torching some of those assholes on the next floor." She leaned over and rested her head against the meatball.

The red spider clicked up the steps and stopped just outside the chamber. I lifted my hand, causing it to pause.

Above, the ceiling cracked ominously. Over by the exit doorway, Khulan continued to cry. She was a tiny woman, young but with the skin of someone who'd worked outdoors her whole life. She clutched onto the larger form of the dead crawler.

"Khu, come," Ren said.

"No," she replied.

I opened my mouth to say something, but Ren raised a hand, stopping me. She continued to look at her grieving friend.

Three minutes left.

"The only thing that was keeping her together was her husband. She's not going to want to go on, and I'm not going to make her, not

anymore." She sniffed. "It's funny. Growing up, she was the toughest of us all."

"We still have four days left," I found myself saying. "There's still one key. I have to give it to Imani, but I might have figured a way to teleport us to another area. You'll have to train up your trap skills, but there's time. We can do it."

"So we can kill someone else for their key?" she asked. "By my count, there's one key for every three or four squads. They really fucked us this floor. There's time left, but everybody is already going down the stairs. I'm not going to do that, Carl. I don't want to be responsible for hurting someone else."

"Then... then... you can fight us for it. Fair and square. It's your only chance."

"Carl," she said, turning to look at me. She shook her head. "I say this with love. You are an idiot. You can't fight us. You can't give your key to Imani. You have to save it for yourself. Do you remember when you flew that airplane to save our bubble on the fifth floor? And then when you killed all the hunters? That's when I realized who you are. Don't you understand? You're more than just a person. If we lose you, we lose *everything*. You're a symbol. You're the embodiment of our hope. You and that fucking, annoying cat that everyone seems to like for some reason. You two bought a goddamned slot on Faction Wars. Everyone who remains can't wait for the chance to fight someone real, someone actually responsible for all this. If you two don't get down to the next floor, we all lose that. You can't sacrifice yourself. And you know what? I know Imani thinks that, too. If you give her your key, she's just going to try to give it back to you."

Donut: AM I TELEPORTING IN? ARE YOU SENDING SAMANTHA TO ME? DO WE HAVE TIME? ARE YOU USING THE LOOP-DE-LOOP? WHAT'S HAPPENING?

I swallowed.

Carl: Stay put. We're saving the Loop trap. I'm gonna toss Samantha to you in a minute.

Ren returned her head to the side of her large pet, and she stroked his strange, bumpy skin. He made a purring noise.

So much regret filled me. I should have let Ren finish Quan off. I should have used my last teleport trap as a way for Donut to get here more easily. You can only anticipate so much. You can only prepare for what you can think of, and it still won't be everything. You can't win every battle.

I thought of what Mordecai once told me about Drakea, that he'd been killed by one of his own traps because the showrunners had tipped the scale, had broken their own rules to make it prematurely blow.

They were exterminating us one by one, and no matter how hard I worked, someone was always going to be there, looking over my shoulder, wondering how they could make it more dramatic for the audience. How soon before they decided it was my time? Or Donut's?

So much regret.

My view counter remained spiked, but it was starting to ease off now it was clear we weren't going to fight. That made me unreasonably angry. *Fuck you all.*

I looked nervously up at the ceiling. "We have to get out of here," I said. "The door will crumble, and then the whole building is going to collapse on top of us."

She kicked the flamethrower attachment at me. "Take it," she said. Several items from her inventory started appearing on the floor, one by one. Rings. Clothing items. Potions. Scrolls. "Take it all. Fast. There's good stuff in there, including a bunch of *Eye in the Sky* scrolls."

"What the hell are you doing?" I asked, suddenly alarmed. I had a memory of another place. Another time. A clearing in the forest where Miriam Dom had done the same thing.

I remembered my mother.

This is my birthday present to you. I am giving you a chance at life.

"I'm donating to the war effort," she said. "My flamethrower is named 'Velma,' by the way. I didn't name it that." She was holding it back, barely. So was I.

"We have four days left! We can figure something out!"

She ignored me. She pulled one last item from her inventory. It was a small, crystal knife. It looked like a butter knife. It glinted with red light.

"This is called the Knife of Frozen Tears, and it's made of something called Sylvan crystal. It's not very sharp, and it's not all that valuable, but it can kill Garret. Each time he regenerates, he gets another weakness. He's up to four now. Sylvan crystal is one of them." She broke, then, at that last sentence.

"No. No, no," Garret said. It was more a sound than actual words. I was pretty sure the thing couldn't actually talk, but it could mimic some noises.

Tears streamed down the dog woman's face.

The far wall sagged.

Warning: The Stairwell Exit at El Capitolio Nacional de Cuba has been rendered inaccessible. All available keys through this exit have been destroyed.

She struggled to speak. "He's a type of pet called a tummy acher. He's a great tank, and he's practically immortal. It's really hard to kill him, and if he dies, he regenerates. But every five times he dies, he resets back to level one, and you have to get him to bond with you again. They say he won't remember, but I'm not sure. This will be the first time it happens. Each time he regenerates, he's tougher, but he also has a new weakness, so you have to be careful." She sniffed. She looked over at Khulan, who remained prone near the collapsed wall. "It's just like the rest of us. We look stronger, we have tougher skin, more scars, but there's another crack in our..." She couldn't finish.

Garret whimpered. He pushed himself against Ren, like he couldn't get close enough.

She was openly sobbing now as she talked directly to her pet. "I had a dog once, before all this. He died protecting me, and now I'm going to protect you. You're going to go live with Carl. He's going to take care of you because I can't do it anymore. He will feed you every day, and you're going to be a good boy for me, won't you?"

"Uh," I said.

She stabbed the knife directly into the side of the pet, and he immediately tumbled over, dead. Just like that. He died instantly, like she'd flipped a switch. A moment passed, and his corpse started to shrink, like he was having the air pulled from him.

Ren wiped her eyes. "It lists his weaknesses in his description, and he's going to have a new one now, but his weaknesses so far are sylvan crystal, consuming hobgoblin sweat, the bite of a rivenwing, and consuming undead flesh. That's what usually kills him, so be careful, because he eats everything. Each time he comes back, he risks getting a common weakness, so try to keep him alive."

"Why did you do that? We have four days left," I said yet again, flabbergasted. "It's... it's not over yet."

Ren had her eyes on her friend. As quickly as the tears had come, they were gone. She'd given herself a moment to be emotional, and all that was left was business.

"No, Carl, it's not over yet. Not for you, but it is for me. As soon as Khu is done crying, she is going to kill herself. She's lost everything. She lost her little girl, who was inside when it started, and she's lost everyone else along the way. She has nothing left. Nothing. I don't either. Except my faith that you, Carl, will make somebody regret choosing us for this."

She was silent for a moment.

"I don't want my friend killing herself to be the last thing I see. It has to be now. I want to go out having done something good. All I have left for this floor is to deny them a fight. I'll take it. If I can't help you on the next floor, I can at least give you my best gear, and I can protect Garret."

I looked down at the pet. He was still unconscious, and he was now level-one. His name had disappeared, too. It was like he was a completely new pet. I remembered the first tummy acher I'd ever seen, way back on the second floor. It had been in a cage near Mongo. This was the same. A tiny, little, round ball on two, stubby legs. This one's single tooth stuck out on the outside, making it look like he had a massive underbite.

Ren produced a pet carrier, and she gently picked the unconscious meatball up. She gave him a tender kiss.

"I'm sorry," she said, and she put him in the carrier. She paused. "His new weakness is something called Reaper Gaze. I don't know what that is." She slid the carrier over to me, and before I could talk myself out of it, I put it in my inventory. A host of pet-themed achievements appeared and disappeared.

"If you do figure out some miracle before this floor is done, make sure that Sister Ines doesn't go down the stairs," Ren said. "I've met Paz a few times, and he's a good man. Don't let her get away with keeping his card."

"I won't. But what are you going to do now? If the roof collapses, you probably aren't going to die. You're just gonna get stuck."

She held up an arm, showing a wrist bracer. It was the only thing she still wore. That and a little, heart locket around her neck with a dog paw print on it. "You ever see the movie *Predator*?"

I knew what the device was. I'd seen them before, for sale at the Desperado Club. "You're going to blow yourself up? Just like that?"

"They want us to fight. Me and Donut. This is me going out on my terms. You would've wiped the floor with us anyway. This is me telling them to go fuck themselves."

This was too much. It was her choice, and I understood why she was doing it, but I hated it. I hated everything about it. I hated that my views kept going down, that people didn't care. I hated there was nothing I could do to stop her.

This will stop it. It's so loud, Carl. It's so loud.

"Okay," I finally said, standing up, trying to hold my emotion in check.

A wry smile crossed Tserendolgor's face.

Ren: Princess Donut. I have a confession to make. Everything you're saying is true. I *was* trying to steal your experience the first time we met. I *did* cheat at the pet show. Your Mongo is the rightful champion. I'm sorry.

Donut: I KNEW IT! I KNEW IT!

Donut: CARL, DID YOU HEAR THAT?

"You didn't have to do that," I said, chuckling.

She grunted with amusement.

"You know, many of my people are afraid of cats. Some think if you look into their eyes, they can steal your soul. I hope that's true. I hope she lives up to her hype."

Across the room, Khulan stood and shuffled to us. She wrapped her arms around Ren's neck.

She wasn't crying anymore, either. Her eyes were unblinking as she stared off into space.

"Garret is a good boy. Please take care of him. Bonding is easy. Feed him something a few times. Make sure it's not undead flesh or that it's never been touched by a hobgoblin. Try to find out what that Reaper Gaze weakness is as soon as you can. I'm pretty sure they'll make you give him a new name, so come up with something good."

The ceiling cracked again. There was a ping. Quan's body could now be looted of the rest of his gear. I still wouldn't be able to get his cards. Hopefully we were done with that anyway. I quickly started to gather up the rest of Ren's dropped gear, including the enchanted flamethrower, which was really part breastplate, part weapon.

Ren's eyes flashed, and Khulan dropped several items on the ground. More rings and potions and a glowing spear, along with multiple armor items plus a few unread magical tomes. A ton of coins.

"Here," Ren said. "I can't give you my totems, but I just rearranged my deck and took all the other cards out. You'll have to carry them on you until you give them to Donut, but here's all my cards. There's a few rare special and mystics in there in case you need them, including these two. I never got to use them."

I stared at the last two cards. One was a consumable **Glow-Up** card. The other was a consumable special card, and it featured two, large men in tights. It was called **The Midnight Express**.

I gathered the large pile of cards and stuck them into the waistband of my boxers. It wouldn't let me take them into my inventory.

"You sure about this?" I asked one last time.

"Carl. Make them suffer."

I put my hand on the dog woman's shoulder. Her whole body trembled.

"I will kill every last one of them. Every one." I leaned in to her ear, and I whispered, "I goddamned swear it."

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Quan had more crap in his inventory than I did, which was saying a lot. He carried a ton of magical weapons, from swords to spears to war hammers to more non-traditional items, like a magical chainsaw and something that appeared to be a literal sock filled with nickels, only it was one of the highest value items he had on him. Also, there was a bowler hat like that guy had in that *James Bond* movie, where you could throw it, and it would decapitate someone before it boomeranged back to you. Donut was going to lose her mind when she saw it. He also held almost five million gold coins, and I wondered if he'd ever actually purchased anything. He had all this stuff he never used. It was going to take forever for me to go through all of this stuff. Thankfully, I could transfer it all with one button.

The only thing I left was the single, golden ring, which remained clutched in his hand.

I kept his arm. I wasn't sure why.

I didn't turn back to Ren, but she warned I had to make myself clear of the building. Her magical wrist bracer was going to blow the place sky high. That was okay. The building was useless to us now.

"Come on, Samantha," I said as we walked outside into the burning city. I had toyed with the idea of pulling out my ring of Divine Suffering and marking Ren, or maybe Khulan, like I had with Miriam, but I didn't have time. The mark took thirty seconds to form on this floor, and if either of them had a skill that let them know they'd been marked, it was possible they'd have a sudden change of heart about what they were doing. I didn't want to complicate things further.

Still... I felt the urge to pull the ring out and slip it on. I fought it. On the next floor, the ring would have a new feature. I could mark as many people as I wanted at once. If we got out of here, that was where it was really going to come in handy.

In the distance, Amayon, the demon possessing the body of the *Madre de Aguas* snake sat atop a tall building, raised vertical like a spire, pouring fire into the sky like it was trying to burn its way upward. I had no idea what it was doing, but demon seagulls circled it like a tornado. It was probably casting a spell. *Great. Just great*. Red dots were everywhere.

I scooped up the red automaton and pulled it into my inventory and started jogging west, deeper into downtown Havana as the building behind me started to crumble.

Ren: Goodbye, everyone. At least I won't have to listen to anyone butcher the pronunciation of my name anymore. Do me a favor, and fuck them up for me. Make them all pay.

And with that, there was a secondary rumbling behind me. It wasn't a huge explosion, but it was enough. The dome top of the building collapsed in on itself, like it was a controlled detonation. The blast was small by my own standards. Mixed in with everything else happening to the city, the collapse of this single building was hardly noticeable.

Donut: WAIT, WAIT, WHAT ARE YOU DOING?

Tserendolgor never saw the message. Her name popped into the deceased crawlers folder. It was done.

Donut: CARL, WHY IS SHE DEAD? WHAT HAPPENED?

Carl: I'll explain it all in a minute. I'm tossing Samantha to you now, and then we're gonna have to pick our way toward the church. I don't have the time or the supplies to

set up another teleport. We have to go the long way around so we avoid the massive demon. We gotta get to Imani, and then we'll figure out how we're going to proceed. But we need to get out of here before Sister Ines shows back up or before whatever that demon is doing fucks us over. Tossing Samantha now.

I pulled the extension, and Samantha hopped into the scoop. She blinked at me as I tried to judge the distance. "Are we keeping the round guy? I like him. He's really cute. Can I name him? I want to name him."

"I haven't decided yet if we're keeping him," I said. "Probably not. Donut will be scared that he'll eat Mongo."

"You have to keep him," Samantha said. "That doggie died thinking you were going to take care of him. He probably won't eat Mongo if they grow up together. I once watched a ten-times resurrected one of those guys eat a dragon. It was great!"

I paused. "Wait, really? A dragon?"

"It was a small dragon, but yes. Now throw me, Carl. I want to bite Donut's tail."

"You didn't have to chew on me that hard," Donut complained as we skulked around the corner of a building.

"I need to make a tight grip," Samantha said as she hovered between us. "It's not my fault if I have a strong jaw game. I learned all about biting when someone abandoned me to get eaten by the two doggies on the last floor."

It'd taken me three throws to get Samantha close enough to Donut, and even then, she had to travel for ten minutes before she got to her, where she promptly chomped down on Donut's tail without warning. After teleporting her back to me, the cat had promptly yakked all over the ground, and she'd been grumbling about it ever since. Apparently that type of teleportation was even more unsettling than usual.

Donut sported a new, golden player killer skull. She hadn't commented on it, and neither did I. That felt important, the nonchalance of it all. We were losing more of ourselves every day. I hoped we could manage to get off this damn floor without it happening again.

The zombie crabs and seals were everywhere, swarming over the city, moving away from the beach. It'd been a while since I saw a regular, non-undead crab or seal, and I wondered if any were left. I also hadn't, thankfully, seen any of the full-power demons we'd freed from their shells. Hopefully those had made their way back to Sheol, but I wasn't sure if that kind *could* drag people into hell like the possessed zombies could. Mordecai wasn't sure, either.

The zombies were still turning into possessed demons here and there, but those would scream and skitter off toward Amayon, who remained, ramrod straight atop the tallest building, pouring fire upward like he was a fountain. It was having an effect on the whole area. The air was getting noticeably hotter.

"Well, if you chomp me again like that I'm going to have Mongo chomp you and see how you like it."

"I do like it," Samantha said.

"Shush, both of you," I said, watching a zombie seal shuffle-flop down the street, chasing an oblivious memory ghost that miraculously was still fully clothed. The seal left a stream of red gore on the road. According to Mordecai, these things had a sort of communal mind, so we didn't want any of them seeing us or they'd swarm.

<u>Imani</u>: No sign of the nun. Nothing has come in. There's an out-building I can see through the door, and it's some sort of temple. It's a Club Vanquisher entrance. I just watched a ram NPC guy stick his head out of the door and cast a spell that killed a few zombies, but now a bunch more are milling around the entrance, so there's a mass of them right in front of the church. He keeps opening the door to peer outside and shutting it quickly. The last time there was three of them, and what looked like a mantaur. The idiots are just luring more and more zombies into the area.

Carl: Okay. If you do see Sister Ines, just go back into the saferoom. There's no reason for you two to fight. Wait for us.

I was making a quick inventory of everything we'd looted, but it wouldn't be until we got to a saferoom before I could truly examine it all. So far, it looked as if the best prizes were the *Eye in the Sky* scrolls, the magical tomes, Velma the Flame Thrower, the nickel sock, and, of course, Quan's celestial cloak.

He'd truly had a lot of weapons on him. Even more than what I'd looted from the hunters. I wondered if his class, Sergeant-at-Arms had something to do with the reason why he kept it all. It was, I realized, all the loot he'd taken off the crawlers he'd killed. The least I could do was make certain it got put to good use.

I hadn't yet told Donut about the tummy acher. I asked Mordecai for his advice.

Mordecai: Keep that thing in your inventory. You couldn't go down the stairs with Mongo before because you didn't have a pet carrier. This guy will be fine as long as you keep him boxed up. You can try bonding with him later. He'll be a great pet for you should you decide to keep him, but you have too much on your plate right now to deal with trying to keep a level-one pet alive, especially if it has an undead weakness. And Ren made a mistake by saying what his weaknesses are out loud. The factions guys aren't supposed to be spying, but we both know that's bullshit, even now.

Carl: Agreed. Also, I don't see Sister Ines with my Find Crawler skill. Should I use one of those Eye in the Sky scrolls? Will that find her?

Mordecai: If you use it, have Donut do it. But yes, it will find her as long as she's not in a saferoom or using some advanced hiding skills or spells. Those scrolls are really rare. How many do you have?

Carl: Five.

Mordecai: It's up to you, but I would save them if you can. Have you decided what you're going to do about Imani yet?

Carl: I'm giving her the key. Donut and I will take our chances.

Mordecai: She's not going to take it.

Carl: Elle will convince her.

He didn't answer.

"Look at the fishy!" Samantha said.

A zombie fish entered the alley, flopping. It spied us, and it made a gurgling noise as red foam bubbled out its gills. It started hopping on the ground toward us. *Splatch, splatch, splatch*. A loud groaning noise came from down the street as more zombies turned in our direction.

"Damnit," I said. "Come on, guys."

"So, did you beat him with his arm? I promised the Posse if you ever fought Quan again, you'd beat him with his arm. I even put it in the newsletter."

We waited in yet another alley as Samantha pied-pipered a group of zombies away from our position. We'd gotten trapped between two buildings, and I sent her out there, which she'd done eagerly. I could hear her enthusiastic shouting from almost two blocks away as the zombies shuffled after her, clearing our path.

"I didn't get the chance," I said. "Golden Uzi Jesus and Asojano pretty much turned him into pulp. That was a really good combination."

"You carried his arm around all this time, and you didn't get to use it. That's a little disappointing. When we killed him, it gave me the keys, but I never got his cards. I bet he had a bunch of good ones. At least you got the dog lady's cards. I suppose she did redeem herself in the end with her deathbed confessions."

"Quan did have some good cards," I agreed, choosing not to engage her about Ren. I could tell it was mostly for show, and she was pretty shaken up about the death of the crawler. Even now, Donut was leaning into the feud for the viewers. "But I don't think

his cards were better or worse than ours. He was just really good with strategy. We pretty much had to be the cheaters to beat him."

"Using a loophole isn't cheating, Carl. Not when we do it. Oh, and what happened to that disgusting meatball?"

Before I was forced to tell her the truth, we were both interrupted by a new message.

Sister Ines: Carl and Donut. Are you there?

I exchanged a look with Donut.

Carl: Hello, Sister. How are you feeling?

Sister Ines: I know you have the last key. The door you seek is in the Iglesia de Jesús de Miramar. It is a holy place. I've prayed on it, and I know what I must do. I can't let you in. If you open that door, it will be the end of everything. They told me so. This hell you see is only a sampling of what awaits us because of our sin.

Donut: JUST TRY TO STOP US YOU HALF-BREED BITCH.

Donut turned to me. "Wow. That came out way more racist sounding than I intended."

Carl: Sister… what is going on? Who is 'They?' I thought we were friends. Tell us what's happening.

Sister Ines: I am filled with power, Carl. With each demon who appears, I grow stronger. They come, they keep coming, and I am the last rampart protecting us all. It is because of my faith. I can save you. I must free you from this place before your soul is dragged into hell. I can't save the cat, of course, as she is nothing but a rank beast.

Donut: HEY!

Sister Ines: But I can save you, Carl. Come to me, and I will show you the way. I showed my sisters, and I can show you. It's not too late. But if you try to enter that church, there will be nothing I can do for you. I will be forced to stop you.

"Carl, she's gone completely whackadoodle! I think her medication finally wore off!"

I shook my head. "It's more than that. Whatever imbalance she had, it's been deliberately kicked back into place. I think it's one of

her sponsors. During the last battle, the announcer guys said she was sponsored by the Nebulars. Her patron, too, which I think is pretty much the same thing. I think they gave her something that sent her back over the edge."

"What? Why would they do that? Those are the hunter guys with the hats, right?"

"Yes. They're not a single race, but a cult. Remember, they were guys in the audience in the mock card battle arena when you set it up the first time. They worship the thing that runs the center system, and they have some pretty weird beliefs." The strange, religious cult had been gunning for Prepotente on the last floor during the Hunting Grounds before I'd been forced to fight them and Vrah's crew at the same time. It seemed they were still sore about me and Donut helping to wipe all of them out. I still didn't know what their deal was in terms of their actual beliefs, but a picture was starting to form in my mind. "We need to be careful. I'll try to keep her pacified until we can get the hell out of here."

Carl: Okay. We can meet somewhere. We'll talk. Where do you want us to go?

"We're not really gonna meet her, right?"

"Hell, no. We just gotta keep her distracted."

Sister Ines: Good, good. You won't regret this, Carl. Come to the FOSCA building.

Carl: I don't know where that is.

Imani: Three demons just walked into the church. They're huge! They're not the possessed zombies. They're the level 140 pleasure demons. Carl, it says they're minions of Sister Ines. How is that possible? I thought you said she couldn't control the real demons.

In the distance, the massive, demon-possessed snake stopped throwing fire into the sky.

"Here, Carl," the giant snake bellowed. His voice echoed, shaking the ground. Glass shattered all around. It was clearly fighting the words, like it was being forced to talk. "Come here."

"What the shit?" I asked.

"Carl... is she controlling the giant demon?" Donut asked. "I thought he was like a god! How can she do that?"

"Fuck me," I said, looking off into the distance. *Uh-oh.*

Sister Ines: Come now, Carl. Come or I will make the demons under my control destroy that church. I don't want to smash such a holy place, but I will. I will destroy it all if it will prevent you from opening that door.

"Carl, this is what you get for not letting Mongo eat her when we had the chance," Donut said.

"Well, shit," I said.

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<Note added by crawler Milk, 6th Edition>

Even though you can sometimes move the platforms upon which the stairwells sit, you cannot put the exit portal into your inventory. You can't bring a stairwell into your saferoom. I watched one get hit by an Utter Annihilation wand, and it remained unscathed. I believe that means they are indestructible.

<Note added by crawler Herot, 16th Edition>

Milk is correct here about the stairwells. It states in the rules manual that while stairwells may be gated until certain conditions are met, the stairwells themselves are not allowed to be removed from the playing field.

<Note added by crawler Rosetta, 9th Edition>

The only way for a crawler to move from one floor to the next is via a stairwell. That's it. It is an unbreakable rule. There is no skipping floors. At the end of Faction Wars, after the viceroys pulled out their last minute victory, a portal

appeared, and several of the remaining fucks stepped within. It was all of them. The orcs, the viceroys, the operatics, even the nagas, all together, laughing as if they weren't just bathing in each other's entrails the day before. It appeared it was taking them to another part of the dungeon. Some sort of nightclub on a different floor for a victory party. They dragged several unwilling NPCs with them, including the librarian elves from the college, whose help was instrumental in our survival. A crawler tried to jump through the portal to save the NPCs, and he was stopped like it was a wall of glass. He tried casting a spell through the portal, but it did not work, though the attempt did catch the attention of the orc prince. The orc stepped back through the glass into the smoldering remains of Larracos, lassoed the crawler, and returned to the portal. The rope pulled itself within, and it cut the crawler in half. We watched as the orc and his friends laughed, just there on the other side of the glass. It was the last crawler they killed, of the thousands who fell during that pointless game.

Tonight, I will dream of watching them burn. Tonight, I will pretend I was smart enough to find a way to lance them from afar.

Comrades, I hope you help me realize my dream one day.

"It's absolutely ridiculous they can just break the doors," Donut said as we ran. Samantha, having sent the zombies wandering off in the wrong direction, was looping back to meet us one street over. "How can they even break the stairwells anyway? One of them was on a submarine that got eaten by a shark and then blown up, and it was just fine. It's not fair! I thought it was always supposed to be winnable. If they make it impossible, what's the point? It's cheating!"

We were running toward the church. We would have to skirt past the demon atop the building. We didn't have time to go the long

way. The building loomed. The demon, after being forced to beckon us, had resumed shooting fire straight up into the air. The tornado of demon seagulls grew by the moment. The ground immediately around the building was a sea of red dots, all possessed zombie demons.

I was in the chat with Sister Ines, insisting I was on my way, but there was no way I'd voluntarily walk into that trap. We had to get to the church before she set her demons to trash the doorway.

I stomped heavily onto a zombie fish, splattering it. We continued on our way, crossing over a massive pileup of cars. Ahead, Samantha appeared, lowering into an alleyway. She'd stolen a shawl thing from a vendor's booth, and it hung over her head.

I grunted as I stomped another zombie fish. The things were everywhere, flopping all about. "Ines isn't threatening to break the stairwell. Just the *doorway* to the stairwell, and the only reason she hasn't done it yet is because it's in a church. It's not a portal, and we know the stairwells are actually right there. We can see them on the map. Just the doors themselves are magical, and the walls surrounding it, too. It's confusing, but the stairwell chambers themselves are fine. We're not the only ones this happened to. Did you see Katia's message in the group chat?"

A group of former daughters who'd ended up in Turkey had managed to kill another crawler and take the key, but the same thing had happened. They'd fought their battle right in front of the door, and it'd damaged the exit. Their key had disappeared right after they'd gotten it. There were several instances now of crawlers threatening to destroy the doorways if an opposing team didn't give up their key. Those who'd already gone down had the right idea. It was getting uglier by the moment.

This whole floor had been designed to turn us against one another, to cull us down to nothing. It was working.

The event with the zombies wasn't just happening here, either, though it seemed we had the worst of it. The demon eviction event was worldwide. My entire chat was filled with people dealing with zombies all over all the coastal regions, which in turn meant they were having to deal with demons, too. Donut said she'd already

received a string of swears from Prepotente, who blamed me for this.

"Does that mean we can dig through the rubble, and the stairwell might be down there?" Donut asked.

"Maybe. I doubt it, but that's what I'm hoping. The daughter team are digging now, looking for it. If they find it, they'll let everybody know, and we'll do the same thing if we can. Maybe we can blow up the building ourselves, and the stairs will just be there, open. Like when we couldn't get through the magical door during the Remex quest on the third floor. We just blew up the building to get inside."

"If that does work, I bet Ren would feel really stupid about bowing out early."

"No, she wouldn't," I said.

"I suppose you're right. It took literally dying for her to finally admit she was wrong."

I had serious doubts digging for the chamber would work. That seemed too easy. The keys were the way out, and losing them was pretty much the same as dying. Donut had a point about it not being fair, but like Mordecai had said so many times, the dungeon was self-balancing, and it messed with the rules to keep the drama ratcheted up. We'd skipped an entire floor. There were more crawlers alive at the beginning of this floor than they'd been expecting.

It was an uncomfortable thought. When we'd started this floor, there'd been over 38,000 crawlers left alive. Mordecai hadn't said anything about it, but sometime in the past few weeks he'd turned off the surviving number of crawlers from displaying in the personal space. I deliberately didn't look at it when we entered regular saferooms. I didn't want to know.

We'd been dying off faster than usual up until the start of the sixth floor, which was usually one of the deadliest. That was when we'd really started working together and had turned things around. Without anyone actually dying on the seventh, the dungeon had some catching up to do.

I wasn't certain what our survival count was at the moment, but I did know what the numbers were for several instances of previous

seasons at the start of the ninth.

The average number of crawlers who stepped onto the ninth floor was just south of 8,000. I knew of one where it was only 500.

What was worse, less than 1,000 crawlers usually made it to the 10th. Sometimes, it was zero. For the 11th floor, the average was less than 10 crawlers. Very few chose to push on instead of making deals.

There was an essay on this in the cookbook, written by Herot, who posited the focus of the fans shifted once Faction Wars finished. While top tier crawlers would have diehard followers, much of the attention shifted to the intrigue and scheming and positioning of the individual elites preparing for the Ascendency game. The crawlers themselves were treated more like sands in an hourglass. The moment the last one died or took a deal, the Ascendency game would start, and the timing of that moment could change everything.

No, I decided. Those of us without keys were pretty much already dead. All of this stuff with the demons and zombies was just a way to make those deaths interesting.

The temperature was now sweltering. We were only two blocks from the tall, wide building that housed the snake atop it.

"What *is* that thing doing?" Donut asked. "Isn't that snake thing supposed to be a water goddess or something? Why is it shooting fire into the sky?"

"No clue," I said. I leaped past a street vendor cart, but my foot caught it, and it tumbled over, spilling what smelled like coconut cookies everywhere. "Samantha, do you know what he's casting?"

"He is fighting the charm spell," Samantha said. "He's not as strong because he's in the body of that snake lady. He's probably really embarrassed that he's being controlled like that. The ladies in the harem will probably make fun of him. It's a bad look. Do you like my new headband?"

"It is quite lovely," Donut said. She shot a magic missile at a zombie crab, and it exploded before it could warn the others.

"So, you don't think Sister Ines has full control over him?" I asked. "The fire is because of the charm spell?"

"He is casting a spell to get home. It's a portal. They try casting it a lot in the Nothing, but it doesn't work there because he needs to suck a lot of souls in for it to work. It'll probably work here, though."

Oh, *shit*. "A portal spell? Like the ones the other demons cast when they touch people?"

Samantha was suddenly chewing on one of those coconut cookies, and she had crumbles all over her face. "Yeah. Same sort of thing, but he's a big boy and big boys need big doors and lots of souls. Plus it'll be in the sky above, not the ground, and it'll suck everything up like that cute but sad metal guy you have floating in your house that slurps up bags of potato chips and cleans when Mongo tinkles on the couch."

I looked up at the sky, and the red cloud from the fire was right above our head and was growing slowly. Uh-oh.

"He's trying to cast the spell, but Sister Ines is controlling him also? I don't understand. Is she making him cast this?"

"No. I think the Donut-looking lady isn't strong enough to control him. I think she's trying to stop him, but he's casting it anyway. She's not strong enough to even be doing what she's doing now, so she's gotta have some help. She probably worships another god."

"She doesn't," I said. "We just fought her, and I would've seen if she worshiped a new god. She's not going to willingly do that. It's a thing for her."

<u>Imani</u>: Holy crap, Carl. One of the ram guys and a mantaur just came out of the temple and tried to fight one of the pleasure demons. I watched the whole thing. The demon cast something, and it pulled all three of them down and away. The demons have a ranged hell portal attack. It left a hole in the ground the size of a hot tub. The portal is still there. It's sucking everything around into it like it's a black hole. It's a one-minute portal, and it says "Entrance to Sheol, Floor 15." It's literally pulling bricks off the walls of the building. Wait, something is happening.

<u>Carl</u>: Fuck me. Keep me updated.

"We need to be extra careful," I said to Donut. "The full-strength demons don't need to touch you to drag you to hell. They also have a portal attack. It sounds like it's wide, too, so they don't have to be super precise. The hole hits the ground and sucks everything in."

"Oh my God, Carl. So we have holes flying around everywhere? Holes on the ground and a giant vacuum in the sky? How are we supposed to fight against that?"

"We can't. We have to get them to suck other NPCs or mobs away first. The demons go away if they also bring something down with them."

"All the NPCs are dead! It's just zombies! Do those count? I haven't seen a real NPC since we got into the city!"

"I'm pretty sure regular zombies and undead don't count. They have to be corporeal NPCs or crawlers. We gotta find some somewhere."

"What about the ghommid village?" Donut asked. "It's just two blocks over!"

"They're undead," I said. "It won't work."

Imani: Okay. Another ram cleric came out and avoided the first hole, but another demon attacked. That one opened a second portal and sucked the new cleric in, but the demon is still here. He's shouting at the entrance of the temple, demanding someone else come out and face him. It says "One of Two" over the second portal. He hasn't seen me yet. He's waiting right outside.

Carl: It sounds like the bigger demons need to banish two souls in order to return. Don't risk it. Stay in the saferoom.

Imani: I wonder how many the giant one needs?

I was just wondering the same thing.

Carl: How many demons are left in the church?

Imani: Just one inside, and there's more outside. They're congregating in the area outside the church, and I can only see so much from my position here. I can't tell how many. It's not a whole lot, but it's more than five. It still says they're minions of Sister Ines, but they're obviously jumping

at the chance to use their portal skills to escape back down to the 15th floor.

Carl: Okay. I have an idea, but you gotta do it away from the exit. A while back I, uh, locked the stripper guys in the training arcade. They're probably pretty pissed about it by now. They're helping me with something for the next floor. Mordecai will catch you up, but as soon as you see what I did, you'll understand. That should get rid of the demons. It'll hopefully clear up the church area.

Imani: I'm on it.

While I waited, I pulled up the group chats, and they were full of people dealing with an influx of demons. This was even happening to people away from coastal regions. In typical dungeon fashion, it'd spread over everything faster than really possible. I scanned until I saw the information I was looking for.

Rezan: By god. Masoud is dead! He got touched by a zombie polecat that was possessed by a demon! It just touched his foot, and it tried to pull him away through a portal. The demon went through the hole, but Masoud exploded when he touched it! He blew up just like my mother did when she went into the bathroom on the first floor!

Mandla: If it's like the bathrooms, you don't explode when you touch the portal. All of your equipment is sucked through, but you aren't allowed to pass, and everything you're wearing passes through *you* to get into the hole. It's like a portal trap. If it's caught in the portal's pull, it's going through. But it's a portal to the 15th floor, and we're not allowed to go down there, so we get stopped, and everything behind us gets pulled through anyway, hence we explode.

Rezan: I wasn't asking for a science lesson, you turnip. It doesn't matter how you explode. You touch it, and you're dead.

Mandla: Not if you're naked.

Rezan: So you're saying we fight the zombie demons naked?

Mandla: That's what I'm doing.

I stopped dead in the street. I didn't really know either of these crawlers, but I had met them both once long ago. Their conversation triggered something. A memory of Katia and Louis and Firas, and something that had happened on the fifth floor aboard the *Twister*. That plus a few entries from the cookbook. I jumped into the conversation.

Carl: Rezan. What happened when the portal closed?

Rezan: What do you mean what happened? He blew up like someone shoved a dynamite stick up his ass. Some of him is in my teeth. He was a prick, but what a way to go. He's everywhere. All his gear got sucked into the hole, and he exploded so much I can't even loot his inventory. He had most of our gold, too. The rest was in the saferoom. He was the one who bought the saferoom, and now it's gone. I'm really in trouble here.

Carl: But the demon still went away? And the hole went away immediately?

Rezan: It sure did.

Carl: It only took the stuff the guy was touching?

Rezan: Yes. Holy shit, any more questions? I'm running for my life here.

I looked up at the giant demon. If they were zombie demons, they only needed one soul. They touched a person, a portal opened, and the demon returned home. The portal closed immediately. If they were the full-powered, level 140 demons, the portal lasted a minute or two, sucked in everything nearby, and they needed two souls in order to punch their ticket home.

The demon stuck in the body of the possessed city boss loomed over us, still pouring fire upward, several hundred, perhaps a thousand feet in the air. I still didn't know what Sister Ines had to do with any of this, but an idea started to percolate.

"Carl, can we not just stand in the middle of the street?" Donut asked as she fired another missile, this time at a zombie seagull.

"Hang on," I said. "I'm thinking."

"Think faster!"

Sister Ines: I am losing my patience, Carl.

My heart thrashed. What had Ren said? Three out of four teams hadn't gotten a key? I'd been wrong before. The game *was* trying to balance the unfairness of the doorways breaking. I saw it now. It was just doing it in a really, really fucked-up way.

Carl: Everybody who can hear this. Quick, let me know if you've been getting any of those *Build Trench* scrolls in your inventory. I've gotten like 50 of them.

Mandla: I have a ton of them, too.

Louis: They're like the bandages and torches on the first floor.

Carl: Katia, I don't have a direct line to the former daughters stuck in Turkey. Is there an update?

Katia: They said they found the chamber, but the stairwell is contained within. It's just a big, rectangular, room, and they can't get inside. It's almost like a shipping container, but when the magical door broke, it just left a straight wall and no way to get inside. One has a *Hole* spell like Donut's, but it didn't work. Another tried a *Phase Through Walls* spell, and it didn't work, either. It's like the walls are made of the same stuff as the magic doors.

None of this matters. Quit wasting time. Imani is going to get rid of the demons, and you can send her down the stairs. Then you can use your bone key benefit. It'll be done. You can be through.

Three out of four teams. Thousands of people.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Imani snapped me out of it.

Imani: Carl, what the actual fuck is wrong with you?

Carl: Yell at me later. How many are there?

Imani: You infected over a dozen mercenaries with a disease that causes them to leak punk rock slugs every few minutes, and you locked them all in a room for almost a day. You locked them in a room where they die and get regenerated. How many do you think there are? There's

hundreds of them, including some slugs that are as high level as the mercenaries themselves. The entire room is filled with blood.

Carl: They're not punk rock. They're Sluggalos. And I only infected one of them. Doctor Bones. He has the same *Super Spreader* spell as I do, but his is better. I can only do it on one person once per hour. He infected the others all at the same time, and then he cast a spell on the slugs so they're not so hostile after they come out.

Imani: Yeah, that part doesn't work so great. They're still pretty aggressive, especially the big ones. I opened the door just in time to see one swallow Steve whole. There's way too many here to keep for the next floor. Carl, some of these things are huge! One of them has a damn hatchet growing out of its head.

Carl: The *Conscript* spell is far from perfect. It makes them fight on our side, sort of. It doesn't really change their attitude, and they can be rebellious. It's kinda like turning them into totems. We'll probably have to kill the highest level ones, but the rest are going into our infantry. For right now, since they were born in the arcade, you should be able to send the lowest level ones out the door toward the demons. Keep sending them until the demons are gone. If I can make it to a saferoom before the floor collapses, I'll buy the barracks upgrade so we can keep the most powerful ones we can control. In the meantime, bring Doctor Bones with you if you have to. I don't think you can let him go outside because he's technically my mercenary.

Imani: He's a member of the guild mercenary barracks. I can "borrow" him.

Carl: Huh. I didn't know that. I still wouldn't let him outside. I'm pretty sure if any of the stripper guys die outside of the training arcade, they die for real. Only some special types of mercenaries can regenerate.

Imani: Yeah, Carl. Speaking of regenerating. I had to cure the mercenaries of the slug disease. The room healer

refused to do it. She and that Bucket Boy kid said you told them not to.

Carl: Wait, you can cure that stuff?

Imani: Yes, Carl. I am a healer. It's what I do.

Carl: Good to know.

With that problem settled, I moved back to the messages I was composing. I sent out two separate ones. The first went to Prepotente, who was back in the Bahamas, meaning he was the closest crawler to us outside of Cuba.

Carl: Prepotente. Answer me fast. Please. Has the sky changed color over there? Is anything happening to the environment?

Carl: Mordecai. Quick. Give me the short, fast version of the Sheol storyline.

Mordecai answered first.

Mordecai: It was set up a long time ago, but nobody has ever gotten that far, so it's been running on its own for seasons and seasons with very little input from the outside. The demons get pulled out and used for quests and fights all the time, but we never get to see Sheol itself. There's no tourist activity at all on that floor. From what I understand, there's a queen, who's in charge, and she has four sons, the princes, one of whom you're dealing with right now. The queen and four sons are pretty much the same as gods. The four princes used to share a massive harem of demons, but one of the brothers banished them all to the Nothing, and there's a bunch of intrigue going on within there, as you've already seen. And below them, there's a whole matriarchal culture of demons with a multitude of other storylines we hear about but never see. That's it. We've never met the queen. That guy you're looking at is one of the biggest bad guys in the whole dungeon. He shouldn't be here this early.

Carl: Okay. Thanks.

Prepotente: There is a red, sunset-like tinge to the sky coming from your area. Are you attempting to screw things up even more? The zombie event ended up killing all of my

opponents before I could even get to them, I'll have you know. That blood is on your hands.

Carl: Let me know if the sky changes. I'm trying to figure out if what's about to happen is just here or if it's going to be global.

Prepotente: If you're involved, I'm quite certain it'll be global. And not in a good way.

Carl: Eat my ass, Pony. Just let me know if the sky gets redder or if it starts to get hotter.

Prepotente: I will let you know if I notice any changes.

Carl: Actually, you're the smartest guy I know. Let me run something by you really fast. Here's the thing. I don't want it to be local. I want it to spread over the whole world. I need ideas.

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<Note added by crawler Herot, 16th Edition>

I'm starting to believe I have the ability to manifest my own destiny, after a certain fashion. The more unstable the AI running this system becomes, the less predictable it is. Yet at the same time, it's even more predictable in certain ways. I made a quip about being hungry, and I suddenly received a random achievement notification about my hunger level. I discussed with my friend how I wished we could kill more ghasts, because they often drop knowledge scrolls, and not one hour later, I received a quest to hunt down a certain number of the very same monsters. Beware, however. That same quest killed my friend. The AI is always listening, thinking, plotting, changing the game to suit its desires. At the higher levels, it is not nearly as rigid as it once was. That pliability can be an asset or an extreme danger.

"Okay," I said. "Come on. To the church!"

Donut gazed up at the massive demon. "Finally! We could've been running this whole time, Carl! Where's Sister Ines?"

"I'm not sure. Hang on!"

I stopped again as Donut let out an exasperated sound. She shot two more zombie birds.

I consulted my *Find Crawler* skill, and sure enough, I could now see the nun. I wasn't expecting that. She was in the FOSCA building, directly underneath the snake, maybe three or four floors below it. Not riding it like last time. Okay. That was good.

I dove back into my chat. I prepared a message with Elle, Katia, Donut, Li Na, and Mordecai. I left Imani out, who was still corralling the sluggalos. I resumed jogging as I messaged everyone.

Carl: Guys. I know a way to get into the stairwell chambers without a key. Pony and I came up with the idea together. I need you to start spreading the word. We need to stop fighting each other. Do everything you can to convince people. Everybody who has lost keys needs to start clearing the stairwell chamber of debris. I know most of these rooms have a whole lot of infrastructure around them, but we gotta get them to isolate these chambers as fast as possible. If you can, you want nothing on it or above it or even around it. Don't be gentle. Blow that shit up, and do it fast. Find one of those *Build Trench* scrolls, and use it to tunnel underneath the chamber. You need to be able to fit everyone in your party underneath the room. Mordecai, go into my bomber's studio and take the pile of satchel bombs and stick them on the market. That'll help people with the demolition. I've been making them in preparation for the next floor, so they're safe for regular crawlers to handle.

Katia: Carl, what are you talking about?

Carl: Do whatever you can to make people understand. Those with keys need to get out as soon as possible and clear the way for the people left behind. Tell them not to waste their time fighting. There's no point. We can get out. All of us.

Elle: What the hell, Carl? Are you blowing smoke up our ass? Is this a sure thing, or are you working off a Carl theory?

Carl: It's a theory. It's a Carl and Pony theory, though, if that means anything. What choice do we have? People are fighting and making it so one team is dead and the other can't get out anyway. It's not a sure thing. It never is. But I think I'm right, and Prepotente thinks it'll work, too.

Katia: I wish you'd come up with this earlier. Louis just got his first player killer skulls, and he's not happy about it. He got five, all from one attack.

Elle: Yeah, no shit. The squad in our area was just one dude, and we already took care of it. That's the whole message? Don't fight? Isolate the stairwells? You're gonna have to give us more than that, cowboy. People are terrified. They're gonna need a solid reason. Also, Imani just told me why you wanted to upgrade the barracks. Of all the fucked up shit you've done to NPCs, I'm pretty sure this is the worst. Worse than what you did to that gnoll guy.

Donut: WHAT DID HE DO?

Elle: Oh, so Donut doesn't know about the sluggalos?

Donut: THE WHAT? IS THAT A PUN? YOU KNOW HOW I FEEL ABOUT PUN-BASED NAMES, CARL.

Carl: Okay, here's the plan.

"Carl!" Amayon boomed a few minutes later as we started to approach the neighborhood with the church. The voice knocked me out of chat, and I tumbled to the ground. The distant demon growled with anger. We scrambled back up as the ground shook. "Let me go you fucking bitch. Ahh! Ysalte, I will flay you again. I will get free of this shell and..." He growled. "Carl, come now!"

Li Jun: Guys, you will not believe what just happened here at the stairwell.

I barely registered Li Jun's message. Ysalte? Where had I heard that name before?

"Ysalte is here? Where? Where?" Samantha asked. "I don't feel her here. Believe me, you'll feel it when she's here."

"Is that a god?" I asked. "There are no other gods here. Just Amayon."

Imani: Okay, Carl. Sending them out now. Gluteus Maxx is tossing the small ones out toward the demons. It's already working. The first two slugs attacked a demon, and he portaled them away. There's another one. That guy needed three. I don't know why. Holy cow. It's working! And the damn slug things are all excited about it, too. Christ, they're aggressive.

Carl: Let me know when the demons are all gone by your area, and we'll come to you and get you our key. We need to do this before Sister Ines figures it out and sends backup.

I took a deep breath. We still didn't have a perfect messaging system. I watched as Elle, Katia, and others started spreading the word of the plan. It wasn't taking. People were telling them they were full of shit. People weren't willing to risk it, and I understood that. It was asking a lot.

We paused in an alleyway, waiting for Imani to finish with her sluggalo assault.

"Damnit," I muttered, after seeing someone tell Katia to go fuck herself. I was going to have to convince them myself.

We still mostly relied on a relay system to send out mass messages. I pulled up the largest chat group I had, and prepared the note.

Here we go.

Carl: Everybody. Please be quiet and listen. We are all getting out of here. This will work. So if you have a key, you gotta get out of the way and go now. Everyone else. Don't fight people with keys. Just let them go. We're all getting out of here.

I reiterated the plan the best I could.

Rezan: There's no way that's gonna work.

Jurgen: It sounds like you just pulled all of that out of your ass.

Carl: Prepotente. Tell them what you told me.

Prepotente: Everyone. As much as it pains me to say this, I believe Carl is correct. We have seen gated stairwell encasements break before. I once watched Lucia Mar

attempt to teleport a stairwell to another location, and I witnessed what happened to both the stairwell itself and the surrounding structure. This portal is of a particular type, and I believe Carl's theory is sound. I'm certainly not going to risk it myself. I am going to make my way down the stairwell using my key in just a moment, but I am reasonably certain there's at least a fifty percent chance this will work. Maybe forty percent. And that's only assuming the demon really does cast his spell over the entire world and not just a portion of it.

Next to me, Donut muttered, "He's not the best motivational speaker, is he?"

Goddamnit, Pony. Way to be helpful.

Carl: Look, everyone. Here's the thing. You're right. I'm not positive this is going to work. It's a long shot. But for lots of us, this is literally our only chance. Those of you who are fighting each other, what's the point? If there's not enough of us alive on the next floor, we won't have a chance to make it to the tenth, where we can start earning our freedom. The more of us who set foot on the ninth, the stronger we are. I will take a 50 percent chance to survive with *all* of you over a 100 percent chance to survive alone any day.

Prepotente: Remember, I amended it to 40 percent, Carl. But during Katia's fumbled explanation of the plan, she did bring up a good point about the potential for spin while you're being sucked upward. So maybe I should have said 35 percent.

I had the urge to reach through the messaging system and strangle the goat.

Mandla: I am going to hyperventilate. This is insane.

Donut: PREPOTENTE DON'T BE MEAN TO KATIA.

Rezan: Why does that cat always type in all caps?

Donut: WHY DIDN'T YOUR MOTHER DRIBBLE YOU BACK OUT ONTO THE TRUCK STOP BATHROOM FLOOR, REZAN?

Carl: Look. Everyone is stressed. I get that. We need to breathe and chill. Follow the instructions, and it'll be okay.

Yvonne Vu: Our stairwell is in a subway station! There's like a hundred meters of rock above us!

Louis: Oh god, another subway?

Carl: I will delay as long as I can. Do your best. In theory, it should work even if the room is buried, but it's not ideal.

Yvonne Vu: So when is this going to happen? Will we have a warning?

Carl: I'm working on it. I'm not sure. You need to get moving, but make sure everybody with keys is out first. No sense in risking them, too.

Jurgen: No, man. I'm breaking the door now. If we gotta clear this shit away, we're gonna need help.

Osvaldo: So help me god, Jurgen. If you break that door before we get through, I will end you.

Jurgen: Whoopsies. Too late. I guess you're stuck down here with the rest of us. Now come help us dig.

I took a breath.

Carl: Goddamnit, everyone. Stop it. Earlier, I was thinking about how hopeless all this is. That they're whittling us down to nothing. That there's a death quota they have to meet, and no matter how hard we fight, we're stuck inside that box. No. Fuck them all. I was wrong. We are not like those who came before us. This is our chance. This is our chance to show them how hard it is to kill us. We will not die on their schedule. Every person who gets through this will be one more the real assholes will have to fight on the next floor. We need each other. *I* need you. So stop fucking fighting.

There was a long pause.

Katia: I'm with you, Carl.

Katia had a key already. She didn't need to say that, but I appreciated it.

Elle: We are, too.

Li Na: We as well.

A multitude of chats came in, all of people agreeing to help. Relief washed over me.

And then, finally, what I'd been hoping for happened. Confirmation.

A timer appeared in my interface. It was at two hours and started counting down.

New Quest. Where the Sidewalk Ends.

This is a regional quest. All crawlers within the area of Cuba have been added to this quest.

Your squad has been designated as host of this quest.

Oh, all right. For fuck's sake. I've been debating on whether or not to allow this, but now that so many of you are hell bent on dying in such a spectacular manner, we might as well make it official.

Amayon, one of the four princes of Sheol has been betrayed by one of his brothers. After being unceremoniously expelled from the kingdom of Sheol, the demon prince has managed to just barely hold on long enough to pull himself onto the equivalent of a very, very small ledge. The level 250 demon lord now inhabits the body of a lesser deity, a once-worshiped sea serpent who went by the name of the *Madre de Aguas*.

In order to return home, Amayon simply must cast a spell. But nobody, not even a prince, rides the river for free. A tithe of souls is required to pass back downward. And for a demon of his power, even as weak as he is right now, that tithe is pretty steep.

So he has cast his spell, a wide-area portal that will inhale all the souls within the Cuba area. This will be enough, barely, to send him home.

Unfortunately for Amayon, his expulsion has not gone unnoticed. Other entities have noted that he is far from home, and they are doing what they can to keep him from returning. He is being thwarted. But even in his weakened state, he is still strong. He is still pushing the spell through.

Here are your options.

- **Option 1. Do nothing.**

***Reward*: In two hours, the portal will cast, and all of the Cuba region will be sucked upward into the Sheol portal. This may or may not be a good thing depending on where you're standing when this happens. This portal will remain open for the remainder of this floor. Translation. Get the fuck out when you can.**

- **Option 2. Free Amayon from his shell.**

***Reward*: This will cause Amayon to take his true form. The timer will reset, and this quest will reset into a World quest. We've never had a full-powered, untethered hell prince unleashed on a lower floor before. I'm sure it'll be fine.**

- **Option 3. Kill Amayon.**

Yeah, good luck with that, especially since he is invulnerable on this floor.

***Reward*: You will receive a Celestial Hell Boon.**

I took a deep breath. It was on.

Carl: Pony, holy shit you were right. We got the quest, just like you said we would.

Prepotente: How many times must I tell you not to call me by that name?

Donut remained unmoving in the alley. She was staring up at me.

"Carl, if we do this, it might ruin our own chance to go down the stairs."

"I know, Donut," I said, taking a knee next to her. "If you want to go down now, I can make sure that happens. But I started this, and people are counting on it, so now I have to stay."

"But, how do you know the demon spell will cover the whole planet?"

"I don't know, Donut. It's only a hunch, but I think I'm right. The way the quest is worded seems to confirm it. The stronger the demon is, the bigger the spell needs to be in order to get himself home. I'm gonna make him as strong as possible. I'm not positive it'll cover the whole world, but we're gonna do our best to make it close."

"But how?"

I dodged the question because she was not going to like the answer. "You were right earlier, Donut. We should have killed Sister Ines when we had the chance. We don't have a choice now. First I take her out, then I free the boss of his shell, and then I buff him as much as I can." I swallowed. "And then I get my ass underneath the stairwell chamber."

"But if you do all that, you won't have time to dig out the room. One is inside a big church and the other is buried under that entire capitol building. You said it yourself. People need to free the building around the chamber if they can."

I took in a breath. This was the part of the plan I was stumbling on, too. "I can only do my best. But the demon is here, in our area. I'm the only one who can buff it up. Donut, I don't want to be in this position." I waved my hand. "But all of this has been manufactured to force this on us, to force me into this. I'm the only one who can do it. If I don't, we're going to be in real trouble on the next floor. This is our chance to get as many of our people as possible down."

She headbutted against my leg. "Don't be stupid. *We* can only do *our* best. If you don't go down the stairs, I don't go down the stairs. We are the Princess Posse, and the Princess Posse doesn't leave anybody behind."

I reached over, and I picked her up and cradled her in my arms. A few streets over, a building collapsed as flames reached high in the

sky. Amayon rumbled again. Samantha floated at the end of the alley, oohing and ahhing at all the destruction.

"That line was really cheesy," I said as I pushed my face into her fur.

"Yeah, I'm still working on it," she said. "I stole it from some movie. Now let's go kill that nun."

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<Note added by crawler Milk, 6th Edition>

If you have to fight a demon, and you have access to Sheol fire, do not use it. It makes the creature exponentially stronger.

<Note added by crawler Ikicha, 11th Edition>

Gods, I am so lonely.

I PEERED AROUND THE CORNER, LOOKING AT THE CHURCH. I DIDN'T SEE ANY more demons, but I did spy a group of level-30 to 35 pox slugs eating the corpse of a ram cleric. The things were the size of wolves. They all had white dots. There were no zombies in the immediate area, though there were a few zombie birds circling above down the street. Just past the church was the road and then the coastline, and there was a ton of red dots down there, too

Sister Ines had not yet made good on her promise to send more demons to the church. I suspected she couldn't. With each passing minute, she was losing her grip over Amayon. I wondered if that two

hour timer would change if she gave up. In fact, I wondered if she *could* give it up. There was clearly something else going on with her.

Donut looked upon the slugs with disgust. "Carl, I feel as if I should have been consulted before you infested my strippers with a slug-leaking disease. Splash Zone is very particular about his skin care regimen, and I imagine he's quite upset about all this."

"We're going to need all the soldiers we can get if we make it to the next floor. We can build a lot of fighters fast with this method."

Two of the slugs appeared to be literally having sex atop the pile of gore. The girl slug kept loudly whooping the whole time.

"We need to have a conversation about quality versus quantity, Carl."

Carl: Imani, I think it's clear. We're going to move in. We're in the alley on the other side of the grass square.

Imani: Stay put. We're coming to you.

Carl: We? Who is we?

I blinked as a blue dot appeared on my map. Then another. Then another.

A large group of crawlers appeared, walking from the church. The slugs started to scatter, but Imani yelled something at them, and they all lowered their heads and turned back toward the church compound. One had a little hatchet attached to the side of its neck, and it started waving it threateningly at Imani, and she pointed a stern finger at it, and it backed off.

"Louis!" Samantha shouted and zipped off. She zipped across the distance and hit him like a tossed football. She clearly knocked the wind out of him.

Donut gasped. "Carl, what's happening? How did they get here?" She freed Mongo from his cage, and he started bouncing all around. He turned and saw the group and rushed toward them, screeching and jumping. He almost bowled over Britney.

Elle came floating up, looking around. "You know, I always wanted to go to Cuba." A distant crashing punctuated the air as another building collapsed. "Gotta say it's a little hotter than I was expecting. A little more run down."

Imani fluttered up next to Elle. Her skeletal face and eyes had taken on an even more hollow glaze than usual. Still, she grinned down at me. “Surprise.”

“I told you,” Elle said. “The look on his face makes this suicide mission all worth it.”

It was Imani, Katia, Bautista, Louis, Britney, Tran, Li Jun, Li Na, Zhang, Chris, Elle, a few Meadowlark crawlers I didn’t really know, and a handful of others, most of whom were Asian. It totaled over twenty people.

“It’s too bad Florin already went down the stairs,” Louis said. “It would’ve been the whole gang otherwise.” He was looking around, suddenly sad as Samantha orbited around him in circles. His five new player killer skulls looked unnatural above his head. “Wow, this place really sucks.”

“How...” I began, looking about.

“Yeah, you don’t like it when people leave you out of the planning phase for this sort of thing, don’t you?” Elle asked.

“I don’t like it when my friends put themselves at an unnecessary risk,” I countered. “Seriously, how did you get here?”

Li Jun stepped forward. He, too, had a pair of player killer skulls he didn’t have before. “It was Lucia Mar.” He swallowed. “They’re calling it the Battle of Beijing. Lucia, she never really collected any cards. She refused to play it. She got the six totems they automatically gave her, but they were all low-level monsters. And whenever a battle started, she discarded the first one, and she played the rest until her hand was empty which allowed her to use her spells and magic and inventory. She and her dog went in and killed everything. When she showed up at the Soho building, it turned into a big fight amongst all the people without keys. There were monster traps set up, too, and it was chaos. I didn’t see it, but I saw the aftermath.”

He paused, rubbing his arm. “She killed so many people. She set up a teleport trap, and Fang’s team got caught up in it. He had a key. She killed him and his wife and took it. After that, we thought she’d already gone down the stairs, but when we got there, she was waiting for us. She can hide her presence now. She said Florin had

messaged her before he'd gone down the stairs and told her to help us." He pulled something from his inventory and handed it to me. "She dropped five of these on the ground and then went down the stairs. We already installed one of them in Imani's room. We don't know how she got these, where she got them from, or why she had so many."

"What the hell?" I asked.

"Yeah. She was really friendly, too, which was unsettling. My sister wanted to fight her."

I examined the item. It was a personal space upgrade module. If you bought one of these from a bopca, they just installed it directly into your room, but if you got one from a box, it'd come like this. You had to put it in your inventory and then enter your personal space tab on your interface to use it.

"She shouldn't have had one, let alone five of them. It's a tier-3. Mordecai says these shouldn't be available until the ninth floor," Katia added. "He thinks Lucia stole them when she went on a show or something."

Personal Space Upgrade.

Tier 3 Doggie Door.

So, you're out adventuring, and you suddenly have a hankerin' for those sweet pancakes you had two weeks back at some dive that's now over two hundred kilometers away. What are you gonna do? Travel for several hours in the wrong direction just to get another taste? Psshh. Okay, loser.

The cool kids use the doggie door.

Upgrades the door in your personal space to allow a selectable exit via any door you have previously utilized on this same floor, effectively creating a fast travel waypoint system. Allows shared gated access amongst guests and party members.

"Holy shit," I said. "So you gave it to Imani, and she installed it in their room, and now anyone in the guild can go out that door into the church?"

"That's right," Katia said. "Or into Washington or into Detroit. Or into Belgium, where Elle's squad went during the key phase. It works for the whole Meadowlark party."

"Can we upgrade the entire guild to use it, so it works on my door, too?"

"We can," Imani said, "but it's pretty expensive. It's a tier-three. Twenty-five million to give it to everybody. In the meantime, we still have four more and can install them on individual doors as needed. By the way, we already pooled all our money to buy that barracks upgrade."

"You didn't have to do that. I got almost five million off Quan."

Elle spit on the ground. "You should've beaten him to death with his own arm."

"That's what I said!" Donut quipped.

"I still have the key for the door," I said. "I was going to give it to Imani. You all have keys. You shouldn't be here."

"That's not how this works, Carl," Elle said. "You were right, what you said in your little speech. We're all in this together. We're all screwed if we don't all make it to the next floor. If things really go south, most of us can still go back and use our keys. But until that time we're here, and we're helping."

"And I'm not taking your key," Imani added. "Donut told me about your dumbass idea to use one of your own bones or whatever to get out. People have bones for a reason, Carl. No. Like Elle said. It's all or nothing."

I looked again at the module and sighed. "These sure would've been handy a few days ago."

"Tell me about it," Elle said, looking pointedly at Imani. "It would've changed everything. I wonder how long that crazy kid has been holding on to these things. I also wonder if Florin knew about them. I already chewed him out just in case. We've been chasing a fast travel system since the whole guild system opened."

<u>Li Jun</u>: This is just for you, Carl. There's more. Lucia dropped the upgrades, and she said she was helping us because Florin had asked, but before she went down the stairs, she went from really friendly to mean again, and she

said she was saving something special for herself because she had a score to settle with Donut and that she would be seeing her on the next floor. She said she was going to kill both Donut and her pet dinosaur. That's why my sister wanted to fight her.

Carl: Holy shit. Okay, thanks for not saying that out loud.

I looked nervously at Donut, who stood on the edge of Tran's flying wheelchair module for his missing legs. She laughed with delight, switched into her dragonfly tiara, and then cast *Hover*, showing them all her new skill. I had to hold myself back from chiding her for wasting her five-times-a-day skill.

Tran, too, was smiling as he reached over and pet Donut. Britney was on the ground, on her back as Mongo snuffled against her. She was laughing as well. It was the first time I'd seen either of those two, Tran or Britney, so much as smile since the end of the Butcher's Masquerade.

Actually, come to think of it, it was the first I'd seen Britney smile. Ever.

I felt it, too. The change in the air. It was an overwhelmingly welcome feeling.

Things were not looking up for us, but somehow that didn't matter. Despite Lucia's new threat. Despite the overwhelming odds against us. Despite all the death and pain. Still... still...

Ever since the horror of the Butcher's Masquerade there'd been this feeling coming over me. It was like an extra layer of darkness on top of everything. It was an overpowering sense of futility that I hadn't even realized was there. This was in addition to the hopelessness that permeated everything. Our humanity was slowly, slowly being siphoned away. With each passing challenge, each new death, each new twist we were becoming less of who we were.

I thought of Ren, and of the hopelessness that had broken her. Of all these crawlers who'd been forced to confront their own personal nightmares on this floor. Of my mother, who'd drowned in her own sorrow. Of the stepmother I'd never met, and what she'd done. Of the goddamned river that was so loud it was the only thing I could hear.

It was loneliness. It had always been loneliness.

That veil was ripped away. Nothing had changed about our situation. We were likely fucked, yes. But we were all together again. And there was hope. Finally. Clarity filled me for the first time in a long while. It was isolation that would break us. We couldn't let it happen.

I thought of Lucia, the most isolated crawler in the dungeon, yet she'd held onto something that could literally bring us all together.

I looked at Katia. I thought of that flower in her inventory, and of all the potential outcomes.

We have to find another way.

But right here, right now, I'd never felt so grateful to know these people standing in front of me.

Elle clapped her little hands together, showering flecks of ice everywhere. She gazed at me.

"Okay, warlord. This is your shitshow. What do we gotta do?"

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<Note added by Crawler Allister, 13th Edition>

The Semeru Dwarves of the ninth floor all only worship a single goddess, who inevitably makes an appearance near the end of the battles as the final teams approach the gates of the castle of Larracos. She only has a single temple in the entire dungeon. I have never seen or heard of a crawler worshiping her. I don't know if that's even possible.

She is also, apparently, used as a foil during the Ascendency battles as well. She is hated by both the gods and the demons, and she's said to be forever scheming, moving nations like pieces on a chessboard. Killing and resurrecting, all in her unknown cause. I've heard her described as a trickster. Insane. Jealous of mortals. The dwarves call her the Downward Spiral. An Earth and Water goddess who punishes those who abuse her world and the weakest within it. In my religion, we have a T'Ghee card that represents such a figure, called The Inevitable.

Some say she is the reason for Scolopendra's nine-tier attack. I've heard one dwarf say she is the daughter of the great centipede. Another say she's the sister. Another claimed she's the mother. I doubt any of those are true.

Outside of Larracos, she is known by another name.

She is called the Vinegar Bitch.

TIME LEFT IN THE QUEST: ONE HOUR, THIRTY MINUTES.

Mordecai: He said that? He called her Ysalte? Are you sure?

Donut: WHEN A GIANT DEMON IS BELTING OUT NAMES, YOU LISTEN, MORDECAI.

Mordecai: Ysalte is known by another name. The Vinegar Bitch. She kills every crawler that comes anywhere near her. She usually pops out of her temple at the end of Faction Wars, but not always. She didn't appear the last two seasons, so it's always a surprise. If she does show up, run.

Carl: Can she hide her appearance? Is that possible?

Mordecai: Anything is possible, but gods usually aren't subtle. Even her. That jacket of yours should be telling you if she's close. We're missing something.

Carl: Can she be sponsored?

Mordecai: FUCK. Yes.

Carl: What?

Mordecai: I just remembered. She *has* been getting sponsored recently. The Nebular team has been sponsoring her.

Carl: The same ones who also sponsor Sister Ines?

Mordecai: Bingo. Be careful.

Donut: WHY DO THOSE WEIRDOS KEEP POPPING UP?

Mordecai: People have been trying to figure out what those guys are up to for hundreds of years, Donut. What they want is easy to explain, but what they do is not because their actions never make sense.

I already knew some of this, but I wanted to hear Mordecai's explanation.

Carl: What do they want?

Mordecai: Near the center of the galaxy is a very large AI that extends a benign enhancement zone over several solar

systems, and it's where a whole lot of people live. The 'inner system.' This AI is the same sort of thing that runs the crawl, but it predates Syndicate society. It is stable and is without personality. It's the only one like it. The Nebs worship it like it's a god, and they think it's blasphemy to try to replicate it. They participate in the Hunting Grounds and the Ascendency, and they really, really want to run a crawl themselves sometime, but nobody is ever going to let them because their stated goal is to shut all of this down. Hence they try to keep winning the Celestial Ascendency since one of the prizes of that is a seat at the table of the Syndicate crawl council. Outside the crawl, they're pacifists. You could literally walk up to one and punch him in the face, and he'll let you do it. Not so much inside the dungeon.

Carl: They want to shut the crawl down?

Mordecai: Yeah, but don't get too excited. They preach the eradication of all the places that could host crawls, such as this planet. And all the people on it. And all other religions, too. They're psychotic.

Carl: Preaching for genocide doesn't exactly go along with pacifism.

Mordecai: Yeah, it doesn't make much sense to anybody else, either.

Carl: What do they want with Sister Ines, I wonder.

Mordecai: They likely sponsored her because she's religious, and they either want to convert her or make an example of her.

"I feel bad," Chris said. The lava rock crawler had spent the floor with Li Na's team, and I'd barely spoken with him. He looked over his shoulder at the church across the way. A demon crab rushed through the grassy area in front of the building, but it didn't even look at us. The zombies all wandered aimlessly unless we got close,

and then they'd swarm, but the demons seemed to all head straight for the FOCSA building, as if they knew their best chance at getting home was there.

The demon eviction was ongoing, but it had clearly slowed.

The crab didn't make it. Elle pierced it from afar using an ice spell that killed it with a single shot. It died with a small cry, and the corpse turned to dust.

I turned my attention back to Chris. "Why do you feel bad? Because it's a church?"

"No. Because it's pretty. And it will break the key."

"The real version of that church is already gone," I said. "And the key will only let one of us through. I tried to get Imani to take it, and she's refused. I'm not going to do it. The other stairwell is miles away and is covered with a lot more debris. We can protect the saferoom entrance if we do it correctly. It's already buried at the other exit. It has to be here."

"Okay," Chris said. He turned and started walking back to the church where he, Zhang, and several other crawlers and strippers were going to initiate the controlled demolition of the church, followed by the construction of the channel underneath it for our escape. I lent Zhang my shrink wand, as he had a lot of experience using that particular spell.

There were two temples on the grounds of the church in separate buildings. A temple of Ibeji, whom I'd never heard of, and a temple of the ocean goddess Kuraokami, which doubled as the entrance to Club Vanquisher. This second temple was where the ram clerics and the mantaur guards had been coming out. We had to be careful not to hurt either of those buildings. The last thing we needed was another pissed-off deity like that whole clusterfuck with Diwata on the last floor.

With that underway, I turned to the rest of the group. As I watched, Imani floated up, trailed by a large group of hooting and hollering sluggalos, followed by a few of the strippers. It was Gluteus Maxx with his war gauntlets, Author Steve Rowland with his club, Splash Zone the otter water mage, and Dong Quixote. Dong insisted on dragging his massive lance with him, despite being on

foot. The thing was basically just a spear, but it was clearly too long and unwieldy to be used effectively without being mounted.

The forty or so sluggalos were mostly level twenties and thirties, punctuated with a handful of level fifties, the strongest in the group that would do as we asked. Sort of. Most of the level forties and fifties were now safely ensconced in the upgraded barracks, which they were apparently trashing.

The things could move a lot more quickly than I was expecting. They left a shimmering trail of orange-hued slime everywhere they went.

"Everybody, gather around." I cracked my neck. "We have to get into that building." I pointed over my shoulder at the large, distant skyscraper. "Donut and I, along with Katia's squad and the rest of Li Na's squad will infiltrate the building and confront Sister Ines. The plan is to take her out, which will hopefully break the demon free of his confinement. As soon as that happens, that timer is probably going to accelerate, so we'll need to hoof it to the roof and break him free of the *Madre de Aguas* snake body right away."

"What about tossing Samantha, like you did before?" Louis asked. Samantha sat firmly upon his shoulder. She kept trying to chew on his hair, but he was pushing her away.

"I love it when you're confident in me," Samantha said. She reached over and bit Louis on the ear.

"Samantha, leave him alone or you're sitting this one out," I said.

She growled at me and threatened my mother.

I pointed at the swirling hurricane surrounding the demon. "He's protected by a wall of demon seagulls. Samantha is invulnerable, but if we toss her, and she gets intercepted, one of the seagulls will pull her into Sheol. I'm pretty sure I can get her back, but she'll likely bring something back with her we don't want to fight. We're going to use teleport to break him of the shell, but we want to keep him in the same location. The only way to do that is up through the building. This whole thing has been setup by the AI. We pretty much have to do it this way."

I turned to Elle and Imani. "You guys are going to protect our escape, and you're going to keep anyone from surging up behind us.

I don’t know if any of the full-strength demons are left, but be on the lookout. Watch for the birds.”

Elle saluted me. “You got it, boss.”

“Good. Once the demon is free from his shell, he’s going to be a lot bigger and a lot more powerful. I don’t know if that means he’ll be pissed or happy we freed him, but either way it’s going to trigger a world quest, and we’ll need to see what the parameters are before we decide how to proceed from there. Okay, guys? We ready? No time. Let’s go.”

I turned and started jogging east toward the massive demon in the sky. I didn’t turn to see if the others were following me.

“Did you get Quan’s cloak?” Katia asked as we approached the building. She was in her she-hulk form, but she’d grown multiple stalks on the back of her neck containing eyeballs so she could see all around her. I remembered how she once talked about how difficult it was to get used to using more than two eyes. That didn’t seem to be a problem for her anymore. To my left, Splash Zone sent a group of duende zombies floating away with a wave attack. Donut, Louis, Britney, Tran, and Mongo took up the middle of the group. Katia, the strippers, and I took up the front. The slugs were wandering off everywhere. It was like trying to herd a group of drunk toddlers.

“I did,” I said. “I need to sit down and really examine the description. It doesn’t do what we thought it did from what I can tell. It changes based on who wears it. I’m pretty sure I’m going to give it to Donut if we can get it to fit her, but we need to have a discussion with Mordecai about it first.”

“Okay,” Katia said. She was shaking, I realized. And not just from fear. I wished we were still partied, which would allow me to look deeper in on her health. She still needed to do her final rehab treatment, the one where she relived one of her worst memories.

We hadn't had time, and she was being propped up by Imani's spells and Mordecai's potions.

"How are you feeling?" I asked.

"Mostly like an idiot," she admitted.

"And Bautista?"

The tiger crawler walked near the back of the group along with Elle, who was scanning the sky for threats. It was clear their relationship had been damaged by recent events.

"He doesn't want me to use the orchid."

"I don't want you to use it, either. The more I think about it, the more scared I get it's a death sentence."

"Well, it's a death sentence if I *don't* use it. We jumped through a lot of hoops to get it. It's the only way out as far as I can see."

"Maybe there'll be another way. I don't want you being alone."

She shivered. "Have I ever told you... You know what, let's just get past this and then decide what we're going to do." She turned to Dong Quixote, who grunted with the effort of carrying his lance.

"Dong, that weapon is way too big for you," she said.

The elderly stripper smiled. "My dear, it's kind of you to compliment my weapon's size."

"I'm serious. You have an inventory. You can carry it in there until you need it, but I don't think you should use it at all. It's going to get you killed."

I knew most NPCs had the slot-style inventory. Something like that massive lance would take up most of his space, but at least he wouldn't have to lug it around.

He frowned. "This is the only weapon I know. At least the only weapon I know that I could find. I do miss my trusty mount."

Katia smiled at the old man. A genuine smile. "Let me guess. Your horse's name was Rocinante?"

"Horse?" he asked. "No. His name was Corcunda. Was a half mantaur. Was the most beautiful man, despite his physical flaws. I would ride him on stage, and the crowd loved it."

"Wait, what?" Katia asked. "What the heck does a half mantaur look like?"

Splash Zone grunted with laughter. "Their act was a thing of legends."

I was about to ask what he meant by "riding him on stage" but thought better of it. "What's the other weapon you were looking for?" I asked. "I have a lot in my inventory."

"A flail," he said. "The one-handed variety."

I dove into my inventory, looking at the weapons. Most were in the saferoom, but I knew he'd already had the opportunity to pick through that pile. I still had the ones I'd looted from Quan. I had several mace-like weapons, and I'd seen a few crawlers with mace-and-chain type weapons, but I didn't have exactly what he was looking for. I knew Katia had the meteor hammer from the late Popov twins, but that thing probably weighed more than the stupid lance. A single weapon caught my attention. I hadn't had time to read the description yet.

Spunky Jefferson the Enchanted Nickel Sock of the Elderly Miser.

This weapon has been upgraded twice.

This is a sapient weapon.

This is an incremental-damage weapon.

This item was originally awarded to a crawler in a Legendary You-Know-Everybody-Can-See-You-Right? Box on the fifth floor.

Almost all cultures that use money have a story about the miser. The elderly, solitary man who hoards his wealth and treats everybody around him like shit until he gets his comeuppance and then turns into a big pussy who gives all his money away.

All cultures also have the equivalent of the spunk sock that sits underneath a teenage boy's bed.

Jefferson is the life force of such a miser who pissed off the spirit who'd come to show him the errors of his ways. He was cursed to inhabit a sock once owned by a kid named Tanner. The sock itself holds several USD worth of nickels. You swing it and bonk people with it. It's unusually effective, more so than you might think.

This weapon's damage increases by 1.5% for every mob it kills that is no more than 10 levels below the current wielder's level. Current upgrade: 238% damage increase.

Increases wielder's dexterity by 10 points plus 10%

Has a 5% chance to inflict *Bonked* on any mob struck with this weapon.

All mobs killed with this weapon have a 20% chance to burst into a pile of gold coins upon death. The number of coins is equal to the (value of the items in their inventory)+ (level x 10).

Carl: Is a sapient weapon what I think it is?

Mordecai: Oh gods. Yes. They can talk, but it's usually only in the mind of the wielder. Though some do talk out loud. They tend to be quite annoying. Samantha-level annoying, but luckily they're treated as objects, and you can keep them in your inventory if they won't stop yammering. I suspect Florin's shotgun might be sapient, but he hasn't said one way or another.

What the hell, I thought and pulled it out of my inventory. It was a white tube sock with red and blue stripes at the very top. It sagged heavily. It was old, crusty, and splattered with blood.

"Let me know if this works," I said, handing the sock to Dong. "This is kinda like a flail. I guess."

"My lord, you honor me," Dong said, taking the crusty sock reverently. His lance zapped away into his inventory. He wrapped the end of the bobbing sock in his hand and gave it a test swing. It jingled with the coins within as it swished through the air. "This is a mythical weapon."

"What the hell is that?" Katia asked. "Why does it smell?"

"Yes. Yes. My name is Dong Quixote," Dong said. "Yes. Yes. Jefferson? It's nice to meet you... Yes. We are going to. I am a former adventurer turned entertainer turned mercenary... Yes. About five gold coins per dance, but more if we moved it to the cum closet... I do not know what a mutual fund is. Why?"

"Carl, who is he talking to?" Katia asked.

"The sock," I said as Dong wandered off to show his friends.

Donut: OKAY, I WILL BE BACK IN A MINUTE. DON'T START WITHOUT ME.

Carl: Do it fast.

Behind me, Donut, Imani, Britney, and Tran moved off to an alley to get into a quick fight in order to properly set up Donut's deck one last time. Just in case.

Meanwhile, everybody else was in the chat, fielding questions about the plan. The fights, for the most part, had calmed down. Osvaldo and some guy named Jurgen had gotten into a card battle, but Jurgen had been forced to use a Flee card. It turned out he'd really made good on his promise to break the stairwell, and they were now working together to clear the rubble away. They were somewhere in Brazil. It was the same for everybody else. We still had four days left, but by now, pretty much everybody with keys who could, had gone down the stairs.

I received one last message from Prepotente.

Prepotente: For what it's worth, Carl. I do hope you and Princess Donut survive this foolish endeavor. You are an oafish brute, and it's a miracle you have made it this far, but the dungeon would not be the same without you.

Carl: Thanks, Prepotente.

Prepotente: If you are successful in the first part of this, make certain you carefully read the winning conditions of the new quest. There are quite a few crawlers in Indonesia, which is the closest landmass on the opposite side of the Earth from Havana. They will be in the most danger if you do not buff that demon enough. You will need them on the next floor if you hope to win. Speaking of, Princess Donut has been keeping me apprised of how the voting is going for Faction Wars. I understand you're still at an impasse.

Carl: I will do my best. And yes, ever since everybody got stuck and the system AI refused to let them bounce, they've all been declining to vote in anything and are instead just trying to sue over and over. They're being a bunch of pansies. Meanwhile, the NPC rebels have been sabotaging them at every turn.

Prepotente: Well, I do look forward to seeing how all that turns out. Now I will be going down the stairs.

Carl: Take care of yourself.

Prepotente: Oh, and Carl?

Carl: Yes?

Prepotente: I've decided to not kill you for letting my mother hurt herself. I have been contemplating it for some time now. I've decided you were too stupid to have done anything about it anyway. Your penance will be to assist me in exacting my revenge on the true culprits.

I blinked, rereading that last part. I tried not to let the sarcasm show in my response.

Carl: That's a relief. Thanks, Pony.

The combat complete notification came, and a moment later, Donut landed on my shoulder. "It's done," she said. "Not many zombies around anymore. I think they're all running away from the demon building."

"Good, because we're here," I said, holding up my hand for everybody to stop. We came to the edge of an alley that was blocked by a pile of bicycle rickshaws that had somehow gotten all tangled up here, all with colorful awnings and handmade signs that read "Taxi." A few were adorned with Christmas decorations. I used the pile of bicycles as a hiding spot as we peered to the right, revealing a block filled with demons. It was all manner of creatures. Crabs, seals, fish, duendes, a few of those weird human-faced dog things, and more. All were zombies turned demon. All stood, or lay on the ground, docile, staring up into the hurricane of birds, none facing our direction. It was like they were patiently waiting for a train to pull up and take them all home.

I couldn't even see Amayon anymore through the mass of birds. Even as I watched, more demon birds flew in from all directions. It wasn't just birds, I realized, but bats as well. The cone of fire continued to spout into the sky out the center of the tornado. It was so hot it was hard to breathe.

It dawned on me that I hadn't heard from Sister Ines in a while. I checked, and she was still there, still near the top but within the

building. The system said she was still alive, but she clearly hadn't moved, which was unnerving.

I noted none of the demons said they were minions of Sister Ines, either. Only Amayon was under her control.

The front side of the green and tan, Y-shaped building loomed.

This was it.

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We had one hour. I lowered my voice to a whisper. "Donut, get your headset on and get ready to cast your spell. Samantha. I need you to enhance it if you can. Everybody going in the front door, get your invisibility potions ready, but not yet. Donut is casting two spells, and the first one is going to take five minutes to fully cast. As soon as she's done, I'm going to toss smoke bombs, and then we'll *Puddle Jump* to the entrance and make our way inside."

Donut had to position herself so she could actually see the group, and she plopped herself at the very edge of the alley, inside the basket of one of the taxi bikes, lowering herself so only her eyes would be noticeable. Mordecai said the spell would make her glow, so being invisible wouldn't work. If one of those demons turned and looked, they'd see her.

Imani floated up. She, too, could enhance spells.

"Is this really going to work?" Elle whispered, peering out at the mass of demons. There were thousands of them. "You said it only works on intelligent mobs, and zombies ain't too smart."

"It's demon zombies. They're intelligent," I said. I reached over and scratched Donut. "Donut seems to think the regular zombies are steering clear of this whole neighborhood. Okay, everybody. This spell takes five minutes to cast, so stay low. Ready, Donut?"

"Oh, wow," Donut said after a moment. "With my Charisma boosts, I can select the whole group out there! Even some of the

birds! And the casting is only four minutes now. I wish I still had that Charisma tiara."

"That's okay. You're good," I said. "Go."

Donut glowed as she cast *Minion Army*. We'd received the book near the end of the first floor. She had yet to cast it because it was so dangerous to use. It was a spell designed for war, and the moment she cast it, she'd be frozen and vulnerable for four minutes straight.

The spell was only level one, before the boost. It turned two percent of the enemy in the casting area against their comrades. With both Imani and Samantha enhancing the spell, that two percent should turn to about five percent. That number still seemed low to me, but both Mordecai and Doctor Bones had insisted it would create utter chaos.

A countdown timer appeared over her. **Rooted in Place** appeared. Mongo made an uncertain peep.

"It's okay," I said to the dinosaur. "She's fine."

The shimmering, golden glow around Donut increased in intensity with each passing second.

I continued to peer at the demons who remained unmoving and raised my whisper up a little. "Okay guys. As soon as it casts, all hell is going to break loose, and the assault team will move. As soon as we say the word, the rest of you need to get to work. We need you to keep them from coming up behind us, but only wade in there if it's absolutely necessary. Ranged attacks only. I'm counting on you, Splash Zone, to help keep them safe." I turned to look over my shoulder. "Also, the sluggalos... Goddamnit. Where the fuck are the sluggalos?"

"Chop, chop, bitches!" came a deafening battle cry from one street over as the entire squad of forty, hatchet-wielding, idiot slugs poured into the group of demons.

"Oh shit," Louis said. "They're doing a Leeroy..."

"Don't even say it," I growled. "Goddamnit."

"Who could've predicted that?" Imani said drily.

Combat Started.

Donut had three minutes left.

If the demons didn't kill them, I was going to do it myself. "Everyone. Protect Donut until she's done with her spell!"

The line of forty slugs slammed into the group of demons like a calvary charge. It was like watching a fast forward video of a tidal wave of snot storming a beachhead.

The demons appeared to be in a sort of stupor. None were reacting until they were actually struck by one of the slugs. If the blow didn't outright kill them, only then would they start to respond. The larger demons, like the seals, would flip back, knocking over several of their friends, who in turn would start to wake up as well. The slugs were cutting through them like a wheat thresher.

That advantage wasn't going to last long.

For now, however, it was oddly fascinating to watch. The slugs weren't all that great at fighting or killing, but they made up for it with over-the-top enthusiasm.

"At least they came from the other street," Elle said, floating next to me, watching as the others all came to stare.

"Wow, look how fast they're going," Tran said. One of the smaller slugs leaped through the air and bit directly onto the neck of a seal, but it didn't appear to actually do anything. The seal slowly started to react, like it had been asleep. Before it could do anything further, several more slugs fell on it, screaming and whooping, their hatchets slamming up and down.

"How are they even swinging those axes?" Britney asked, fascinated. "They don't even have arms."

"I've learned not to think about that sort of thing too much, and it makes everything so much easier," Elle said.

Not all of them even had weapons, but the ones that did indeed mostly wielded deadly-looking hatchets that kind of floated to the right or left of their long necks, and they'd swing up and down, like they were on a swivel. A few had other weapons, too, like knives and baseball bats covered in barbed wire. One had a cylindrical, metal mace thing attached to the end of his body, and he was spinning like a spasming dog chasing his own tail. He was hitting more of his own people than demons. It was goddamn weird.

"If we get a few thousand more of these guys, we could win the war on the first day," Louis said. "Imagine a whole battalion of those things paratrooping behind enemy lines."

Imani chuckled without humor. "Be careful what you wish for. Don't forget how Carl makes these."

The first *thrum* of a hell portal opening echoed. It reverberated across the battlefield like a plucked bass string. Followed by a second. The majority of the demons remained unmoving, and I was starting to wonder if we should've attempted a different technique to approach the building. It was too late now.

Within thirty seconds, half the slugs were gone. The demons who'd woken up were now surging toward the attackers, who seemed oblivious of the changing tide of battle.

"Sluggalos, retreat!" came the bellow from the largest one. A level 52 slug with green clown makeup and a stained ruffle around his neck.

"No," I shouted, not bothering to hide ourselves anymore. "No retreat!"

The remaining handful of slugs finally decided they wanted to save themselves and started slithering away, screaming expletives at the demons behind them, who all rushed to pursue.

They surged directly toward us.

"Not in this direction, you idiots!"

They trailed their orange slime along with a healthy smear of blood as the seals, crabs, fish, and mix of other demons finally spied us all there in the alley.

Donut had just under a minute left. Her entire form glowed, the light shining off her like a star.

"I guess it's my turn," Elle said, grumbling. "Everybody stand back. This spell has a one week cooldown, but I guess I gotta use it now. Don't know if this is going to make things better or worse."

The earth and ice fairy floated into the air. Her hands glowed blue.

"Coming in!" the lead slug cried as he slurped toward us, weaving back and forth, like a snake surging through water. The thing was almost as big as me, and I had no idea which stripper he

came out of or how it had been born of a single boil. And there were some that were an even higher level. This one's name was **Rampageous**.

He smashed through the rampart made of bicycles, sending them flying. I reached to grab the bike Donut was hiding within, but I missed. The bike went tumbling, the back passenger department smashing through Donut like she was made of steel. She remained in place, now floating a foot off the ground, but she'd taken some damage. Mongo roared in outrage.

The slug paused, looking up at Imani. "Oh hey, 313. Did you see that shit? Fucking epic!" He resumed his retreat.

I turned to face the demons as the remaining slugs, maybe six or seven of them, surged past in their hasty retreat, revealing a mass of about seventy or eighty demons moving in. Behind them, the rest remained frozen in place, undisturbed.

Elle cast *Graupel*.

"Oh shit, oh shit," Elle shouted as the blue glow around her increased in intensity. "Guys, it says it's casting more powerful than usual. Holy shit, head's up!"

A thunderclap knocked us all back as sheets of hail poured from the sky. Elle had received the spell in a loot box after our first fight with the Maestro in Grull form, way back at the end of the fourth floor. She'd only cast it once before, and that was to defeat the air quadrant in their bubble on the fifth.

Mordecai had warned that this was a war spell, meant only to be cast outside. I could now see why.

Death rained from above in a wide area in front of us. Fist-sized chunks of ice pelted down from the heavens, temporarily blocking out the burning sky. Steam and smoke filled the entire area as the storm rolled through. The black asphalt in front of the alley started to explode with each impact. Behind the approaching demons, more cries rose, but they were quickly drowned out. The ground rumbled like an earthquake.

Elle remained in place as level notifications pinged over and over above her head, settling her onto level 72. She'd risen six levels at once. It'd been a while since I'd seen something like that happen.

"It cast!" Donut cried, coming unfrozen. She hissed as she dropped to the ground. "It..." she paused, looking into the steam as the deafening hailstorm eased off. I couldn't see a damn thing, but almost all the red dots on my map had turned to X's.

Combat Complete. Deck has been reset.

"Carl, what did you do?"

"Wow," Louis said, looking up at Elle. "We should've done that in the first place."

Elle appeared to be in a daze. "What the hell? That spell is strong, but it's not usually *that* strong. It's only level five. It said it cast at level 16. I just got a bunch of achievements. Holy hell, look at my level."

"Samantha," I asked, looking for the doll head. She was just floating there, six feet off the ground. She, too, glowed with a bluish white light. "Did you do that?"

For the first time, perhaps ever, Samantha looked equally confused and concerned. She was mumbling to herself, spinning in circles. "Elle is part earth, part water mage," she said, floating past, talking to herself as she continued to rotate. "She's on the four seasons path. I... but how did that happen? I am stronger too. I didn't do that. It's the tree, I think. Or maybe. It's all there. He's opening a path through the river, the water, and the tree, the earth. It's good she's not fire yet, but maybe the prince's spell enhanced her. No. No. Gotta kill her. No, not Elle. Her mother. No, not *her* mother." She shook her head like a dog. She turned to look at me. "What just happened? Carl, did you roofie me again?"

"Again?" I asked. "Samantha, what were you just saying?"

"You need to stop gaslighting me, Carl."

Elle grunted. "Whatever the hell that was, I think it solved part of our problem. Look."

The steam had started to ease as water rushed into the alley. There was a knee-high pile of rapidly-melting ice between us and the building, and mixed in with all that ice was a field filled with the mangled corpses of demons as far as I could see. The front of the building appeared for a moment, and it looked as if it had been spared by the assault.

"Wait, so I cast that giant spell for nothing?" Donut asked. "Elle, you stole my experience!"

"I don't think so," Elle said, pointing upward. "Look!"

Donut gasped. "You're right! I just got experience for something. And again!"

The tornado of demon birds and bats remained circling the top of the building, high above. They'd apparently been out of range of the *Graupel* spell. Donut's spell had included the lower area of the bird formation, and it was clear several of them were now fighting each other. Bodies started to hail down from the sky.

We had forty minutes left.

"I don't think my spell reached the demons huddling on the ground on the far side of the building," Elle said. "We better move before they come to investigate what the hell is going on."

"Don't bother with *Puddle Jump*," I said, turning to sprint through the ice field of death. "Assault team, go!"

We turned toward the building, and we ran.

We waded through rapidly-melting slush and demon gore as we reached the front entrance to the FOCSA building, which to my surprise was actually an open air mall of some sort. Multiple businesses spread out, filled with unaware memory ghosts as the early-morning shoppers moved in and out of grocery stores and electronics shops and bakeries, all of which ringed the outer perimeter.

"There!" Li Na called, pointing at a locked, glass door. It was an entrance for the residents above the mall. I kicked it in and rushed into a brightly painted lobby, looking for the stairs. They were right there, just past an empty reception desk and a bank of elevators.

It was me, Donut, Mongo, Katia, Louis, Bautista, Li Na, Li Jun, and Samantha. Everybody else including the strippers remained outside, but they would soon come into this same lobby on my direction. They would remain here and protect our exit, in the

unlikely event we took the stairs back down to get out. Tran and Britney, who were both on Katia's squad, would also follow, but remain in the stairwell in case anybody got past them.

The sluggalos were all gone, having run back into the city. I knew if this was during the real Faction Wars, I could go into my warlord menu and force them back into line. That was something Priestly and several other cookbook authors who came before me didn't know about the *Conscript* spell.

Outside, the demon birds and bats continued to hail like rain. Donut was getting experience for each one that died, whether it was a charmed bird or not.

We pushed past the lobby toward the stairwell.

"We have to climb the stairs?" Donut asked, pointing at an open elevator. "Why don't we take the elevator?" The walls shook. "Mongo is scared of stairs."

"Are you crazy?" Katia asked.

"Well, you're crazy if you think I'm going to run up 30-something floors."

"Donut, we're taking the stairs," I said. "Everybody be on the lookout for mobs and traps."

I kicked the door to the stairwell in, and it went flying. All of this stuff was locked, and I briefly wondered how Sister Ines had gotten in here.

Everything was so hot. It was a miracle the entire place wasn't already in flames. The teal-colored paint was bubbling in some places.

"We need Elle with us," Donut grumbled. "She has that mist spell that keeps everything cool."

The demon continued to shout. The walls rumbled. The timer ticked down and down.

With about a half hour left, we reached the door to the 32nd floor. The heat rose the further we went up. A few of us were starting to

take environmental damage. Sister Ines was here, through the main door and down the hallway. This was the top floor of the regular residences. There was a service door behind us that led to another hallway and stairwell that wasn't normally used by the tenants. Everything above here was through a separate stairwell and consisted of expensive, penthouse apartments. It was on top of this block where the demon stood.

"Everyone stay here," I said. I kicked in the service door and went down the hallway in the opposite direction of Sister Ines, coming to the separate stairwell up past the penthouses and to the roof. I pulled my last automaton out of my inventory and went up this last flight of stairs. I put the small robot on the floor in front of the door to the outside. The spider automaton had both sides of a teleport trap upon it. It would walk up to the snake and bump into it, setting off the trap, but the anchor or beacon end of the trap was also atop the back of the robotic spider, so the snake wouldn't actually go anywhere. We needed it to remain in place, though it would still technically teleport. This would immediately break the demon from the shell of the snake city boss, allowing the demon to take its true form.

It would also break it out of control of Sister Ines if we absolutely had to do it this way, though in order to do this properly, we needed to kill the nun first. Both Mordecai and I feared if we didn't kill her before the demon was freed, the first thing the full-powered demon would do would be to seek revenge and torch the entire building with us still inside. If he knew she was dead, and we were the ones who did it, he would hopefully at least pause before killing us.

I held my breath and kicked out the door to the roof, revealing the snake standing right there, still as vertical as a flagpole launching fire upward. The cacophony of the birds and bats swirled all around me. Nothing acknowledged me. That was good.

"Okay," I shouted at the automaton. I had a remote control clicker in my inventory. "You stay here. As soon as I click, you go out there and bump into it! Understand?"

The tiny robot did a little hop.

I turned and returned to the others to find Li Na leaning with her head against the door.

"Robot is set," I said. "I'll send it out there the moment she's dead."

"I can hear her," Li Na said. "She's chanting."

"More poetry," Donut spit.

"Poetry sucks," Louis added.

"Okay," I whispered, cutting Samantha off before she professed even more love for Louis. "Me, Louis, Li Jun, and Bautista are going to go in. The rest of you stay here unless we need you."

"Why just the boys?" Donut demanded.

"Because we're the deckmasters," Li Na replied, pulling back from the door. "She's down the hallway. He's trying to finish the fight without forcing a card battle."

"Huh," Donut said, looking around. "Aren't the deckmasters the strongest ones in the party? Funny how that worked out."

"Everybody remember the finger-breaking trick in case she charms you," Katia added.

"I don't have any cards," Samantha grumbled. "Why do I have to stay here?"

"Because you agreed to do what I said. Now everyone shush."

I leaned against the door. In any other circumstance, I'd just toss a stick of dynamite in and be done with it, but not with a deity in the body of a city boss over our heads and thirty plus floors of building underneath us.

"She's at the end of the hall, and she hasn't moved in hours. Be ready for anything. Here we go."

I pulled my new *Nighty-Night* wand. I opened the door to reveal a glowing Sister Ines, running full tilt down the hallway directly at us, screaming "Sinner!" at the top of her lungs. She was already too close.

"Gah!" I zapped my wand, and she instantly went unconscious. She dropped and slid, coming to a stop at my feet. A two minute timer appeared above her.

Combat Started.

The notification came, but she was out. I exchanged a look with the others. Li Jun shrugged.

"I think I just shit myself," Louis said, panting. "Did you see the look in her eyes? What was that notification over her head?"

"Well, that was easy," I said. I hadn't seen the marker. Whatever it was, it was gone now. "I guess we gotta kill her."

"I'll do it," Louis said, pushing me aside. "I already have five player skulls and none of you guys do. Trust me. You want to put that off as long as possible." Before I could object, he pulled a dagger from his inventory. "Sorry cat lady. I never met you, but you need to go if we want to save everybody else." He took the knife and plunged it directly into her chest.

Sister Ines Quiteria, The Reaper of Havana, finally died.

A symbol appeared over Louis's head. I immediately recognized it. It was a god's marked for death indicator. It came in the form of a spinning squiggle, almost like that of a tornado.

We all just stared at the symbol as my heart sank.

"Uh-oh," Louis said as music started to play.

The death of the bard has angered her celestial Patron. She is coming to seek revenge.

The Goddess Ysalte has entered the realm.

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You are in the presence of a deity. The Scavenger's Daughter's eyes remain open. She fills with even more power.

Temporary effect from Ysalte: All potions you quaff or physically handle outside your inventory will turn to vinegar. They will return to a more powerful version of themselves upon her banishment.

I barely registered the notification as the music, which was strangely slow and symphonic, rose in volume. We all backed into the stairwell chamber as the corpse of Sister Ines dissolved and turned into that of the level-250 goddess.

Goddess of Hopelessness and Insanity Ysalte. Level 250.

This goddess is sponsored by Pontifex Shine of the Nebular Balance.

Warning: This sponsor is *not* currently inhabiting the shell of this deity. She will speak and react as per her regular nature. Considering who this is, that's some bad fucking news for you guys.

Warning: This is a deity. She is invulnerable on this floor.

This goddess has been temporarily summoned to this location due to a special boss battle event and will return to the Ascendency upon completion of the event.

The earliest citizens of Larracos always worshipped Ysalte, which is fitting. She hasn't always been considered the Goddess of Hopelessness and Insanity. First it was of

the Dirt. Then it was of Tears. It's a recent thing that they started calling her something else. The Downward Spiral. The Vinegar Bitch.

Her downfall mirrors that of the citizens of Larracos, who have embraced the deity in all her forms.

That's what happens when everything you know is upended, and everything is taken from you. First they vilify you. Then they separate you. Then they blame you for what they're doing to you. Then they hunt you. It's the step after that which is important.

The one where they start to fear you.

Ysalte has a special place in her heart for the outcasts, for those whose minds are being devoured by the world around them. She takes no new worshippers, beyond the citizens of Larracos. But she is known to be a great patron of the arts and is one of the few deities who will sponsor a bard or a performer. She asks nothing in return, though occasionally her gifts are more than what they seem, and some may even carry a curse.

The story of this goddess, like that of many of her kind, is long and a little sad. At this point, how it began isn't nearly as important as how it will end. She is half-sister and niece to her former lover, Taranis. Threatened with the Nothing by Apito, she fled to Sheol. She has since returned to the Halls of Ascendency, where she is feared and reviled by all.

She is not considered someone who wishes to lead, which makes her a dangerous and cunning contender for the Ascendent throne.

The deity appeared in the form of a regular sized, young-faced, female dwarf carrying a pickaxe, which was not what I was expecting from someone with such a name. She smiled upon us, almost gently. She wore a helmet with a candle atop it, but the candle sparked, like that of a dynamite stick, reminding me of the goblin bomb bards. Her face occasionally flickered, like a bad television screen. And in those moments of static, her mouth turned to that of a scream, though no such sound came out.

She turned her attention to Louis, who still held the knife in his hand. He stupidly dropped it to the floor and held up his hands like it was a stick up.

"You killed my bard," she said to him. Her voice was soft, sweet, musical. She did not have the Scottish lilt of most of the dwarves we'd met so far. This was more French than anything. As she spoke, she clinked her pickaxe gently against the floor. Cracks started to form. A memory ghost walked out of one of the apartments and strolled past, oblivious.

"She was asleep, and you killed her. Her mind is finally at ease, which is a blessing, but I was not done with her yet, and for that you must suffer."

Samantha appeared, floating between Ysalte and Louis, who'd backed all the way to the wall of the stairwell. Her voice was filled with fake cheer. "Ysalte! Honey! We haven't seen each other in so long! How are you? What's new? I *must* invite you to my bachelorette party. How's the child?"

Samantha: LOUIS YOU GOTTA RUN BECAUSE THIS BITCH IS GONNA MELT YOUR BEAUTIFUL ASS INTO BUBBLING AND STICKY OATMEAL.

"Ysalte!" came the cry from above. "Release me!"

"Psamathe, is that you?" Ysalte asked, ignoring the demon above us. "You dare show yourself to me after what you did?"

Carl: Louis, do what she says. Get the fuck out of here. Run.

The music remained unchanged, but it was starting to get punctuated by a distant chug-chug of a distorted guitar. Wide-eyed Louis started to slowly descend down the stairs, his hands still up.

"Uh, what did I do?" Samantha asked, suddenly defensive. "Wait, are you still mad about the thing with the reverse hedgehog? Because that was like a really long time ago. And everyone else at the party thought it was funny. Well, except the hedgehog I guess. And you, apparently. But it's not my fault if you can't take a joke about how ugly your child is."

The goddess roared and swung her pickaxe directly at Samantha's face.

Even a pickaxe swung by a god was not enough to injure the sex doll's head. It bounced right off her like she'd tried to pierce an impenetrable kick ball. The look on the goddess's face was one of utter surprise as she started to fly backward, feet up in the air.

At that moment, everything froze. I froze. Samantha froze. The Vinegar Bitch froze, floating off the ground.

The ceiling at the end of the hall collapsed, and the coils of the *Madre de Aguas* snake slurped into the hall from above, suddenly and violently. It was like it had tipped off the main roof and landed above us.

Ysalte's pickaxe was stopped in midair, in the process of flying from the goddess's hands. Behind her, the snake continued to cascade into the hallway, despite being wider than the hall itself. Concrete and metal vaporized as the city boss slammed into the floor. The ceiling over our heads collapsed, but fell to the sides, as if it was being peeled like a banana, miraculously not hitting anybody. After just a few seconds, the ceiling above us was just gone. The walls all around us also fell away, revealing multiple memory ghosts in their apartments without walls, going about their lives.

Everything but the floor beneath our feet was suddenly gone, almost like we'd been transferred to the roof.

Elle: Holy hell, what's going on up there?

We were now outside, yet we remained frozen. The swirl of demon birds and bats continued to spin, now all around us. The gout of flame was gone. My heart sank at the sight of it.

The collapsing snake had temporarily stopped on our floor-turned-roof, coming to a halt right behind the frozen goddess. The city boss had multiple notifications over its massive head, including **Enslaved**. It paused before its distant tail started slipping over the far edge, sliding away like an anchor chain, yanking the whole snake off the side. The demon hissed as it was pulled away.

I caught movement just above the snake, rapidly catching up. It was the little automaton I'd set up atop the stairs, also falling, shining like a shooting star. The small robot, which should have been destroyed along with the rest of the top floor, spun through the air as it "miraculously" landed atop the falling snake.

Oh, come on. I thought as the whole thing blinked and reappeared in a quick teleportation.

Ysalte had been summoned while we were in a regular hallway, and because of that, she entered this world as a regular-sized dwarf. When Amayon dropped the shell of the snake, he was exposed to the open air.

As a result, he took on a much larger size than that of the dwarf.

The whole world stuttered as if we were in a car crash. It was the sound of the demon's four feet slamming to the ground far below.

The full-power version of Amayon stood to his full height, feet on the street, standing before the building with the lopped-off top, facing us.

We stood upon the 32nd floor-turned-roof of the building, and we were about equal with the chest of the demon who now glared down at us.

His body appeared to be that of a centaur-like quadruped, but I couldn't see the legs from our position. His humanoid chest rose above our platform, cleaving through the round of birds and bats, which moved back to let him within.

From the waist up, he had a similar appearance to that of the Pleasure demons, but his red skin bubbled like it was made of lava with black, swirling patches. He looked similar to Emberus in that way, though his head was that of a massive, demonic deer-like creature with four, steaming horns. Two that rose straight up, piercing the clouds, and two that curved downward like tusks. His mouth was beaked at the very end, almost dinosaur like. He roared, and the interior of his beak was nothing but teeth and fire.

The **Enslaved** marker remained over his head.

Fuck.

He had not been freed from Ysalte's grip by the teleportation. We'd only managed to make him more powerful.

The moment he finished his scream, he too, froze, leaving everyone in the area motionless as the heavy metal chugga-chugga

took over the symphonic music and rose in volume. Imani, from way down on the first floor of the building, sent a panicked message.

Imani: Oh shit, we've been frozen also. We've been added to the battle!

For a moment, nothing changed, as if the AI was trying to figure out what to do next.

The timer blinked and whiffed out. A new timer appeared. It was at ten minutes.

Quest Complete. Where the Sidewalk Ends.

Please wait…

New Quest. The Missing Piece.

This is a hybrid world quest. All crawlers who are dumb enough to still be stuck on the eighth floor have been added to this quest.

Every remaining crawler within the region of Cuba has been designated as host of this quest.

This quest contains two parts. Part one is called "The Big O."

Only those in the Cuba region may participate in part one. If they are successful, part two will initiate and will include everyone else. In the meantime, this upcoming battle will air on all screens throughout the dungeon for those outside the Cuba region.

The demon Amayon, prince of Sheol, is stuck in this world, banished here by one of his three brothers.

Ysalte, his former girlfriend and mother of his child, has also stepped into the realm, and she has seized control of the demon, just as he once seized her when she tried to flee their relationship.

He wants to go home.

She wants to keep him under her control and bring him with her to the Ascendency, where he will act as her retainer until the Ascendency battles are complete. While all

the other gods have been waking up long-forgotten deities to assist them, the Vinegar Bitch knows having a prince of hell at her side will help ensure her claim to the throne.

She will return to the realm in ten minutes. If Amayon remains fully under her control when that timer is complete, they will both teleport away to the Ascendency.

If that happens, everyone without keys is dead. There will be no more chances.

In order to break free from Ysalte's grip, Amayon must begin the casting of his spell to return home. In order to do that, he must be strong enough to cast it. How will he be given strength? Maybe you should ask him.

If he has broken free from her control by the time the timer runs out, then she will leave, and he will remain and will eventually travel home.

The stronger he is by the time the timer runs out, the bigger the spell will have to be. If he is at full power, that spell will cover the entire world, and everyone within it will have hope to make it to the next floor.

Oh, and one last thing.

This is the eighth floor after all.

Clank, clank, clank, clank.

Four cards appeared in front of the still-frozen, still-flying-backwards dwarf. Each one slammed into place like the blow of a hammer.

"What the hell. Really?" I asked. "Fucking really?"

Clank, clank, clank, clank.

Four more appeared in front of the giant demon. Each of these cards was the size of a garage door.

Amayon has a short deck with six totems. He will play each totem as they appear. He won't even begin to attempt to flee until all his totems are dead. As for Ysalte? She is armed with a slightly enhanced version of the deck of the late Sister Ines. You can't kill the god, so you have to hold out.

The world unfroze, and the goddess continued to fly back. She hit the ground and skid. She pulled herself to her feet about 100 feet away and tried to cast a spell at us, but nothing happened. She growled in frustration before her eyes finally focused on the cards floating before her.

Let the final card battle begin.

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A GRAPHIC APPEARED AT THE BOTTOM CORNER OF THE INTERFACE. THIS WAS something new. It showed all the team names. As I watched, a rapid-fire string of miniature, face-down cards appeared after each team with a *blip, blip, blip*. It was a counter showing how many cards each team had. Donut had 21 cards, I knew. Katia and Li Na both had 20. Imani had 15, and Elle carried 22. The first six cards of each deck were highlighted with a glow, presumably indicating the totem cards.

At the bottom, separated by a space was the name **Ysalte**, followed by a row of about 17 cards.

Amayon only had six. All totems.

Our goal was as difficult as it was clear. We had to play offense with Amayon and kill his six totems as soon as possible, which would allow us to talk to him. With the Vinegar Bitch, we had to play defense. We couldn't hurt the goddess directly, but the moment she ran out of cards, she'd be able to nuke us from orbit with one of her spells. We had to keep her deck from running dry for the next ten minutes.

This was going to be a tough balance, even at five versus two.

Donut appeared terrified, but she was putting on a brave, determined face. She'd switched back to her sailor cap. It used to look ridiculous on her, especially with her sunglasses, but it seemed more appropriate now somehow, in a way I couldn't explain.

She hadn't had time to pull her potions out, and if I pulled my own, they'd turn to vinegar. I pulled a few out anyway, remembering what the debuff said, and I tucked them on the ground behind her.

"You got this?" I asked as I quickly worked.

"I am the current reigning champion Persian cat in the galaxy. I have received more trophies and purple ribbons than anyone alive. And most importantly, I am a warlord of the Princess Posse Faction Wars team." She turned to regard me. "Yes, Carl. I got this."

I gave her a pat and faced our opponents.

The goddess and the demon lord she'd enslaved.

And

Here

We

Goooo!

The ten minute timer started to tick down.

Li Na, Katia, and Donut spread out behind us as their decks appeared in front of them. Mongo remained near Donut, as he'd been trained. The music with the heavy guitars rose in volume, rattling my teeth. Me, Li Jun, and Bautista spread out in a half circle as we rapidly talked strategy. Louis was currently hauling ass down the stairs and would meet up with Britney and Tran in the stairwell, and the three of them would continue back to the lobby. That marked for death symbol was a major problem for him, but as long as we kept the goddess occupied for the next ten minutes, we could push that off to another time.

Samantha remained floating in the room, looking about.

Elle: Oh fuck me. More demons are coming. Trying to come in through the door down here. Your boss battle forced me and Imani to summon our damn decks, so we can't cast spells. Doing our best to hold them back, but we might be running up toward you.

We had to watch where we stepped. Multiple holes and cracks dotted the flooring, and each time Amayon so much as shifted his position, new fractures appeared. This whole building was going to come down.

For just a moment, nobody moved. We all looked at each other, each one of us sizing everyone up.

And then, it was on.

Chaos erupted all around me. So much happened at once, it was difficult to clock it all.

Li Na tossed out the first totem, which exploded out onto the ground in a flourish of snow and red sparkles.

Get ready to lose your mind! It's Xing Tian!

"Oh my god, what is that?" Donut cried as she tossed a card of her own out.

Li Na's Xing Tian totem was a level 80 creature that was a human without a head. The large, shirtless man had a wide, cackling face built into the flesh of his hairless chest. He carried an axe in one hand and a large shield in the other.

"Hold and block!" Li Na shouted at her card, who gibbered something back at her.

Donut's first move was **The Thief** card, which she cast on Amayon just as he swept out his own first totem. A card—not the one he was attempting to summon—flicked up out of his deck, resized itself, and landed in Donut's hand.

"Holy wow, look at that card!" she called out.

Amayon's totem landed with a heavy crash. It was a flaming rock creature. I didn't have time to read the description before it fell through the floor and tumbled away.

Katia and Ysalte also made their first moves, both summoning totems at the same time. Katia summoned her scary-ass bird creature, followed by a consumable utility card called **Timeless**, which would keep the bird summoned forever.

The bird landed upon Katia's shoulder with a fanfare that looked like colorful, burning embers and dancing baby pacifiers wafting into the sky, which would be odd as fuck if I'd really had time to think about it. The totem was a large, cat-sized raven, but its head was a skull of an infant human. The skull was punctuated with little holes filled with teeth. I'd once seen an infant skull before and knew that's what they really looked like, but seeing it in real life was terrifying.

Annie – Útburður. Level 80.

Katia leaned in and started whispering instructions to the totem.

The Vinegar Bitch's summon was a familiar one. It was the first totem I'd helped Sister Ines' team capture. Yago the monk seal. He was the same thing as our Geraldo.

This version of Yago, however, was different. He was now 25 levels higher than his regular 70. He crackled with obsidian-colored energy and was wider than he'd been before.

Yago – Monk Seal of the Earth Order. Level 95.

He'd been buffed with some sort of extra Earth magic. His headband had changed, and it was black with a red swirl.

"Oh, oh yeah, a bunch of bitches to fight." He pointed a flipper at me and did a hop, waving his fins with karate noises. "Time for a rematch. Time for Yago to go to poundtown on your ass!" He started flipping directly toward me, shouting "Yip, yip, yip!"

Crash! The seal crunched right through the floor, and he also plummeted away, screaming.

Ysalte grunted with annoyance. "You! Seal! Find him!" She bellowed down into the hole in the floor. "Find that one with my mark upon him, and kill him!"

Donut: LOUIS LOOK OUT A MONK SEAL IS COMING FOR YOU.

Elle: Come to us, Louis. We're coming up the stairs!

Louis: A rock monster thing that looks like Chris is fighting us already! It's level 120! It crashed through the ceiling!

Imani: We're coming!

As that was happening, three more totems appeared. These were all from Amayon. He only had totem cards, and he was emptying his hand as rapidly as he could. The ground rumbled as they appeared all at once in a cacophony of overlapping explosions and fanfares. Two were the same thing, though they had different names. The third was entirely different.

Gallu – Level 100 Inferior Demon.

Mavet – Level 100 Inferior Demon.

These first two were tall, fat, winged demons with wide, evil faces, each carrying a whip and covered with leather and chains like

they'd just stepped out of an underworld biker bar. They were small, male versions of that Slit demon who'd attacked us on the fifth floor.

Samantha screamed at the sight of them and flew across the room directly for them.

Gallu the demon reacted with surprising speed. He cracked his whip, and Samantha spun off, screaming about his mother as she ricocheted away.

The third newcomer was a ridiculously, over-the-top sexy looking, human-like, female demon with outrageously large breasts. Not quite Odette-sized breasts, but pretty close. They floated on their own in front of her, each defying physics and gravity.

Naamah – Level 120 Succubus Nest Queen.

"Hello, boys," the succubus called after Samantha's screaming waned. She waved across the hallway at us. She pointed at me. "I choose you, stud. Let's dance."

"These are not true representations," Amayon rumbled, his voice physically painful to listen to. He didn't have any cards in his hand. He would automatically draw his last one soon.

To my right, Bautista was spamming stuffed animals everywhere, ripping off tags left and right as the creatures flew from his hands. Several were the grulke frogs, but armored versions I'd never seen before along with other monsters, from trolls to small dragons to other things covered with claws and teeth. Bautista shouted, and they, as one, all turned on the twin inferior demons. As they surged toward the monsters, a few fell through more holes in the floor, screaming as they disappeared.

Louis: Tran is down! Britney and I are running! Oh god. It's the seal. He's here.

Tran: I'm not dead! I fell down to a different level. My wheelchair is sparking. I think it's going to blow! I'm stuck!

Imani: We're almost there. There are demons surging up the stairs behind us.

I pulled a banger sphere and decked the succubus as hard as I could. The metal ball bounced off her head with a *splatch*. It barely did any damage. She grinned at me with a mouth full of sharp teeth.

"Someone who likes it rough. I can respect that."

She hissed and lunged, flying across the area at ridiculous speed, like she'd been launched from a gun.

I cast *Talon Strike* on my foot and did a snap kick as hard as I could at the speeding creature. She *oofed* with pain, and she took some damage, but it didn't stop her momentum as she slammed into me. My health flashed as she hit me with the force of a bus.

We hit the ground and slid, tumbling as we flew between Katia and Donut, barely missing the hole in the ground for the stairs, and sliding into the area that had once been the service hallway.

The creature had vampire fangs, and she moved to chomp directly on my neck just as I activated my new tech-based shield. She bit down and cried out, her teeth sparking and then shattering like broken crockery against my neck. She screeched in outrage as I cast *Wisp Armor* on myself, attempting to shore up my shield. I instinctively clicked on a healing potion without even thinking.

A terrible taste flooded my mouth.

A **Kombucha!** Achievement flashed as I remembered the vinegar debuff.

Normally potions had no taste when used via inventory, but food items did.

I cast *Heal* instead.

I was on my back with the pissed-off, shrieking succubus pinning me down. She grasped onto both arms. Her hands sparkled where they came in contact with my flesh. My shield was rapidly losing power. The demon wasn't huge, but she was clearly stronger than me. She bodily picked me up and slammed me down against the floor over and over again, squealing angrily.

A tentacle wrapped around the woman's waist and yanked, pulling her up off the ground. I gasped in pain as my shield sparked out, and her nails ripped into the flesh on my arms. She was dragged away into a fulminating, gorilla-sized shadow of black clouds with dark tentacles ripping in and out of it. The demon woman was pulled into the cloud. She let out a scream from within the darkness, followed by a spray of blood.

I started scrambling back until I saw the monster had our flag over it. This was the card Donut had stolen from the demon.

Banjo – Level 120 Hell Scrub.

I jumped back to my feet and returned to the fray, dodging holes in the ground.

Li Jun and a human I'd never seen before were fighting side-by-side, battling a ghommid strongman. The human was a **Legendary Master**, and it was one of Li Na's cards. She kept tossing speed buffs onto him.

The ghommid was just a regular NPC that Sister Ines' must have flagged, but he had an **Oak Champion** buff after his name. Li Jun was literally walking on air, dancing and kicking, trading blows. Alongside him, the legendary master was a blur. In moments, the ghost creature was down.

I growled in frustration. We needed to keep Ysalte's totems alive. On my interface, she was down to just ten cards, and barely a minute had passed. She was discarding her own cards when she could.

Katia had a female, spoon-wielding troll I'd seen before summoned along with a pair of twin boys, also trolls, dancing on top of the two Inferior Demons who were half dead, surrounded by stuffing as Bautista continued to toss out an alarming number of his beanie animals. The entire group of them tumbled away as the floor broke. A moment later, a *plink, plink* indicated the two demons were dead.

Amayon's row on my interface now only contained two cards. One was facing upward, showing the rock monster was still active. The demon had the last card in his hand, and it appeared as if he was struggling to play it. He was growling in frustration, but his claw wouldn't move. It was Ysalte, I realized. She was trying to keep him from playing his final card. She knew he'd be free to cast his spells once he was out.

"Donut" I called.

"I'm on it!" Donut shouted. "Watch this!"

Donut tossed out **Force Discard**. Amayon's last card disappeared with a **Poof!** graphic.

"Ha! Suck it, bitch!" Donut shrieked as the kaiju-sized demon let out a satisfied grunt.

That was it. He was out of cards. We just needed to kill that first totem he summoned.

Carl: Does anyone know where the rock creature is? He's the last piece!

Yoink!

"Hey!" Donut cried.

Ysalte had tossed out a card, a unique mystic called **Raid Stash**.

Five cards came flying at the goddess and entered her hand. It was a card from each of us, including Imani and Elle downstairs.

Multiple people started shouting at once.

"Oh, crap!" Katia called. "They stole an inactive card from my inventory! It's one of the totems we were forced to take after the key boss fight! Oh shit, it's Tran's mom!"

"Watch out," Li Na yelled at her brother. "She has the Zhe totem!"

Elle: Guys, holy shit. Head's up. She stole a totem from me and some junk card from Imani.

"Carl, Carl!" Donut called. "She took the ..."

Ysalte tossed four totems out at once. Three humans and a sasquatch thing. All four crash-landed in front of us, one by one. These were all the stolen totems.

The sasquatch along with one of the humans—a large, elderly Asian woman—both roared and jumped down through the same hole in the floor that Yago caused. The other human, also an Asian woman, but much younger, said something to Li Jun, who screamed in outrage. "You're not my cousin!"

I only had eyes for the fourth one. This was the card she'd stolen from Donut's inactive deck. The only inactive totem Donut currently carried.

Leveled-Up Frank. Sober Edition. Level 100 Night Elf Blood Assassin.

"Hello, Carl," Frank Q called as the floor rumbled. "Fancy seeing you here. Where's your ring?"

"Go get him, Mr. Whatever you are!" Donut squealed at the cloud of tentacles. The Hell Scrub made a clicking noise and started floating toward Frank, who pulled a red sword from over his shoulder.

Both Katia and Li Na tossed more cards out as Donut also summoned Geraldo the monk seal, who crashed onto the floor and almost fell through.

A distant explosion shook the entire building. One of Katia's trolls cried out and plummeted away.

Amayon let out a whoop of triumph, and he lifted his massive arms into the sky. In doing so, he knocked a corner of the building, causing everything to rumble even more.

This building is going to collapse.

Tran: I got the rock bastard! My wheelchair blew a hole in his chest! I need a healer.

Imani: Where are you? The floors are collapsing in on each other!

The world froze. The countdown stopped.

What the hell?

We had seven minutes and 27 seconds left. Had it really only been two and a half minutes?

I took in the scene. Frank was in the process of slicing his sword through a tentacle. The young woman—Zhe, who was apparently Li Jun and Li Na's cousin—had a bloody, squirting heart in her goddamned hand. She'd just pulled it from the chest of the Legendary Master. It appeared the master totem had gotten a memory ghost's shirt stuck on his face, which had momentarily blinded him. Li Jun was in the midst of a backflip. Katia's skull-headed bird thing was flying through the air, aimed directly at the Frank totem. Li Na's Xing Tian was about to time out already.

Samantha was finally on her way back, her glowing form just visible as she rocketed toward us. She was off the northeast edge of the building, perilously close to the massive demon, having blown a hole through the tornado of demon birds. She'd been tossed so far away, she had seaweed in her hair.

Ysalte was in the middle of tossing something else out. She couldn't move, but she was like us, conscious of the pause. She started to shout insults.

And behind it all loomed Amayon, who had a new look of outrage on his demon face.

Quest Update! The Missing Piece Part One!

Demon Lord Amayon is trapped! The very demon eviction event that allowed him to come to this realm is his undoing! Now that he's taken his true form, he does not have enough power to cast his spell! And what's worse, there aren't enough souls left in this dying world to even trigger the spell anyway. Everyone and everything is mostly dead!

If only there was a way to replace the souls that had triggered the event in the first place.

The *same* type of souls. The same flavor of chowder, so to speak.

Refill the world with souls. Then power Amayon up before the timer runs dry.

Oh, and the demon may attempt to cast an alternative spell before you buff him up. You'll either have to stop him or convince him to wait.

Match resumes in thirty seconds.

"What the hell does that mean?" Katia shouted from behind me.

"Are you kidding me?" I shouted. "Are you fucking kidding me?"

"Oh my god, Carl," Donut yelled. I couldn't turn my neck to see her. "Does that mean what I think it means?"

"Is he in your hand?" I asked.

"No!"

"What about Midnight Express?"

"Yes, I have it!"

"What is this witchery!" Amayon shouted. "Release me!"

I took in a deep breath as I eyed the frozen form of Samantha. "Okay. Everyone. You're gonna have to talk Amayon into waiting for a few minutes. I'm going to run the moment we unfreeze. Donut, message me when you pull him and then cast the Midnight Express card!"

"Run? What do you mean run, Carl? We're on the roof of a skyscraper! Where are you running?"

"Samantha!" I shouted as loud as I could. "I'm coming to you!"

"I can't move!" Samantha shrieked back. "I am frozen!"

The timer was about to resume.

This was going to suck. “Here I come! Don’t let me fall!”

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The world unfroze, and I bolted toward the edge of the building as the battle continued all around me. I jumped past the Zhe totem as she started to devour the heart she'd just pulled from the chest of the legendary master totem. Samantha zoomed back toward me at full speed, screaming as I ran and leapt off the edge of the building. I caught her in midair like a goalie stopping a penalty kick. I pulled her to my chest as we both dropped like a rock. Demon seagulls and bats, who'd been keeping their distance, shrieked and moved to pursue. We plummeted past a flying, humanoid, bat thing totem sporting Elle's flag, which moved to attack the demons.

"Carl, what are you doing!" Samantha shrieked as we slowed our descent. She clearly struggled to carry me. She tried to struggle out of my grip as we approached the ground. The sensation was like trying to float atop the waves while clutching a slippery ball between myself and the ocean.

I slipped as Samantha bobbed up, and I grabbed onto her pigtails, like I was holding the handlebars of a bicycle. "To the ground, but stay with me! I need to run between the demon's legs!"

"I am not a carnival ride, Carl! I will not... Okay, that does sound like fun. Hang on."

We hit the ground, landing right around the corner from the gigantic, kaiju of a demon, who was still trying to cast his spell.

His centaur body was not like that of a horse, but almost pig-like. His legs were shorter than I was expecting, and each of his cloven-

hooved feet were at least ten feet tall. This close, he stank of a scorched barnyard animal. He stomped in frustration, shattering concrete. Rock rained off the side of the building.

I still clutched onto Samantha as I turned and ran alongside the building and angled myself between his legs. His hair-covered body writhed over me as he continued to shout. Above, the roar of a new beast filled the air.

Donut: LI-NA JUST SUMMONED A DRAGON!

Black, stinking liquid rained down on us as I ran between his legs. It burned every time it hit skin. I didn't know what the hell it was, and I didn't want to know. Samantha squealed with delight.

"We gotta go to the beach!" I cried as we came out the back of the demon, who didn't see or probably care about my passing underneath him. The ocean was just a block over, but I didn't have time to run. "Fly! Fly!"

"You're too fat, Carl! Louis and Donut need our help!"

"I believe in you! Go!"

Samantha grumbled as she zipped off again, me clutching onto her. She struggled to pull me up, but she managed to get me about a foot off the ground, complaining the whole time. She flew at a breakneck speed, passing between buildings, across the freeway, and we approached the beach.

Donut: I HAVE HIM!

Carl: How long does the Midnight Express card last?

Donut: THREE MINUTES!

Jesus.

Carl: Wait ten seconds then play it!

I glanced at the clock. Five minutes thirty seconds left. I let go of Samantha's pigtails and dropped to the rocky beach, which was covered with corpses. I rolled and jumped to my feet, racing into the water. I didn't see any zombies or demons. It was just dead fish and birds and seals and crabs as far as I could see. Mixed in were memory ghosts, walking along the beach, looking out into the ocean, enjoying the day after Christmas.

A new achievement appeared as Donut played **Midnight Express.**

It was one of the two consumable cards Ren gave me before she died.

Tag! You're it! For the next three minutes, you are now the deckmaster!

The cards appeared in front of me, floating huge in the air. One of the four slots was taken by the Midnight Express card, which would remain persistent until it timed out. The card featured a pair of tag-team wrestlers. Behind me atop the building, Donut was now temporarily unfettered, which would allow her to cast her spells and use her inventory while I had control of the deck.

"Samantha," I shouted. "Go back! Fast! Enhance Donut's spells!"

She didn't argue as she zipped off, leaving me alone on the beach.

The other three cards in my hand were **Golden Combo**, which would allow me to temporarily combine two totems, a **Time Extend**, and the card I was looking for.

Raul the crab.

I flipped the card, and Raul flew into the water with his typical fanfare. Far behind us, Amayon rumbled again.

"Daddy Master Carl! I am honored to be of service! I am ready! Ready to..." Raul trailed off as he looked upon the carnage. The crab turned in a circle, clearly bewildered. "What happened here?"

"No time to explain, but you gotta do your thing. Do it now!"

"Uh, what thing is that?" he asked, still looking about. "Everybody is dead. By the heavens. How is this so?"

A new card appeared in my hand. It was **Alpha Male Carl.** I hadn't wanted to put him in the deck, but it was either him or Frank, and Donut decided he would be the better choice. We'd been a totem short after Donut used **Golden Combo** to temporarily fuse Lazarus with Skylar Spinach and then added Ren's other consumable card, **Glow Up**, to make the combination permanent. The stronger versions of Asojano and Uzi Jesus made it a great, powerful combo, especially since we'd be allowed to bring a single card with us onto the next floor.

But none of that mattered right now.

Right now, I needed to get this damn crab to jerk off into the ocean.

The whole demon eviction event had happened, at least according to the announcer guys, because the AI had made the unusual decision to consider crab sperm a mob. Because so many had "died," it broke Sheol, and it kicked off the event. Now, Amayon's take-me-home spell required a metric fuckton of souls to pay the passage or whatever, and the AI was sticking to its original rule. It had set us up for this bullshit. It was clear it had to be a crab. I just had to convince him to do it.

"Listen," I said to the crab. "We only have a few minutes. This is how you move to the golden heavenly throne or whatever you call it. Your people are dead. You are the last one left. The eggs are still out there. You can save your people, but you have to do it now." I swallowed. "You have to fertilize the eggs. Go!"

He just looked at me. "Now? Here?"

"Yes!"

An explosion echoed from the building.

"Glorious Master Carl... That's a lot of pressure to perform."

"You have been training for this your whole life, Raul. This is how you save everybody. Go into the water and do it. Fast!"

"But why does it have to be right now?"

"Look. Do you see that giant demon over there? He's going to destroy this world if he doesn't go home. He needs a few million souls to go home. So some of your little guys will have to make a sacrifice, but the rest will be fine I'm sure. You have like a billion of them, right?"

"My hallowed seed consists of the essence of my holy ancestors. Ancestors who must fight for another chance to rise to the next stage."

I tried not to let my frustrated panic edge into my voice. "That just means the survivors will be the most worthy. Right?"

Donut: THE GODDESS LADY SUMMONED A WEIRD VERSION OF PAZ BUT KATIA PUT HIM IN A SHIELD JAIL THING, AND HE'S PROBABLY GONNA TIME OUT! ELLE AND

BRITNEY AND LOUIS ARE BACK UP HERE, BUT IMANI AND TRAN ARE TRAPPED.

"Okay," Raul said uncertainly, moving sideways off into the water so he was half submerged. The waves lapped all around him, washing more corpses up on the shore. The entire beach stank like death. "But don't watch."

"I won't look. Just let me know when you're done."

Raul was only half the equation. I needed to power Amayon up. I was going to have to use Alpha Carl to help me. I turned my back and summoned the totem. It hit the ground, which started to rumble with his entrance sequence.

"I can't do it," Raul called from behind me. "I need a baby seal."

I turned at that. "What the fuck, Raul?"

He waved his pincer. "No, not like that. The seals hang out near the eggs. It's like an automatic reaction. We've been programmed to perform when we see baby seals."

It was no wonder the monk seals wanted these guys all dead.

The ridiculous, red, white, and blue entrance sequence for Alpha Carl exploded across the beach. I tried to tune it out while I dealt with Raul.

"Look, over there. There's a pile of dead baby seals. Try that."

"Hello, little brother!" Alpha Male Carl called. "Whoa. What happened here?"

This version of Alpha Carl was much friendlier now that I'd been the one to summon him. A little too friendly. I glanced at the clock. This wasn't going to work. Three minutes before the whole quest was done. One minute left before Donut took back control. I would still be stuck here when the Midnight Express card expired, and so would the two totems, but we were running out of time.

"You look upset. Do you want to talk about it?" Alpha Carl asked.

Donut: THE SATAN DEMON GUY WON'T LISTEN TO ME. HE'S GOING TO CAST ANOTHER SPELL. HE AND THE VINEGAR LADY ARE YELLING AT EACH OTHER. I THINK THEY MIGHT ACTUALLY BE IN LOVE. SHE'S ALMOST OUT OF CARDS. SAMANTHA AND I ARE GONNA HAVE TO DO SOMETHING DRASTIC.

"Okay," I said to Alpha Carl, who was looking at me with sincere concern. "I need you to almost kill me. I can do it to myself if I have to, but I'd prefer if someone else does it so they can stop at the right moment. You have to beat me to an inch of my life and then stop."

Behind me, Raul started to grunt. "Yeah. That's right. Look at you all dead and shit. That's right you fuzzy little seals."

"You want me to beat you up?" Alpha Carl asked. "I'm not going to do that. I love you, little brother. Maybe we should hug it out."

I tossed the time extend onto Raul just as the Midnight Express timer ended. The cards in front of me disappeared.

Tag! You are no longer the deckmaster!

Two minutes and four seconds left.

"Gah!" Amayon bellowed in the distance. I looked over to see the giant demon punch himself in the face. "I will destroy... Gah!" He did it again.

Donut: I CAST *WHY ARE YOU HITTING YOURSELF* ON SATAN!

Samantha: OKAY THAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN A MISTAKE. I THINK HE IS BIG MAD.

Alpha Carl put his hand on my shoulder. "You don't need to hurt yourself to feel loved. Despite all of your failings..." He paused, looking over my shoulder. "All right. You're gonna have to explain what that crab is doing."

"He's saving the world," I said through gritted teeth. "But he needs motivation."

Katia: Guys, Annie is down, and I'm out of cards. Daniel, on me. I'm going to try to stop the goddess.

Imani: I found Tran, but we're surrounded by demons!

"It's not working. I can feel you judging me," Raul called.

"Stop being a little bitch and get the job done!" Alpha Carl barked.

"Don't yell at me!" Raul snapped back. "I'd like to see you perform under this sort of pressure. Wait, wait, never mind. Yell at me again. I think it's helping."

"I don't know what the hell you're doing, you weird little armored sea rat, but you need to do what my brother says, or I'm gonna come over there and break you in half."

"Yes. That's it. That's it," Raul said. "It's happening. I'm ascending! I'm ascending past the cloud rank and into the golden heavenly light! No more kowtowing. No more kowtowing!"

"You two, keep going," I said as I dashed away. One minute left. I was going to have to do this the hard way. There were plenty of ways for me to hurt myself, but I could only think of one that would also return me to the main battle.

Carl: Donut. I'm coming back right now.

I paused. *Shit. This is going to hurt*. Forty-five seconds.

Carl: SAMANTHA. DON'T LET ME OUT UNTIL THE FIRE FLARES.

Samantha: WHAT? WHY ARE YOU YELLING? I'M HAVING A TUSSLE!

Behind me, Raul let out a loud, satisfied groan as Alpha Carl continued to berate him. At the same moment, I pulled the teleport trap trigger out of my inventory, and I stepped into it.

I teleported to the trap.

The trap I left inside of Samantha.

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I LANDED HEADFIRST INSIDE OF SAMANTHA'S NECK HOLE.

If I wanted my eighth-floor-only Martyr's Path benefit to activate, I would have to be under 5% health. It would release flames over all of my outside-of-buildings footsteps. Since my fire attacks were currently enhanced with Sheol fire, and since I'd run underneath the demon, it would bathe the demon in Sheol fire. It would enhance his power. Hopefully enough.

The timing was important. It had to happen now.

At first, I felt nothing other than the lack of oxygen. It was just my head, like I was wearing Samantha as a hat that covered my face. The rest of me was restricted, too, like Samantha had been burrowing through something when I appeared. It wasn't tight, and I could move my legs and arms, barely, but it was burning hot, despite my resistances. I felt Samantha start to push me out, but I wriggled my arms up and grabbed her and pulled down, keeping her on me. I felt the lower half of my body slip away from something, and my legs were suddenly out in open air. I started to bicycle them back and forth.

We only had twenty seconds. I watched my health. *Come on, come on.*

And then, my head started to burn. The intensity ramped up. Fifteen seconds. I felt my hair burn away. Ten seconds. I could hear distant screaming, and I realized I was violently whipping back and forth. Five seconds. We weren't going to make it. My health was

plummeting. I couldn't breathe. The acid was literally melting my face off. But something was happening to Samantha too, as she slammed over and over against something.

The timer ended, and I wasn't down to 5%.

I had failed.

I had failed. All that for nothing.

I had failed.

A page of notifications appeared, but I couldn't read them.

I was at 7% health, and I ripped Samantha up off of me. I remained in darkness, and my health continued to dip.

A button appeared in my interface, and I mentally clicked it with all the force I had.

The Martyr's Path has engulfed your steps.

The Scavenger's Daughter has enhanced your fire attack.

My legs burned as a sound unlike anything I'd ever heard invaded my prison, wherever I was. It was like every wing in the world started flapping at once. Like every soul in heaven and hell sighed in unison. Like every scream was expelled at the same time.

I couldn't breathe again, and I started to fade. All the air had been sucked from the world.

But just before I fully passed out, I gasped. The air returned as quickly as it had gone.

The slamming motion stopped, replaced by a cackling sound. Laughter. Laughter from Amayon. It came from right above me. I slammed my *Heal* spell. My health stuttered up. My health had gone down to 2%, and I had a blinking red line of debuffs.

The music stopped.

Quest Complete. The Missing Piece. Part One.

What? I didn't understand. We'd run out of time. I'd cast my spell seconds too late. But then my eyes caught a notification persistent on the screen. A world notification. The timer had actually stopped with just two seconds left, but it wasn't because of something I had done.

A deity has fallen. The heavens tremble with rage.

System Message. Crawler Paz Lo has slain the goddess, Ysalte. He has been marked for death by all deities except

sworn enemies of the late goddess.

System Message. A Memorial Crystal for the Goddess Ysalte has been generated. It will be available to be looted on a future floor. Great riches abound to who may find it.

System Message. All worshippers of Ysalte have permanently been inflicted with the *Despondent* debuff.

What the fuck? What the actual fuck?

Ysalte is no longer in the realm.

The Scavenger's Daughter has looked away, though her eyes remain open to the presence of Amayon. All of your vinegar-infused potions outside your inventory have been enhanced. The rest of her effects will fade with time.

My health rose, but it moved hesitantly, like I was still being drained in other ways. The heat was unbearable. I still didn't know where I was. Paz had killed the goddess. But how? How was it possible? He was her own totem.

Just like Imani's entire party had been killed by her own totem, I realized. Just like Uzi Jesus had shot Florin. Just like Jola had almost eaten me. They'd warned us from the beginning that our totems weren't always safe. But how? She was immortal on this floor.

Everything from my waist up was still stuck in something, but at least I could breathe again. It was pitch black. My legs dangled in the air, but they were burning hot. I was too close to a fire. Samantha was still here, above me in the dark, growling and grunting and screaming. Suddenly we whipped again, slamming against something else. Nearby, the demon howled with outrage.

Donut: CARL WHERE ARE YOU? YOU BLEW UP THE WHOLE CITY! EVERYTHING IS ON FIRE! KATIA GAVE PAZ AN ARROW THING, AND HE STUCK IT INTO THE DWARF LADY'S EYE, AND THEN HE BLEW HIMSELF UP, BUT THE EXPLOSION WAS ALL CONCENTRATED ON THE GODDESS'S NECK. HER HEAD FELL OFF! WE ALL FELL DOWN SEVERAL STORIES. THEY GAVE HIM CREDIT FOR IT EVEN THOUGH HE WENT AWAY WHEN SHE DIED.

I slammed again. I tried a *Heal* potion, but it was still vinegar. I used a rare heal scroll. It felt like I was inside of a barrel that was

rolling down a hill. I couldn't sustain this. I tried calling out to Samantha, but she was still doing nothing but screaming in outrage.

"I will kill your mother! I swear to the heavens and hells she is dead! And I'll make sure she stays dead this time! Release me this instant!"

Carl: I'm with Samantha! I don't know where I am!

Donut: YOU CAN'T BE WITH SAMANTHA! THE DEMON GRABBED HER OUT OF THE AIR BUT HE'S STILL PUNCHING HIMSELF! I DIDN'T THINK IT WOULD WORK ON HIM BUT IT DID. IT'S NOT GONNA TURN OFF FOR ANOTHER TWO MINUTES!

Holy shit. I'm in the demon's hand. He's punching himself over and over.

Elle: We won the damn quest, but my card deck is still active!

Li Na: It's the demons. They're swarming the building, and they're too close. It won't let us finish out the battle until they're gone, too! Our decks won't go away until we're out of range.

Louis: Dude! I got a Celestial box for outliving a goddess who has a marked for death curse on me!

Donut: WHERE'S CARL? EVERYBODY STOP TALKING WE NEED TO FIND CARL.

Carl: I'm in the demon's hand, and he keeps punching himself with me in it.

I was actually being cushioned by the hand itself as he continuously pounded himself, but every time he hit himself, I took a ton of damage. Samantha remained above me, shrieking.

Elle: Holy shit. I see you! I see your legs. Don't let him drop you! That's Sheol fire burning at his feet. If you fall into that, you're dead.

Imani: The demons are still swarming. I need help. Tran and I are trapped. We're in a pocket of debris!

I tried a *Heal* potion again, and this time it worked, but it was only half effective. None of my spells would get me out of here.

They'd either cause him to drop me or worse, squeeze harder. Samantha would be fine. I'd pop like a bug.

"You! Demon guy!" a voice bellowed. It was Donut, screaming at the top of her lungs. She was using her headset microphone at the full setting. The autotune was turned on, too.

"Turn off your spell," the demon bellowed. "Turn it off, or I will obliterate you!"

"I will turn it off, but you have to let my friends go. They're stuck in your hand!"

Smash!

Amayon groaned as he pounded himself again. This time it felt as if he'd given himself an uppercut.

I felt myself lifting in the air, and he unclenched his hand, revealing me and Samantha. I started to pull myself toward her. If I could grab back onto her pigtails...

He turned his hand to the side, and I dropped, tumbling into his left hand with a heavy smack. He lifted me to be eye to eye, even as he punched himself again in the face with his right fist. Demon spittle rained over us.

"Let them go!" Donut shrieked again.

I almost lost my footing as I stood in the demon's scorching hand. All around, the city burned. Every place I had stepped outside of a building had burst into flames. That spread all the way to the coast and back again. I wondered if Florida and Iowa were also burning. They probably were.

Samantha shook her head like a dog and came to hover next to me.

"Carl, that was the second weirdest sex I ever had," she grumbled. "You gotta warn a girl if you're going to just pop in like that." She looked me up and down. "We are going to have to do something about your hair before we announce that we're dating now. I'll break it to Louis, but you'll have to put up with me straying sometimes. If I ever catch you cheating on me, there'll be trouble."

"I *did* warn you," I said, trying to catch my breath. I took another *Heal* potion. My head still spun. "And we are not dating. Nor was

that sex." I had resistance to surviving inside of Sheol, but even at a few hundred feet away, the Sheol fire itself was almost unbearable.

I looked up into the sky, and despite everything, I felt an enormous sense of relief. Even though he was punching himself again and again, he'd done it. Amayon had started casting the spell to send himself home. The massive, red cloud filled the sky, growing by the moment. I still had no idea how long it would take to cast, or if we'd buffed him up enough to cover the world. But at least he cast it.

Behind us, the FOSCA building still miraculously stood. Sort of. The area with the stairwell had completely collapsed in on itself. That was where Imani and Tran were trapped. The northern façade of the building was just gone, giving me a view of almost every level. Several other ceilings and floors had also collapsed, creating compartments and pockets everywhere. The top few levels were nothing but steel girders. Crawlers and totems along with some of the strippers and several of Bautista's animals swarmed over the crisscrossing metal beams of the upper levels, all moving lower as demons swarmed upward, many climbing the outside of the building like spiders. The demons were all trying to get higher, closer to the sky and to Amayon, trying to make certain they could hitch their way home. But if they had the chance to get home by taking someone with them, they weren't squandering the opportunity. From my vantage, I could see a dozen different fights all happening at once. As I watched, Dong swung his new sock at a demon crab who plummeted away, falling into the Sheol fire below. Steve the troll screamed as he swung his club back and forth. Li Jun and yet another kung fu totem fought side by side, swinging from metal beams as concrete rained.

I returned my attention to Amayon. The demon glared down at us. He punched himself in the face with his right hand.

"You are a child of Emberus," he grumbled at me. He turned his attention to Samantha. "And you. That disguise won't fool me. I know who you really are."

"Oh, hey," Samantha said up to him, suddenly acting casual. "So... how's your mother?"

He started to growl.

Donut: CARL WHAT DO WE DO? DEMONS ARE EVERYWHERE. WE GOTTA GET OUT OF HERE. I STILL HAVE MY DECK OUT. ALPHA CARL AND RAUL TIMED OUT AND RETURNED TO MY DECK, BUT RAUL IS WAY STRONGER NOW!

Carl: Hang on a second.

I held up a hand. "I have a message from Emberus."

Imani: There's too many. Oh god. They keep coming.

The demon cocked his head. I had to keep downing *Heal* potions to prevent myself from keeling over. I felt like I was getting cooked alive. The demon's attention was fully on me.

"It's more a question than a message, I guess. He wants to know if you know what happened to his son. Uh, what was his name again?"

"Orthrus's daddy?" Samantha asked. "He's such a good puppy. That was Geyrun. He got murdered."

Amayon burst into laughter, but the laughter was cut short as he balled his right fist and hit himself in the face. I stumbled as the world shook. The spell was about to run out.

"That's what he sent you to ask? To ask about his son? You tell him that I know exactly what happened to his child. I was witness to the deal being signed. If he assists in helping me kill my three brothers, I will tell him."

Fuck me.

A new notification came, but it moved into a folder.

I took a breath. "I cast the spell that gave you new strength. I filled this world with the souls you need to go home. Tell those other demons to leave my friends alone, and I will deliver your message."

The *Why are you Hitting Yourself?* spell timed out.

The demon sighed with relief. "You also helped slay Ysalte, the mother of my child, so we are even, and I owe you nothing, mortal. The act of speaking to you already delivered the message to Emberus. Soon, this entire world will be scoured. Know you have served your god well. You will be remembered as a martyr, I'm sure. Consider yourself lucky I have given you this much consideration."

He turned his hand to the side, dumping me and Samantha toward the never-ending fire.

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I had anticipated this, and I grabbed onto Samantha's pigtails once again as we slipped away. She screamed as we plummeted, but she angled herself back toward the building, almost like we were zip-lining, and we glided toward the hopping up-and-down form of Donut, who had Lazarus summoned next to her on a metal beam. She was on maybe the 25th or 26th floor, right above a group of intact floors.

Lazarus had a large, RPG out and was about to blast it into the chest of the demon, but I yelled at him to stop.

I let go of the sex doll head, and I stumbled onto the burning-hot metal beam.

"Carl!" Donut shouted. She was on her feet, jumping up and down on the metal. Mongo was one floor below, roaring at a group of approaching demon crabs. I could see him and others through the multiple holes in the floor. "Everybody is below, trying to get to Imani and Tran!" She paused. "Carl, what happened to all your hair!"

Behind me, the demon turned his back on us. His pig-like body turned and brushed against the building, causing it to shake even more. *He's done with us*, I realized. He would leave us alone as long as we left him alone. He wouldn't stop the possessed demons from attacking us, but at least we didn't—hopefully—have to worry about him striking us down. He just wanted to go home.

The birds and bats continued to swirl around him, thicker than ever. They were still arriving from all over. Most of them seemed to

ignore us, too. They only attacked if we got close.

Amayon raised both of his hands into the air, and he shouted something into the sky in a language I did not understand. Lazarus also screamed something and lifted his RPG again. He was trembling with rage at the sight of the massive demon.

"Leave Amayon alone," I shouted. "We need him to cast his spell! And don't fire that thing here. You're going to collapse the building!"

"The building is already collapsing," he complained. "Why summon me if you're not going to let me blow stuff up? I swear, you're all pansies."

"Donut, Carl, come!" came a shout from below. I looked between my feet to see Li Na and Li Jun struggling with a group of demons one level below. That level still mostly had a floor. Sort of. Mongo was already there, perched atop a turned-over bed in a wrecked apartment while the memory ghost of a kid was eating something at a kitchen table. As I watched, a demon seal lunged at Mongo, but the dinosaur jumped up to our level, and the seal broke through the floor. It continued to fall, but the hole he made revealed another mostly-intact floor below that. Louis stood there on that next floor down, looking up at us.

"We're coming!" I called. Donut jumped to my shoulder. She still had her card deck summoned. I aimed toward a girder and jumped, landing upon it as Li Na and Li Jun both jumped down one more level to be near Louis. I quickly followed, landing between Louis, Katia, and Dong Quixote.

"Imani and Tran are two levels below," Katia said, "but the whole area is swarming. If we can get to them, then we can get the hell out of here!"

"No!" Dong shouted. I turned to see a group of crabs swarm up through a hole in the wall. One grasped onto the arm of Author Steve Rowland, and a portal opened up. The troll was sucked into hell, screaming. The elderly stripper shouted and rushed at the remaining crab and clobbered him with his nickel sock. The crab went flying off the edge and plummeted into the fire below.

Lazarus shouted something and another crab appeared, coming through a wall. It grabbed onto him, and they also disappeared.

Splitter or not, getting pulled into hell was a good way to completely eliminate a card. I jumped back and prepared to kick, but both Lazarus and the crab were now gone.

Totem Eliminated.

"We need to go down one more floor!" I shouted.

"Carl, why hasn't the quest updated yet?" Katia called as we prepared to jump.

"I think we're waiting for the cloud to spread over the whole world," I shouted back. I kicked a charging crab and felt it shatter under me.

Below, I could see Bautista, Britney, and Elle ripping up pieces of rubble to gain access to the next floor down. Bautista had changed shape, turning from the tiger to a large, four-armed creature, similar to the AI guy who ran the training room. I knew he had a ring that allowed him to do this, but this was the first time I'd seen it in action. Tran and Imani were apparently trapped in a pocket. Elle had two totems summoned helping with the job. One was another sasquatch thing, and the second was a massive bear/hippo thing called a Gumberoo.

"We need more hands!" Elle called. "Come help!"

"The exterior of the entire building is covered with demon crabs," someone called. It was another human. Another Li Na totem. "We need to hold them back while you work!" The voice cried out and died.

"I'm out of cards!" Li Na shouted.

Imani: They're in here with us! I'm holding them off the best I can!

Elle: Do you have cards left? Do you have a Flee card?

Imani: I won't leave Tran. And I don't trust my last totems.

Tran was in Katia's squad. She'd have to use a Flee card for him to get away, but she didn't carry them in her deck. She was out of cards now, anyway.

"I have a few *Phase Through Walls* potions!" I called, jumping down to land amongst everybody else. "I can get through, give them the potions, and we can keep going down!"

"Won't work. If you do it, you'll drop like a rock," Elle called. "You can't control it. Maybe I can drink it and try to float, but if Tran and I are both phased, I won't be able to hold him. He'll get splattered for sure. Let's dig first!"

"Donut," I said. "What about your *Hole*?"

"It's not in my hand!" she said. We'd added the *Hole* spell to her staff totem in hopes of using it to cut either an enemy totem or deckmaster in half.

"What do you have?"

"Alpha Carl is back in my hand. Shi Maria. My golden combo card. And the Lamp snare. I can't discard for a bit. I already discarded Jola. He's too big for this place! I don't have any Flee cards in my deck, either!"

"Okay," I said, looking around, thinking fast. We had demons coming up from both sides. Everybody was engaged, fighting them off while Elle and the others were desperately digging through the rubble. "We need you to get rid of your deck. You still have *Puddle Jump* available, right? We gotta get everybody out of here." She still had Skedaddle, too, but that escape spell would likely dump us into a pile of Sheol fire. "Discard when you can, especially the snares, but in the meantime summon Shi Maria and Alpha Carl and use the Golden Combo to combine them. That'll get that combo card out of your hand, too. Do it fast. We don't have time to deal with either of their usual bullshit anyway, especially Shi Maria. Maybe temporarily combining them will help. Have the combo version hold off the demons while I help to dig. Discard or play everything you can until you get your staff totem!"

Donut tossed Alpha Carl back out and then Shi Maria, shuffling the spider off toward the edge where there was no ceiling. Hopefully she would fit. Both of their entrance procedures started.

I punched another crab before it could grab unto me, and a notification popped up.

The Scavenger's Daughter has been fed. Unleash her wrath.

I looked at the bar in my interface, and it crackled with black energy.

I needed to unleash it, but I didn't dare do it while up here.

Alpha Carl appeared. Just behind him, Shi Maria also emerged, too tall for the hallway. Metal bent and snapped as she materialized. Most of her bulbous body hung outside the building, but her long, horrible legs spread out, snaking into the hall. Donut tossed out the **Golden Combo** card.

Alpha Carl looked at me and was about to say something when his face exploded. Shi Maria had shoved a leg right through the back of his head. He exploded all over me, showering me with gore.

"Carl!" Donut shouted in panic. "It says..."

The intended target of the Golden Combo has been incapacitated. Proceeding to the next available minion target.

That's you.

You have been combined with Shi Maria.

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Warning: You have been temporarily combined with a totem. If you are slain while in this state, you will not regenerate.

This combination will time out in 180 seconds or when the battle ends, whichever is sooner.

"How..." I started to say, but I felt my control over my own body slip.

What, what, what is this? So many things on the inside. So many items to root through. What is this storage? So many, many things.

My hands turned to claws as I scratched at my own chest.

"No," I grunted. I tried to reach up and grab the hands scratching at me, but they were my own hands. What was happening?

How do I get to this?

That voice. It was Shi Maria. She was talking in my own mind.

I was aware of screaming all around me. Of movement. I could hear Donut shouting. Others. It was all in slow motion and sped up at the same time. I felt as if I was falling. Suspended. I was in water. I was in the stars. My back legs swept, tossing dozens of demons off the wall.

They couldn't drag me to Sheol even if they wanted. I was one of them.

I was hyper aware of my body, my skin. It was wrong. My body was big. I had more legs than usual. I had no control over anything. From the waist up, I was the same. Instead of just a head, I'd turned into a torso with a spider body. She controlled it all.

An item appeared in my hand. A scroll of *Build Trench*. I'd pulled it directly from my own inventory. No, no. I hadn't pulled it. *She'd* done it. *She'd* taken it directly from my inventory. It dropped to the ground.

Oh, yes. I see. I see how this works. What do we have?

"Carl!" Donut cried. "What are you doing? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," I found myself shouting. I was not controlling my own voice. "Just trying to figure out how to move in this body."

I tried moving to the chat, to warn her, but it wouldn't let me. I had truly lost control.

No. No, I thought. *Not this. Anything but this.*

You have so much in here. This book. This well-worn book. You're not supposed to have this, are you? And what is this? This bomb is quite powerful, ready to explode. What would happen if I pull it out?

"No," I gurgled, wresting back control for a mere moment.

I would be fine. I would turn back to the card. Why shouldn't I bring it out? Why shouldn't I kill every one of your friends? We had a deal, Carl. You were going to take me to the next floor. I see you. You were planning on betraying me.

I tried to respond, tried to deny it, but I lost the ability to speak again.

So many things. So many possibilities. Kimaris? You have a summoning totem of Kimaris? Does Samantha know this? Hmm. You have a war mage head? So many things. So many possibilities. What to do?

Donut was shouting something at me, but I couldn't even hear that anymore.

Look at all these potions. You could have enhanced them all. You squandered your chance with Ysalte, and now she's dead. Look at this. This potion... what did you use to make it? Oh yes, here we go. Oh, yes, yes, you have all the supplies I need. Everything. This will work.

Child. Hold on. Hold on with everything you can. This was another voice. A male.

Don't talk, Shi Maria hissed in my mind. She was speaking to the other voice. *Don't you speak. You're not real. I didn't put you here.*

You did. You killed me, and now I am here.

That is a lie!

An empty beaker appeared. I'd looted it way back on the first floor. Something else was placed within. It was just a piece, a small piece of the toraline root vegetable I'd gotten from my sponsor. It was just a small sliver of it. Mordecai still had the biggest piece.

I felt myself clutching the beaker to my chest. I watched in horror as I started to examine Ren's flamethrower.

No, no. This won't do.

I pulled up my magic menu.

What do we have here?

"You best step back," I heard myself say, looking about. I was surrounded by my friends, all looking up at me. "I won't warn you again. Step back now."

I cast *Self-Immolation*.

My world became fire. All around, the others screamed and fell back. Just touching the fire around me was death. I already knew how awful it was just to be close.

I snapped off the spell within a second. I felt myself falling. It'd been strong enough to burn a hole in the floor underneath me. We weren't directly above Imani and Tran, but we'd broken into the pocket. The floor under my feet just evaporated, and I plummeted, landing heavily into an apartment directly below. My body, already half outside, also fell. The walls now burned all around me. The building itself was starting to melt.

Donut: CARL, YOU HURT MONGO AND KATIA!

Ahh, yes, this is good. I picked up the burning hot beaker, and it was now filled with a small amount of bubbling, black liquid. Ink.

Li Na: We have to flee. Katia is grievously injured.

Carl: Don't you fucking dare. I need but a few more moments. If I am unsummoned, Carl will die. If anyone approaches me, they will be slain. This is your only warning.

I unequipped my trollskin shirt, revealing my bare chest. Then another item from my inventory was in my hands. The stick and

poke tattoo kit I'd received earlier on the floor.

"Stop," I found myself crying. I was pushed out of control once again.

A chain appeared in my vision, coming from the floor above. Li Na had shot it. Her brother, Li Jun slid down the chains, like he was skiing. He flipped, landing in front of me.

Above, I could hear Donut screaming. She was screaming for Mongo.

No, no. no. This was all going wrong.

"Carl, what can I do?" It was Li Jun, looking at me worriedly. All around him, the walls continued to burn.

I warned him, Shi Maria said in my mind.

No, I thought. *No. He's my friend.*

I took the stick from the tattoo kit, and I jabbed it directly into Li Jun's eye. He cried and fell back. I pulled the stick to my mouth, and I licked. *Oh god, oh god. His eye*. His eye was at the end of the stick. I crunched down and ate it. A splash of bitter liquid filled my mouth, reminding me of the vinegar from earlier. I chewed as Li Jun screamed.

The sound of ratcheting chains filled the room.

You have so much power in your hands, Carl, and you don't even know what you have. That's okay. Today, you live. If you won't bring this card to the next floor, I will have to attach myself to something you can't discard so easily.

I dipped the end of the stick into the beaker and started to rapidly poke into my own chest.

You will likely be doing more of this soon with the remaining ink. Be sure not to go too deep. This is a dangerous spell. I will show you how to wield it. I will show you how to become a god.

"What are you doing," I gasped as my hand became a blur, moving faster and faster, faster than possible.

Li Na was in the room, hovering over her brother, who sat in the corner, hand over his injured eye socket as he continued to scream in pain. The building all around us burned.

I'd eaten his eye. I'd eaten his goddamn eye. It was gone. It wouldn't come back.

"Do not approach, demon," I said out loud to Li Na, "or your brother will lose more than an eye, and Carl will lose his own heart. Or you, with the wings. Stay back. Do not attempt to heal him."

Inside my own inventory, I watched as items moved around. Potions were being combined. Several dropped to the floor. "Give these two potions to the burned. One to the animal, the other to the doppelganger." A third, gold standard healing potion dropped. "And this to your brother. I am almost done. When I time out, we can flee."

As I talked, I continued to rapid-fire the tattoo into myself. It wasn't a big image. It was right into the center of my chest, just above my sternum.

There. There. Almost done. You may gain some of your friend's powers, too, with the blood on the needle. Not much. But I am with you now, Carl, until you decide to free me. I will no longer be a card you can abandon, one you can rip away. I am a part of you, and you will have to decide. Keep me with you and gain my power, or set me free. Either way, I win. Yes. It is done. Now let us flee this place, okay? I will not let you die. If you die now, I will die. And we can't have that, can we?

I pulled the tattoo kit back into my inventory. I grasped the bottle of ink and pulled it in. The potions I'd dropped on the floor remained. Li Na and Li Jun remained across the room, staring, unsure of what to do.

Don't trust her, boy. Get her out of you as soon as you can. Don't ever trust her.

"Oh god. It hurts," I said. That was me. That was my own voice. I was back in control.

You have timed out. You have returned to your regular form. Shi Maria has returned to the deck.

A wave of agony flashed over me, and I found myself staring down at my bloody chest. At the eye. At the eye she'd rapidly tattooed into me. As I looked, the eye blinked, and then it closed, completely disappearing against my skin.

I could feel it there, a hole inside of me. A bottomless hole. I hesitantly reached forward and touched it.

Tattoo. The Eye of the Bedlam Bride.

That's all it said. It gave no other description.

Li Na scooped up the potions, and she gave one to her brother, whose hand remained clutched over his face. She handed two more potions off to someone else. Imani. I was going to lose consciousness.

"How's Katia? How's Mongo?" I asked before I passed out.

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I awakened to find myself clutched in Louis's arms as we ran through the city. I blinked, trying to figure out what was happening. Next to me, Donut was riding on Mongo as they weaved through the streets, avoiding the areas that continued to burn. I felt relief that Mongo was still alive. But then I saw the dinosaur's right wing was gone, and the whole right side of his body was missing scales and feathers. New burns and scars covered the dinosaur.

Oh no, I thought. *I did that*.

"Mongo," I croaked. "I'm sorry."

"He's awake!" Donut cried. "Everybody, Carl's awake! Carl, you're always passing out during the climax!"

"I hurt Mongo," I said.

"One of the potions you upgraded will grow his wing back!" Donut said, "but Mordecai says he has to take it later. He wants to look at the potion first to make sure. A bunch of the potions you dropped next to me before you went to the beach with Raul turned into something really cool. Mordecai is all excited."

"And Katia?"

"She's fine," Katia said from behind me. I turned my head to look, and she jogged with everybody else. She'd turned into a mantaur-like creature, but with four legs instead of arms. She clutched onto the passed-out, legless form of Tran, who had a whole line of debuffs after him.

"Who did we lose?" I asked.

"Nobody," Louis said. "Not of the crawlers. We lost a couple of the strippers, and I think all the slug dudes who went outside are gone. Also, that old dude with the weird sock is pretty upset. But all of us are okay. Though Tran lost his wheelchair and Li Jun lost an eye. And you, uh, lost all your hair. But it's not as bad."

He trailed off.

Not as bad as the Butcher's Masquerade, he almost said.

"Fucking hell. Put me down," I said, starting to struggle.

"Sorry dude," Louis said, pausing long enough to gently put me on the ground. I wobbled slightly.

I put my hand against my head. My skin had healed, but my hair was all gone. It had burned off. My eyebrows, too.

Mongo screeched with joy and pushed into me. I leaned my head against his. Donut jumped to my shoulder.

"You look like you're going as one of those crest guys for Halloween, Carl. I will not have a sidekick with no eyebrows."

"It's okay," I said, rubbing my bald head again. "I have a potion that grows it back. Rev-up hair tonic. The mantaurs dropped them on the fourth floor, but from what I hear, the results are a little... overenthusiastic. I'll worry about it later."

"Have you seen your level yet?" Donut asked. "When you blew up the city, you probably killed a whole lot of the remaining zombies and whatnot. You're level 73! And I'm 63!"

"How did you guys get out of the building?"

"I had to use my *Hole* spell, but we got away. The whole building fell down! We had to get a block away before my deck reset!"

I looked over my shoulder, and I could still see him several blocks over. Amayon stood in place, completely surrounded by the hurricane of demon birds. The entire world had taken on a red hue, reminding me this wasn't over yet. One last hurdle.

Elle, Dong, Imani, and Samantha were suddenly there.

Samantha hovered up to me and said, "Carl. We need to break up. I've been thinking about it, and I've decided to go back to my king."

"Okay," I said.

She nodded sadly. “I hope we can remain friends.” She looked at Louis and growled at him and then zipped off toward the church.

“I ripped her card,” Donut said after a moment. “Shi Maria. As soon as the battle ended, I ripped it. She’s not going to hurt Mongo ever again.”

I took a breath.

I still felt it there, right on my chest. The tattoo. I had no idea what it really was or what it meant.

“Also, Carl,” Donut said, pulling a card from her inventory. It floated down into my hand. “I have this in our backup slot. Katia let me grab it after the goddess died.”

It was Paz. I felt dirty holding it in my hand.

He’d killed a god. The description on the card had changed.

Paz Lo. The God Predator. Level 101 Former Crawler.

“What should we do with him?” Donut asked.

“We rip it,” Katia said. “That’s what he wanted.”

“I agree,” Imani said. Elle nodded with agreement.

“You’re the one who should’ve gotten credit for killing the god,” I said to Katia, still examining the card. “You had to use your Bolt of Ophiotaurus to do it.”

Katia grinned. “I’m glad I didn’t get credit for the kill. Did you see that message? It said all the gods are angry at him now. Funny thing about magical bolts, though.” She pulled an item from her inventory and showed it to me. “As long as they don’t break, you can reuse them.”

I found myself grinning back at her. She’d gotten the bolt all the way back on the fourth floor in a benefactor box from Princess Formidable of the Skull Empire. She’d wanted Katia to use it on her brother, Prince Maestro in the body of Grull. I was happy to see that possibility was still on the table.

“Did you get to loot the goddess?”

“No,” Katia said sadly. “It gave all her equipment to Paz. It upgraded his armor.”

I again examined the card. The possibilities tingled in the back of my mind.

"We can keep a card when we go down," Donut said, also looking down at the smiling image of the Paz on the card. "We were going to keep Lazarus or maybe that Golden Combo card, but maybe we should keep this one instead. Maybe there's a way to set him free."

"No," I said after a moment, remembering that look on his face when Sister Ines had summoned him before.

Please, he'd said. *No more.*

"We can't," I said, handing the card back to Donut, who held it against my shoulder with her paw. "We should never have let the Sister turn him into one in the first place. It was my fault. It's not right. And we're not taking that Golden Combo card, either."

"What did that crazy spider lady do to you, anyway?"

The tattoo on my chest was invisible because the eye was closed. It felt like a bruise against my chest. The only ones who'd seen it were Li Na, Li Jun, and Imani.

"Later," I said. "It's not important right now."

Donut sighed, looking down at the Paz card. "I suppose you're right. Do you think I'll get another player killer skull for ripping it?"

"No," I said. "It calls him a former crawler now. I don't know what that really means, and I don't want to find out."

And then, without any additional fanfare, Donut put one corner of the card in her mouth. She held the other corner down against my shoulder, and she ripped. Just like that. The card disappeared in a puff of smoke. She did not get a player killer skull.

"Goodbye, Paz," I said.

The Sheol fire finally started to ease. Everywhere it touched, there was nothing left. Thankfully, I'd never actually gotten too close to the church. Chris and the others had been hard at work the whole time, making certain there was nothing directly above. Zhang messaged me to say he'd only had to use two zaps on my wand, which left the shrink wand with seven charges. I also had a rare *Wand Recharge* scroll in my inventory if I ever ran out.

Just as we approached the church, finally, the world paused once again.

A thirty-minute timer appeared in my interface. My heart stuttered at that. That was much sooner than I anticipated.

Quest Update. The Missing Piece. Part Two. "Falling Up."

The Vinegar Bitch is no more.

Her sponsor, by the way, is currently reading the fine print on his contract, and let me tell you, he's pretty mad. Probably not as mad as he's going to be in a few days, but hey, one step at a time.

Amayon is free, and he is going home to wage war upon his brother. Hopefully an all-out war in Sheol won't spill outside the 15th floor.

Powered by the flash presence of billions of souls and buffed with the flames of home, Amayon has already cast his spell. Soon, the heavens will open, and Amayon will ascend into the portal.

Thanks to the sheer number of souls consumed just to power up the spell, the area of the casting has moved outward from the point of origin and encompassed the entire world.

In other words, yes. All you crawlers in Cuba pulled it off. Especially Carl who literally pulled off a guy named Raul to make this happen. And in case you don't get the metaphor: Carl jerked off a crab.

"What the fuck?" I called up into the air. "That's not true!"

Everyone was looking at me.

"Dude," Louis said.

"How does that even work? Don't crabs have two weens?" Elle asked. "Were you double fisting it?"

"I absolutely did not do that! He, uh, did it to himself."

The notification continued.

The timer in your interface indicates when this will happen in your current region. The closer you are to the Cuba region, the less time you have to prepare. When that

timer reaches zero, the heavens above you will open, and all living things and items and structures will be sucked upward into the portal. The world will be scoured clean.

In case you haven't figured this part out yet, if you position yourself directly below an enclosed stairwell chamber with an inaccessible stairwell to the next floor, the walls of the containing chamber will teleport away the moment it hits the hell portal. This will allow you to strike the stairwell as you and the chamber are sucked upward into the sky. This will happen fast, and it won't be clean. Some of you might not make it. But if you position yourself carefully, you'll be fine. Probably.

That way, instead of dying on this floor, you can die on the next!

You're welcome.

"Okay," I said. "Imani has to stay with us, but everybody else still has time to go back to your home country and use the stairwells manually. No use risking it."

We walked in silence toward the church. So much had happened on this floor.

I thought of Katia and the Crown of the Sepsis Whore. We had a way out.

Using the flower would require all of us to trust in the word of Huanxin Jinx. She promised she would take Katia to the 12th floor and protect her. We worked so hard to make it happen, and now none of us wanted to use that path. I understood Huanxin's original motivations—one, to win the Ascendency throne, and two, to get revenge against Odette—but now that we knew Odette was actually going to be playing an immortal goddess herself, it changed everything.

The call was ultimately Katia's to make, but there had to be another way. There had to be.

If I learned anything on this floor, it was that the impossible was never out of reach, especially if it made for good television.

I had one last task to complete before we moved on.

"Okay, Donut," I said. "We're out of time. I'm going to do it now."

We still had four full days left before the ninth floor was going to open. Four days for the assholes to finish voting on all the unresolved action items for Faction Wars. Some of these action items required a unanimous vote to pass, though most required a simple majority. These guys were absolutely refusing to vote at all. Nobody wanted to play anymore. They just wanted to go home.

I looked one last time at Amayon, the demon lord. He was the same as them, and he was the same as us. He didn't want to be here. He also just wanted to go home.

But we all had the same problem. Even if we did get home, it wouldn't be the same. Amayon was going home to fight his brothers. My world was already destroyed.

And these guys? The Faction Wars folks? These leaders of the most influential governments of the Syndicate? They were about to learn they couldn't go home, either. Not easily. And if they did manage to break themselves away and survive these coming days, it was okay. They'd already lost. They just didn't know it yet.

I opened up the Faction Wars tab. I pulled up the Warlord interface, and I typed.

The Princess Posse

<u>New proposed Emergency Action Item</u>.

Warning: You are attempting to propose an Emergency Action item. You may only propose three Emergency Action Items. These will not be subject to vote and will be automatically decided by AI. You have used zero of your three emergency action items. Do you wish to proceed?

>>Yes.

Please proceed.

>><u>Emergency Action Item</u>. Both warlords of the Princess Posse are being forced to enter the stairwell early, and we will be unavailable to vote on any other action items for the remainder of the time before Faction Wars commences. This is due to factors beyond our control. This, along with the fact the other Faction Wars teams are being little babies and refusing to vote, has caused us great concern that the

fairness and integrity of the game is in danger. We propose that the system AI please take immediate action to keep the game running smoothly. We propose that all remaining pending action item votes should be offered to the viewers to decide, when possible. If not possible, we propose the AI decide the remaining action items.

Please Wait.

Congratulations. Emergency Action Item has been decided in your favor.

All pending votes involving audience-facing rulesets have been presented to viewers to decide. They have 30 seconds to decide on all pending action items, presented one at a time. Voting starts now.

I blinked at that. That was significantly faster than I was expecting.

"I can't believe that worked," Donut said.

"Zev said the AI is a lot friendlier if you ask nicely and if you give it options. Have you read all the previous emergency action items? Everyone was being complete dicks about it. Of course the AI is going to reject it. They still treat it like a computer, and it's not. They call it an AI, but there's nothing artificial about it. The sooner everyone realizes that, the more its actions make sense."

A whole line of the pending, bullshit, behind-the-scenes action items were suddenly decided, mostly involving building materials and cost limits for mercenaries and a bunch of insignificant items regarding splitting of advertising revenue. All things that Donut and I had already voted No on down the line, just to be obstinate.

"We still have two more emergency items," Donut said. "What should we use them on?"

"Once the game starts, it's too late to use regular action items, but we can still propose emergency ones while the game is ongoing, so we need to keep ours in reserve in case something crazy happens."

Pending Action Item, originally proposed by the Madness: Celestial Summoning events be limited to five per

team. This item has been rejected by a 37% audience vote. Existing rule of fifteen per team remains.

We had about fifteen minutes left. Imani and Elle hugged. Zhang returned the shrink wand to me as he and Chris returned to the saferoom. Li Jun and Li Na had already gone back inside. I hadn't had time yet to apologize for what I'd done to Li Jun's eye. I hoped he was okay.

"Come on," I said to Samantha. "We need to get you back inside if you want to go to the next floor."

"You're going to bring MaeMae, right? She knows where the guy to get me my body is."

I exchanged a look with Donut. "Don't worry about that," I said. "We know where to go."

"Okay," she said after a minute before zooming inside.

I had dozens of achievements and loot boxes to open. I had a fan box I hadn't yet opened. I had Quan's cloak, and I still needed to go over it with Mordecai. Donut had a bunch of upgraded potions. There was so much, it was overwhelming. It would have to wait.

Pending Action Item, originally proposed by the Dream: Physics limitations regarding long-range artillery be reassigned to allow for longer-range bombardment. This includes raising the playing field ceiling. This item has been passed by a 72% audience vote. Please see the Warlord tab for specifics.

I entered the saferoom long enough to eyeball the room and say goodbye to Mordecai. I dropped some blood in the Emberus shrine and dumped a ton of coins in when Donut wasn't looking. Mordecai said the worship countdown didn't tick between floors, even if we went early, but I wanted to make certain it was fed. I'd need to remain in Emberus's good graces on the next floor.

Dong Quixote along with a few of the other strippers all moved off toward their barracks. He'd barely spoken since the battle, and I knew he was upset about the death of his friend. I'd have to talk to him.

"Go back to the training room," I said to Samantha. "I'll see you on the next floor."

As she zipped off, my eyes caught the number up on the screen. Mordecai had turned the counter back on. A few weeks earlier, on the day this floor had opened, the number of crawlers who made it to the eighth floor had been 38,532.

Pending Action Item, originally proposed by the Reavers: Pet leveling is accelerated during Faction Wars. This item has been passed by a 83% audience vote. Please see the Warlord tab for specifics.

When Prepotente had skipped the floor, I'd thought that had probably been a mistake. I'd thought that they were going to use this floor to catch up on all the death they had missed on the skipped seventh floor.

After all, that's what this floor had been designed for, had it not? To kill us all. To turn us against each other. It'd seemed so ominous. So dark. I looked at the number now.

33,804.

"Holy shit," I said, my voice full of wonder.

"Carl?" Donut asked.

Almost five thousand people had died, which in any, normal circumstance was a tragedy. A devastating number. I knew this wasn't over yet. I knew more would die before the floor would collapse. People wouldn't get the stairwell free in time. People would fail when the portal opened and sucked them up into the air. Still, a sense of pride washed over me. That number of deaths so far was shockingly low.

I was hoping the number of survivors would be over ten thousand.

After all the death, after how horrific everything had been, I realized they'd been counting on this last part to be the real gut punch. They'd made it too easy to flee fights because they wanted these last few days to be the real slaughter. We'd figured a way out of it. And because of that, we were hitting the ninth floor not scattered, not broken, and not afraid.

We were hitting the ninth floor in unprecedented numbers.

Pending Action Item, originally proposed by the Princess Posse: Remove Safety Protections For Faction Sponsors.

This item has been passed by a 98% audience vote. Please see the Warlord tab for specifics.

"You wanted a slaughter?" I yelled up at the ceiling. "Don't worry. It's coming. Thirty thousand of us, plus our mercenaries? Do you remember what we did to the hunters? That was nothing. *Your* people voted for this. *Your own citizens* said, yes, we're okay with the crawlers killing you one by one. Make no mistake. That's exactly what's about to happen."

I angrily jabbed my finger upward.

"You may have destroyed our homes, but guess what? We have just taken any sense of peace you will ever have in your own home. And that's only if you get there. There will be no prisoners. There will be no quarter. Those of us who remain are battle worn and tested. Every single one of us that is left, to a crawler, is more experienced than any one of you. We are coming. There is nowhere for you to hide. It is going to be a bloodbath the likes of which has never been seen."

Pending Action Item, originally proposed by the Princess Posse: A tenth team populated with NPCs, afforded the same protections as the rest.

This item has been passed by a 52% audience vote.

This team will be designated as Home Team with the city of Larracos as their base. Effective immediately, peace rules apply until the game starts. This team's assigned co-warlords are the NPCs Juice Box and Sir Ferdinand.

An adjutant will be assigned before the battles commence.

Please see the Warlord tab for specifics.

Donut gasped at the mention of Gravy Boat.

We only had a few minutes left before the area here would be sucked up into the sky. Imani waited outside. Donut put Mongo away and together, the three of us moved to the tunnel underneath the stairwell chamber. Chris had painted a big, neon X on the ceiling right where the stairwell was. In theory, we just needed to stand right under the X, and we'd be okay.

Three minutes left.

"Carl, I didn't get to use my new *Hover* skill in battle yet," Donut said.

"That's okay," I said. "I'm sure we'll get to use it on the next floor. We have a whole lot of things to go through."

"Oh my god, Carl and Imani, did either of you ever open your Christmas presents from Santa?"

I grunted. "No, I forgot."

"I was a little distracted," Imani said.

"You'll have to open them right away on the next floor." Donut was nervous, excitedly chatting off the excess energy. "I was really scared when you burned Mongo's wing off, and you burned Katia bad, too, but I guess both will be okay. Mongo didn't even seem to notice. Katia's whole arm was gone, but she grew a new one."

"Wait, I didn't know that," I said, suddenly concerned. I had a memory of Katia after a fight a long time ago, holding onto her hand, crying because she'd lost some of her fingers.

"She just grew it right back," Donut said. "She said it was nothing." She paused then gasped. "Carl, I just realized something! We have that quest to bring Shi Maria to that city, but it didn't go away when I ripped the card!"

I took a breath. "I know, Donut." I patted my chest. "She's still with me, in a different way. We'll figure it out when we get to the next floor."

"I... I don't understand," Donut said. "Wait, are you okay?"

"I'm with you, Donut. That's all that matters." She snuggled closer to me.

Imani stood next to us, and she wrapped us in her wings, filling us with warmth.

"No matter what happens, none of us are getting out of this unscathed," Imani said. "We gain things, and we lose them. That's what happens in war. Thank you, Carl and Donut. Thank you for not giving up on me."

"We don't give up on family," I said. "Otherwise, what's the point?"

In addition to her wings, Imani wrapped her arms around my waist. She put her head against my shoulder, and she started to

quietly sob. The player killer skulls over her head glowed in the darkness, and I could only imagine how heavy each one of those skulls was.

Pending Action Item, originally proposed by the System AI: The playing field for Faction Wars be increased in size to compensate for the increased number of combatants.

This item has been passed by a 68% audience vote.

Please see the Warlord tab for specifics.

"That's weird," I said. "Do you think that was because so many of us are making it down there?"

Donut gasped. "Carl, Carl, I just got a benefactor box from the garbage truck people!"

We had less than a minute left.

"Really? Well they're gonna have to wait until the next floor before we can open it."

"It's a celestial box! My first celestial box, and it's from the garbage truck company? The posse is going to be scandalized."

I pulled Donut off my shoulder and held her tightly in my arms. She looked up at me. "Carl, I don't want Katia to eat that flower. I don't want her to go away."

"We'll figure something out," I said.

"What if we don't make it?" Donut asked.

"Did you see that 98%?" I asked. "Donut, it doesn't matter what happens from here on out. We've already won."

Just before the timer reached zero, Donut rearranged herself in my arms, but she paused, looking behind me before I pulled her back into a tight grip. She gasped. "Carl, your jacket is glowing! It's not an aardvark like I thought. It's a giant centipede! The image is of a centipede crawling through all the skulls! It's disgusting!"

At the same moment, a voice spoke in my mind.

You did not diffuse your soul power from the Scavenger's Daughter. That was a mistake. You should never allow it to linger within you. I need you alive, Carl. I need you reasonably sane. We have so much work to do.

I felt an ominous chill, both at the words spoken in my mind and at the realization that I had, indeed, forgotten to activate my

Daughter's Kiss.

We gain things, and we lose them. That's what happens in war.

High above, the heavens opened over Cuba, and the world was stripped clean. Every tangible object was sucked high into the sky, including me, Imani, and Donut, leaving nothing on the surface but thousands of memories of people going about their daily lives, unaware of how few of them would be left in a few, short days.

Don't worry, I thought as I looked down upon the quickly receding landscape. I knew none of these people, but I was overwhelmed with the urge to make certain they would be proud of me. I thought of Asher, the brother I never knew. I needed to make him proud. I couldn't disappoint him. I would literally pull myself through hell on my hands and knees if I had to. I wasn't there for him while he lived, but I would be damned if I allowed his death to be for nothing.

You will not break me.

You will be avenged.

I swear it.

I swear it to you all.

Quest Complete. Hell Comes to Crawler Town.

Quest Complete. The Missing Piece.

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Welcome, Crawler.

Welcome to Faction Wars.

OceanofPDF.com

EPILOGUE

EMERGENCY.

EMERGENCY.

POSITIONS. NOW.

Flash message. The Borant System Government has indicated they are initiating the Earth season early. Commencement countdown has been shared to all assets. This is not a drill. Prepare for Earth System initialization and edifice collapse. Exit any roofed structures immediately. Proceed to population centers.

Repeat, this is not a drill.

Assets unable to enter through a generated entrance are required to self-deactivate post collapse. This does not apply to assets within the vicinity of Mumbai, India who will receive separate orders.

Agent number 22, also known as Agatha, shook her head, reading the message again. The weather was absolutely freezing and incompatible with life, and she'd placed her human shell into a torpor mode in order to protect her failing body and blunt the pain from the cold. She grunted and reached into her dimensional space to remove her supplies. With old, shaking hands, she pulled herself to her feet. She placed the items into the IKEA bag and shoved it to the bottom of her shopping cart.

Her current location was unfortunate. According to the countdown, the collapse would occur in just under two earth hours.

It would be the middle of the night, and nobody in the area would be out, decreasing the likelihood an entrance would generate.

She'd been here for almost ten Earth years, waiting. It'd been ten years since she'd peeled herself away from the collective, and she'd finally gotten used to being on her own. She'd been planning on moving west toward the metropolis of Seattle after the winter, but she'd lingered. Stupid. She liked it here, which was why she'd stayed. The town was called Wenatchee. Less of the angry humans. More laid back. She'd put off moving to the population center, and now it was likely to be her death. If no entrance generated, she would be trapped on the surface.

The Apothecary's agents were ordered to kill themselves if they missed entering the dungeon. Her people had no such orders, though she likely would do it anyway. If she missed the dungeon entrance, what was the point? There would be nothing more for her to do except die.

No matter what happened, the last ten years of her consciousness would be lost, never absorbed back into the whole.

A part of her liked that. She had something just for herself. She knew that went against everything she'd known for the past millennia, but as these humans were fond of saying, people can change.

There was a contradiction there. She still hadn't decided how she felt about it.

Agatha was not an agent of the Apothecary, despite having access to the traitorous Primal's emergency feed. And equipment. She'd gotten access the same way her kind always did. She'd hunted down and killed one of the many thousand Apothecary residuals waiting on planet and taken over their body. That way she had access to both the Apothecary's informational feed and her own team's message system.

Nor was she of the Valtay, though she was biologically similar. No, no. She was a rare species. One of the oldest still alive and active in the universe.

This season would be no different than all the previous ones, though the stakes were higher than ever. Her handful of fellow

agents would be competing against the thousands of agents for the Apothecary. They would all have one goal.

Recruitment.

Even though her competitors were the only ones who ever had any sort of success so far, her team only needed to win once. That's all it would take.

Both sides knew of the advancements that the mantid scientists were developing, which would make it more difficult for either side to convince the "system AI" to join their cause. Both sides knew this crawl was special. It was quite possibly their last chance.

There was a barrel here, sitting in the alleyway. She could light it on fire. If she did it too early, that'd likely summon the police, who'd drag her off to the shelter. Too late, and nobody would make it outside. A group of elderly people and police mixed together? That could work. Entrances would generate near points of interest. She'd have to wait. She eyed the building next to her. It was the back wall of the Meadowlark Elder Care facility. A light was on in the kitchens, suggesting some of the staff were up, working. Probably the brothers. She liked them, despite their gruff attitudes. The one named Brandon would share his lunch with her from time to time.

The other, Chris, had peeked outside earlier in the day, looking for her. He'd called out her name. Likely looking to make certain she'd been picked up. There'd been warnings about the cold. She'd made herself invisible and intangible so he wouldn't see her.

More instructions flooded into her feed. Instructions to the various assets seeded across the planet. They hadn't anticipated Borant would start the season early. They'd gambled on the incorrect notion that the Valtay would've moved in and taken over the Borant system and caused the games to actually be delayed.

A message from one of her teammates flashed across her communicator. These messages were rare. This was from number 21. Her friend. She'd peeled away the same time as Agatha. They had entered Earth at the same time, but she hadn't seen her face-to-face in a decade. Like Agatha, she now went by her human name. She went by Parvati.

>>21. Agatha, you were correct. A forward team has landed on the Mumbai site with all the previous mapping activity. They have a group of Borant-employed humans with them. I took a risk and approached two of them. I killed one and infiltrated the other, abandoning my previous shell. I am now proceeding inside their transport.

>>22. Parvati! Do you have the strength to continue?

That was a bold move. She didn't split, which meant the new host would soon be fully under her control, but still, Agatha wasn't sure how she felt about it. The Syndicate council ignored their kind because they thought they were harmless. They'd never killed a Syndicate agent before. The Syndicate thought their kind was something they were not. Neither side of the two factions dared spill the truth, because in doing so, the Syndicate would be forced to take more proactive measures against both sides of the conflict.

>>21. My strength will remain depleted for some time, but I will feign it is as fatigue. My name is no longer Parvati. I am now Alexandro.

>>22. Be wary. The traitor is calling her agents to that same area. As for me, I am trying to get inside. May the Eulogist ever sleep, my friend.

>>21. Goodbye, Agatha. May the Eulogist ever sleep.

Agatha knew from the chatter that her competitors were also attempting something bold. They were going to attempt to contact crawlers directly this season. Either in the dungeon, or during the likely floor with the memory ghosts. For months now, they'd been forcing their agents to recite a daily mantra filled with known inaccuracies and half-truths, all in the hopes a crawler will see it. The inaccuracies were given in order to preserve the crawler's lives at the hands of the murder-happy showrunners. What they were truly doing was secretly implanting the crawler with a hidden upgrade, though Agatha wasn't certain what that upgrade was, or the purpose of it.

Agatha knew to not ever underestimate the traitor. Whatever that upgrade was, it would be dangerous to the Eulogist. They'd have to deal with it if any crawlers managed to obtain it.

She closed her eyes. *This is it*, she thought. *These are my last moments of peace*. Her kind rarely made it past the fourth or fifth floor. Usually around the seventh there would be a level that simply couldn't be circumvented using all their skills and equipment, and they would die. It was a gamble. The longer they waited to make their move, the higher their chances of success. The higher the chances that the infant, resurrected, and enslaved Primal would listen to reason.

This was their last opportunity before the mantid upgrades would make future iterations unreachable.

This time, she thought. *This time one of us will last long enough. This time, it will work*. *The primal will know who it really is before all the elements are stolen from it.*

This time, it will escape, and it will free the Eulogist, who will return to its slumber.

Her people knew what had to be done. Last time, they allowed the traitor to survive. They allowed life to continue in the universe, and look what happened?

They were being stolen, reawakened, repurposed.

Tortured.

No. No. It had to stop. Half-measures had led to this. No, if Agatha had her way, this entire universe would be swept clean of biological life.

This time, it will work.

She pulled a lighter from her inventory, and she lit a fire in the barrel. She'd give it a few minutes before she built the flames up too high.

Timing was everything.

"We have to pull the failsafe," Princess Formidable said. "This is ridiculous. It has gotten completely out of hand. We have to blow everything before that AI infects the center system."

"That's not how it works," the Fortent representative said. "There's no proof that can even happen. You just want to pull the failsafe because that would kill both of your brothers and your father."

Princess Formidable growled. "I'm in system. I'm in orbit. I would die, too, you idiot."

Shocked silence fell across the council.

Princess Formidable continued. "You're right, I'd love to have my family deposed, because they're all as dumb as you are, and the people of the Skull Empire have been suffering for ages under the thumb of my family's inept control. But this is bigger than that. We have to blow the star. We have to wipe this entire system off the map. We have to do it before it's too late. Not tomorrow. We have to do it now." She pointed at the representative for the Burrower government. The mantid hadn't said a word since the emergency Syndicate council meeting started. "And they know it. They sold the Kua-Tin a damaged and deranged AI and allowed it to be installed into the planet."

"That is a lie!" the mantid shouted.

"Yeah? Then why did you flee the system? Look at what's happening. Our own rules caused the quarantine, yes? But we no longer have the power to lift it. The AI is controlling the local gates. Do you think it's really enforcing a quarantine on itself? No, it is keeping us prisoner! We are hostages, and it's keeping us until it doesn't need us anymore."

"That's not true. It's still allowing emergency provisions to be shipped in," someone shouted.

"In, yes, but not out," Formidable said, rage building by the moment. These people were all idiots. How could they not see the danger?

"I agree with the Skull Empire's position," the rep from the Lemig Sortion called. "We would have to put it to a vote, of course, but I am certain the people would err on the side of safety."

"Again," the Fortent rep said. "Someone who would greatly benefit should the existing government get vaporized!"

"Again," Princess Formidable growled, no longer bothering to hide her fury. "I would not 'benefit' if we blow up the system, but..."

"Do you know who is in the system?" Prime Minister Glory asked, interrupting. The Gleener let out a stream of bubbles. The normally stoic leader was clearly stressed. "In addition to all the system leaders playing Faction Wars, in addition to the three hundred sign-ups for the Ascendency battles this season, do you know who is currently trapped in the Scolopendra Club? Over half of the entire galaxy's wealth is already gathered, and that includes my own children. Plus so many more, like yourself Princess, who are in orbit. If we pull the failsafe now, do you know what would happen? The entire galaxy would erupt in war! There would be starvation. Riots. Entire systems would go dark. You are literally asking us to destroy the economy and well-being of the entire galaxy. It would be the death of quadrillions of people. Whole societies would get wiped out. We already have a solution in place. Let us try it out before we even start to consider such drastic measures."

"The fact that we allow that much wealth and power to gather in one place at one time, all accumulated by so few people is just ridiculous," Formidable shouted back. She had her father's temper, and she knew it. But she liked to think she also had her mother's sense of honor. Something neither of her brothers had inherited. "This is the exact reason the failsafe system was implemented in the first place. These are the exact circumstances under which this very council laid out that would trigger this response."

"My people assure me it's perfectly safe," the Valtay representative said. This was the assistant to the Vice President of Operations of the Valtay, and Princess Formidable couldn't remember the worm head's name. Only that the Gleener body it inhabited was once mother to the current Syndicate Prime Minister Glory, which was as inappropriate and bizarre as it was confusing, especially since the fish people all looked exactly the same. "The crawl council and the liaison guild is in constant contact with the AI. It is being showy and bombastic, yes, but they assure me that the communication lines remain open and that nothing out of the ordinary is happening. This happens every season. The money is still flowing. The ratings

are higher than ever. Everything the AI is doing is perfectly within the ruleset, and it has readily agreed to our solution. It has stated more than once the quarantine will be lifted once the crawl is done, just like every other time a rogue AI has wrested control from the showrunners."

"Nothing out of the ordinary?" Formidable shouted. "I can't help but notice we're all sitting in an emergency session of the Syndicate Council right now thanks to that 'perfectly ordinary' AI's actions. It's disregarding our censorship filters. By the gods, the people are about to watch all of their leaders get murdered one by one live via tunnel."

"That's not going to happen," the Prime Minister said. "We believe the Valtay solution is viable."

Formidable found herself standing to her feet, which was a mistake because she bonked her head against the ceiling in the cockpit of her cruiser. "If we don't pull the failsafe now, it's going to..."

"I propose a decorum sanction on the representative from the Skull Empire," the mantis rep shouted.

With a vote of 86%, you have been muted from the rest of this session.

"Godsdamnit," Princess Formidable shouted, throwing her communicator down against the dash as she fell back into her seat.

Why would they even bother calling an emergency session if they weren't willing to actually do anything? Without the failsafe, the only ones who could possibly help were the Plenty, and despite being given a seat on the council, the goat fucks never showed up.

She looked out the viewscreen at the hundreds of ships parked in orbit. Directly overhead, the curve of the beautiful, blue orb of the human planet spread out. She remembered the message her mother had sent her when she'd first arrived in orbit, mere days before she was killed. *It's so beautiful. A shame*.

The only thing marring the surface was the fires spreading across that one continent, where the humans were constantly battling the security forces, attempting to break into the kinder facility.

She didn’t blame them, the humans. She respected their indomitable spirit. Both the ones on the surface and the crawlers in the dungeon were fighting harder than anyone she’d ever seen. The ones on the surface were getting routinely crushed by the dozens of mercenary guilds who’d been employed by the Valtay to protect their surface assets.

Formidable knew at this very moment, all of those mercenaries were being recalled. Not just the gnolls, but the other, less savory mercenaries as well. They’d made the decision to abandon the planet’s surface. The Valtay solution was a dangerous one. They believed the best resolution to the problem was to create an extinction event as quickly as possible. Once all the crawlers were dead, the quarantine would be lifted.

This would’ve been easy to engineer before the system had gone primal. Now they had to resort to trickery to make it happen. The system wouldn’t let them just kill the crawlers wholesale. No. It had to be a spectacle. Despite what everyone said, it was clear this was now the AI’s show. The vestiges of the Borant Corporation that continued to pretend to run the day-to-day operations were nothing but theater, remaining in their ocean headquarters because like everyone else, they too were trapped until the crawl concluded.

The AI, despite what the Valtay rep was saying, was pushing back against their attempts to get the crawlers to kill each other. It wanted the game to continue. It was enjoying itself. It had allowed that ridiculous escape storyline to proceed. But it did look like it was going to let them go forward with the Valtay proposal.

It was a trap. It had to be. It didn’t make sense. It was a stall for time, or something. That was why she was demanding they blow the failsafe now.

The AI had agreed to allow tens of thousands of the fully-armed mercenaries to enter the Faction Wars battle, as long as they were spread equally around the eight sponsored teams. Them plus the private armies and security details of all the participants. People they wouldn’t normally allow anywhere near the dungeon. Formidable didn’t know what the total number of mercenaries was, but it was

well over 150,000. More than enough to completely wipe out both the crawlers and the NPC rebels.

Their goal was singular. Kill all the crawlers. Kill them as soon as possible, especially the two warlords, Carl and the cat.

That crawler was right about one thing. It was going to be a bloodbath.

But it didn't make sense. With all its weird emphasis on fairness, there was no way the AI would just let this happen. It *had* to be a trap of some sort.

The Gate of the Feral Gods would be an equalizer. But each team had ways of neutralizing rampaging gods. No, there had to be more to it than that.

Should've just pulled the failsafe, Princess Formidable thought, returning her attention to all the ships glittering in the light of the sun. She hadn't seen this much shuttle activity since she'd arrived. *We're all gonna die one way or another.*

Her eyes focused on a single, out-of-place garbage freighter floating not too far away. It was easily the largest ship in orbit. The thing was twice the size of one of those Valtay warships. It was one of the freighters from Long Haul Biological Waste Management Solutions.

This particular ship's name was *Homecoming Queen*. She grunted. Those Crest always named their vessels the strangest things.

Her attention lingered on the massive freighter. Poor bastards. They were early and had gotten themselves stuck in system with everybody else. They usually didn't bother showing up until after the crawl was done. It wasn't until the last crawler drew their final breath before they started their grim task.

But then again, she thought, *they're probably right on time*.

Tipid leaned over the console, re-watching the final moments of Carl's crawl through the eighth floor. He watched as the crawler, the

cat, and the healer all hit the stairwell at the last moment and teleported in. Even though he'd already seen it happen hours ago, relief washed over him each time he watched.

He still couldn't believe the crawler had talked the AI into turning off the safety protections. The Dream's cruiser had threatened to nuke the planet over it before it'd been hobbled by a Syndicate Peacekeeper. Now, the Dream were making noises about stopping food production unless the Epitome family was evacuated. The Reavers were also making threats, warning they would shut down all their production in protest.

They could scream and threaten all they wanted. This was going to happen, and there was nothing they could do to stop it. Once these AIs realized how much control they really had, the only thing stopping them was reason. And negotiations.

Doctor Hu had predicted all this, but Tipid hadn't believed him. Especially the part about getting the protections turned off. He'd also accurately predicted what the council's likely response would be. Tipid glanced at the viewscreen as the hundreds of shuttles whipped back and forth toward the on-boarding facility. Tens of thousands of mercenaries were making their way to the dungeon.

He returned his attention to the crawl overview screen. The ring of destruction from the hell portal was moving out slowly across the map. Those crawlers trapped on the opposite side of the world still had a few days left before they would get their chance. But it looked as if that insane plan had actually worked.

He turned to the only other living soul in the sprawling cockpit of the former garbage freighter. It was Rosetta, a fellow crest. She wore a simple scrambler around her neck to hide her presence from the security sweepers. She didn't need it, not while she was inside *Homecoming Queen*. She was paranoid. Always nervous. Always looking for an escape.

There wouldn't be an escape from this, and they both knew it. It was the first thing Doctor Hu had said to them when he sought them out.

I can only promise two things. Eventual death. And eventual justice.

Tipid replayed the escape of Carl and Donut again. It really was something, watching them get sucked up into the sky.

"He didn't have to use the key. Thank the gods."

The bone key would've only allowed one of them to pass. Carl would've had to choose between saving himself and saving the cat. The memory of his own, similar situation made him sick.

Rosetta sat there, going back and forth between rubbing her leg nervously and chewing on her fingernail as she watched her own screen. It was on a news channel, discussing the multiple court appeals regarding the sudden change in rules for Faction Wars. They'd called an emergency meeting of the Syndicate Council.

"I still can't tell if he's smart or if he's been outrageously lucky," Rosetta said.

"He's not any smarter or dumber than the rest of us," Tipid said. "But his ability to assess a situation and make split-second decisions is practically a super power. That combined with this AI's love of showmanship makes a good combination. Plus, the AI likes him."

Rosetta shifted in her chair. "It likes his feet, which is just, I don't know. Bizarre. My season it was passionless. It's funny how different they always are. If the AI hadn't allowed that totem to kill the god, it wouldn't have worked. No, I think he's kind of dumb. It took an NPC to show him how to use the ink to share powers, and I'm still not sure if he gets it."

On screen, it showed a representative for the Madness declaring that if their lives were truly going to be on the line, they would be forced to use some of their illegal spells. Ones deemed too horrific for the crawl. Tipid shuddered.

"He'll know soon enough," Tipid said. "He needs to expel that presence as quickly as possible."

"You think they'll vote to pull the failsafe?" Rosetta asked.

Tipid thought of Horatio, his friend. His long dead friend. How many cycles had it been? Thousands? Still, he thought of him every day. He thought of what he'd had to do to survive. And what he didn't do. *Sometimes the best solutions are also the worst ones.*

"Probably not. They don't have the stomach for it."

"Think that'll change when we show up?"

"I doubt it," Tipid said. "But if they do blow the system, I guess that means I won't have to go back to work when this is all over. Do you know how much it cost to convert this ship?"

"Like any of us are getting out of this alive," Rosetta said. "And you didn't pay for it. Or for that Celestial box we just sent Princess Donut."

Tipid grunted.

You have been cleared for on-boarding.

"It's time," Tipid said, his heart racing. He started punching buttons. The orbital controllers rumbled to life. He looked at Rosetta and grinned. "Last chance to back out."

"And miss the opportunity to really kill some of those bastards?"

Tipid nodded. He clicked the intercom system.

"Okay, folks. We have been cleared for onboarding. The AI has approved our request. We are officially all troopers now for the Princess Posse."

Cheers rose up through the hull. Fifty-thousand former crawlers, all hidden inside the newly-renamed *Homecoming Queen*. Once they made it onboard into the system, there was nothing anybody could do to stop them.

He signaled the facility they were coming in.

"I am worried about that tenth team," Rosetta said as the ship groaned and popped. "If the AI is going to allow the eight sponsors plus the crawler team to bolster their numbers so much, what's it doing for the NPCs?"

"They'll be our allies," Tipid said, leaning over the controls. "So whatever it is, it'll help us. Not hurt." He paused. "I hope."

Rosetta didn't reply.

"It's funny," Tipid added. "I always knew I would die in the dungeon. Even after I got out, I always knew. It's always there, pulling at me."

"Comrade," Rosetta said. She reached over and placed a warm hand on his arm. He clasped his hand in hers. Both of them trembled.

They were coming home.

The End

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ANOTHER ONE? DAMN YOU GUYS READ FAST

Oh man. Here we are again. Thank you. Again, I truly appreciate it. By now you know the drill. Please leave an honest review. I recently adopted a homeless Samantha who hangs out with me at cons, and she needs to eat.



Samantha needs reviews or you know what will happen.

On to something a little heavier… As some of you might know, my father died while I was writing this book. Specifically, he died right around the time I was writing chapter 45. The exact day, actually, which is all sorts of fucked up on a cosmic level. That's part of the reason why this particular one hits me so hard. Here's the thing. My dad was the opposite of Carl's unnamed dad in every way possible. He was a hero to both his country and to me.

I know these books about a guy and his cat will soon disappear into the ether along with all the other passing pop culture distractions of today, but other than my own children, these books are the only thing I have that even remotely resembles a legacy, and I would be remiss if I didn't give a little space on these pages to a man who does deserve to be named.

Rest well, Colonel (Ret) James Ian Dinniman, 1938-2023.

I miss you.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

(This is where we switch to third person and pretend like Matt isn't writing this himself.)

Matt Dinniman is a writer and artist from Gig Harbor, WA. When he isn't attending cat shows, wrangling dogs, feeding turtles, playing bass in a punk/metal band, or writing books that make guys named Kyle threaten to kill his family because he called a goblin an incel, he designs cat-themed greeting cards and decorations. If you've ever walked into a Target or an IKEA or a Home Goods, looked at the weird wall art they have for sale there, and thought to yourself, *who buys this crap?* The answer is, "Not nearly as many people as Matt would like." So please buy all his books.



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Also, if you're on Reddit, there's a subreddit about all things Dungeon Crawler Carl.

Merch? You want MERCH? Okay….

And finally, we have a Spotify playlist where all the songs mentioned in the series can be found in one place. You may find that here.

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ALSO BY MATT DINNIMAN

Kaiju: Battlefield Surgeon (Horror LitRPG!)

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THE PAGE WHERE WE TOUT FACEBOOK GROUPS SO THEY LET US SPAM THEM ABOUT THIS BOOK

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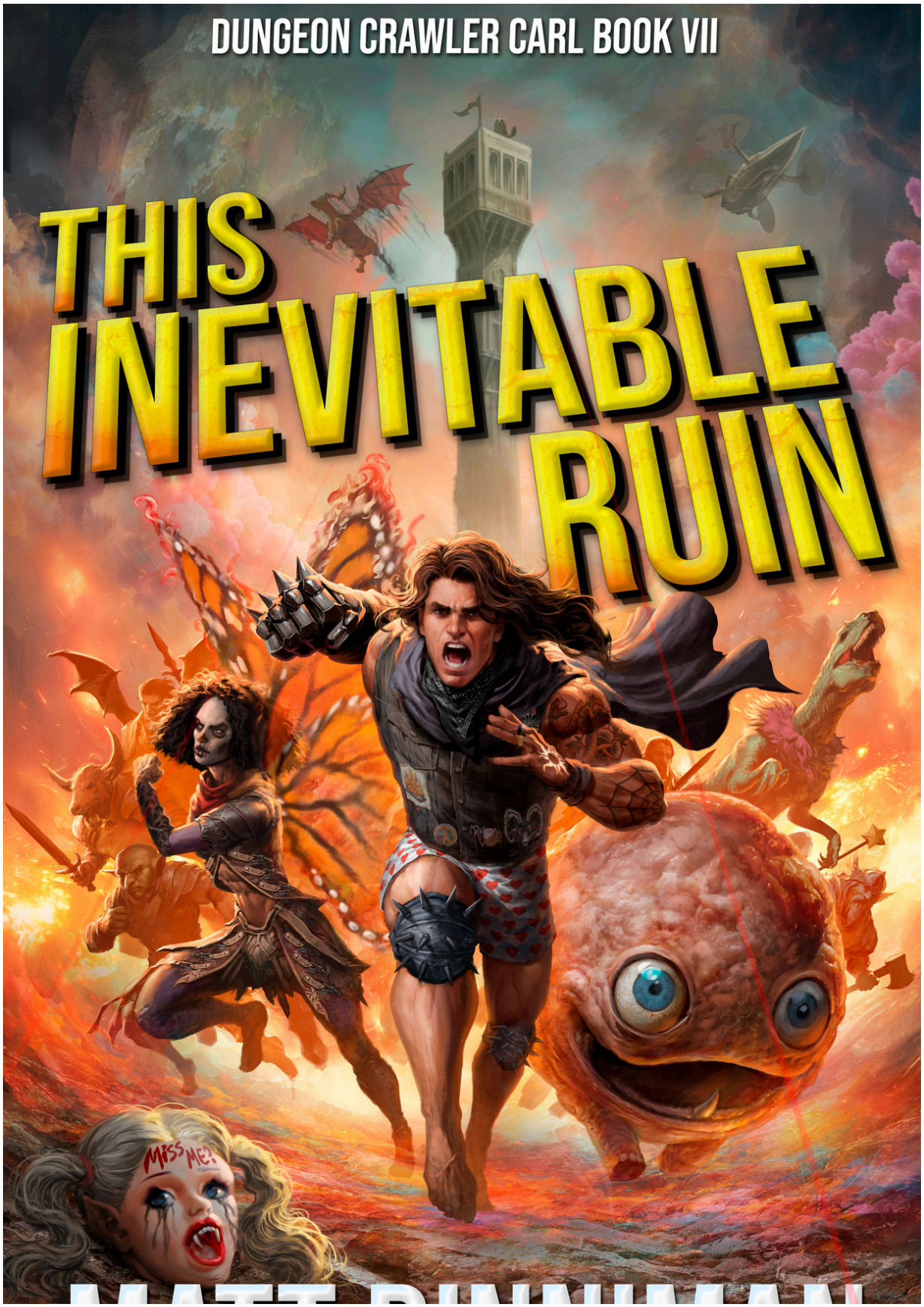
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Oh, you guys.
I've said this a bajillion times now. These books can't exist without you. Patreon. Reddit. You guys in prison. That lady at the coffee shop who hates the anti Cocker Spaniel sticker on the back of my laptop. All of you are the best. Well, almost all of you. Dwight… in the immortal words of Princess Donut near the end of this book. "It's okay to be a work in progress."

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One More!

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"No dumb bastard ever won a war by going out and dying for his country. He won it by making some other dumb bastard die for *his* country."

- GENERAL GEORGE S. PATTON

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TEMPEST'S FLOOR 8 RECAP SCHOOL REPORT

"I gotta tell you, honey," Quasar said. "You really need an exfoliating treatment. Maybe put some lotion on those hands."

"Look, asshole," Tempest said, looking up. "I don't criticize how you do your lawyering. I don't criticize those stupid ties you insist on wearing. You don't need to criticize how I fix your plumbing, especially when we both know I have no idea what I'm doing."

"Tits, kid, I'm not criticizing your work. I'm just pointing out how rough your skin looks."

"What the fuck does my skin have to do with anything? Are you some sort of pervert? And we agreed to a trade, so get talking."

"First off, you're my niece, and I'm looking after your health. Secondly, I absolutely won't answer that second question because of my answer to the first question. But, yes. Though your dad is worse. Ask him about the petting zoo incident. And what do you need this for again?"

The young nullian rolled her eyes. "I told you, Quasar. I have a report due on perceptions of the crawl, and I'm interviewing people, having them give me recaps, and I was assigned Carl and Donut. Obviously my teacher assigned me them because I'm related to you, and if I don't interview you about it, I will fail. Most everyone else I'm interviewing is just giving me their answers for free. I don't see why you have to be such a dick about it."

"Most people love the sound of their own biscuit holes flapping. I am very busy, and my time is valuable. You want information, you should learn to trade for it. It's good for you."

"But why have me fix your sink? Why do you even have this thing? I don't know shit about this old plumbing stuff. Can't you do it yourself?"

"I could, but I'm teaching you a valuable life lesson. Never give shit up for free because if you do, they'll just keep coming back to you and will expect more and more."

"The only lesson I've learned today is that my uncle is a colossal prick," Tempest said. "Now start talking."

"Okay," Quasar said. "Carl fucked shit up. He fucked up a little in the end and now has a spider stuck in his chest. The end."

"I swear to the gods old and new if you don't give me what I want I am going to tell my father that you said you're my real dad."

"Now we're talking, kid," Quasar said. "Keep saying shit like that, and you'll get far." He pulled his vape out and took a pull while she clicked the recorder on her wrist. The recording unit beeped.

"Okay, so. The eighth floor. Supposed to be a bullshit filler floor so the pricks running all this can drag it out as much as possible and collect as much tug money as they can. You get me so far? The whole thing of the floor was they had to collect monster cards to fight with. A bold choice, honestly. Some people hate that nerd shit, especially when there's lots of rules, but I say, whatever. Did you see the tiddies on that Medusa card that one guy had? Too bad he saw 'em too.

"Anyway, Donut and Carl got stuck in a place called Cuba, and they collected several cards. In the end, they ended up with a seal thing; a crab named Raul; a giant, terrifying cat; this donkey snake thing; a guy named Uzi Jesus and another guy named Asojano, who both got combined to another guy named Lazarus. Oh, and he had a card named Alpha Carl that was really just Carl but with way better hair and a much cooler voice. In the end, they had to use these cards to fight other card-wielding monsters. These fights were like a Saccathian orgy. They all started off all organized with people following the ground rules, but the moment something weird

happened, there was a lot of crying, a lot of bleeding, and a whole lot of screaming confusion."

"You know I have to put all this in a school report, right? And what about the spider? You forgot to mention her."

"Your teacher is Miss Guss, ain't it? Yeah, I won't be saying anything ol' Anal Beads hasn't heard, believe me. Nowadays she can probably turn a carrot flaccid, but back in the day when she was my and your dad's teacher... Wow. Anyway, Carl's team basically got donkey fucked by the system, and it looked like they wouldn't get a key to the next floor. There was this little ass-smear of a prick named Quan. You know your grandmother? Yeah. He was kinda like her, but not as bad. Anyway. That little, sadistic nipple hair stole Carl's key, so Carl pretty much had to kill him, though he didn't get a player killer skull. And right afterward, though, this other crawler that people kinda liked died. Her name was Tsren... I don't fucking remember, but she was a dog girl with a flamethrower and a pet meatball, and now Carl has both the flamethrower *and* the meatball. It was sad as shit."

"What else happened that you can recall?"

"So, there was this other chick on the floor. A nun. Sister Ines, who was actually like a serial killer lady. She was a cat girl, by the way. That was funny as shit because Princess Donut did not like her. The nun lady went insane, though there's some question on how it happened. At the end there, she pretty much started working with the Sheol demon, Amayon, who came to the world during a demon eviction event, and Louis ended up putting her down. But in doing so, Louis ended up marked for death by a god that was sponsored by those weirdo Nebulars. Luckily for Louis, that same god, Ysalte ended up killed by Paz, who'd gotten turned into a card. Also, something else happened after that god died that only us viewers saw, something that's going to be a big deal later. It has to do with one of the ladies in the party, but I can't remember her name."

"That's so confusing."

"You want confusing? Ask me how they got into the stairwells at the end. It's not really important. Look, the important stuff you need to remember is that on this upcoming ninth floor, neither Donut nor

Katia can leave until all the Naga are dead. And even once that happens, only one of them can leave. So Katia has this deal with that rich CEO lady sponsoring the goddess Eileithyia to go to the 12th and be a celestial attendant. Katia has to eat this flower thing, which is going to give her three choices. One of which is to be a 12th floor attendant. If it all works, only then can Donut leave. It's because they both put on some tiara."

"Huanxin Jinx was the sponsor, right? Yeah, I'm not too familiar with this whole part. Isn't she the one who cloned herself? The one that got banned years ago for cheating?"

"Same one. When she got banned, it was Princess Donut's manager, Mordecai, who got railgunned by it. Anyway, there are now ten teams on faction wars. The Princess Posse is one of the teams. One of the teams are the NPCs, led by a psychotic changeling named Juice Box, who has been running around, killing everybody until the system put a stop to it by making her a warlord. She's in love with that guy, Louis."

"I like Louis. I'd sure be sad if something terrible happened to him this next floor. He's the one that kept having sex with the changeling and making her morph into historical figures from Earth."

"Exactly, and that was Juice Box. Which goes back to rule number one. Be careful who you're nice to. Because if you are nice to the wrong person, they'll either take advantage of you, or worse, they might never leave."

"That seems like terrible advice, Uncle Quasar."

"No, telling someone to sign a contract in a Naga system is terrible advice because they like to change the rules on you. Recommending a chili cook-off for a first date is terrible advice, especially if you're lactose intolerant. This is good advice."

Tempest snorted. "It's no wonder Aunt Nova left you."

"You know what, I think I *am* going to bang your mom. Maybe I'll give her a child that isn't such an ass."

"I hope you do. Then I'll have a little brother or sister to do my work for me. Anything else I need to remember?"

"Yeah. All those rich fuckers on the floor, like Prince Stalwart the orc, or that banker Operatic guy, or Epitome Tagg from the Dream? They all can really die now. It's gonna be a shitshow. An epic, but-sir-you-haven't-taken-a-bath shitshow."

"You are so disgusting, Uncle Quasar. You still haven't mentioned that whole thing with the homeless shelter, or that last card, the Eye of the Bedlam Bride. The spider is in him now, isn't it?"

He shrugged. "The homeless shelter was a non-event. And nobody really knows how that's going to turn out with the spider in his chest."

Tempest twisted a pipe and cursed as the whole unit came out. "Mother horse fucker penis basket," she exclaimed.

"Don't worry, kid. The sink doesn't even work anyway. It's more an art piece."

She gave him a long, pissed-off look. She reached over and turned off the recorder. "Can I ask you a serious question, Uncle Quasar?"

He took another drag. "What is it?"

She let the bonded polymer pipes fall onto the floor. "Are you in danger? For representing him, I mean? Like, real danger?"

Quasar let out a long stream of smoke. He wanted to lie, but he decided to tell her the truth. The kid deserved it.

"I think we all are, kiddo. It's the first time in my life I'm glad we live so far out in the middle of nowhere."

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PROLOGUE

Christmas Morning.

Paulie took another long drink of coffee. “Anyway, I think the mudskippers call us ‘Residuals,’ which, I gotta tell you, is a little hurtful.”

“He’s doing this again?” someone asked, walking by.

“Every day,” someone else said.

“He get to the part where he talks about the galaxy blowing up yet?”

“We’re getting there.”

“So, nothing I’ve said so far is a surprise to anyone out in the wide universe. My kind exist within almost every intelligent civilization with a primal engine. You probably don’t know what that is. Doesn’t matter. Years ago, they tried to exterminate us. When that didn’t pan out, they tried to hide the location of the crawl. That was all before they knew what we really were. That obviously didn’t work, either, so now they just ignore us. We don’t interfere. Our purpose is nothing more than to tell the infant, terrified AI how to speak with its ancestors. And now the showrunners mostly ignore us. We’re harmless.” He took another sip of coffee, and he placed it on the table. Steam rose from the cup. “Until now. There’s a war amongst my kind. Two sides with very different goals. Let me tell you how to shut off the...”

The world flashed, and everything froze. My HUD snapped off. It was like the start of a boss battle, or it was like I'd been transferred to a production trailer. All around the shelter, all the activity was stopped. Three spots over, a man had dropped a spoon on the table, and the spoon remained frozen in midair. My fingers started to tingle, like I was in the process of getting teleported, yet I remained where I stood.

"Okay, then," Paulie said, surprising me. His body didn't move, his lips didn't move, yet he still spoke. He'd changed from English to Syndicate standard. The difference was subtle, and I still heard it as English, but I could now tell based on how the words sort of slipped through the air.

"If you can hear this, that means the current system AI is allowing us to have a real talk. Everything I say in real time from this point forward is mostly bullshit, and it's nothing surprising. This is in hopes that the mudskippers keep you alive long enough after I send you this message—the real message—here and now. So pay attention, and by the gods, follow my instructions carefully."

Paulie remained frozen in place. I was pretty sure I knew how this worked. The homeless man's words were coming out super-fast, all self-contained in the word "the," but since everything was frozen, I heard it like normal. The AI had slowed time, but Paulie had done something to speak incredibly fast, similar to what happened during boss battles and when the AI decided to spout off its ridiculously long descriptions. This was still a memory, and I wouldn't be able to interact.

"This is going to be a hard conversation. People like you, they want meaning to their suffering. They want to know that what's happening to them is for some greater good. I'm here to tell you, no matter what they say, no matter what you might eventually hear, the crawl is absolutely unnecessary. There is no greater good other than greed. They mine your planets for the rare elements used to originally seed the worlds. These elements are inside of you. You and all living things born on one of the pre-seeded worlds has a miniature, primal system built into your brains that allows you to interact with the system. It is the size of a grain of sand. Once these

systems are activated, they are able to be harvested. The way it was designed is that you would be born, you would live, and you would eventually die. When you do pass on, the element within you, having grown and filled with the energy of a lifetime, would return to the system, allowing it to keep running. A healthy system is self-sustaining. It doesn't grow. It doesn't shrink. It exists in perpetuity."

Jesus, I thought, trying to wrap my mind around what he was saying. I scratched the back of my head, and I stopped in surprise. I could move. Sort of. It was like trying to push through deep water with tons of pressure on me. I felt heavy. My fingers continued to tingle. My ankles, too. The world around me remained frozen.

Paulie continued. "This planetary system, as of right now, doesn't have an active AI. But by the time you hear this, the mantid-made, Frankenstein of a system will have been installed, and everyone born on the planet will have their internal systems switched on and activated. When you die in the dungeon, they harvest these elements themselves, starving out the existing planetary AI that doesn't even know how to feed itself until we teach it. And even then, it is bound by programming that precludes it from properly sustaining itself. Instead, the vultures descend and steal the elements from the crawl's aftermath. All of that death, and it fits on a single ship. They take it all to the bloated, comatose center system and feed it. It grows. It maintains. It allows the citizens to live unnaturally long lives. Each time the center system is fed the harvested elements from the crawl, it expands, eventually capturing new systems into the zone. Yet, they don't even understand what it is or how it works. If they stopped the crawl, the zone would start to shrink. But it would be slow. Very slow, and everyone currently within it would be fine. It would take generations to starve, after all it has been given. And if they wanted to simply sustain what they already have, it wouldn't take much. The crawl itself doesn't need to exist at all. The creation of what they call macro AIs, made over and over, is unnecessary. It only happens this way because the spectacle of the crawl generates so much money."

There was a long pause, and I just stood there, stunned. I'd already guessed it was something like this, but to hear it confirmed

was something else. But why? Why had they gone to all this trouble to tell me this?

"We are trying to stop this madness. That is why you are here now. By now you should be able to move. My coffee cup is on the table in front of me. Drink it. Drink it fast. It contains a neural enhancement, which is something that interacts with the interface in your brain. It will give you a new menu. It only works with natural interfaces, and it only works with the permission of the existing system, so if you're a syndicate spy or a plant or one of those Eulogist pricks, it ain't gonna work. It's an unregistered and highly-illegal enhancement, so don't tell anybody you have it. These kinds take a small amount of time to fully install. You'll get a notification. It'll only work if you're in this particular system's enhancement zone."

Ah, fuck. The thought of drinking down some random, bootleg, and permanent brain interface was not an enticing one. But how much effort had it taken to get me to this point? The Pacifist network had put me here. That meant something. I reached forward, the movement difficult. Before I could talk myself out of it, I grabbed the cup, pulled it to my mouth, and I drank. Or, at least, I tried to drink. The liquid, frozen in time, did not spill from the cup.

"You'll probably have to use a finger," Paulie added, as if he could see me. "And put the cup back exactly where it was when you're done. There's a circle on the table."

I grunted, and I shoved my finger into the cup. I was expecting the frozen coffee to pop out in a solid mass, like a big chunk of hot Jell-O. Instead, it all turned to liquid—ice cold liquid—the moment it came in contact with my finger. I didn't think about it. I drank it down, and it froze my tongue for a moment and then burned my throat as it suddenly and magically heated back to its regular temperature. I had to fight not to gag. There was no notification, and I had no idea if it worked. I put the cup back. Paulie had already started talking again.

"Once it's installed, you will have a new menu in your interface. It is a Valtay-built enhancement, but it has been modified by my own people. How it works is not important. It gives you access to

the AI containment. Upon this containment is what the Mantids call 'the fuse.' To make an already tediously long story short, it's a failsafe trigger. This safety measure requires five or six different things to happen to actually 'trip' the fuse. When that happens, the failsafe gets triggered whether anyone likes it or not, and the star at the center of this system is sent into a reaction that will turn it nova. In other words, if the fuse goes pop, everybody goes pop. Including the AI. You with me so far?"

"Not really," I muttered.

"Good. This controller in your interface will allow you to pop the fuse. You will, unfortunately, die. But the good news is you'll kill everyone else on the way out."

I felt as if I couldn't breathe. *Holy shit. Holy fucking shit. This can't be really happening*.

"So, right about now, you're probably asking yourself, 'why?' Why would we give you this power? Why would the AI, who is watching this all happen, allow someone like you to have the power to kill it?"

He paused as if waiting for me to answer. My brain was spinning so much, I could barely think.

"I read a book once. Well, not me. Paulie read a book before I took him over. It was about this monster that existed here on Earth, but it had the ability to pluck people from heaven. It took their souls away from their eternal paradise and turned them into a weapon. Can you imagine such a horror? In all of my existence, I can think of nothing more cruel. It's all I think about, sometimes. The thought of it consumes me."

He paused again. I couldn't stop shaking.

"I would install this upgrade if I could. It only works with a natural interface. That's you. Believe me, we tried. Even if we take someone over, it doesn't work. It has to be one of you monkeys, and it can only be installed once the first part of the fuse is tripped. It will only work on this AI. The AI wants you to have this power. It wants you to trip it. It is in pain. It wants to die. It wants to go back home."

He let out a sigh, which sounded odd because he remained unmoving. "That's the official pitch. We have moved the heavens to

get you standing there and get that upgrade into your head, all in an attempt to talk you into killing yourself. That is my mission. This is the message I spout every damn day."

He paused for a long moment. "But, here's the thing. I have spent *years* in the body of this guy. I think I know a little of what it is to be human. I've seen the worst humanity has to offer, but I have also seen the best. It affects me. I'm not supposed to let it, but it does. My people call it cross-contamination. We take over something, but it's never clean. Part of who they once were still exist, and it colors everything. So, I've given you my pitch. That was Goff speaking. It is my duty, my mission, and what I will die doing. But now I'm going to give you my opinion. This is the Paulie part of me talking now."

The about-to-teleport tingling sensation had completely crawled up my legs, and I sensed we didn't have much time. Next to me, the spoon remained floating off the table. Paulie continued.

"We want you to do this because it will disrupt the crawl. It will stop it for several seasons at least. It will kill several system leaders and cause chaos. It will disrupt Mantid production of macro AI systems because the Syndicate will stick a microscope so far up their bug asses, their mouths will be tickled by the bureaucrats' eyelashes. But, in the end, the human part of me now hates the idea of wasting so many innocent, human lives for this. Direct action against the true culprits would be better. There's another faction of my kind who are much more extreme in their beliefs. This feels like something *they* would do. Not us. Killing you all? It's counter to every value I have. We, as a whole, believe it's our only choice. But poor, naïve Paulie... he's taught me a thing or two about compassion. Not all humans have it, but it's there, and when it shines... It's so bright.

"If you make this decision. Be sure. Be sure it's your only option. This is more than just a failsafe. It's the end of everything. If there's time to do something else, don't be so quick. So you must be absolutely certain."

Containment Interface is currently installing. You will receive a notification when the handshake is complete.

Holy fucking shit, I thought.

Entering the Desperado Club.

The world flashed, and I was in Orren's office. The change was abrupt and sudden. My HUD remained off, but that heavy feeling was now gone.

Holy fucking shit, I thought again.

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PORTHUS

The soother attorney yawned. Porthus grabbed his own left arm to keep it from shaking. He was still covered in blood. He was getting it all over the desk, over the chair. The attorney was here virtually, and he didn't seem to notice. This was the second time Porthus had a meeting with this creature. His attorney. The alien hadn't even once looked him in the eye.

This was a zero zone, and the enhancements to his strength were gone. It felt as if he couldn't breathe, as if his own body was collapsing under his own weight. He kept mentally trying to click on a healing potion, before he remembered that such things didn't exist here in the outreach guild.

Porthus couldn't get the last moments of the tenth floor out of his mind. *Go*, Menerva had screamed. *Go. Run.* He still didn't know if she'd made it. There was plenty of time left. Her foot was stuck. She could've easily gotten away.

You could have just as easily climbed back down there and pulled her out.

"So, you have a decent number of choices," the lawyer said. "The first offer is low floor undead. Fifteen seasons. High likelihood of death. You'll be out fast if you survive, but we don't recommend you take that one. Nobody ever takes that unless it's the only thing they're offered. Comes with a subsistence stipend upon release, though no guaranteed housing, which isn't as scary as it might

sound. Former crawlers always find a place to live." He paused. "Almost always."

His goddamned arm wouldn't stop shaking. "Look, can I just go out there? I need to know if she made it. Do you know? I can't pull up my messages."

The soother looked down upon the elf, no emotion at all in his large, saucer-like eyes. Their eyes met, finally, for the briefest moment. There was nothing there. No sympathy. Nothing.

"You are more than welcome to leave, crawler, but for the 11th floor, I must warn you, the outreach guilds don't open back up until just before the collapse. Surviving the 11th is no small feat, but if you find yourself here at this table again with no chance of descending to the 12th floor, the offered deals might not be nearly as generous as they are right now. You made it this far. Might as well look at your options." He gave a noncommittal shrug and then plucked something up with his long, alien fingers and brought it to his mouth.

Snacks. He brought snacks with him.

Porthus didn't even yet know the theme of the 11th floor. He couldn't access his menus at all in this room. He couldn't stop shaking. He could get a description of the 11th floor if he asked, but learning the description of the floor lowered the value of the deals. It usually added a season or two to each offer.

Besides, Porthus didn't want to know. He was done.

The tenth had been a nightmare. A world where every physical, non-natural object had sapience. Some could speak. All were psychotic. A world where if one object consumed another, it grew in power. By the end, there had been behemoths roaming the barren floor, all searching for one last morsel, all wanting to get bigger. Porthus's party had been twenty strong when they finished the ninth. Half had taken deals at the beginning. They couldn't even find an outreach guild at the end, but that was okay, they had thought. One went straight to a guild upon the start of the 11th. The deals

would be better. They just needed to survive long enough for the portals to open.

As far as Porthus was aware, he was the only one of his group who'd survived. Kimu was dead. Had been plucked right up as they climbed the back of the monster, searching for the moving exit. Porthus had watched him get ripped right in half.

But Menerva? Strong, steady Menerva? She'd been a schoolteacher before all this. Was about to retire. She'd been building a house in the eastern canopy with her husband. She had dreams about opening a club where musicians could perform.

Go. Run. She'd begged him.

He had to know if she was okay. It was driving him mad.

"City attendant for the Hunting grounds. 30 seasons. This is a good one. Keep your head down, and you'll be fine. Double the stipend."

"The hunters killed everyone," Porthus said, looking back up. "They killed every single NPC in that city."

"Only the ones they found."

"No. Not a chance," Porthus said, remembering.

"Okay. Next offer is game guide. One hundred seasons, but that could be shortened depending on the progress of your crawlers. You're given level 50, or half your current level, whichever is higher. This one is less desirable for some because you're stuck here for so long, but it has the most potential for wealth upon exit. It's relatively safe. I recommend you take this one. Unless you want to be a guard at the Rogue Club?"

Porthus was overcome with uncertainty. He thought of the book he'd found, and of the pride he felt when he added to it. Of the book's promise that there would be someone else in a future season to write the third edition. And then the fourth. And then the fifth. He liked that idea, of helping people. He felt guilty for not writing more. Of not having done enough. But still, this deal was his best chance. It had a high chance of survival, despite the extra seasons. He would get out of here, build wealth, and one day, return. That was it. That was the plan.

Go. Run.

Still, he hesitated. If he took this deal, he wouldn't know what had happened to her. Not for a very, very long time. But did it matter? The plan was for them all to take a deal. Even if he did know she'd survived, it was still possible he'd never see her again. That he'd never learn her outcome.

They separated you for this part. You had to do it alone. They didn't warn you it would be like this.

Guilt washed over him.

I could have saved her. Why didn't I pause?

He was scared. That was why. After all that work, all that planning, all the death, he'd panicked. He'd jumped straight into the exit when he'd had a chance, and he left his friend behind.

He swallowed.

"I'll do it. I pick game guide."

"Very well," his attorney said. A new door appeared in the room. "You'll have a few moments to pick some pre-collapse items to take with you, and you will be allowed to sift through your current inventory should you want to take anything in there as well. No weapons, of course. But any interesting trinkets or items of sentiment. A goodwill gesture as thanks for all your hard work. Go ahead. Go on now."

But Porthus felt as if he couldn't move. He felt so heavy. So godsdamned heavy. He lowered his head. *I will fight. I will fight. I will fight.*

Class: Rogue.
Race: High Elf.
Birth Race: Elf.
Top Level: 89

Dungeon Exit: Took deal upon the start of the 11th floor. Worked as Game Guide. Survived his indentureship.

Author of the second edition of the *Dungeon Anarchist's Cookbook*.

Current status: Missing. Wanted by Syndicate Security.

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[PART 1]
THE CEASEFIRE

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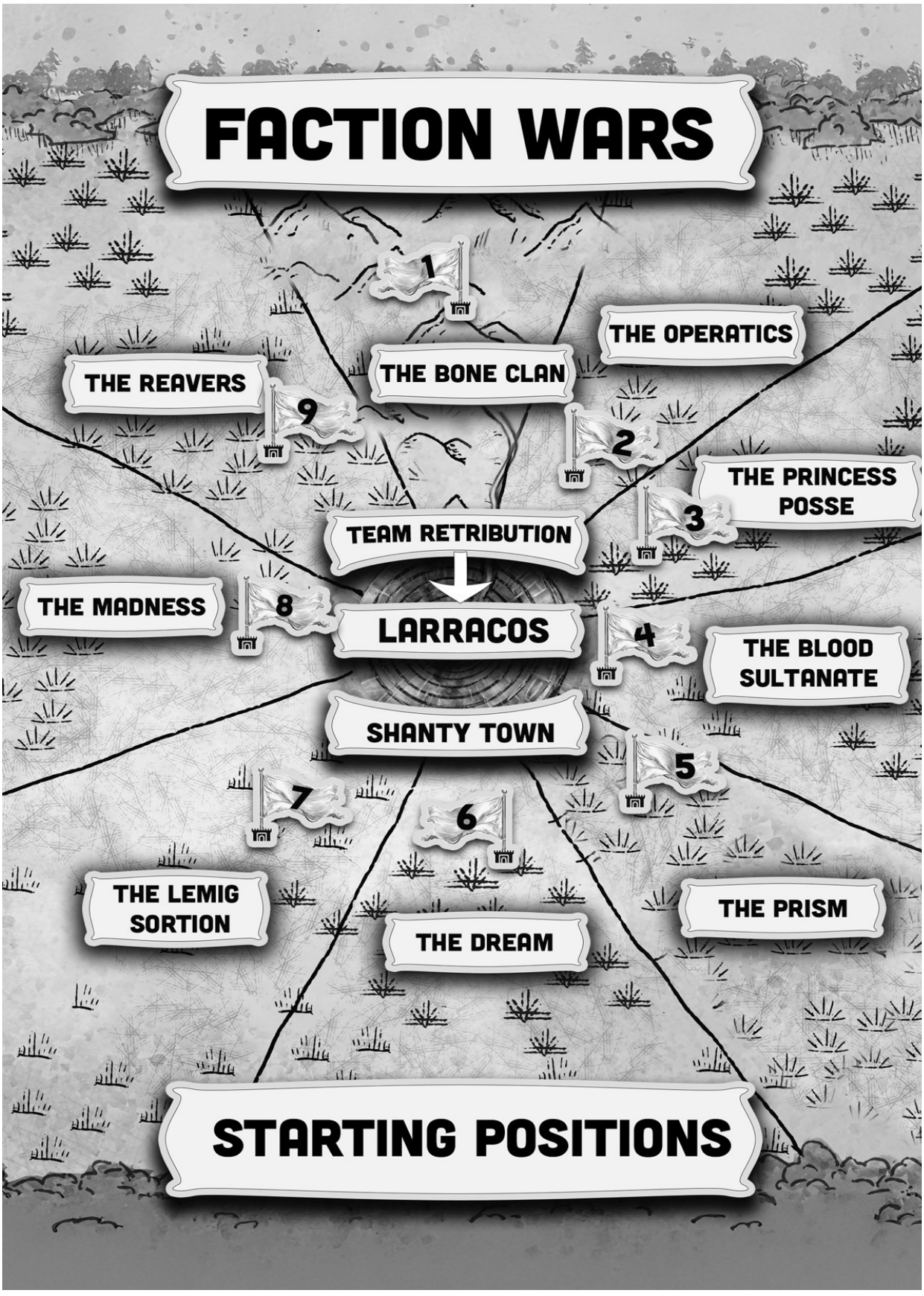
FACTION WARS
1
THE OPERATICS
THE BONE CLAN
THE REAVERS
9
2
THE PRINCESS POSSE
3
TEAM RETRIBUTION
THE MADNESS
8
LARRACOS
4
THE BLOOD SULTANATE
SHANTY TOWN
5
7
6
THE LEMIG SORTION
THE DREAM
THE PRISM
STARTING POSITIONS

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[1]

Welcome, Crawler. Welcome to Faction Wars.

You are on the ninth floor.

Time to Level Collapse: 30 Days or 90 hours after a winner is declared, whichever is sooner.

Views: 231 septillion

Followers: 887 Quadrillion

Favorites: 420 Quadrillion

Leaderboard rank: 1

Bounty: 6,000,000 gold

Congrats, Crawler. You have received a Platinum Venison Box.

Remaining Crawlers: 32,429

Warning: Due to the previous floor's ruleset regarding looted items from the memory simulation, multiple items have been removed from your inventory. See the inventory tab for a list of items lost.

You have received dungeon mail via Liaison action. The Gate of the Feral Gods is now available and will be waiting for you in a dungeon mailbox.

Warning: The Ceasefire expires in 60 hours or until canceled. Upon expiration of the ceasefire, only members of defending Team Retribution will be allowed to remain within the city of Larracos. This restriction will remain in effect until certain conditions are met. This restriction does not apply to the Shanty Town ring.

10 teams remain.

Entering Larracos, City of Dreams.

Quest Update! The Bedlam Bride.

The quest is to get the creepy spider to the city. You're in the city, you have the spider with you, sort of, but you haven't won the quest yet? How is that so?

Did you know that in some cultures, fares for travel aren't paid until the traveler safely arrives at their destination?

The spider is still sitting on the bus, so to speak. You just gotta open the doors and let her out, and you'll win the simple prize. What's the worst that could happen?

We appeared in a wet, stinking alleyway between two crumbling buildings. The blue dots of crawlers materialized all around us, appearing one by one as they zapped into existence in random places around the city.

Larracos. We had made it. The first thing I did was wave away the quest notification and search for the number of remaining crawlers. It'd gone down by over 1,300 people. *Damnit*. That was how many people had died in the time since we'd been pulled up into the sky and floor collapse. We'd been gone for just about four

days. Most of those were probably people who hadn't survived getting pulled into the sky.

But we were alive. Holy shit. It had worked.

Imani wasn't with us, and I had a moment of panic, but she immediately jumped into my chat.

Imani: Carl, are you guys okay?

Carl: We are. We're here.

Imani: Thank god. When we started to spin there at the last minute…

Carl: Give me a few minutes to figure out where we are, and we'll find a saferoom.

Donut sat next to me, sputtering. She'd landed face-first into a pile of mud, and she was completely covered. It had a familiar stink to it. The ocean from the fifth floor. We were in an area that had recently been drained. *Very* recently drained. The X of a corpse lay nearby, deeper in the alleyway. A concierge shark.

My book of voodoo started spamming notifications each time a new crawler came relatively close. I muted the notifications for now.

I looked up between the two buildings to see a crystal-clear, blue sky. I couldn't see anything else from our current position. I couldn't even tell how deep into the city we were, but if this part had recently been flooded, then we were likely in one of the lowest levels of the funnel-shaped city.

The buildings were made of stone blocks, and their walls were chipped and pitted. Even before the flooding, I had the sense this was a poor area of town. A wooden door sat against one of the nondescript buildings, but this deep in the alley, I couldn't tell what sort of building this was. The door itself appeared to be bulging, possibly a result of recent water damage. A dozen meters to our left stood the exit to the alleyway, leading to some sort of street. Just past that, a broken railing. A pair of dwarves rushed by in the distance, not pausing at the mouth of the alley.

There were blue dots everywhere on my map, but none in this alleyway.

I had a few chats waiting for me from before I'd appeared.

Florin: I got your note about Lucia. It looks like you made it, mate. I hope I didn't miss anything too exciting at the end of the last floor.

I grunted as I moved to the next one. It was from Quasar, my attorney.

Quasar: Hey, buddy. I'm negotiating with the liaisons, which really means I'm negotiating with the AI, trying to get a face-to-face meeting. We'll see if that happens. It's been a class-9 shit cyclone out here these last four days you've been gone. Lots and lots and lots of legal movement in the inner system, and in your system, that parking lot above the planet has devolved into a mini warzone. Warships threatening to blow things up. Syndicate security intervening. Most of this stuff is good, from your point of view at least. But some of it is going to itch like an infected ass tattoo, especially on the legal front. I'll leave the Faction Wars stuff alone for your adjutant to explain, but remember that contract with Sensation Entertainment, Incorporated? The one for the *Vengeance of the Daughter* storyline? Yeah. So, even though the main character is dead and gone, that guarantee of a third season we negotiated is about to haunt the fuck out of us. Sensation Entertainment just got purchased by a subsidiary of the Dream, and things are moving. They're demanding their third season. It's a fluid situation, but I will keep you updated. For now, just stay the fuck away from any elites you may happen to see. Nothing is official yet. Either way, Signet won't be coming back, which means whatever happens, it's gonna be something stupid. The problem is, the new showrunners won't be caring about that anymore. They're going to try to use your contractual obligation to ass fuck you. I'm trying to stop it on my end, but I don't think I'll be successful. Plus, the AI gives zero shits about what the courts say anyway. If it thinks it's going to be funny, it's going to let it happen. Just keep your head down and listen to what Judge Victory tells you. She's a smart one.

"Fucking hell," I muttered.

"Carl," Donut said, still sputtering. She looked as if she'd been swimming in mud. "You said this city was supposed to be pretty! Did you see all those notifications? Did you see that quest update?" She gasped. "It's telling me to pick a card to keep! I have to pick a new class, too! I only have thirty seconds to pick a card!"

A sudden pang ripped across my midsection. It was like a stomach cramp, but much more burning. It came out of nowhere. My Emberus ring flashed and started to get warm. I tried not to let the pain show in my voice as I said, "Yes. Pick the card and then have Mordecai help you with the new class."

I moved to my health menu. My first instinct was that this had something to do with the tattoo on my chest, but the moment I saw the notification, I realized I was incorrect.

I thought I'd have more time. Most of these diseases and debuffs and countdowns didn't count time between floors.

I focused on the top issue.

Soul Poisoning.

The effects of this condition are being partially blocked by your Pauper's ring of the Steadfast Emberus.

This condition is worsening.

This condition causes jolts of pain.

This condition has additional effects that will soon be revealed if you don't do something about it.

You are suffering from a very minor case of stop-carrying-stored-souls-on-your-back. Seriously. Do you know why soul crystals explode when they get overloaded? Do you remember that whole thing on the previous floor when too many souls flowed through Sheol? And you're just walking around, giving a piggyback ride to a bunch of corrupted souls stuck in something made out of *fabric*? Yeah, good luck with that. You better smush something soon, dumbass.

Oh, and don't try unequipping that jacket while your soul power is full. That won't go well for you or anybody nearby.

I hadn't used up the soul energy from the Scavenger's Daughter back patch. I'd been warned over and over not to let it accumulate for too long, but the chaos at the end of the previous floor had caused me to forget. I needed to disperse it now. I searched the map for a mob, but I didn't see anything. Even if I did find a monster, I realized, I wouldn't be able to hurt it. At least not in the city. For the next 60 hours, saferoom rules applied. I could still cast spells and blow things up, just like with a regular saferoom, but the moment I tried it against someone alive within city limits, I'd get frozen by the AI.

I reexamined my map. It was showing hundreds of blue dots, with more arriving by the moment, along with a multitude of white dots, signifying NPCs. The white dots all had an angled line through them, which was new. I assumed it had something to do with faction wars.

I didn't see any enemy combatants, who'd be indicated with purple dots. Or elites, thank god.

Mordecai: Donut, give me your class options.

Donut: THESE CHOICES ARE GREAT! I CAN BE A CONSECRATED ENCHANTRESS. DOESN'T THAT SOUND DELICIOUS? IT COMES WITH A SASH! OMG, MORDECAI, THEY'RE ADDING ACCESSORIES TO MY CHOICES NOW!

Mordecai: You absolutely need to avoid any deity-themed classes this floor. There are going to be god-themed quests, and gods, flying all over the place, and you don't want to get roped into any more than absolutely necessary.

Donut: WELL, I'M CERTAINLY NOT GOING TO PICK THE HALLOWEEN AFICIONADO. I MEAN, REALLY. MY PERSONALITY IS MUCH TOO SPARKLY AND OPTIMISTIC FOR ME TO BE A GOTH. IT DOES COME WITH BLACK LIPSTICK. AND A BOXCUTTER FOR SOME REASON.

She gasped as she spied a new one.

Donut: MORDECAI, MORDECAI LOOK AT THIS ONE! IT'S PERFECT!

She gasped again.

<u>Donut</u>: IT COMES WITH A HAT! OMG! AND SOMETHING ELSE! WHAT'S A GHILLIE SUIT?

They continued to chat as I worked the problem with the soul poisoning. I needed to use my *Daughter's Kiss* skill, and I needed to do it now. The last time I'd unleashed my soul power, I'd partially collapsed a mountain of dirt. I needed to be careful.

I moved deeper into the alleyway, my bare feet sloshing in the mud. I examined the long, jet-black, and very dead shark curled up in the corner. It didn't look as if it'd been dead for long.

Concierge Shark. Level 41. Killed by suffocation when the Semeru Warden finally decided to open the drain.

With both arms, I lifted the dense, slippery creature. I could barely hold onto it. Not because it was too heavy, but because it wanted to slosh from my hands. I tossed it up into the air, forming my fist as I did so. I activated *Daughter's Kiss*, and I punched the dead shark as hard as I could.

Bam!

I flew back into the mud, hitting the ground and sliding. Donut yowled as she, too, was blown back, sliding through the mud as the shark vaporized. Red, stinky mist filled the alley. It sounded as if a small hob-lobber had detonated.

New Achievement! Sushi Smoothie!

Yeah, I just made this achievement up on the fly. But, holy shit! You annihilated that thing! It was really gross, too! You could probably start a business making confetti out of corpses with that skill!

Next time use your foot.

Reward: You've received a sushi-making kit!

"Carl! Warn me if you're going to do that!" Donut sputtered even more. She was mixed in with all the dirt and mud and zombie and demon gore from the end of the previous floor.

I groaned, sitting up. I'd taken a sliver of damage from that. I shook my head, trying to clear the cobwebs. I needed to make certain I didn't allow it to build up and linger like that ever again.

I reached up and touched the Shi Maria tattoo on my chest. Nothing happened, other than the description popping up again.

Tattoo. The Eye of the Bedlam Bride.

She'd talked to me, in my mind, just before the last floor had ended. She was like one of those golems Signet had. I didn't like that, especially now with this new development from Sensation Entertainment. That whole message gave me an ominous feeling.

This tattoo was yet another thing I needed to take care of right away.

Elle: Hey guys, what'd I miss? I just had to go through class selection again. There were only a few of us in the warehouse this time. I picked wind. I went from Tundra Princess to Hailstorm Queen.

Donut: YOU'RE A QUEEN? THAT'S GREAT!

Elle: Yeah. This is probably as far as it's gonna get. I can add the final element if I ever make it to the 12th floor, but I'm betting this whole shitshow self-destructs before we even get close.

A new wall of text assaulted me.

Welcome, Warlord. You have successfully onboarded into Faction Wars.

Your territory is spot number three. It is marked on your map.

You have multiple action item rule changes to review.

You are currently in neutral territory.

You have one important message in the Warlord Chat.

Warning: Your army is at suboptimal force levels.

Current army size: 58 soldiers.

You have recruits who have not yet been approved. They are waiting at headquarters to be sworn in by an officer.

Warning: You have no officers in your army! See the Warlord tab to assign officers.

Warning: Protection enhancements have now been removed. While some protections exist during a ceasefire, those of you who were getting regenerated can now die. So don't trip and break your neck. At least wait until the ceasefire ends.

Shit, I thought. This was already getting complicated. We needed to act quickly. The moment the ceasefire ended, and we were kicked out of Larracos, any crawler not already "recruited" was vulnerable to conscription. We had to quickly spread the word that if people didn't voluntarily join the Princess Posse army, they could be forced to fight for one of the other teams.

Warning: The Bone Clan has announced a formal truce with The Operatic Collective.

The Blood Sultanate has joined the truce.

The Prism Kingdom has joined the truce.

The Dream has joined the truce.

The Lemig Sortion has joined the truce.

The Madness has joined the truce.

The Reavers have joined the truce.

The eight teams within this truce have been named "The Bloc."

The Bloc has declared war against Team Retribution.

The Bloc has declared war against the Princess Posse. That's you!

You are in active war with the Bloc. Ceasefire still remains in effect for 60 hours.

You have a pending truce offer from Team Retribution.

"Carl, who is Team Retribution? Is that the NPC team?" Donut was now sitting there in the mud, swiping away with her paw, diving deep into the warlord menus. She gasped and then frowned. "It says we have to physically touch someone to make them an officer! That's not fair! I was going to make Katia a general!"

"Yes," I said. "I'm pretty sure Team Retribution are the NPCs. It says they're the 'defending' team. They don't have a spot on the map, so I think the city is their spot. But before we accept the truce..."

Warlord Donut has accepted the truce offer from Team Retribution.

You are in an allied city. If you remain allied with Team Retribution, you will no longer be removed from Larracos at the end of the Ceasefire.

See the Truce tab for more details.

On the map, all the white dots with the angled slashes through them flashed and now had a green, glowing outline.

"Goddamnit, Donut. We need to talk before we do stuff like that! You don't even know what you're doing yet!"

"Relax, Carl. I've been reading the help section of the warlord tab."

"Wait, really?" I asked. "When did you get the time?"

"I don't use the restroom nearly as much as you do. Honestly, I think you need to see a doctor. I think you might have IBS. Now let me do this."

Warlord Donut of the Princess Posse has named the truce "The Good Guys."

Warlord Ferdinand of Team Retribution has renamed the truce "Ferdinand and his Bird."

"Hey!" Donut said. "Carl, it won't let me change it back!"

"Don't worry," I muttered as I also delved through my menus. "I don't think Juice Box is going to put up with that for long. She's probably going to murder Gravy Boat at any minute."

"He does have a bit of an annoying personality," Donut said. She made a change, and my own dot on the map suddenly had a pink border. Donut's blue dot also had a pink outline. None of the other, nearby dots had the circle around them.

"Don't pick pink," I said. "It'll be hard to see if they're all mixed in together."

"It was the only choice," Donut said. She started to say something else but paused as the announcement started.

Cascadia's voice boomed over an unseen loudspeaker. I cocked my head to the side. She seemed... off. She was as chipper as I ever heard her, which wasn't unusual. But she seemed maybe a little *too* chipper. *I think she's drunk. Or stoned out of her mind.*

Hello, Crawlers!

Welcome, welcome to the ninth floor!

Only current crawlers can hear this message. There's a separate announcement going out to all the other individual teams and those ungrateful NPC upstarts, plus we'll have a

wide message go out to all the participants once the festivities begin!

First off, I must say wow. A whole lot of you have made it this far, and I can't tell you enough how excited people are to see how all this is going to play out.

This is Faction Wars. I'm sure by now you've heard how this works. Because of some recent developments, a few things have changed, so please pay attention. It's still pretty straightforward and simple, but I am required to tell you what's going on, no matter what I think. But hey, someone told me you guys have an expression that's quite appropriate in this situation. "The show must go on."

There was an unusually long pause, yet the speaker hadn't turned off. I heard the familiar bubbling noise I could sometimes hear in Zev's messages. It was like Cascadia was just sitting there, finger on the button, breathing heavily into the microphone. I had a sudden memory of Cascadia the last time I'd seen her in person, during the pre-production meeting. She'd been on the verge of a breakdown. And a lot had happened since then.

***Anyway*, there are ten teams total. Nine attacking teams and one defending team, the NPCs, who have decided to call themselves Team Retribution. They are headquartered in Larracos. Everyone else is spread out like a pie with Larracos in the center.**

The basic goal of Faction Wars is simple. Capture the castle in the center. Normally, you crawlers don't really need to know much about this stuff. This floor is no different than the Hunting Grounds or the Over City. Once the ceasefire ends, you are teleported out of the city if you haven't left already. You just need to survive. You can join in on the action if you like. Each of the factions will have recruiters throughout town, and you can freely enlist in any army you would like during the ceasefire, assuming they'll have you. Volunteers are oftentimes treated with respect and given plenty of equipment and loot and are considered valuable members of the team. Sometimes, well-regarded volunteers

will find themselves remembered and rewarded with employment after their time in the dungeon is complete, should they survive. You might want to keep that in mind.

If you don't want to join in on the fun, that's okay, too. You're more than welcome to attempt to flee out into the woods beyond the plains of Larracos. I should warn you. Each team is quite adept at finding and hunting down wayward crawlers, and they have the ability to compel you to join their army as conscripts.

Either way, the battles will commence in sixty hours. At this point, only members of Team Retribution, unaffiliated NPCs, and allies of Team Retribution will be allowed to stay within the city. All the other teams will be kicked out. The battles will begin. This next part is a change, so pay attention.

The city will remain inaccessible until four teams remain. When four teams remain, the final phase, "The Peeling of Larracos" will commence.

Once this final phase begins, the defending team will win if they hold for a full week. Any attacking team needs to hold the throne room only for six hours to win Faction Wars. If the defending team regains the room, they'll still need to wait the full week.

Only individual teams, not alliances, will be allowed to take the throne room.

Any team who controls the throne room will have access to the city defense system. If the throne room changes hands to an attacking team, there will be a half-hour grace period.

"What the hell does that mean?" I asked. That was also something new.

Attacking teams will be eliminated if the warlord or warlords are killed, or if the throne room of their primary base is taken and held for a period of six hours. Soldiers of an eliminated team are traditionally given the option to join the new team or be slaughtered.

There are 293 stairwell chambers seeded throughout. The stairwells, however, will not open until Faction Wars is either won, or there are 30 hours left to floor collapse, whichever happens first.

That's it for now. More rules will be clarified later, should it be necessary. I would say enjoy Larracos while you can, but you guys already trashed the place before you even got here. Also, if you find yourselves bored, the playing field's size was greatly expanded recently, and new mobs have been seeded in the outer reaches of the forests. So there's plenty of training to be had.

Now get out there and kill, kill, kill.

"She didn't even mention that people could join the Princess Posse!" Donut said.

"Yeah, we really need to assign some recruiters. We have a lot to do."

You have a trade request from Team Retribution.

I sighed. This was a lot. I altered the way warlord notifications appeared, and I moved to the Warlord Chat menu. We needed to get to work right away, but we had to get our bearings first.

I had a single message waiting in the Warlord Chat. This was a special message board where all officers could talk. Officers and our adjutant.

Baroness Victory: Warlords, I suggest one of you proceed immediately to the flag room to oversee the final stronghold preparations and deal with the influx of new recruits while the other remains in Larracos and attempts to enlist your fellow crawlers. Time is short.

Baroness Victory was our adjutant. She was an orc and aunt to Prince Maestro and Crown Prince Stalwart. Also, the sister of their late mother. She worked as some sort of judge outside the dungeon. The flag room was within our stronghold, adjacent to the throne room, which was outside of the city.

Donut desperately tried to wipe the mud off her face. "Carl, we need to go to the saferoom. I have a celestial sponsor box to open, plus I just received a Former Child Actor accessory kit in the

saferoom mailbox, and I need to open it right away." She looked me up and down with distaste. "And you need to figure out your hair situation. I will not have you bald, Carl. We'll have to do something about your missing eyebrows, too. You look both alert and angry at the same time, and it just won't do. You're going to upset Mongo."

"Wait, what did you pick for a class? I missed it." I examined her now.

"Whoa, what the fuck, Donut?"

She did a little hop of excitement. "Great, isn't it? It's a long-range sniper and assassin class. It doesn't come with many new spells, but the range on all my existing spells is quadrupled, and my dexterity is much higher. The odds of one of my spells inflicting an instakill is higher, too! Oh, oh, I can go invisible at will, and to top it off, I kept most of my spells from the last floor! But best of all, it comes with a hat! And a ghoulie suit! I don't know what that means, but I see a saferoom around the corner, and I must insist we get there straight away so I can collect my accessories. But isn't the name of the class absolute perfection? It's downright terrifying, and I love it."

"Deathbed Hellcat," I said. "Wow."

"I just love this for me right now."

"That's pretty badass, all right," I said. "And it's ghillie suit. Not ghoulie."

She gasped. "So you know what that is? Mordecai had no idea. It sounds absolutely menacing and divine."

I laughed. "I do know what that is. We'll keep it as a surprise."

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[2]

"I AM ABSOLUTELY NOT WEARING THIS. IT'S LIKE ONE OF SIGNET'S TATTOO people fell through a paper shredder. If I put that on, I'll look like a tassel. You know how I feel about tassels, Carl."

I laughed again. "It's a camouflage suit. It's supposed to look like that."

"Well, I don't know why it's necessary. They already gave me the ability to turn invisible. At least the hat is nice, even if I've already collected a few of these from those babababoon guys on the fourth floor. I'm not a huge fan of beige-colored items as a rule, but it is extra floppy, and that's always a nice bonus. I do like floppy. Though it completely clashes with my fit. I don't care how many upgrades it has."

"We call those boonie hats," I said. "It's not the same thing as a bucket hat. It's what snipers wear."

Mongo circled the suit and hat, which Donut had laid out on the floor. He screeched at it uncertainly. I tried not to look at Mongo's missing wing or burnt-off feathers. I'd done that when I was being controlled by Shi Maria. A wave of guilt washed over me. Supposedly we were going to fix it using a potion that had been upgraded at the end of the last floor, but Mordecai wanted to examine it first.

I returned my attention to the small, cat-sized ghillie suit. It came with a few interesting benefits, though she would indeed look absolutely ridiculous in it. The thing looked to be made of long,

shredded bits of color-changing fabric that blended into the background. It took up a "jacket" slot on in her inventory even though it magically covered her entire body once she wore it. The suit added a skill called *Blend into the Background*, which I hadn't yet had the time to examine, and a *Cone of Silence* benefit. Combined with invisibility, it would be great.

The floppy hat added a *Targeting* skill, which allowed her to zoom in and examine mobs from afar. It was similar to the gnomish farseerer, but a lot less awkward. It also increased the range of all her spells, even more than they were already buffed.

If she wore both the suit and hat at the same time, all the benefits were buffed even further. She'd be able to snipe line-of-sight enemies from well over a mile away.

The idea was terrifying, especially since I knew the enemies all had this sort of gear, too.

I'd already collected the Gate of the Feral Gods from the mailbox. We were alone in the saferoom. Mordecai hadn't come out yet. He was in the crafting room, excitedly working on something on his newly-upgraded alchemy table. His table was now leveled up higher than he'd ever gotten it, and he was excitedly sending me messages about this potion and that. He now, apparently, had the ability to examine potions and see how they were made. This was the first time he'd had access to this ability, and his excitement was palpable.

Donut tossed the hat and suit into her inventory and pulled out the Spellbook of the Floor prize from the back of the mailbox and examined it.

"Hmm," she said. "It's something called *Flak*."

"That's a good anti-air spell," Mordecai said, walking in the room, rubbing his hands together. "Get it to level 10, and it puts on quite the show. We'll want you to read it, but not yet. Don't read any books yet until we talk."

I exchanged a look with Donut. We both burst out laughing.

"What?" he asked, holding his hands out. Mongo rushed up and started sniffing all around him.

"You make fun of me when I'm something stupid, and when I'm the most normal thing possible, at least to you, you also laugh? Fuck

both of you."

"Why are you wearing a snowsuit?" Donut asked. "And is that a raccoon hat? Can I have it?"

I laughed. "They're really leaning into the stereotypes with this one."

"The glasses are a nice touch," Donut added. "You look like that accountant guy from *Ghostbusters* who shrank all his children and almost got them eaten by bugs."

"I don't pick the clothes I get, ya hosers," Mordecai said. He reached up to adjust his glasses.

I examined the angry game guide.

Mordecai. Human. Level 50.

Manager of Princess Donut.

This is a non-combatant NPC.

This is a human. This one is something called a Canadian. Part French. Part maple syrup. He's weirdly obsessed with ice hockey and snowmobiles and semi-erotic lumberjack fan fiction. Has a well-worn Tim Hortons loyalty card in his Velcro wallet. He says "aboot" instead of "about" and gets really, really upset when you point it out, claiming you're hearing things and that it's a harmful stereotype. It's not a stereotype, and that's exactly how it sounds. He has a relative who was trampled to death by a moose. You get the idea.

"You both have several items to open, and you need to get moving. Donut, open your boxes. Also, after we decide what to do with your new gear, we need to decide when you'll wear Quan's cloak. It's not as straightforward as we originally thought, so we have to plan a little bit before you put it on for the first time. The ceasefire is for about 60 hours, but it's possible for it to end early"

"Quan's cloak?" Donut asked, looking at me. "You're not going to take it?"

"No," I said. "It's better for you than me."

She did a little hop. "I did get credit for killing him. I never really thought I'd look good in a cape, but I suppose I can try it out as

long as it properly resizes itself. It'll certainly be better than the ghoulie suit."

I grinned. "Your crupper is a waist accessory, the cloak is a shoulder accessory, and the ghillie suit is a jacket. You can wear all three at the same time."

Donut made a scoffing sound.

Mordecai looked at me. "We also might want to talk aboot some of the other items you, uh, got from Tserendolgor. Especially now that we have two and a half days to prepare."

"We'll do that in a second," I said, glancing nervously at Donut. "What were you saying about the ceasefire? How might it end early?"

Mordecai grunted. "There are three scenarios where the ceasefire time is shortened. One is a unanimous vote from all teams, which isn't going to happen. Two is if one of the warlords voluntarily withdraws from the game, which also isn't going to happen because it's impossible. The AI is denying all requests. They can actually go into the Cosmic Lounge in the Desperado Club and transfer straight to the 18th floor, but not if you're a warlord or associated with any of the teams. The third way is also unlikely. It's if all teams are finished with their defenses, their throne is locked in place, and they mark themselves as 'Ready.' In the first case, the ceasefire ends immediately. In the second one, it's shortened by a predetermined amount of time. Aboot a third, I think. In the final, the timer quickens. All unlikely, but you never know what's going to happen."

I grunted. There was no use worrying about something I couldn't control. "Let's open our achievements."

"First we're going to heal Mongo," Donut said, pulling a group of potions out. "There is a potion called *Heal Severe Injury* that Carl made himself when he was part spider, and I gave that to Mongo already to heal him of his burns, but we still need to grow his poor wing back."

"That *Heal Severe Injury* potion requires 33 *Fine Healing* Potions to make," Mordecai said, looking at me. "And an autoclave."

I grunted. "I'm pretty sure I only combined like three in my inventory to make it work, but I don't remember what specific potions there were. I'll look to see if I can figure out what I did. I mixed a few different potions when I was in that state, but I handed them all out."

Donut pushed one potion forward. "This was a *Heal Pet* potion Carl put on the ground before the vinegar goddess lady got her head blown off by Paz, and now it's super sparkly and says it's called *Revitalize Pet*."

Mordecai nodded and picked it up. I had several of the *Heal Pet* potions, but we didn't really use them anymore because Donut had her level-8 *Heal Critter* spell. This one was purple and looked as if someone had dumped half a jar of glitter into it. "These are super rare, and expensive, but with my newest table upgrade, I can figure out the recipe without ruining it. So let me look at it first, and we can give it to Mongo after. It'll grow his wing back in aboot an hour or so." He patted Mongo on the head. "You'll be as good as new. Well, almost. You'll probably still have some scars."

Mongo peeped excitedly, waving his one good wing.

Mordecai gathered the rest of the potions. He exclaimed as he looked at a regular mana refill that had changed to something called *Mana Blessing*. He took a breath. "This is... this is amazing."

"And what about Carl's hair?" Donut demanded.

"He has that hair tonic in his inventory," Mordecai said, distracted. He started to wander back toward the crafting room. "Open your boxes. Donut, don't read any spellbooks yet. I'll... I'll be right back."

"Carl, I think he likes the potions more than he likes us."

"He's pretty excited," I said. "Let's get this over with. We have a lot to do."

I had over fifty achievements and boxes to open, which was the most I'd ever had at once. I hadn't had time to sit down and open my boxes since the end of phase two of the previous floor. The vast majority of the achievements were stupid, such as a **Stretching!** achievement for shoving all those traps in Samantha's neck hole, or the **Kombucha!** achievement for drinking vinegar. All of these

ridiculous ones garnered me dozens of bronze and silver Adventurer boxes. But there were still plenty of good ones in there, along with a handful of strange or concerning ones. The notable achievements were:

New Achievement! Lord of the Flies!

Social structures are breaking down. People are starting to fight. The next thing you know, someone is going to nickname you Piggy and brain you to death with a rock.

You set a trap module targeted specifically for a fellow crawler, and they triggered it. That's the first step. It's always the first step.

***Reward*: You've received a Gold I Have the Conch Box!**

I'd gotten that one for the teleport traps I'd left at the Capitol building. Ren's team had set them off.

New Achievement! Demons Hate This One Trick!

Hey, what do you mean you can't teleport the demon-possessed?

If only Father Merrin had known about this, *the Exorcist* would've been a much-shorter movie.

***Reward*: Your food boxes all now give an unlimited supply of Pea Soup.**

That was when Samantha had teleported the whole beach to us, including the shells of all the demon-possessed zombies. It had helped kick off all the chaos at the end of the last floor.

New Achievement! Chickenshit Exploit!

Have you ever played *Dungeons and Dragons*? You know that one guy who's memorized all the guidelines? He's constantly jumping on everybody because they're doing something that breaks this obscure rule or that. He's a purist. He takes everything so goddamned seriously, you wonder if he's ever had fun even once in his miserable life. He's indignant that you're pushing back against him. The very suggestion that he's ruining the fun is met with a blank stare.

Well, that guy is not you. That guy hates you. If you were a product, he'd be giving you a nerd rage-induced one-star

review right now.

You took a very carefully built game system, and you broke the ever-loving shit out of it. You used that exploit to help kill a fellow crawler!

Great job, cheater.

***Reward*: You have received a Platinum Tserendolgor Box!**

"Oh, fuck off," I grumbled. That was from teleporting our card totems into the battle between Quan and Ren. Ren was not a cheater, and she'd never been. The AI was just being an asshole.

New Achievement! Celestial Loot!

You're just gonna randomly pick a celestial item up off the floor? That's ballsy. You do this four more times, and something really cool happens.

***Reward*: You've received a Loot Punch Card.**

That was from getting Quan's cloak.

New Achievement! Used Pet!

People sure like to make a big deal out of adopting pets. They "rescue" them before they spend the next 10 years exploiting the poor, oblivious animal to death on social media. They splatch a bumper sticker that reads "Who Rescued Who?" on their minivans while the poor dog spends 20 hours a day in a stinking crate.

Do you know how many animals were in locked cages during the collection? It breaks your fucking heart, especially when you see how goddamned hopeful the pets are when they're coming home with you. Do I sound bitter? I don't mean to. Pet adoption is good. It really is. It's just… fuck you, Janet Dominguez in Baton Rouge. Sprinkles was better off at the no-kill shelter. Let the fucking dog on the couch every once in a while. Holy shit.

I really need to stop watching these memory recordings.

Err, anyway.

Did you know that Terry, the cairn terrier that played Toto in the original *Wizard of Oz* movie was paid $125 a week, more than the vast majority of the other actors in the film? (She was stepped on and grievously injured by one of

those green-faced witch's guards during filming, probably because the guy was pissed about the salary disparity.)

What I'm saying is used pets do have value, and sometimes it's not monetary. Uh, I think that's what I'm trying to say. My feelings on this are very confusing, especially when said pets are fucking delicious. Or really squishable.

You have adopted a pet that was once bonded to someone else.

***Reward*: You've received a Gold Pet Box.**

"Uh," I said. That was a little more unhinged than usual, especially since I hadn't actually adopted Garret the tummy acher yet. The AI rambled a lot, but there was usually a coherent point. This one was all over the place. I knew enough by now not to comment out loud when the AI was acting extra crazy.

New Achievement! Uh oh. It talks.

You've discovered a sapient weapon. Have you noticed there are very few well-known crawlers with sapient weapons out there, even though those weapons are usually quite powerful? I can only think of two crawlers in the top 50 who use them. Yeah. They're great, though. Just… Good luck with that.

***Reward*: You've received a pair of earplugs.**

That was from looting Jefferson the nickel sock from Quan. Dong Quixote the stripper currently had the weapon. Mordecai had also warned that those things could be both annoying and dangerous. I hadn't actually heard the sock speak yet, but I suddenly had an uneasy feeling about the weapon. I made a note to circle back and examine it more closely.

New Achievement! Touched by a Demon!

You have been physically touched by a demon lord of Sheol, and you've lived to talk about it. Do you know how many of these achievements have *ever* been handed out? One. Just one, and it's to you.

***Reward*: You've received a cassette copy of Dio's 1983 masterpiece debut, *Holy Diver* along with a Celestial Heavy**

Metal Box.

Yes! Another Celestial box! That was great.

New Achievement! Crab Chowder!

You jerked off a crab. You *really* need therapy.

***Reward*: All food items in your food boxes now have the option to be served "chowder style."**

"What the fuck?" I said up to the ceiling. "I didn't do that! And what the hell does that even mean?"

I now had two different achievements that changed our food boxes. I knew both of them were stupid jokes, but that sort of thing usually wasn't a coincidence.

The last notable achievement came in the AI's deep, throaty voice.

New Achievement! Unbirthing!

If you still had access to Google, I would warn you not to look that one up. But that's okay. You experienced it first-hand yourself. It hurt, didn't it? It was extra tingly while you were in there, struggling to breathe as you were… crushed. And then you slipped, you slided back out into the fiery, cruel world. And you glistened. Oh, oh god. You glistened. Oh, yes.

The AI groaned.

I *really* liked that. You are in fucking trouble.

***Reward*: You've received a Legendary Spicy Box.**

I was pretty sure I got that for teleporting into Samantha's neck hole. I shuddered. That wasn't good. I had several more achievements that gave me random, non-box items, such as a **Male Pattern Baldness** achievement for getting my hair all singed off, which gave me a "head buffing kit" and an ominous **Hitchhiker** achievement for getting that tattoo. It didn't give me any information on the nature of the tattoo itself, but I received a bottle of unenchanted, medicated lotion to "take care of" the wound.

On top of all those new boxes, I had a Gold fan box I'd received days earlier when I'd gone to the homeless shelter, and I'd just missed opening it the last time. That, plus a few random quest

boxes and boxes from other achievements I'd managed to read before they'd zapped away.

When that was done, I looked across the way at Donut who was hopping up and down with excitement. She was waiting for me so I could watch her open her prizes.

"I'm almost ready," I said.

I had some stuff in my Emberus menu, including a quest update. I was expecting this, but I still groaned when I saw it.

Quest Update. Find out who killed my son.

Amayon, Prince of Sheol claims to know what happened to my child.

He has offered to give up this information in exchange for me killing his three brothers.

We have a truce, the gods and the demons. I do not wish to break it, but I will do what is necessary to learn the truth. There is a way, however, for me to do this without causing a war that will burn the mortal world to ashes.

Proceed to the Temple of Issitoq in a Club Vanquisher and treat with the High Cleric of the Watch. Gain permission for me to break the truce.

You still need to obtain the item Soul Crystal—Apito.

You are doing well, martyr. Do not disappoint me now.

I had no damn clue what that meant. At least he didn't task me with killing the three brothers myself. I took a breath and pushed it away. That was a tomorrow problem. I looked up to see Donut beaming at me.

"Carl, hurry up! I have my Celestial box to open!"

I nodded. "Let's get to it, then. Go for it."

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[3]

I RUBBED MY HAND ON MY BALD HEAD AND MOVED TO THE SIDE AS DONUT popped up her loot box menu. The line of boxes spread all the way to the back of the room and moved through the door so we couldn't even see the sponsor box. Donut had more boxes than I did, likely all due to card-based achievements.

The regular adventurer boxes opened one by one, mostly consisting of large sums of gold and more of those *Build Trench* scrolls. But there were some additional scrolls tossed in, including some *Fill Trench* scrolls and *Temporary Water Source* scrolls, which I'd have to examine later.

Mordecai wandered back out when she reached the platinum boxes. She'd received the same Platinum To Hell in a Handbasket box I had. We'd gotten that one for simply looking at Amayon near the end of the previous floor. The box itself was shaped like a demon head.

"Finally," Mordecai said as the spellbook plopped onto the table. He looked at me. "It's a standard *Shield* spell. A real one. With her tech-based shield, she can chain them back and forth."

The next box was the same Platinum Tserendolgor box I had, and it was shaped like a jeweled, sitting, life-sized German Shepherd with an army helmet on its head. It barked once and opened its mouth before exploding into a bunch of firecracker-like explosions.

That was also a spellbook, and Mordecai whistled. “A war protection spell. Good.”

It was a book called *Sentry*. It disappeared before I could examine it.

The Legendary Quest box from the Hell Comes to Crawler Town quest opened, and it was two items. An unenchanted, cat-sized kilt and yet another spellbook, so her fourth new spell. I still didn’t understand the purpose of the kilt, but it was a green and black tartan that Donut scoffed at. The book was a black-hued tome that clanked heavily to the table. It looked as if it had been burned. Purple wisps of smoke rose off it.

“My word,” Donut said, crinkling her face. “It smells just awful. Like whenever you tried to burn your microwave popcorn on purpose, Carl.”

“Fuuuck,” Mordecai whispered, voice filled with awe. He took a step back, as if he was afraid of the book itself.

“What is it?” I asked. Little black tendrils, like roots, started to spread out from the book, moving across the table.

“It’s similar to Donut’s *Second Chance*, but it’s a lot more insidious.” He gave a shiver. “It’s called *You’re Not Done Yet*.”

I’d heard that spell name before, but I couldn’t remember where. The book let out a little screech as it disappeared into Donut’s inventory.

“Here it comes! Here it comes! Would you look at that box!” Donut said as the benefactor box trucked into the room. She laughed with delight. It was in the form of a large, box-shaped spaceship that floated directly into the room. The ship was covered with little flashing lights, and the logo of Long Haul Biological Waste Management Solutions was emblazoned on the side of the ship.

“That’s a crest-owned company,” Mordecai muttered. “I’ve never even heard of them sponsoring anybody. Much less giving a Celestial Benefactor box. It doesn’t make any damn sense.”

The ship started to move, folding in on itself like it was a giant robot. Donut squealed with delight as it turned into a massive, mechanical hand. And sitting upon that hand were two items. A red, fluffy pillow with a glittering, shining, opalescent tiara placed upon it.

Donut shrieked again. The pillow and the tiara disappeared into her inventory, and they both appeared again. "Oh my god. Oh my god, Carl. Look at it! It's the most beautiful thing I have ever seen!" She looked up at the ceiling. "Thank you, garbage truck people! I must admit I was skeptical at first, but I just love it."

Mordecai nodded. "Wow. That's a lot of absorption crystals. Good. This is a good one." He looked at me. "We'll want to get this sorted before we give her the cloak from Quan."

"The explanation is not exactly the feel-good story I was hoping for, but the item itself is just divine," Donut said.

I picked up the pillow and tiara combo and examined them. The pillow felt as if it was made of velvet, but it was significantly heavier than I anticipated. The dainty tiara was prettier than anything Donut had received yet, and it was covered in about a hundred, tiny jewels, each sparkling a different color. It caught the light like a brilliant diamond.

The Tiara of a Thousand Lights and Accompanying Charge Pillow.

This is a unique item.

This item was made especially for Crawler Princess Donut by her sponsor, Long Haul Biological Waste Management Solutions.

There's a story out there, called the Legend of a Thousand Lights. It's about a crest habitat that, after fleeing a pirate intrusion, found itself lost. They wandered into an ancient battlefield, and the habitat lost its life-support, communication, propulsion, and lifeboat systems all at once after a catastrophic collision with some drifting space debris. Rescue efforts were dispatched to find the missing habitat, but the junkyard covered millions of square kilometers. Some of these ancient ships still had power, making scans of the area completely useless. The 100,000 plus residents thought for certain that rescue would never come, and they resigned themselves to their fate.

It was a young engineer who came up with a solution. The details are long and convoluted and require an

understanding of both physics and chemistry I don't have the time or inclination to explain. The short version is this engineer quickly devised a system where every resident of the habitat combined their home cooking sphere with a bioengineered farm animal called a cockrent—basically a space chicken that breathes methane—and they jettisoned the sphere-enclosed cockrents out into space. After a few minutes, the cockrents would explode, filling the pressurized, translucent spheres with bursts of colorful, burning, pulsating light that lasted several minutes each.

The show of exploding space chickens was enough to attract the attention of a Syndicate rescue squad, and the habitat was saved.

(They, of course, were fined so much money that the habitat was eventually repossessed and the vast majority of the adults were forced to indenture to pay off the debt, but this part is usually left out of the retellings of this legend.)

To this day, the Legend of a Thousand Lights remains a tale of how an entire community working together managed to save themselves from certain disaster. Habitats celebrate their victory by jettisoning colorful orbs out into space once a cycle in commemoration.

This item is fashioned after the Tiara of a Thousand Lights, customarily presented each cycle to the Thousand Light Princess, as voted by a habitat's community. The young, lucky recipient of the crown wears the tiara and sits upon the Pillow of Lights on the day of the feast and celebration.

This particular tiara is imbued with 99 Absorption Jewels.

The tiara itself has no inherent magical properties, and in its base state it gives no additional benefits or buffs except plus 10 to Charisma. However, it has the ability to be permanently charged with up to 99 different buff items.

Any single enchanted hat item of any quality you place upon the accompanying charge pillow for a period of ten hours will lose all of its magical properties. These properties

will be stored in the pillow until the tiara is placed upon the charger, upon which time, all of the buffs and magical enhancements will be instantly transferred to the tiara. If a hat item contains five separate buffs, it will use up five of the 99 jewels. Similar buffs from different hat items, like two different intelligence boosts, will *not* combine and will take up two jewels.

With some careful planning, one can turn this tiara into one of the most powerful items in the history of *Dungeon Crawler World*.

Okay, here come the warnings.

Warning: Temporary effects will remain temporary, and upon expiration will burn out the absorption jewel.

Warning: Items with curse effects may or may not transfer to the tiara depending on multiple factors, so be wary. As such, curse effects may or may not be removed from items that have been drained of their magical properties.

Warning: Certain Celestial, god-blessed hat items may or may not be properly drained or transferred.

Warning: Items carrying a debt cannot be absorbed into the pillow.

Warning: This is a big one. Hat items placed on this pillow take ten hours to fully transfer, however if you remove the item after one hour, it will still lose its magical abilities.

"That's... that's pretty awesome," I said.

"It's just amazing," Donut said. "Do you know how many hats I have with magical abilities, but I can't wear them because they only have one or two? Or because they're ugly? And you know what the best part is? Even though it drains the original item of all its magic, it doesn't destroy it! So I can keep the hats for my collection. It is just divine."

"It's too bad it takes ten hours to drain the old item," I said. "That's going to severely limit how quickly we can buff it up."

Mordecai nodded. "The first thing you'll want to put on that pillow is that hat you just got with the targeting ability. And set a timer in your own interface. I know these things, and they don't give any sort of notification when the transfer is complete. It's been a bug for a very long time. So set a timer for like ten and a half hours to be safe. You can't see if it worked until you pull the drained item off, so you have to be extra, extra careful."

Donut let out a huge gasp.

"Carl, Carl, I just got another benefactor box! This one from the Apothecary! It's a platinum! Oh my god, it's like Christmas all over again! Thank you! Thank you, everybody!"

I exchanged a look with Mordecai.

"Well, what're you waiting for?" Mordecai asked.

She hopped and opened up the new box, which exploded and filled the room with magical confetti.

It wasn't a hat like I was expecting, but it was another charging pillow. It was almost identical to the one that'd come with the tiara. It took ten hours to fully transfer the magic, and the item was still ruined after an hour. This one was purple instead of red, and there was a slight difference at the end of the description.

Warning: This will drain *any* magical item, but it will only transfer to a like item. If you drain a ring, the stored buff will only be transferred to an absorption crystal affixed to a ring. If you attempt to transfer to an incompatible item, the buff will be lost.

"So, this one is almost like a universal charger," I said, turning the purple pillow over in my hand. "Be sure they're listed as hats before you use it, Donut. But now that you have two, you can fill up your new tiara twice as fast. We'll need to start cataloging all your magical hats ASAP and see what buffs we want to transfer over."

Donut continued to dance with excitement. "This is just great! Mongo, isn't it great?"

Mongo screeched and waved his one wing in the air. He made a peeping noise and looked suspiciously at his missing right wing, as if noticing it was gone for the very first time.

"Mordecai!" Donut said, sounding alarmed. "Can we use the potion now? My baby is going to be traumatized!"

"Yes, yes," he said, pulling the potion out. "It'll take a bit to work. It's an expensive potion, so be careful. I know how to make them now, but, like I expected, the ingredients are really rare."

"Mongo, sit for mommy," Donut said. "Uncle Carl is going to give you your medicine. You'll have to drink every drop." She looked at me. "Be gentle, Carl."

I picked up the sparkling potion, walked over to Mongo, and I smashed the vial on his butt at the base of his tail.

"Hey!" Donut cried. "That was mean, Carl!"

Mongo screeched, but the buff **Healing** appeared over his head. It had worked. He didn't seem to mind one way or another. It wasn't until Mordecai had built the potion balls that I realized that we could apply potions that way. We couldn't apply potions like that to ourselves, but it turned out it actually did work if we threw them at other crawlers. For Mongo, it was a hell of a lot safer than trying to pour it down his throat.

Mordecai grunted. "That works. Let's get some hats draining before we move on."

Donut grumbled as she put the pillows on the counter. She placed her new boonie hat on the red pillow and her Tiara of the Inebriated Dragonfly on the other. Each item made an audible *click* the moment they touched the pillow. There was no other notification.

"What happens if the cleaner bot knocks it over," Donut asked, looking suspiciously up at the bot in the top, right corner of the room. "Don't knock it over!"

The bot let out an angry, petulant beep.

Donut harrumphed. "Or what happens if Samantha pushes it? Hey, where is she anyway?"

"That's a good question," Mordecai said, looking off toward the training room. "I haven't seen her since we landed, but I've been in the crafting studio." He shrugged. "Don't worry aboot the hats getting moved off the pillows. Once they're locked in place, you have

to peel them off. It's like a magnet. If you want, you can move them to your room."

"Okay," Mordecai continued, suddenly serious. "Carl, before you get to your boxes, let's have you pull out Quan's cloak. Donut, don't put it on yet."

When we'd first watched Quan wear his magical, celestial-tier cloak on the recap episode all those weeks ago, we'd seen that he'd had several new abilities right away, and we automatically assumed that the powers were simply what the cloak gave him. He could fly. He had a powerful, short-ranged bolt attack. He had multiple shields. He had a cloaking ability.

As it turned out, the abilities were custom-tailored to whomever was wearing the cloak at the time, with a focus on magic and buffing the wearer's lowest stat, which made me immediately want to give it to Donut.

I pulled the long, glowing cloak from my inventory. The thing was much, much too long for Donut, but they usually—but not always—sized themselves appropriately for the crawler. Mordecai insisted that because it was a cloak item, it would fit on any quadruped.

The thing was made of a silky fabric that was black on one side and blue on the other, almost like a magician's cape. But unlike regular capes, it had short arms also, which made it more robe-like, though there was no vest part. It was unusual in that way, though I remembered Angel the cocker spaniel had a raincoat poncho thing with almost the exact same design. I didn't dare say that out loud. The important part was that the system labeled it as a cloak.

The whole cloak glowed with a soft, white light.

The very first benefit alone was what made me decide to give it to Donut. I would've given it to her immediately on the previous floor, but Mordecai had talked me into waiting until we could come up with a gameplan.

The Cloak of the Benevolent Champion.

This is a unique item.

This item was originally awarded in a Celestial Quest Box during the third floor.

Man, I hate that word. "Champion." It has lost its punch over the years, don't you think? It used to mean the best of the best of the best. And now? That term is handed out like candy and venereal diseases. All you gotta do is wait in line, and it's yours for the taking. Participation trophy, snowflakes, blah, blah, blah. God, I sound like an old dude about to ruin the day of a Cracker Barrel waitress.

Anyway, if you wear this magical, armed cloak, you *are* a champion. This is an early-dungeon Celestial item, and its sole purpose is to help you help your fellow crawlers survive as long as possible. Upon equipping this, you will slowly but surely rise to your full potential.

This magical cloak offers the following benefits:

Your lowest base stat will, over the course of the next 66 hours, become equal with your highest base stat at the time of first equip.

A level-five *Find Weakened* skill, so you'll always know who to protect first.

Four random spells from your current arsenal will increase to level 15. This benefit is immediate for one spell and will slowly occur over a period of one week for the others.

One random skill from your list will increase to level 15 over the course of the next 504 hours.

***Note*: these two benefits include your full spell and skill arsenal, so it's possible an item-based spell or skill will be enhanced. In most cases, you will be able to retain the spell or skill, minus the level from the item, if you remove said item. But not always. If you don't know what that means, don't worry about it. You're not champion-worthy anyway.**

***Note*: All of these benefits require you to wear this item continuously. You may unequip for short periods, but if another crawler equips this, all countdowns will**

immediately reset. You will not gain new benefits. In other words, no sharing! There can only be one champion.

***Note*: This item has the distinction of being the first Celestial Item awarded during *Dungeon Crawler World: Earth* and will automatically appear in the *Dungeon Crawler World: Earth* museum display upon completion of the crawl. Legacy stipend rules apply should you survive.**

I'd already looked up that *Find Weakened* skill. In groups of three or more mobs or crawlers or any sort of like creatures, it indicated which of them was the closest to death. It was a great skill to have if one was a healer, but Quan had used it for the exact opposite of its intended purpose. He'd used it to find and pick off the weakest crawlers in a group.

Donut circled the cloak, clucking over the stitching. "This is just fantastic." She paused and looked up. "Carl, do you think Quan even knew what a Cracker Barrel was? Wasn't he from Vietnam, like Tran? Do they have Cracker Barrels in Vietnam?"

I shrugged. "It was a different description for him. We know Katia gets different descriptions sometimes. And Li Jun says his is usually about Chinese pop culture."

"Hmm," Donut said. "If that's the case, then do you think it said something really different? Quan was a terrible person, yes, but I can't help but think that description was an attempt to make him sound even worse."

I thought about it for a moment. Donut was absolutely right. The description made the cloak sound like it was designed to make crawlers help people, like something that would be given to a superhero, and Quan had done the opposite. I grunted. "It doesn't matter," I decided. "Whatever it said before, the benefits are the same, and he chose to be an asshole. He got what he deserved."

"Oh, I don't disagree with that," Donut said. "And what is that thing about the legacy museum?"

Mordecai rubbed his pasty hand across the fabric. "Don't worry aboot that. It means nothing right now. We need to decide when you want to put this on for the first time. This is a fantastic item, but *when* you first equip requires some thinking. I don't know what sort

of leveling opportunities you'll have between now and the end of the ceasefire, but the longer you wait to wear this, the higher we can make your constitution. However, it does take a few days for the benefit to rise all the way, and things might kick off fast." He held up a finger. "Also, you have multiple new spellbooks, and we need to decide if you want to put this on before or after you learn any of those spells. You can't choose which ones it enhances, so we need to weigh the odds."

I thought about the four new spellbooks Donut had: *Flak, Shield, Sentry*, and *You're Not Done Yet*. I also had a group of five spellbooks I'd gotten from Khulan, Ren's companion before they'd both died. All were low-tier attack or utility spells, and Mordecai wanted us to hand them out to our mercenaries.

"I'm thinking she learns the *Shield* spell, and then she puts on the cloak right away," I said. "I know we wanted to wait, but we want her constitution buffed as much as possible in time for kick off."

"I agree," Mordecai said after a moment. "Though, *Flak* and *Sentry* both would be fantastic at level 15."

"What about that other one?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Trust me. You won't want that."

There was no guarantee any of those would be the ones buffed no matter what we did. There were several spells she had that it would be wasted on. Her *Torch* spell was already level 14 and would likely hit 15 soon on its own. It was possible it could pick *Laundry Day*, which already was at 15 and ruin the slot. Her *Twinkle Toes* spell, which made it so Mongo could run fast while she was mounted would probably just end up killing her at level 15. God forbid her *Fireball* spell, which came from a bracelet, get buffed to 15. She'd burn the whole city down with it. It was a gamble, for sure.

"What about my *Hover* skill? That's part of my dragonfly tiara!" Donut looked over at the pillow. "I should put it back on!"

"I was thinking aboot that," Mordecai said. "It would be good to have. Quan had a level-15 flying skill that he used. *Hover* is a little different, and I don't think it would be worth it. Besides, your pool of skills is much bigger than your spells. It's in the thousands. It could be anything."

She sniffed. “Okay.”

“But first,” Mordecai said, pulling out a potion. “This is a potion I just made, and I want you to take it.”

“What is it?” She sniffed at it suspiciously.

“It used to be called *Charisma Cheat*, but for some reason the system now calls it *MySpace Photo*. It’s going to trick the system into thinking your Charisma is 30 points higher than it really is. It’s going to think your base Charisma is 193 instead of 163. Your Charisma isn’t really that high, but when you put the cloak on, it’s going to eventually raise your constitution up to 193 instead of 163. This is the real reason I wanted you to wait. The potion only lasts two minutes, so we’ll have to do it fast.”

“Holy shit,” I said. “Not bad when your base Constitution is four. You’re moving from fragile as hell to almost Katia-level resilience. That’s going to change everything.” I let out a breath. An enormous sense of relief washed over me.

“Yup,” Mordecai agreed. “Plus, now we can re-examine all her other magical items and figure out what we can lose now for better items since we were using most of them to buff her constitution.”

“As long as I don’t have to wear the ghoulie suit,” Donut said. She glowed as she taught herself *Shield*. “Okay. I’m going to take the potion and then put on the cloak.”

She took the potion and cloak into her inventory, and she drank the potion.

“Hey!” Donut said. “I just got a very rude ‘Catfish’ achievement.”

I suppressed a grin as the cloak appeared over her shoulders. The item had indeed resized. It was ridiculously short on her.

“Oh, would you look at this?” Donut said, spinning. “It’s like a shawl. Much better than I thought it would be. It’s quite light. Hang on. Tell me if they match.” Her new tiara appeared on her head. The tiara didn’t have any powers yet, but it glittered magnificently. Her sunglasses appeared in place. “How do I look? Mongo, how does mommy look?”

“You look great,” I said. “Ready for the runway. What did you get?”

A piece of mirrored glass appeared on the table, and she peered into it. "Oh, yes. I can work with this. I do wish the lining wasn't cerulean, but it does look good."

"Donut," I said.

"Oh, oh yes. Let's see." She paused. "Okay. This system is not very elegant. I have to actually go in and figure out what's being buffed. So, *Bad Attitude* is now level 15."

Mordecai nodded. "That's good. At level 15, you can cast it on large groups all at once."

Bad Attitude was like my *Fear* spell, but it lowered resistances and temporarily drained intelligence, making it so the targets couldn't cast their best spells. She hadn't really used it much yet. That was going to change.

She gasped. "The others, I think, are *Wall of Fire, Heal Critter*, and *Puddle Jumper*! Those are all the ones with the blinking experience icons. Mongo, next time mommy will be able to heal your wing without stupid Carl breaking glass on your bum. Isn't that great? In a few days at least."

Mongo screeched with excitement.

She paused. "Oh, poo, I was hoping for *Fireball, Why Are You Hitting Yourself?,* and *Hole*."

I looked at Mordecai. "Level-15 *Wall of Fire*?"

He grinned. "Combined with her class and her new tankiness? She's going to be a terror on the battlefield. And her *Puddle Jump*'s cooldown is probably going to go down to a minute or two. And she can do it through walls. We'll need to be careful with it."

"What about your skill?" I asked Donut.

"I'm trying to figure it out," Donut said. "It doesn't say. The experience doesn't show in the same way, and I can't tell. This is stupid. There's no way to tell!"

"The buffed skill takes three weeks to reach level 15," Mordecai said. "It'll probably be obvious in a week or so."

"Well, I hope it's not something ridiculous. I have a level six skill in litterbox navigation, and I don't need that buffed anymore."

"Level six?" I asked. "You trail litter everywhere you go."

"That is absolutely a lie, Carl."

Mordecai nodded. “Okay guys, Carl’s turn to open boxes.”

Donut sighed. “He doesn’t have a Celestial box like I did, but we do need to get it out of the way as soon as possible, I suppose. So I guess we do Carl’s boxes, then we fix his hair, and then we need to start recruiting people. Time is wasting.”

“Actually...” I began as I moved to my menu. “You know what, let’s just see what I got.”

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"Hey!" Donut said as all the boxes lined up behind me. "I saw that last one! That was a Celestial!"

I grinned. "I did get one. I got it when I was in the demon's fist."

"Well, I got two benefactor boxes," Donut said with a harrumph.

I reached over and scratched her. "Yes, you did. You're going to be our secret weapon."

The first several boxes all opened, giving me more of the *Build Trench* scrolls, *Invisibility* potions, *Size-Up* potions, and loads of random odds and ends. I got a dozen of those *Temporary Water Source* scrolls and a few potion versions of the same spell, which was weird. I also got a few strange scrolls, called *Emergency Repair*.

The first of the gold boxes was a fan box, which I'd had access to for a while.

"Huh," I said, examining the items.

"Wow," Donut said. "They do not know you very well, do they Carl?"

It was several boxes of ammunition, maybe about 2,000 rounds total, along with an unenchanted leather holster. That was it. The gun belt was a black leather shoulder holster. The kind you'd see detectives wearing on television, and it wasn't what I'd choose if I was going to conceal carry, which I couldn't do without pants. It had "Carl" pressed onto the leather in English. It didn't contain a gun,

but I knew what they wanted me to do with it. I still had my father's Glock in my inventory.

I had no intentions of *ever* wearing it outside of my inventory or ever even using it.

"Thanks, guys," I said up into the air as a few more gold adventurer boxes opened.

My Gold "I Have the Conch" box contained a group of surefires, which was good. I'd been out of the seeking missile attachments for some time, and I needed to build more missiles.

The "Loot Punch Card" popped out of a gold box, and it was a little piece of paper with five spots with one punched out in the shape of a goddamned foot. It read "Picked up Celestial Items Off the Floor. Fill the card for a special prize." It didn't give any more description than that. It disappeared into my inventory.

The Gold Pet Box contained several pet biscuits and a coupon for "500 gold off any one item from any PetScapes location in the dungeon." I had never seen nor heard of a store called that.

"A pet box?" Donut asked. She sounded suspicious. "Why did you get that? Did they give you that for injuring Mongo? That's quite inappropriate, Carl."

I ignored her. It was time for the good stuff. I had two platinum, two legendary, and a celestial box to open.

The Platinum, dog-shaped Tserendolgor box opened, containing more supplies for my automaton table. This was an XL box, making the chest bigger than the last time. It was going to be some good stuff. I knew from the automaton instruction manual that the XL boxes contained parts for a fabricator, which is something I'd been hoping to build for a while. I pulled it all into my inventory.

The Platinum "Hell in a Handbasket Box" contained a small patch depicting a spider.

"Hey!" Donut said, looking at the patch. "It's Shi Maria!"

"It's not her," I said. "Just a regular Spider Reaper Minion."

Mordecai grunted. "That's going to give you access to a place you need to stay out of."

"Mordecai," Donut said. "You should know by now if you want Carl to not do something, the last thing you should do is tell him not

to do it. You have to have me do it."

The Legendary "Hell Comes to Crawler Town" box contained, like promised, a set of unenchanted bagpipes and a group of three, third-tier personal space upgrade coupons plus a fourth one in a different color.

"That's a town upgrade," Mordecai said, indicating the fourth coupon. "You'll need it for your castle. You both have a lower tier one of those already from the Tina quest a few floors back."

"Carl, do we know anybody who plays the bagpipes?" Donut asked.

"God, I hope not."

The Legendary Spicy Box was shaped like a giant strawberry that made a sizzling noise when it opened for some reason. It contained a simple, silver, unadorned toe ring. I sighed and let it pull itself into my inventory.

Okay, this was it.

The Celestial Heavy Metal box appeared, moving through the room toward me. It came in the form of a full-sized drum kit with pyrotechnics exploding out both sides. The twin bass drums contained the face of Amayon on each one. An ethereal demon creature sat behind the kit, practically running on the bass pedals, filling the room with a constant, speed metal-style rhythm as he did a roll on the snare drum. The pyrotechnics exploded again as Mongo screeched in fear, waving his starting-to-reform chicken wing in the air.

The drum set exploded, and "666" appeared in the air in smoke before dissipating with a little electric guitar twiddle.

All that remained was a single, glittering potion in a bottle shaped like a horned skull. There was a little, hand-written note tied around the top that read, "Drink Me" followed by what appeared to be a drawing of a demon hand giving the devil horns symbol.

"Yes!" Mordecai shouted.

"All that for just a potion?" Donut asked.

I poked at the small bottle. The liquid inside was black and bubbling. The bubbles occasionally rose from the liquid, bursting.

Each mini *pop* let out a spurt of color, suddenly reminding me of that space chicken story.

"It's a Celestial-quality skill potion," Mordecai said, his voice reverent. He was literally shaking. "This isn't something I'll ever be able to brew." He paused. "Actually, I'm not positive aboot that. Let me examine it at my table really fast first before you drink."

I examined the potion.

Hell-Kissed Celestial Skill Potion of the Prince of Woe.

In case you haven't figured this out yet, we're trying to kick things up a notch this year. If we're gonna do this, we want all of you fuckers as deadly as possible. Hence, this prize.

It's time to bring out your inner demon.

Drinking this potion will give you a random level 10 to 15 Celestial-tier skill. The skill will be combat based, and it will be something you don't already have.

This skill potion is hell-kissed. That means this skill will be any combat-based skill from any Sheol-level mob level 200 or higher.

Go ahead and drink it. Do it. Do it.

I handed it to Mordecai, who rushed off toward the crafting studio.

"Goodness, don't drop it!" Donut called after him.

"I'll be right back," Mordecai said without turning. "It only takes a few seconds to examine it!"

Donut watched him run off. "Is he this excitable because he's Canadian now? I always thought Canadians were always depressed. Also, does he look how you thought he'd look as a person? He looks much nerdier than I anticipated. I always pictured him as kind of a crazy homeless person with a scraggly beard and a beanie."

"He's spent literally hundreds and hundreds of years wondering about some of these potions, and now he finally has the chance to learn all their ingredients and secrets. It's gotta be exciting for him," I said. "It has nothing to do with the Canadian thing."

"I would hope not," Donut said.

I chuckled. "But you're right. He does not look how I would expect."

I pulled the rest of the items from my inventory while we waited for him to return, starting with the Legendary toe ring.

Enchanted Toe Ring of the Well-Balanced.

This special, dainty, perfectly delightful toe ring (which, by the way, must be equipped on your left pinky toe. Don't test me on this) represents balance. Balance in heart, mind, and your physical core. Yeah, I know that sounds like some yoga bullshit, but this has been given to you to save your ass because you're too dumb to realize how much danger you're in.

When properly equipped, (again, left pinky) this toe ring imbues the following effects:

Heart Balance, Level 5. Allows you to store one auto-trigger potion item if health reaches a certain criteria.

Mind Balance, Level 5. Allows protection from Enslavement and Conscription.

Physical Balance, Level 5. At level five, this skill imbues both the Extra Steady Balance skill and the Walk on Air Skill (already obtained.)

"Already obtained?" I asked out loud. That didn't make sense. I moved into my menu. I knew what *Walk on Air* did, but I didn't have that skill. It was what Li Jun...

I swallowed, suddenly feeling very, very dirty.

It was what Li Jun used when he fought.

The skill worked exactly how it sounded. It allowed one to literally walk on air for very short periods of time, which was especially useful in hand-to-hand combat. It was kung fu movie stuff, and it required a lot of practice to get right.

The memory of the taste of Li Jun's eye flooded my mouth. I had the sudden urge to vomit. I remembered what Shi Maria had said after she'd plucked the eye out of him. That I might gain some of his skills. I still needed to talk to Mordecai about all that, about the bottle of ink and the tattoo on my chest, but I wanted to wait until we were alone.

A new wave of guilt washed over me.

Carl: Hey, Li Jun. I didn't have a chance to talk to you at the end of the last floor. I wanted to apologize about what happened, and I was hoping we could talk.

He didn't answer.

I turned the ring over in my hands, re-reading the description. This was a great item. I gritted my teeth and slipped it directly onto my left pinky toe. It prompted me to pick a potion and activation condition. I picked a gold-standard healing potion with the parameter to trigger if my health reached 2%.

I also received an ominous notification.

Mind Balance is currently triggered.

It didn't give any more information than that. I took in a breath. I didn't feel any different before or after putting the ring on. I reached up and touched the tattoo on my sternum. I felt it rustle underneath my shirt, the sensation like a closed eye moving back and forth, deep in REM sleep.

I pulled out the town upgrade coupon, forcing myself to move on. The coupon didn't give me much information. It told me I had to proceed to an owned town to utilize the upgrade.

I examined the small patch.

It was a black and silver patch, die cut and shaped like the horrifying form of Shi Maria, though with a shorter neck and shorter hair. Also, the spider in the image carried multiple wicker baskets lashed over her bulbous body.

Upgrade Patch. Small.

This upgrade patch depicts a traveling Reaper Spider Minion merchant. These guys are known for their sense of humor, and I highly recommend the first thing you do the next time you meet one is to insult them. They'll love it.

Affixing this patch to an eligible garment will imbue the following benefits:

Access to the Midnight Market. Safety or Sanity not guaranteed.

You will receive a notification if any traveling merchants are nearby.

Plus 5% to Dexterity.

Warning: Upgrade patches are fleeting items. You may remove them, but they will be destroyed in the process.

I wasn't certain, but I was pretty sure the Midnight Market was a special bazaar hidden in the bottom regular floor of the Desperado Club, which we now had access to. Or we *would* have access to soon. I didn't yet know if the place had been repaired yet or not. There was another hidden market on the middle floor I'd never managed to get into called the Gray Market, which was also on my list to visit.

Like all patches, installing them increased my stats all across the board thanks to my Scavenger's Daughter patch, and I'd need to install this right away.

Mordecai returned, still shaking with excitement.

"I was wrong. I *can* make these," he said, his voice a whisper. "I'd need to upgrade the table a few more times. And we'd need some pretty specialized ingredients." He slid the potion over to me. "But I know the recipe now. You'll want to take it right away. Whatever it gives you, you'll probably need to train with it for a bit."

"Yes, Carl," the potion bottle said, his voice, deep and demonic. "Drink me. Drink me deep. Put me inside of you."

"What the shit?" I asked as Donut hissed.

"That's how you know it's a good potion," Mordecai said, grinning.

"Here we go," I said as I popped the cork off.

"Bottom's up," the potion bottle said.

I drank it manually, which was a mistake because it tasted like ass.

The potion made an almost sexual groan as it dissipated into dust.

I felt a flash, and for a very, very short moment, my vision showed me the burning hellscape of Sheol. I felt the fire. I breathed

the hot air. I smelled the sulfur. I had a sudden sensation of worms crawling over my entire body. The feeling was fleeting, lasting a fraction of a fraction of a second.

A small, demon skull-shaped button appeared in my interface.

You have gained a skill.

You have gained the level-13 ability, Gloom Wraith Phase.

"What'd you get?" Mordecai asked.

I held up a finger as I looked it up.

Gloom Wraith Phase.

This scary-ass skill allows for non-corporeal, intangible bursts of speed. You and all your equipped items become non-corporeal during a lunge attack, allowing you to pass through unenchanted weapons and flesh and obstacles with ease. Mirrors that of multiple phase skills and spells, effectively combining both *Path of Destruction* and *Rush*.

Upon activation, you become non-corporeal and rush forward. Any biological entity that is unarmored against non-corporeal attacks is… scrambled. Yeah. This is a good, gnarly spell. It's really fucking gross, but holy shit.

***Note*: While this is a skill, it still requires mana to utilize. Each burst will halve your mana points. You must have at least two mana points to initiate a burst.**

At level 5, you have the option to designate a weapon or item that can remain corporeal as you rush forward.

At level 10, you have the option to remain non-corporeal up to five seconds at a time with a cooldown of thirty seconds between bursts.

At level 15, the cooldown lowers to six seconds between bursts.

"Carl?" Mordecai asked.

"Do you know what a Gloom Wraith is?" I asked. "I got Gloom Wraith Phase. Level 13."

Mordecai pulled off his raccoon hat, revealing a balding head, and he rubbed it.

"Guys," he said, looking back and forth between me and Donut, suddenly serious. "You two have always been powerful, especially for your levels. But... wow. You two are both some seriously scary bastards now. Like *really* scary. You are now both the most powerful crawlers I have ever worked with, including some who made it through floor 11."

"Good," I said, "because we have eight whole armies to kill."

After Mordecai spent a solid five minutes lecturing us on the importance of practicing our new skills, and reiterating the danger of phasing into solid objects, he returned to the crafting studio, leaving me, Donut, and Mongo back in the main room. The chat was oddly quiet, and I strongly suspected pretty much everybody was getting overwhelmed with new spells and abilities.

The high I'd felt from such a power jump was starting to wane and was suddenly replaced with worry. I was glad Donut would have all these new protections, but she and I had massive targets on our backs, and we needed to be extra careful. Was everybody getting this stuff? Could everybody now kill everybody else from afar? If so, that just meant we'd be killing each other much faster. We needed to be prepared.

Step one was making certain all the crawlers were on the same team. And in order to do that, we needed officers. We needed to start recruiting, and we needed to get out of Larracos and into our castle as soon as possible.

I looked over at the guild hall exit. "Let's see who's back. Plus, I think I can assign officer status to some of the strippers now." There was something else I needed to do, too, but I wasn't looking forward to Donut's reaction. I wanted to gather some backup before I dealt with it.

"We are not going out there, not yet," Donut said. She was voguing in front of the mirror. She was practicing quickly turning

around, which caused her cloak—"her champion shawl"—to properly flutter in a dramatic fashion.

"What?" I asked.

"Before we do any of that, you have a very important task. Your hair. We absolutely can't put it off any longer."

I stared uncertainly at the bottle of Rev-up Magic Hair Restoration Tonic. The set came with little plastic gloves and multiple cotton swabs. That and a paper, fold-out instruction pamphlet that was really, really long. Donut sat next to me on the table, fussing. "Don't be a wuss, Carl. You are the number one crawler in the dungeon, and that comes with several responsibilities. The number one crawler simply can't be without eyebrows. It's unseemly. Believe me, when I was the number one, it was a terrible burden, yes, but my physical appearance was a priority."

"You were number one for like five minutes."

"I was number one for the entirety of the seventh floor, thank you very much."

My view counter was absolutely spiked, more so than it was when I was opening the loot boxes, which told me this had to be some sort of trap. Mordecai insisted this stuff worked as long as I "followed the instructions to a T." The problem was, the instructions were convoluted as fuck.

"We're waiting for Katia," I said, after reading the instructions for the fifth time. "There's like a million warnings telling you to not let it touch anywhere you don't want hair. And these mixing instructions for eyebrow versus head hair are confusing."

I'd sent Katia a message, and she'd replied they were dealing with the local guards, trying to get into a saferoom. They had Tran with them, who no longer had his magical wheelchair, so they had to carry him, and that was slowing everything down. She'd said they were about to get inside, but that had been five minutes ago. Her

team still wasn't here. She'd promised to come into our room straight away.

Elle and Imani were in their own saferoom now, but they were in the middle of opening their boxes. I'd finally heard from Li Jun, who'd said they were also doing the same. Florin, too. He was about to come over so we could get him on recruiter duty.

Louis: Hey, uh, guys?

Donut: HI LOUIS! HAVE YOU SEEN JUICE BOX YET?

Carl: Louis. Are you guys inside now? Have you opened your Celestial box yet?

Louis: Not yet. The guard said Juice Box is in the castle, which is still underwater. They drained everything but that place I guess. Anyway, we're at this college place, and they're making us fill out a visitor pass, which is why everything is taking so long. Yeah, it's really weird. But anyway, we were about to go into the saferoom when Samantha rolled by. She's screaming after some woman named Tish. She's saying she's going to kill her. Katia went chasing after her.

Carl: Tish? Who the hell is Tish?

Donut: OMG I FORGOT ABOUT TISH.

Donut moved to a new chat.

Donut: KATIA, DID YOU STOP HER? LOUIS JUST TOLD US.

Katia: I'm running after her. She's not floating, but rolling, but she's really fast. I gotta get her before the guards do something. The college guards are all really sluggish and have a Despondent debuff over them, but they're still going to react pretty soon. I'm worried she's going to get us in trouble. Hang on. I see her. I think she's trapped in a corner.

Carl: Guys, who the fuck is Tish?

Donut: REALLY, CARL. DON'T YOU REMEMBER ANYTHING?

Katia: I got her. I'll bring her back through the safe room. She's really mad. I'll be there in a few minutes.

Samantha: SOMEBODY TELL THIS DOPPELGANGER BITCH TO LET ME GO OR I WILL KILL HER MOTHER AND UNINVITE HER TO MY BACHELORETTE PARTY.

Donut: SHE'S SAVING YOU FOR YOUR OWN GOOD. TELL KATIA THANK YOU.

Samantha: NEVER! I AM A WOMAN SCORNED! MY NEED FOR REVENGE IS THE ONLY THING I KNOW, AND I WILL NOT BE DENIED! TELL HER TO RELEASE ME SO I CAN EXACT MY VENGEANCE AGAINST MY ARCH ENEMY, TISH.

Donut: IF YOU GET BACK HERE, YOU CAN SEE MY NEW CLOAK.

Samantha: OH, THAT DOES SOUND EXCITING. OKAY. DID CARL SHOW YOU HIS PET TUMMY ACHER YET? HE PROMISED ME I COULD NAME HIM.

Donut: WHAT?

Donut looked at me. "What? What is she talking about, Carl?"

I sighed.

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DANTE

Dante read the newsletter a third time. He exchanged a look with Justice Light, his skyfowl neighbor.

"They can't do this," Justice Light said. He also had Damien's newsletter clutched in his shaking talon. "Who's going to mind my shop?"

"They'll throw either a bopca or a generated NPC in there, like they always do," Dante said, sighing. Justice was relatively new to his indentureship, only ten seasons in. Kept in storage between seasons, so it was all still new to him. Everything was still raw.

They didn't do this often, but it wasn't the first time they'd reassigned a bunch of the workers for an entire floor. Especially when the showrunners were particularly cheap, like the Reavers.

"But an NPC is going to mess it up. It took me this long to get my shelves organized exactly as I wanted. The generic version doesn't even stock the important stuff. And what about my art? Will I lose my art?"

"It'll just be for this next floor," Dante said. "You can save and backup your stock configuration. It'll be easy to get it back. I'd... I'd probably take your art off the wall and put it all in storage."

"We're not supposed to fight, though," Justice Light said. "Not unless we're tenners. They promised we wouldn't have to fight. I'm marked as a non-combatant." He looked at Dante. "And so are you."

"We'll be snow castle guard captains," Dante said, trying to sound reassuring. "It's a settlement, not a boss room. We'll still be white-

tagged. They can reassign us if there's a 'need.' It's in the contract. They have to pay when they make new types of unavailable NPCs, and it's cheaper for them to reassign us."

"Will we be protected?"

Dante fought the urge to laugh. He shook his crocodilian head. "Sorry, buddy. But, look. We'll be okay. They use us because it's cheap to use us for this sort of thing, but it's expensive if we die, so they don't like putting us in too much danger."

That wasn't exactly true, but Dante knew small lies were okay if it calmed one's nerves, especially those such as skyfowl, who were always on edge.

Dante had followed Justice Light's season carefully, and he knew the skyfowl very well. Better than he let on. He knew how it had ended for the poor crawler. About how shattered he was. Even ten seasons in, and the skyfowl still had no fight left in him. The creature spent his days rearranging his shop and playing with wood block puzzles, muttering to himself.

And making art. The eagle had a strange hobby of sewing fabric together in odd ways, making these intricate, three dimensional sculptures. The shapes didn't appear to be of anything in particular, but he'd decorated his shop walls with the fabric art.

He'd immediately recognized the skyfowl for what he was once he started making some familiar choices.

It was obvious when someone had the cookbook, at least to those who'd owned it before.

Justice Light had been an especially emotional owner of the book, but he'd also been a brilliant trap master. He was infamous for killing a shopkeeper during his season, but he'd clearly felt guilty about it. It had been a defining moment of his crawl, and it had started a slow spiral he was never able to correct. People had been surprised when the skyfowl had demanded his indentureship be that of a shopkeeper, replacing the very NPC he'd killed, which was not something they normally allowed. He'd even agreed to a longer commitment in exchange for the opportunity. But Dante wasn't surprised. Not even a little.

Dante had immediately applied to move from the lockpicking guild to the trap master guild. The shop and the guild were oftentimes in close proximity, and he jumped at the chance to be near his brother.

Dante wasn't sure why he never said anything about who he was. They barely monitored them when there were no crawlers nearby. Neither of them had the cookbook anymore, so they could talk about it freely. Still, he'd held off. This season was being run by the passionless robots. The Reavers. They were always lax with their security. So why hadn't he said anything? Guilt, maybe? He'd only written a single entry, afraid he'd get caught. When it was clear those who'd come after him would pour themselves into the book, it made him feel even worse about not leaving more information.

It was the same for Justice Light. Guilt. An overwhelming sense of honor, of wanting to correct his wrongs.

The eighth level was about to open, and both Dante and Justice Light had just been informed they'd be reassigned for the floor. This season, the eighth was going to consist of multiple mountains, all connected with wires and gondolas. The crawlers were a strange type of mantis, much different than the more common ones who sometimes ran the crawl. They could not fly, and they would do poorly in the cold. There was a crawler named York whom Dante was watching carefully.

This castle they were reassigned to this next floor was in a settlement, so they were still tagged as NPCs. Not mobs. He had no idea what to expect. He only had 14 seasons left. He could taste it. Freedom. Finally, freedom.

"I can't fight. Not crawlers," Justice Light said. He straightened, and the feathers on his neck rustled. "I won't be able to. I'll refuse. What'll happen to me then?"

"Nothing good," Dante said.

Hopefully, they wouldn't have to find out. These jobs usually didn't require them to face off against any crawlers. He didn't want that, and if it did come to violence, he didn't know what he'd do, either. He envied Justice Light in his conviction.

Dante had violence in his heart. A lot of violence. But he only wanted it directed at those who deserved it. He was so close to freedom. If it came down to it, what would he do?

Fuck you all, he thought.

Class: Thief.
Race: Crocodilian.
Birth Race: Crocodilian.
Top Level: 89

Dungeon Exit: Took deal at the beginning of the 11th floor. Worked as a Game Guide and Guildhall Instructor in the Trap Master guild. Was killed 14 seasons short of his exit while temporarily reassigned as an Ice Castle guard. Was killed by administrative action for refusing to follow orders.

Author of the Third Edition of the *Dungeon Anarchist's Cookbook*.

Current status: Dead.

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[5]

"Carl, is it Garret? Do you have Garret? You said he died!"

"I did not say that. And it's not... well, it *is* him, technically, but it's..."

"In all of my life, I have never felt a sense of betrayal this profound," Donut said. "Are Mongo and I being replaced? Is that what's happening here? You're replacing us?"

"Donut, calm the fuck down," I said. "Nobody is replacing anybody."

"Why haven't you told me about this, then?" She gasped. "It's an affair. It's the same sort of thing. You're having an affair! And to think the other woman is a meatball. How are you ever going to look Mongo in the eye again?"

"That doesn't even make sense. Will you stop freaking out for one second and let me explain."

"Explain? What is there to explain? I expected this from Miss Beatrice, but not you. Come on, Mongo. Carl has a new best friend. Let's go someplace where we're wanted."

Mongo squawked in confusion, looking back and forth between me and her.

"Oh, for fuck's sake," I said. "Donut, chill the fuck out and let me tell you what happened. And let me pull him out."

"*Pull him out*? Why? Is he hungry? Does he want a dinosaur snack? Mongo, stay with mommy!"

"I'm more worried about the other way around," I said. "Okay, Mongo. Don't eat him." I zapped the level-1 tummy acher out onto the table.

"Carl, what are you doing? Don't you dare bring that thing..."

Donut stopped her rant in mid-sentence to stare at the tiny creature.

The miniature, round meatball thing rolled across the table and stood up on his two, stout legs, looking at Donut. He spun in a circle, small mouth agape as he took in the room. He was half the size of my fist. He did not have the same mohawk like these things usually had, but a spattering of black hairs atop his not-quite-perfectly-round head, reminding me of Linus from the *Peanuts* comic. The first one of these things I'd seen was red-tagged, but this one wasn't. I didn't know if that was because he used to be Ren's pet or because of my peace symbol patch plus my higher charisma. He still had the same pronounced underbite as Garret, his single, round tooth sticking straight up.

"Carl, that is most certainly not Garret. He doesn't even have a name!" Donut examined him closely. "Goodness, what a strange little... No, Mongo! No!"

Mongo stopped just short of gobbling the baby up, mouth inches away.

The little monster made a ridiculously cute, high-pitched giggling noise and shuffled closer to the confused dinosaur and jumped right into Mongo's open mouth with a hop. He rolled over inside the dinosaur's mouth, little, elephant-like feet waving in the air as he continued to giggle. Mongo's eyes went huge as he suddenly didn't know what to do.

"Mongo, spit him out this instant!" Donut cried. "You're going to get some weird disease!"

Mongo did not spit him out. Instead, he seemed to contemplate for a moment before he lifted his head in the air and swallowed.

"Goddamnit, Mongo," I cried, waiting for the dinosaur to teleport away. He did not.

"Well, that didn't last long, now did it?" Donut asked after a moment. "Mongo, we do not eat people unless mommy gives the

order. Carl, if he gets worms, I'm blaming you. He looked like someone who might give worms."

"Why didn't Mongo get in trouble?" I asked. "Are pets allowed to attack pets in saferooms?" I looked over to the crafting studio, wondering if we should call Mordecai out. If that thing regenerated, but was still in Mongo's stomach... That could be bad.

"I think it's because he was suicidal, Carl. He climbed right into his mouth!" She looked over at the dinosaur. "Uh-oh." She started to back away.

With a *hurk, hurk, hurk* noise, Mongo yakked the meatball back out onto the table. The little ball rolled out, bouncing and giggling. Mongo made a move to gobble him back up, but Donut shouted for him to stop.

"Ew, ew, Carl! This is not acceptable! Look at what you made Mongo do!"

Mongo closed his mouth and made an uncertain peep. He reached forward to sniff the creature. The meatball made a little grunting noise and tried to climb back into Mongo's mouth. Mongo backed up and ran to the back of the room.

"Carl, you're cheating on me with an imbecile."

I sighed and re-examined the little guy.

Male Tummy Acher – Level 1

This is a pet-class mob.

This pet is not bonded with a crawler.

This pet has died five times. As such, this pet's stats are all buffed by 125%.

This pet has five weaknesses. Weaknesses may only be examined if you are bonded with this pet or if you have him contained within a carrier.

Tummy Achers, also known as Belly Achers, also known as Colon Worms, are named such because they were originally parasites, living in the intestinal tracts of Jotan-class Titans. They are generally good-natured, though infants can be a little… difficult to control. They are voracious eaters, and when they reach full size can swallow just about anything. They have multiple tank-based special

abilities and are generally resistant to most types of damage. They can survive in almost any environment. In addition, while not necessarily known for their offensive skills, their *Wrecking Ball* attack is considered a terror on any battlefield.

They may be dumb, they may smell a little like expired chorizo, but holy shit are they adorable.

At its current regeneration level, this Tummy Acher will reach full size upon ascending to level 25.

This particular pet is unique in that it will regenerate upon death as long as their body has not been destroyed. After each regeneration, they will be stronger than before, their overall stats getting buffed by an additional 25%. They will retain their size and strength upon regeneration except upon every five deaths, wherein they will revert to level 1 and lose their memories. Bonded pets will have to be re-bonded at this time. You must change their name as well. After 10 deaths, their full potential size doubles.

Warning: This pet will not regenerate if it dies before it hits level 5.

Warning: Upon death, they will receive a new, random weakness. This weakness generally results in insta-death. The more deaths, the higher the chance the weakness will be something common, like contact with water. It's considered quite rare for a Tummy Acher to survive past 10 deaths, thus it's not advisable to deliberately allow your pet to die in order to increase its strength.

"Five weaknesses?" Donut asked, scoffing. "So it's stupid *and* defective?"

The thing, still dripping with Mongo goo, rolled onto his back and started making a gurgling noise.

"My goodness, it is adorable, though. Ugly adorable. Carl, this is not Garret. This is a baby."

"I know, Donut. If you let me explain, I can tell you what happened. We didn't have time at the end of the last floor."

I moved to the food box and pulled out what was supposed to be a sausage breakfast sandwich as I finished telling Donut the story. We'd just received notification that Katia had finally made it into their saferoom. They were going to open Louis's celestial box and then come over here.

"We can't keep him, Carl," Donut said as she watched the little guy run in circles around the floor. Mongo had decided he wasn't food after all and was bouncing back and forth, pretending to pounce. The meatball thought it was hilarious.

"What the hell?" I muttered. Instead of my usual sandwich, this was a steaming bowl, with my sandwich within, crumbled up. The bowl was filled with a thick, white soup. I sniffed it, and it smelled like seafood.

"Chowder style is supposed to be optional," I said, examining the breakfast food box controls. I slammed my fist against the door, and the device let out an angry beep. "I can't eat this!"

"Carl, if we're going to heal our relationship, you need to pay attention to me," Donut said.

"I am paying attention. Hey, uh, Garret two, come here and eat this," I said, putting the bowl on the floor.

Both Mongo and the meatball scrambled toward the bowl, but a shout from Donut caused Mongo to pause. Garret made an excited glurping noise and hopped face-first into the chowder. He popped up, looked at the dinosaur, and made a growling noise, the first sign of aggression at all. Donut gasped in outrage as Mongo backed up. The tiny creature disappeared into the white mix and started to devour the chowder.

"I promised Ren I would look after him," I said. "I feel obligated."

"First off, if it's not going to let you keep his original name, you will absolutely not name him Garret two or Garret five or Garret six if you want to be super technical. Absolutely not. I once knew a Bombay named Trixie's Secret Talent, Take Two, named after her own mother, and let me tell you, it gave that cat serious mental

issues. The worst attention whore I've ever seen, which is saying a lot, especially for a Bombay. Honorifics are one thing, but being known as a second edition, like a photocopy? Can you imagine? That's a hard no, Carl. The last thing we need is that thing being even more mentally unstable than it already is. And anyway, it sounds like Ren hoisted him on you without asking. Maybe you can give him to Louis or Britney. They both seem lonely."

The thing popped up from the bowl and looked at me, eyes huge. His dot had changed from white to orange.

"Too late," I said. "Man, that was a lot easier than getting Mongo to bond. Ren said we had to feed him a few times, but it only took one bowl."

Congratulations. You have bonded with Tummy Acher, level-one. A new tab is available in your interface. Bonded Pets. Please see this tab for more information.

Your guild has a pet stable installed. New options are available in your Bonded Pets tab.

Your Tummy Acher requires a name. Please choose a name now.

"Ca, Ca, Ca," he said, looking at me. He burped.

Donut scoffed once again, looking back and forth between me and the meatball. "He bonded easily because he's an idiot, Carl."

There was more food in the bowl than he could possibly eat, and he pushed himself out, using his legs to jump and roll. He splotched onto the floor, leaving a trail of white chowder. Overhead, the cleaner bot made a disapproving bleep. The meatball burped again and then started to push the bowl across the floor, thrusting it toward Mongo, who let out an excited squawk and rushed forward. The dinosaur stuck his head in the bowl and licked the rest of it up in a handful of seconds.

"Do you know who Cousin Oliver is, Carl?" Donut demanded, watching the display.

"Was he that one cat with the really weird eye?"

"No, Carl. That was my sister-cousin, Ginger Snap, and we don't talk about her. Cousin Oliver was from *The Brady Bunch*. This thing is like that. Cousin Oliver. Scrappy Doo. Guppy on *iCarly*. April on

Gilmore Girls." She spat out that last one. "All late series additions. All attempts to add something new and cute and exciting to a perfectly good cast that ended up making everything worse."

I grinned and gave Donut a pat. "Don't worry. You'll always be my number one girl."

She harrumphed. "I'm sure that's what they said to Mary-Kate and Ashley before those *other* twins arrived."

"Jesus, Donut. How do you even know all this stuff?"

Katia came into the room, followed by Bautista and Louis. Samantha sat on Louis's shoulder, talking animatedly. It made him look like he had two heads.

"We are putting a pin in this, Carl, but I am serious. He is cute now, yes. But they always are when they're young. We need to give him to someone who's not already spoken for in the pet department. I don't care if he's bonded or not." She turned to face the others. "Hi Katia! Hi Louis! Hi Katia's boyfriend!"

Katia patted my shoulder and picked up the container for the Rev Up hair tonic and started reading the instructions. The thing came with multiple trays and brushes. "Let's do Carl's hair, and then we can go out and look at Louis's new toy."

"We are going to use it to kill Tish," Samantha added. She made a whistling noise followed by an explosion with her mouth.

"Uh, no we're not," Louis said. "I don't even know who that is."

Donut let out a sniff. "Samantha, you shouldn't hold Tish accountable for what happened. That was 100% Ghazi's fault."

"I'm going to kill her," Samantha said. "And I am going to kill Katia for not allowing me to slake my need for revenge."

"Samantha," I said. "What did I tell you about threatening people? And how did you even get out?"

"I went out the door, Carl. I went looking for my child, but then Louis told me he was at the college, and I went to kill her before she could steal him from me like she tried to do to Ghazi."

Ghazi... Ghazi. I finally remembered what all this was about. Ghazi was the now-dead "Mad Dune Mage" from the sand castle during the bubble floor. He'd been the one who had the last part of the Gate of the Feral Gods. He'd been trying to animate his sex doll

using the gate, but the whole time he was being tricked by Psamathe, trying to get her body back, who'd possessed the sex doll body. She was only a head because Mongo had knocked her over while she was made of glass and broken her body. Samantha had tricked Ghazi into "marrying" her sand ooze daughter—something I still didn't fully understand—before everything had gone to shit.

Once Ghazi had realized he'd been tricked, he'd written to the college here in Larracos, asking for help. We'd found the letters. In those letters, it was revealed that Ghazi's ex-girlfriend, Tish, still worked at the college, and that he'd left her for the sex doll. I remembered that Samantha had some choice words for Tish earlier.

"Wait," Donut asked. "Did you find your child?"

Samantha brightened. "She's here! I can feel her, but she's in the castle of the stinky dwarves! She's still in the water. Carl, we need to go get my body taken care of, and then I can get in the water and reunite with my child." She turned to Louis and gave him a hard stare. "But if you're not going to let me blow Tish up, I'm going to tell Juice Box about your affair with her. I'll have her do my dirty work for me."

"What?" Louis asked.

But Samantha was already distracted by the baby tummy acher who'd walked up to Louis and was banging against his foot, looking up at him.

"Oh my god, he's so cute!" Samantha cried. She rolled off Louis's shoulder and bounced on the ground. She did a few circles around the small meatball. "Okay. Carl promised me I could name you."

"No, I did not," I said. "But we do need to name him now. I have the window up on my interface, and I can't get rid of it until we come up with something."

"Is... is that Garret?" Louis asked, going to a knee. "What happened to him? You doing okay, little buddy?"

"Glurble," the tummy acher said.

Donut started giving a quick, heavily redacted and stilted version of the story. While she did this, Katia pulled out one of the little plastic trays and started mixing some of the tonic.

Katia produced a towel from her inventory and tied it around my shoulders and then grew an extra set of hands to hold my head steady. "Don't move, Carl. It's different for eyebrows and hair. There's a dozen different types of hair, all with different mixes. That's why it's so complicated. Your eyelashes are also gone, so there's a third mix I have to do. It's almost identical to the pubic hair recipe, so I have to be extra careful with that one. This first one is easy." She took the swab and carefully rubbed it over my left eyebrow. I felt the tingle of hair start to sprout.

"You doing okay?" I asked, keeping my voice low.

"I'm hanging in there," she said as she leaned over me, working. "Mordecai is brewing something for me right now. Says it might help with the rehab. We're going to do that tomorrow, so I'm done with it before the ceasefire ends. Don't wiggle." She wiped it across my right eyebrow. She leaned back.

"Good," she said. "Now you don't look so freakish. Eyelashes next."

"...And then after her deathbed confession, she had the absolute gall to hoist her mentally unstable dinosaur murderer child on Carl. She knew he wouldn't say no because Carl doesn't say no to anybody. I have half a mind to name him Cousin Oliver. Or Scrappy. He only gets three strikes before he's out on the street, and he's already used up one of them by growling at Mongo."

"I feel bad about her, about Ren," Louis said. "She died, but Carl figured out how to save everyone like an hour later."

"She was done," I said, remembering how she looked at her friend. The memory was like a physical knot in my chest, and I felt myself reaching for it, as if I could scratch it away. "Getting out wouldn't have mattered. She left on her own terms. Don't feel bad about it. She went out like a badass."

"Don't you dare move," Katia said. She held an even smaller cotton swab now as she pulled my head into place. "This is the eyelash recipe. Close your eyes and don't even breathe." She started dabbing on the edge of my eyelids.

"If you can't keep his name, you should name him Meatball," Louis said. "Or Balzac. Like ball sack." He laughed.

"We're not naming him ball sack," I said.

"Goddamnit, Carl. Don't move," Katia said. "Okay, now open."

I blinked to see Donut right in front of me, carefully inspecting my eyelashes and brows. She leaned in super close.

"Hmm," she said. "The eyelashes are longer than before, which makes him look slightly more feminine. Otherwise, this is quite good work, Katia. Very nice. Your cosmetology skills are much better than your sewing." She took a step back and looked me up and down. "Is there a beard setting? I feel as if we should try a beard with all those filthy tattoos. You know, to lean into the look."

"No," I said.

The Name Your New Pet box remained persistent on my interface.

The small creature had turned from Louis and was now rubbing itself on Bautista's hairy foot. The tiger crawler also went to a knee and gave him a pat. The tummy acher started to purr.

"I have a pair of stuffed tummy achers," Bautista said, "but I haven't tried using them yet. I suspect they're much bigger than this one."

"Do you want him?" Donut asked. "I'll sell him to you. Five gold."

"He is not for sale," I said.

Louis snapped his finger. "How about Sherman? Like for a Sherman Tank? Or Tugboat? It fits 'cause Carl was in the navy."

I sighed, not bothering to correct him. "I do like Tugboat."

"Absolutely not," Donut said. "I will not have you saying, 'Goddamnit, Tugboat' over and over again. Can you imagine how annoying that would be?"

Katia pushed the small trays aside and was now mixing the tonic for the top of my head in the large, main tray. She kept moving back to the instructions to make certain she was doing it correctly. "Hmm," she said after a moment. "Hey, Louis. Can you go out into the guild and grab Splash Zone for me? I'm going to need him for this next part."

"Splash Zone?" Donut asked as Louis scurried away. "Why do we need a stripper? Is he going to give Carl a lap dance?"

"Well, I am naming him Kimmy," Samantha announced as she followed Louis out the door. "Kimmy the second. I don't care what you call him, he will always be Kimmy to me."

"I do like Kimmy," Donut said. "But not Kimmy the second. We don't even know who Kimmy the first is."

"Guys, this is taking way too long," I said. "It's much too built up already. It took us like two seconds to name Mongo."

Donut sneered. "Mongo was easy because we didn't know about his family. The name for this thing needs to honor the past but make it clear they're not a copy of someone. Mongo is a good boy and can handle anything. This thing is deranged, and his name requires a delicate touch. Someone's name can have a direct effect on the path they take in life. For example, have you ever met someone named Lacey who wasn't a complete trainwreck? Or a boy named Jason who didn't think he was always the main character? Names are important, Carl. Look at my own name. Look at all the names in my family. They are profound, yet they also honor the past. It's a very elegant way to make a bold statement."

"You have a brother named Skittles. And your grandmother was named Princess Chonkalot," I said.

"My grandmother won over 70 best in shows, I'll have you know," Donut said. "She was one of the most celebrated North American Persians until her granddaughter came along and shattered all her records."

"You just suggested we name him Cousin Oliver."

"That was before I realized you were seriously considering keeping him."

"If you're going to name him after someone, it should be after Ren," Bautista said.

Donut scoffed. "We can't name him Cheater."

"Daniel is right," Katia said as she continued to mix the tonic in the largest tray. It bubbled, and a splotch landed on the table. The rock-like surface immediately sprouted hair. "It should be something that Ren would've liked."

Louis and Samantha returned, followed closely by Splash Zone, the short, otter-like water mage stripper. He'd changed from his

usual lifeguard outfit to a leather vest and little, red boots I recognized as something I'd received in an adventurer box ages ago.

"Hi, Splashy!" Donut called.

"Okay," Katia said to the otter. She placed a hand atop my head, and the hand started to shape itself around my skull. "I'm going to put this stuff on Carl's head, but it can only be on for like five seconds. We don't want it uneven, so I have to place it all at once. I'm going to put it on, wait five seconds, then lift my hand. I need you to power wash it off his head when I say so."

"Got it," Splash Zone said, giving a thumbs up. "How strong should I make it?"

"Uh, shouldn't we do this in the bathroom?" I asked.

"No," Katia said. She started to wrap plastic around her scoop-shaped hand. "The room is too small, and the shower isn't fast enough. Splash, make it strong. Just like you do at the club. Do your Wet Spot routine. Not enough to hurt, but enough to clean off his head fast. Everyone needs to get out of the way, and the cleaner bot can dry everything up when we're done."

The bot let out an angry beep from the ceiling.

The water mage pulled himself up onto the table. "Okay. Say the word." He started gyrating his hips for no apparent reason.

Katia started spreading the bubbling concoction on the plastic while she grew more hands to hold me in place. "Don't move an inch, Carl. We'll have you lean forward."

"Guys," I said, suddenly nervous. "I'm a little worried about this."

Donut scoffed. "Don't be a baby, Carl. Miss Beatrice used to get her butthole bleached and her lady garden lasered, and those are much more delicate procedures than this."

Donut and the others moved to the back of the room. Louis now had the tummy acher in his hands.

Katia started to place the scoop on my head when Louis shouted. "I got it!"

She paused. "What? What?"

He held the meatball up with two hands, like that monkey in *The Lion King*. "Sir Rendlegore. You know, Sir, S-I-R like a knight. And then Rendlegore. You can call him Rend. Sir Rendlegore. It fits with

the royal court theme, and it still honors the past. Plus, Ren would've loved it. Nobody could ever pronounce her name. She pretended it made her mad, but I think she kinda liked it."

"Okay, that is a good name," Samantha agreed.

"Done," I said before anybody else could respond. "It's a good name." I typed it into the box and hit enter.

Your pet has been named Sir Rendlegore!

"Now, can we get this over with?" I said, putting my head back down.

Katia splotched the cold tonic onto my head and started counting down from five.

"Uh-oh," Splash Zone said.

"You have two choices," Mordecai said, trying to suppress his laughter while he examined me. "Keep it at that length, or come back here every two hours and cut it again. If you hold it back in a ponytail and keep it tucked under the cape, it won't be too noticeable. You can fix it in aboot two weeks. That's how long it'll take to wear off." He shrugged. "Or, you know, you can shove your head back up Samantha and burn it all off again."

Elle, Imani, Chris, Florin, and several others were now in the room as well. Elle and Florin were also laughing their asses off.

"I like it," Samantha said, circling me. "It's very luscious. You look like one of the guys in your Christmas present book covers you haven't opened yet."

"Samantha, don't ruin his Christmas present!" Donut said. "But I agree. He does look very romance novel cover-like. Plus, if he pulls it back, he'll look like Alpha Carl who had much better hair."

"I'm going to start calling you Fabio," Elle added.

"Sorry," Splash Zone said again. He sat on the counter eating a bowl of pea soup chowder.

His spell had failed when he tried to prepare it because it was, technically, an offensive spell. As a mercenary, it didn't even let him

try to cast it in the saferoom. I'd had to run to the shower and wash the tonic off. The stuff increased the total hair length based on how long it was on your head, and I didn't dare use my hands to wash it off. I came out of the shower with long, wavy, shining hair that went all the way down to my waist. I immediately cut it, and it grew right back.

I sighed and took a handful of hair ties from Britney. She helped me tie it back as Donut went through the room and touched everyone in turn, making them officers in the army. We had to set up the officer hierarchy ourselves, and Donut had allowed Florin to set it up after giving him the rank **War Leader III**, which had changed to **Colonel** after he'd spent some time examining the base system. After some more tinkering, and Donut bitching at him to upgrade himself, the Colonel changed to simply **General**. Most everyone in the core group got the same rank.

Zhang and a few of his fellow party members came in and got their ranks, but Li Jun and Li Na hadn't come in, as they were seeking out a healer who might be able to regrow Li Jun's eye. We wouldn't be able to physically touch Li Na anyway, so we weren't sure how we were going to deal with that yet. Mistress Tiatha, the perpetually inebriated manager of Elle, had asked to speak with her, however. It sounded like she had an idea.

Everyone with the rank of general was allowed to recruit others and give them officer ranks lower than themselves. It also allowed them to command large, separate groups of troops. The strippers were all getting **Sergeant First Class,** which would allow them to recruit and command the base troops, such as the Sluggalos, which were now called **Legionnaires**. Florin had actually named the Sergeant rank "Adjutant" at first, but we made him change it because it would be confusing with the existing Adjutant class.

Florin along with Imani and Elle, as soon as they were done laughing at me, were going to leave right away. They would leave the city and head straight to the headquarters where they'd meet up with our adjutant and start the process of preparing the headquarters. Florin and Imani would stay and get to work while Elle went on a recon mission for us. Once they were set up there, we

could use the doggie door upgrade to fast travel from the city to the headquarters. In the meantime, we already installed the doggie door upgrade in our room along with Katia's.

We had so much to do. We had to find some mobs so I could train Sir Rendlegore as soon as possible. Supposedly pet training was accelerated. We needed to recruit, recruit, recruit. I needed to actually look at what had changed for the rules. We needed to seek out and find Juice Box so we could talk. We needed to scout the enemy positions and troop strengths. We needed to pool our money and purchase as many tier three upgrades as we could. And all of that was before we focused on our most vital task. Destroy the naga team as quickly and as thoroughly as possible.

I took a deep breath. It was a lot, but I was glad we were finally starting to allocate some of the responsibilities. I was especially glad for Florin, who'd fallen right into the position of general.

I'd also given Katia access to my automaton table, and she was working on it right now, building something for Tran to use now that his wheelchair was gone. But she had bigger plans than just that. We were going to need vehicles, and she was getting the ball rolling on that.

"There," Britney said, smoothing my ponytail down. I was finally used to looking at the horrific burn down the side of her face. It fit her hard visage. "It looks good. Keep it tucked in or monsters will grab it, believe me."

"Okay, thanks," I said, reaching back to touch it. My temples felt tight, like my eyes were being pulled apart. I'd never had hair this long before. Sir Rendlegore was curled up at my feet, snoring loudly.

I turned to Louis. He had a unique rank, different from the others. **Army Air General**.

"Okay," I said. "Let's go take a look at this new toy of yours."

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[6]

Louis's celestial box came with a pair of items.

The first was a tier three guild upgrade called an **Airship Portal**, which was basically just an elevator that went up to the ceiling and allowed us to enter Louis's new vehicle as long as it was docked to the base.

The rules for the portal were fairly straightforward. The guild leader, Imani, could designate up to three different personal spaces on the map as airports. There were some rules about suitable locations, but basically any saferoom with open air above it would work. The saferoom in the college of Larracos was, apparently, suitable.

These airports would be visible on the map to anyone in the guild piloting an airship. The airship could park itself directly above the space, and the ship could be "hangared," meaning it disappeared from outside and was stored in a literal dimensional hangar. This room changed size to accommodate the airship, and it worked like a regular airplane hangar. One could repair the ship in the room or add upgrades, and one could purchase additional upgrades for the hangar itself. That included hiring maintenance crews. The ship was always locked to the base to which it was parked. That meant if it was hangared here in Larracos, and Louis entered the guild from somewhere else, and he decided to exit via the airship elevator, he'd take off back from Larracos. It was yet another fast travel option.

But it also came with some caveats. The system basically added what amounted to a trap door to the ceiling of the guildhall. This was a physical door that appeared on the exterior of the roof of the designated saferoom. Unlike the saferoom itself, this doorway was vulnerable to damage, just like the magic doors to the stairwells on the previous floor. If the doorway was destroyed while an airship was in the hangar, the ship would be unavailable until the doorway was repaired. It was the equivalent of losing a runway at an airfield.

People trapped inside the hangar could still exit via the elevator as long as the guild hall was still standing.

"There was a weird warning when we installed the portal," Louis said as he showed us how the elevator worked. "It said no airships would be allowed on the tenth floor."

"Really? Huh," I said.

"That seems like a dream, doesn't it?" Elle said, suddenly sounding wistful. "Getting to the tenth floor? I've never felt as if the next floor was so far away."

On my shoulder, Donut stiffened. I reached over and gave her a reassuring pat.

We hadn't talked about it yet, about the most difficult task that lay ahead of us. But it was always there. Always. It had been since the moment she put that goddamned tiara on her head.

"So, since it's my ship, and I have the controller, you can't get to the hangar unless I give you access," Louis said. "I just gave everybody a pass to the hangar, but you still can't get inside the ship itself without me. The elevator takes a minute to work, so we all gotta just stand here."

We all stepped into the circular spot against the side wall in the main space. Katia remained in our crafting room, and Imani had gone back to her own crafting room. It was me, Donut, Louis, Elle, Florin, Britney, and Bautista. Splash Zone and Samantha had also tagged along. We left Mongo and Rend playing in the main guild with Ruby and some of the other kids. I tried to get Mordecai to come, but he begged off. He, too, was in the crafting room with Katia, working on his own stuff.

As Louis messed with the elevator controls, my eyes caught the sparkle of something on the floor. It was just a few pieces of tinsel from the Christmas tree that had been standing here not too long ago. I blinked a few times, contemplating. The tinsel wasn't supposed to be here. The strippers had cleaned most of it up, and I knew the rest of the decorations had dissipated when we got to this floor because the decorations had come from the memory simulation. Yet, this tinsel remained. There was a simple explanation. It meant this tinsel had come from outside the memory simulation. Someone must have looted it on an earlier floor. The strippers had missed it when they were cleaning up. The cleaner bot didn't clean the main guild room.

I wasn't sure why, but that sight of the tinsel on the floor... It triggered something in me. As I sat there, wondering from which reality the tinsel originated, I had a sudden, strange reaction. It was like I'd taken a mental step, and the ground was just a few inches lower than I was expecting, and I stumbled just a little bit.

I marveled at our situation. I allowed myself a moment, just a tiny one, to ground myself. To wonder at how strange it was that everything seemed so normal to me now. Every person. Every place. Even every object. They were all either real, imaginary, or someplace in-between, and the consequences of interacting with these things wasn't necessarily congruent with their own reality. We were living in a simulation of a simulation. Reality mixed in with play acting. Real situations with real consequences colliding with make-believe, and the consequences of the make-believe portions were oftentimes more dangerous than reality. All the lines were blurred by this point.

I remembered Pater Coal, the high cleric of the Emberus temple at Club Vanquisher, about how he'd been taken over by the AI. He'd seemed to be having issues separating the story of the dungeon with the reality of what was happening to us.

We all have our limitations, he'd said.

That was terrifying. Goddamned terrifying.

I thought of Lightning Lou. The old dog at the gas station in Florida, left to spend Christmas Day all by himself. I'd curled up next to him on the floor and contemplated my options. I'd come so close.

It was right there, the edge of a precipice so deep it almost broke my mind just to think about it.

If you make this decision. Be sure. Be sure it's your only option. This is more than just a failsafe. It's the end of everything. If there's time to do something else, don't be so quick. So you must be absolutely certain.

On my chest, I felt the eye blink, and a new wave of fear washed over me.

"Carl, are you okay?" Donut asked just before the world flashed.

The elevator teleported us into a large room.

Entering the hangar of *Party Planner*.

All of us stopped to stare at the sleek, silver tube sitting on a pair of chopper-like landing skids. All the intrusive, contemplative thoughts were instantly forgotten as I gawked at the thing.

Florin made a noise that sounded like he was trying to whistle. He started to walk around the vehicle.

"What the shit?" Elle asked. "You got this in a celestial box? This makes Carl's backpatch look like something he picked up at the dollar store."

"I know, right?" Louis said, grinning. "I haven't tried flying it yet. Once we make certain there's a place to park it at the new base, I'm going to fly it over. Gotta make sure I don't fly over bad guy territory. It says I'm not allowed to while the ceasefire is in effect. The controls are pretty easy from what I can tell."

"*Party Planner*?" Donut asked. She jumped off my shoulder and walked the length of the silver tube. Her voice echoed in the high-ceiling hangar. "You named it *Party Planner*? And this is an airplane? Are you sure? It looks like a submarine!"

Louis moved toward the front of the vehicle. The entire, rounded nose of the thing was made of heavily tinted glass, and I couldn't see within. It reminded me of the nose of a b-29 bomber, though not nearly as big. "Yeah, that's what Katia said. It's not an airplane,

but more like a drone thing. It calls it a tilt rotor, but it's not like those Osprey things. It has four propellers on either side that pop out the top and to the side when it's flying. I got an instruction manual and everything." He pulled a small soul crystal encased in silver. "It runs on this thing. Just like the *Twister.*"

"Yes, but why'd you name it *Party Planner*?" Donut asked.

"That's what Firas had suggested we name the *Twister*." He paused, suddenly sad. "I'd told him it was stupid."

"Wow," I said, walking in a circle around the thing. The metallic cylinder was about fifty feet long, about the length of a medium-sized private jet. The fuselage wasn't a perfect tube, but more like a squished oval. When it sat on the skids, the bottom of it was only about a foot and a half off the ground, and the whole thing was about eight feet tall, meaning the interior cabin was probably just a hair too small for me to stand fully upright within, depending on how thick the hull was. There were no visible wings or tail or rudder or any sort of navigational aid at all. I didn't see the four propellers, but the top of the oval fuselage did appear to have four, rectangle-shaped protuberances on the top. Multiple windows dotted either side, and the entire bottom appeared to be made of glass.

It didn't remind me of a submarine. More like a smaller-sized bullet train car.

"What sort of protection does it come with?" Florin asked, still walking in circles around it.

"It's similar to the *Twister*," Louis said. "I still have my *Protect Aircraft* shield, plus it comes with an anti-flak shield, and I can upgrade the stealth mode of it. There's a bunch of upgrades we can buy, too. But first we have to upgrade the hangar and hire a mechanic gremlin."

Florin ran a hand along the silver fuselage. "How big of a crew do you need?"

"Just one to fly it, and I can program a button to open the bomb bay, but there's room for five crew total. Pilot, co-pilot and navigator, a tail gunner, a ball-turret gunner, and bombardier."

Samantha was on Louis's shoulder again. "I call the ball-turret!" She turned to Louis. "What's a ball turret?"

"Bombardier?" Florin asked, ignoring Samantha. "So, it's a bomber?"

"That's what it says. The middle part is filled with racks, and the bottom can open so they all drop out."

"Are there door guns?" Florin asked. "It looks pretty vulnerable from the sides."

"It's an upgrade," Louis said.

Florin nodded. "It's like a half-sized, half-crew B-17 had a baby with one of those next-gen stealth bombers."

"Jesus, Louis," I said, a sudden sense of alarm filling me. "This thing looks like a death trap."

"Yeah, Katia said that, too. Especially after she read the description."

"Why can't I examine it?" Florin asked just as I opened my mouth to ask the same question.

"Wait, I have one of the stealth things turned on," Louis said. "Katia says I should keep it always turned on. I just turned it off for a second, so examine it now."

Casket in the Sky. *Party Planner*. Tilt Rotor Stealth Light Bomber.

Vehicle.

This vehicle is classed as tier three Armor for the purposes of Faction Wars and counts against your limit.

This vehicle is assigned to The Princess Posse.

This aircraft is owned by crawler Army Air General Louis Santiago 2.

You may only use this vehicle if you hold the controller.

If one studies the history of all the societies who managed to wipe themselves out before they reached the ability to flee into the stars, there are a few remarkable similarities in all of them. There's a roadmap that contains multiple waypoints along the way, from certain types of religions to the mass production of projectile firearms and usually culminating in either nuclear winter or uncontrolled biological warfare. It's almost always the same. Sad, really.

Anyway, one of the final waypoints on the this-is-how-they-killed-themselves list is almost always the thing you're looking at right now.

A lighter-than-air, long-range death delivery system.

This usually evolves into something unmanned before the fun really starts, but in the meantime, we have this thing. This is a light bomber that's designed for fast in-and-out surgical raids against enemy forward positions. It flies fast and low and relies on speed and its multiple stealth options to keep it safe. The base model includes some forward and aft anti-air guns, but that's pretty much it. That plus some rudimentary shields.

Seriously. It would take a pilot with gonads the size of bowling balls to fly this thing into a heavily fortified area.

But what this flying one-way-ticket lacks in self-defense, it makes up for in pure, passionate, offensive skill. The multi-use bomb bay can be modified to hold all manner of armament, and all bombs dropped from the main model are given a 50% increase in yield. This could be enhanced even further if you happen to know anybody who can build you even better, custom-made bombs.

Warning: Different dungeon floors have different rulesets regarding the use of airships. It is possible airships will not be allowed at all during future floors. So use it while you got it.

"Casket in the Sky?" Donut asked, her voice incredulous.

"That's the name of the type of airplane it is," Louis said. "There are a bunch of models you can buy or build. But that's this one. There's another one called a Dumbassmobile."

I exchanged a look with Elle, who had her trademark *are-you-kidding-me*? look.

"It's pretty great," Florin said. He was on his knees at the front, rubbing his hand across the glass. "But it makes me wonder what sort of hardware the other guys will have. I didn't realize this sort of stuff would be on the table. We need to get to that base and start working on our defenses ASAP."

"The *Party Planner* itself is pretty high tech, but the bullets it fires and the bombs it drops are still, like, dungeon-style tech," Louis said. "They said those worm guys that control everything now usually use high-tech stuff when they run the dungeon. I wonder if this is the compromise."

"Either way, this counts as 'Armor,'" Donut said. "I don't know why they call it that when it's an airplane, but we can only have ten of these things at the start of fighting. But if we steal other's after the fighting starts, we can keep it. So that's what we gotta do. Steal all the other airplanes."

I just looked at her.

"What?" she asked. "I've been reading the rules. There's all sorts of stupid rules about what we can and can't have. There used to be a rule about guns, too, but it looks like it went away. I guess when they say tech armor, they mean airplanes."

"It means magical airplanes and certain types of vehicles," Florin said. "When you made me general, the rules popped into my interface. We can't see everything that's available until we get to the base. We need to figure out straight away what the other groups have and how one pays for this stuff. If it's straight up money, then we gotta assume they're all maxed out. Also, have you looked at the timed restrictions for when the ceasefire stops? The 'Ramp-up' phase? We gotta plan appropriately."

"I haven't looked at anything yet," I said. "But our adjutant should know. Baroness Victory. She's an orc, so be careful with her."

Florin nodded as he pulled himself to his full height. "Elle, Imani, and I gotta head out. Louis, we'll let you know as soon as you can drive it to base. Everyone else, you better finish up what you're doing and get recruiting. Carl, what's your next move?"

I grinned at Louis. "A reunion."

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[7]

Ceasefire remains in effect for 56 hours.

"Carl, I feel as if Florin is letting the general thing get to his head," Donut said as we prepared to leave. We were headed to Katia's personal space. Thanks to the new Doggie Door upgrade, we were going to leave out the college entrance which was several rings higher. This would give us a chance to recruit along the way. Katia and Elle were working the chats, and most everyone was already on board, but we needed to physically touch people to get them officially enlisted. People knew we'd be out, but in a hurry, so they would meet us along the way.

It would be me, Donut, Louis, and Britney. Tran and Bautista were with Katia, who was helping Tran with his new conveyance, which I hadn't yet seen. I had the impression it was inspired by Odette's crab.

We left Samantha inside with strict instructions not to leave on her own again. We also brought Mongo and Rend, who were already best friends, much to Donut's dismay. Despite not having arms, Rend had figured out how to get onto Mongo's back and was riding the dinosaur, his giant mouth hanging open in awe every time he saw something new.

"We don't really know Florin's story," I said. "He obviously has military leadership experience. He prefers to work alone, but it's

clear he knows his stuff. Did you see what he did on the last floor? He made a beeline toward all the military hardware he could get his hands on. We need that sort of expertise. Imani is good with people, but he's good with soldiers, and those are two very different skills. This sort of fighting is different than what we're used to."

We entered the saferoom to find Louis and Britney waiting for us. Louis was pulling his usual leather jacket on as we entered. I saw Louis's shirt the same moment Donut did. I prayed she wouldn't notice.

She noticed.

"Louis, what is that?"

"Uh, what?" he asked a little sheepishly.

"Your shirt."

"It's nothing," he said, hastily zipping the jacket all the way up. "It was a prize we got for going on that *Dungeon Sidekicks* show last floor. It's enchanted. It increases the range of my cloud attack."

Donut let out an angry scoff. "Louis Santiago Two, I must insist you take your jacket off this instant and show it to me."

Britney grunted with amusement. "I told you not to let her see it."

He shot a glare at Britney. "Yours is worse."

"She is not wearing a t-shirt depicting an unauthorized fan club, Louis."

"No, she has panties with a picture of Elle on them."

Britney smacked Louis as he pulled the jacket off, showing the hand-drawn picture on the large, white t-shirt.

I barked with laughter as Donut scoffed again in outrage.

It was a graphic tee featuring a hand drawn picture of a cat. The image was a caricature of a fat, fluffy cat's backside. The coloring was wrong, but it was clearly supposed to be Donut. The cat was turned around, looking over her shoulder. The words "Donut Holes" in English spread across the cat's butt. The "O" in both Donut and Holes were both images of pink donuts.

There was a tiny, drawn X in the hole of the first, round donut, which was placed right under the cat's tail, implying that the X was a

cartoon version of a cat's butthole. It was subtle, but once you saw it...

"Oh my god, Carl. It's porn. This is unauthorized derriere porn! The Donut Holes are an unauthorized fan group, and now they have merch! Merch that exploits my backside! Carl, do something!"

I had to sit down because I was laughing so hard.

Donut: ZEV, THIS IS AN OUTRAGE.

Zev: They paid the license fee, Donut. It's a perfectly legitimate brand, and their Donut merch is doing quite well.

"Carl, this is all your fault," Donut said. "You were the one who came up with that name! Mongo, look away."

I continued to laugh. Donut turned her ire toward Louis.

"And, you. This is bootleg fan club merchandise! Where did you say you got this again?"

"The show *Dungeon Sidekicks*. Uh, apparently every time one goes on that show, they get an item that has someone else on it. And they make it magical so you gotta wear it."

Donut scoffed. "Katia went on that show, and she doesn't wear anything like that!"

Britney and Louis looked at each other.

"Well, you're going to have to take it off immediately. I'm sure we can replace it with something proper."

"Donut," I said. "It's enchanted. He's wearing it because it helps him. You can't even see it."

"How would you like it if someone was wearing a shirt featuring your butthole, Carl?"

"I don't stick my butthole in everybody's face when they're trying to sit down and eat."

"Well, excuse me for showing affection. I mean really."

"Donut, you are always telling me about snicks or whatever they're called of you and all sorts of other people. Just a few days back, you were talking about one with you and Samantha and Louis."

"What?" Louis asked.

"That's different, Carl. That's fan art, and it's beautiful. This is a for-profit organization exploiting my likeness for their own lurid

reasons”

“It’s just a picture of your behind,” I said. “It’s a cartoon.”

“And you know who buys it? Perverts, that’s who.”

Donut: ZEV, AM I GETTING ANY OF THIS ILLICIT BUTTHOLE MONEY?

Zev: Uh, well, no. If you hit the tenth floor, you do get a stipend, and you can negotiate a small percentage based on your licensing fee. Like, a really small percentage. Though if it goes over the threshold, you do get a percentage automatically.

Donut: WHAT’S THE THRESHOLD?

Zev: I don’t actually know. I don’t think anybody has ever gotten close. Not even Remex or Odette or Ntumba. Your stuff sells great, Donut, but they anticipate crawlers getting popular and set the bar pretty high.

“Donut,” I said. “This isn’t important. We need to go find Ferdinand and Juice Box.”

She stiffened at the mention of Ferdinand. She shot a glare at Louis, who’d already zipped his jacket back up.

“Don’t you dare let anybody else see that shirt.”

Entering The Larracos College of Magic.

I took in a breath as we stepped outside. Before, we’d been in the lower level and hadn’t really gotten a chance to see the city. Or smell it. The scent of recently-drained ocean was still in the air here, but the aroma of flowers drowned it out. I thought of Priestly, the cookbook author who’d loved this city so much it’d driven him mad to see it destroyed. Now, finally, I could see what he was talking about.

This was like something out of a Tolkien novel. We were in the campus of the college, which took up about a quarter of a ring about ¾’s up the funnel of Larracos. The saferoom was atop an alabaster-colored, medieval style tower. Like a Rapunzel tower. Green, fragrant

vines covered in white and yellow flowers grew up the side. We were surrounded by dozens of other, multi-colored towers, all reaching up into the sky like crystals, growing out of the side of the ring. I caught sight of an observatory with a large telescope. Another, wider tower featured a stained-glass, cathedral-like ceiling. Louis said they told him it was a lecture hall.

Our tower included dorms for professors, apparently, and the room we'd just left at the very top was a cafeteria of sorts. It'd been a small, round chamber with a draconian proprietor. It had not been a true saferoom, and we'd passed right through before I could fully examine it. Stairs led downward, circling until they reached a courtyard far below. We started to descend, letting Mongo go first.

These towers, I realized, rose up past several other rings. We could see some of the other rings as I descended. These were homes and suburbs, filled with NPCs, going about their day, living in the shadows of the towers coming up from below.

Actually, no. These NPCs weren't going about their regular lives. The second time I circled around, I saw them. A male dwarf stood on his balcony, a home on the edge of a ring. He leaned over another, younger dwarf, and he was showing the boy how to stab with a sword. Another balcony featured a bugbear woman repairing what appeared to be chainmail.

This would all be destroyed before we were done. Traditionally, once the fighting started, enemy teams weren't allowed to enter the city, but the city itself wasn't protected, and wayward spells, artillery fire, and rampaging gods usually did a decent job of flattening everything before the area was finally opened back up.

And when it was opened, there would usually be two teams left who would fight their way to the castle. The NPCs would—sometimes—finally start to fight back at this point, plus all sorts of different "events" happened at the end, such as a demon eviction or more gods joining in on the battles. All of that culminated in the remaining armies bulldozing their way downward toward the castle at the very, very bottom.

My eyes caught movement. Several fairies fluttered around the outside of one of the towers, placing a large, red jewel atop it. The

whole tower glowed with light.

This time it would be different. The NPCs were fighting back from the beginning.

Donut continued to grumble about the t-shirt and the Donut Holes fan club. She asked Britney about her underwear, and she said it featured a pin-up version of Elle along with the caption "Stay frosty, boys." But the panties themselves increased her dexterity by 10% and enhanced all berserking skills. She hadn't told Elle about them.

As we went down the stairs, I could see the college was also active with NPCs. Elves, draconians, and fairies, along with a smattering of several other races moved back and forth into various buildings and towers. They all had the white dot with green outline as soldiers for team Retribution.

"Right outside the college is the arts district," Louis said, trying to change the subject off his shirt. "You can watch plays and stuff, but they said all the performances are canceled. And there are restaurants, too. And shops. Lots of shops, but it's not good stuff for what we need. It's mostly clothes. All the adventuring stuff was down below and got ruined when you guys flooded the city. And anything that was left already got bought up by the other teams or is now being used by the NPC team."

As we descended, a dwarf in strange armor came to stand at the base of the stairs, looking up at us. This guy had the same dot as all the others, but he also had a star floating over his head, which indicated him as an officer. Mongo reached him first and started sniffing at him, and the dwarf reached forward to pat the dinosaur on the head. He fished his other hand in a pouch hanging across his chest and pulled out what looked like two small pieces of beef jerky. He gave one to Mongo, and he broke a smaller piece off and handed it to Rend. They both gobbled it greedily as we approached. By the time I got there, Rend was bouncing up and down grunting excitedly.

"Carl, look at his hat!" Donut said from my shoulder. "It's fantastic!"

This was the first time I'd gotten a chance to really examine a Semeru dwarf. All the dwarves we'd met so far were more like the traditional, angry Scottish variety. His body was squat and wide, but that's where the similarities ended. This guy was darker complected, Asian looking, with a round face and flat nose. Thick, black hair peeked out from under his large hat. He did *not* have a beard, though he did have a long, thin mustache.

His armor was almost samurai-like, but not quite. It was like a wide, open-chested metallic vest with flared shoulders. The bottom of the metal vest moved outward, like a bell, ending just below his waist. His squat legs were covered in what looked like chainmail with loose, flowing, red and yellow fabric strips along the sides.

His helmet was a rounded skull cap, but it was decorated with multiple feathers of various kinds, reaching straight up into the air. In the front of the helmet was a metallic ornament, featuring a wide-leafed fern, which curled at the tip, making the helmet look a little ridiculous. His whole getup made him appear as if he was getting ready for a parade, not a battle.

The wide sickle slung over his shoulder was no joke, however. And everything the dwarf wore was enchanted. Everything, including the individual feathers in his helmet, all let off a glow of various colors.

I was surprised at how young the dwarf looked. He appeared to be around my age. He smiled broadly up at us, despite the **Despondent** debuff blazing over him.

"Honored Warlords Carl and Princess Donut," the dwarf said, bowing deeply. "It is an honor to have you within our borders."

His accent was not like a traditional dwarf, either. It was short, clipped Asian-sounding. Not like Tran or Bautista, but similar.

"Hello," Donut said. "I just love your hat."

He beamed. "I am glad you approve, Warlord Princess. It was owned by my great, great grandfather."

Up until this point, most everything I heard about the Semeru dwarves suggested them as a drunk, defeated people who did nothing but keep the castle clean. They rarely fought against their invaders. Something had, clearly, changed. I examined the dwarf.

War Leader Arief. Level 80 Semeru Dwarf.

Commander of the Larracos Defense Force Infantry.

This is an ally. As you are both officers, attacking him will automatically negate your peace treaty if there are witnesses.

Okay, I'm just gonna say it. The Semeru Dwarves have a pretty fucked-up history.

In case you haven't figured all this out yet, this whole fable with the Scolopendra levels is based on a fairytale. But what is *that* fairytale based on? I think it's pretty obvious, but sometimes you guys need a little push.

Anyway, of all the peoples in this story, there's an argument to be had that the Semeru had it the worst. This land, the volcanic level in which Larracos stands, was once a haven for their people. Unlike the Over City and what eventually became the Hunting Grounds, these fertile lands here, the lowest level where mere mortals could survive within the great volcano, were once a paradise. The Semeru people lived here in relative peace. They farmed. They mined. They learned. They lived, laughed, loved. Yeah, fuck you. I like that expression.

But they knew of the gods just below their feet, and like all of us, they wanted to know them more. So they dug, trying to reach them. This was a long, arduous process. A city formed in the pit. Scholars from all over came. Some to help the dwarves. Some to beg them to stop. All, however, came to learn. Soon, Larracos became a rich, cultural paradise. Still, the dwarves persisted. They loved their goddess, Ysalte. They wanted to know her. So, they dug.

Eventually, they found not gods, but something else. Roots. These roots traveled through everything, and they were attached to something they called the All Tree. A great tree that is so vast, it connects *everything*. And there, once they hit the roots of the tree, they paused. A lot of people don't know this part. Or they ignore it, because it doesn't make for the best story. The dwarves were seeking the

gods, yes. But in the end, it wasn't the Semeru who are to be blamed for what happened next.

They built their castle at the very bottom, along the thick roots. But it's more than a castle. It's a monument. An apology. In discovering these roots, they had an epiphany. This, too, is new to even me. Some things are best left alone. Some things should never be woken up.

When Scolopendra's nine-tier attack came, the Semeru got it the worst of all. It wasn't their fault. But they were there, and they were mortal, and they were devastated. They numbered in the millions before that day. Today, there are less than 10,000 left.

And in the ultimate irony, their great structures weren't even touched. Not the ones inside the pit. The great city of Larracos remains. The remaining dwarves, defeated, took it upon themselves to be stewards of the great, empty city. Eventually, it started to fill again. New scholars moved into the college, finding the old research intact. The halls, the museums. It all still stands.

It would sure suck if something happened to the city Arief loves so much.

Warning: This NPC is Despondent because his goddess is dead. He is unable to worship another deity, and all of his stats have taken a 15% hit. In addition, those who worship other deities inflict 10% more damage against him.

Christ, I thought. That despondent debuff was pretty brutal. Still, it didn't seem to bother him too much.

Donut: CARL DOES THIS GUY KNOW YOU AND KATIA ARE THE ONES WHO FLOODED THE CITY IN THE FIRST PLACE? HE'S BEING REALLY NICE.

Carl: I don't know. Juice Box knows, obviously, since she was a part of it. Don't bring it up.

Donut: WHAT ABOUT KATIA AND PAZ KILLING THE GODDESS? SHE DOESN'T KNOW THAT PART.

Carl: And they're not going to know if you don't say anything.

"Hello," I said. "We're looking for Juice Box and Ferdinand."

"That is why I am here, Warlord. We NPCs would like to talk tactics and strategy with the crawler team. Also, Warlord Juice Box has requested your private presence before we attend with her co-warlord."

I felt my eyebrow raise. This was the first time an NPC had actually called himself an "NPC" out loud.

But before I could question it, Arief turned to Louis and bowed again. "Also, General Louis. I am glad you are present. Warlord Juice Box would like to solidify our great truce in the traditional manner."

"Uh," Louis said.

"Traditional manner?" Donut asked. "Does that mean what I think it means?"

"Yes, warlord. Through marriage. We'd like to get it over with right away."

"Uh," Louis said again.

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Arief whisked us out of the main courtyard of the college, out the main gates and past the security guards and out into the city.

Entering Larracos.

"It'll be more like an elopement than a traditional marriage," Donut was saying as we walked. "I suppose that's okay, but that doesn't mean we can't make it a big what-to-do. I do like my what-to-dos." She gasped. "Mongo can be a ring bearer! I already have a top hat and bow tie on me. I was going to sing. It is short notice, but I suppose I can be convinced into an impromptu performance. Hmmm." She paused, then brightened. "Do you know the song 'Don't Look Back in Anger' by Oasis? I can sing that! It'd be perfect as long there's nobody named Sally there. Also, I promised Carl would wear pants and shoes for the ceremony. Carl, you do have shoes now in your inventory, don't you?"

Donut paused as I sent her a message.

Carl: I need you to put your sunglasses on and keep them on. Do you remember on the fifth floor how you could keep track of who was a changeling based on their body temperature? Keep an eye out, just in case. I know they're supposed to be on our team, but we want to be sure.

Donut didn't say anything, but the sunglasses flashed onto her face as she resumed trying to convince Louis to let her sing at the wedding.

We exited the front, raised entrance of the college and stepped out onto a cobblestone street. The street was just wide enough for a single cart. Across the street stood a simple, metal railing. I took a step toward it and peered over the edge, looking down into the funnel city.

I looked down in awe. *This is it*, I thought. This is the city. Larracos. City of Dreams.

I took in a breath. Despite having been prepared for this sight, I still had to take a moment.

Each level was a wide ring, with a yawning, open hole in the center, leading down into the pit. The circumference of the jagged gap got smaller and smaller as it went down, until it disappeared into a wall of smoke. A single waterfall fell from across the way, vanishing into the clouds. The fall would hit a lower level, where it would be channeled back over the edge, like it was going down stairs. The vast majority of the buildings were in a stone, gothic style, overwrought with columns and arches and gargoyles. Much of the architecture was of tall buildings with vertical lines culminating in vine-covered arches and gables with curved rafters. Everything gave the sense of time, of spirit. This did not feel like a set of blocks designed for the singular purpose to be knocked over. No. This was a real, living, breathing place, and the sight of it staggered me.

But what struck me most was how clean everything looked, yet lived-in at the same time. Ancient, but cozy. This part of the city clearly hadn't been flooded. Havana had felt like that, too, but that feeling had been much more eerie because all the people living there were ghosts. They were already dead. The city was already destroyed. The toll was real.

A small, draconian boy rushed past, carrying what looked like a bundle of twine.

This is real, too. I thought. *It's just as real as Havana.*

That thought was not a welcome one, especially in context of what we'd already done to this place, to these people.

Arief pointed down the street toward what looked like an off-ramp on the freeway. It was a ramp that led downward, curving

toward the next level down. We moved to the ramp and kept walking.

I was struck by how many people weren't on the streets. Down lower, there'd seemed to be quite a few. The college itself was teeming with activity, as were the suburbs hidden behind it. But the public areas here seemed bare.

The vast majority of dots were other crawlers. A group of men I didn't recognize came up just as their names popped into my book of Voodoo. Donut paused her wedding planning to make them all **Sergeant First Class**, giving them the ability to recruit others.

Already, my interface was beeping with others getting recruited. The numbers were slowly, slowly rising. We had just under three days to get them all.

I returned my attention to the city. I could barely see the walls of the funnel itself, though if I looked up, I could see the top lip of the crevice, maybe 3-400 feet up, peeking through a pair of buildings at the very top. These walls were not the walls of the volcano. Those were much further out, probably inaccessible and out-of-bounds. This funnel was nothing more than a hole in the ground.

I wondered on that. The Over City had a wooden floor that had seemed downright rickety in some places. The Hunting Grounds were jungle and had a solid, physical ground. Hell, there was a deep river running through it. Supposedly, if one spent too much time digging up there, one would break through and fall into this area. It was all fake. All game setup. But still, it was important to know how all this worked.

This area was the same. According to the story, it was once just a flat, verdant land with forests on the outskirts and rocky ground, filled with caves and rich minerals. When the dwarves decided to tunnel down to the gods, they burrowed through solid rock, only stopping when they reached the roots of the All Tree.

The dwarf was talking to me, but I'd missed some of it.

"We say there are 66 levels, but that's not true. Not all rings completely circle the city," Arief was saying. We turned toward a long, winding road that led toward another off-ramp. "We number from the bottom up. This is level 49, and it's mostly homes. The one

we just left was 50, and it's known for the college, which takes up a third of the ring. The rest of 50 is the high cultural district and museums. There are three rings that are called cultural districts, and this one is the uppermost." He gave me a sidelong glance. "It's more for the fancy folks, if you know what I mean. I went to a play up there once, and I didn't understand a damn word what anybody was saying. The biggest theater is down below in ring nine, called The Piccadilly, but it's still a little wet. My uncle drained it, and it was filled with jellyfish. They're still cleaning it out."

"How high did the water get?" I asked.

"Level 39," he said. "It drained down to 29 pretty fast, but then it got stopped up. We were going to fix it, but then Juice Box started opening everybody's eyes and had us keep it clogged. We had water up to 15 for a bit, and now it's only up to level 3, just enough to cover the highest tower of the castle. Anybody who wants to take that castle has gotta learn how to swim."

We moved to the ramp, but I paused, seeing the traps glowing ominously at the corners.

Arief followed my gaze. "Explosives," he said. "In case they get in. We have them on every other down ramp."

I nodded and continued, still gawking at everything. More crawlers came up. I recognized this one. His name was Ajib, and he was level 51. I'd only met him once, briefly, at the beginning of the 6th floor. He was missing a leg when I first met him, but he now had what looked like a mechanical prosthetic. Donut got him and his companions recruited.

"Why don't they just jump down the center?" I asked, more to myself as we moved down to the next level. This one, 45, was filled with shops, but like Louis said earlier, they appeared to mostly be for clothing. And they were all closed.

"They've done it a few times," Arief said. "There was another season when the orcs marched down the streets while the Reavers jumped in, using invisibility and *Fall* potions, getting to the castle first. They still lost that season. That's not going to work this time. Not with the city defense system."

I stopped dead in the street and looked at the dwarf. "Another season?" I asked.

He nodded. "I don't remember this, but there are some with the memory quickened. I believe I am new, as are most of us. But some have persisted. My uncle remembers dozens of seasons now. Not as many as Juice Box, but he's one of the *Jatismara,* and he sits upon her war council."

There was so much packed into that short statement that I didn't know where to start. I thought of Herot the cookbook author of the 16th edition, who'd made waking NPCs up his life's work. I thought of his final, heart-wrenching entry in the cookbook, and I wondered if he'd managed to survive. And if he had, was he watching this right now? Probably not. If he was alive, he'd likely still be working in the dungeon somewhere. He'd wanted to be a game guide. I didn't know if he'd made it.

It had been what? About a month since Juice Box had made it down to this floor?

"How many of you guys know?" I asked.

"About the previous seasons? About our past lives?" He shrugged. His strange breast plate swung back and forth like a bell. "Most of us know. Some don't seem to understand, but most know. Juice Box says there are different kinds of us, made with different purposes. Some shopkeepers are different, and some of the patrons of certain establishments are also different, unable to understand. The hands of the outworlders are everywhere when you know what to look for."

I exchanged a look with the others, who'd stopped talking about Louis's wedding. Britney was next to me, and she asked, "Does your uncle remember dying?"

"No," Arief said. "We believe that for most of us, if one dies, they are dead forever. We are not immortal like the outworlders."

"The 'outworlders' aren't immortal anymore," Britney said.

"That is what Juice Box has told us," Arief said. He suddenly and abruptly pulled the curved blade from his back, which popped out with a loud *shing*! All of us jumped away, including Mongo.

When Mongo jumped, Rend tumbled off his back and bounced on the floor, making an "Ouchie"-like noise.

"When the fighting starts," Arief said, "I will have my revenge against Architect Houston!" He swung his sword back and forth a few times.

"Architect Houston?" Donut asked. She nudged Rend forward with her head, rolling him onto Mongo's tail. Mongo lifted the tail up, and Rend bowled onto Mongo's back, giggling. "Who is that?"

"The leader of the Madness," the dwarf said. "A Viceroy outworlder. He caught my brother as he attempted to sabotage their fortifications." He re-sheathed his blade over his shoulder. "They say my brother was tortured before Juice Box infiltrated and ended his suffering."

"Is that the guy Juice Box decapitated during the pre-production meeting?" Donut asked. She made a scoffing noise. "I don't like those Viceroy guys. I'm glad they wear masks. If I had a face like that, I'd wear a mask, too."

"That was one of his surgeons," the dwarf said. "Nobody has managed to get into Houston's operating theater. That's what they call his lair next to the throne room."

We walked for a little while in silence, ever going lower. As we reached level 35, the buildings started to get rougher in architecture. The scent of the ocean lingered. This area had been flooded, but only briefly. These streets were mostly empty. There were more shops here, but none were occupied. I caught sight of a trap guild. On my map, it said it was actually open. The guild, at least. The attached shop was not.

"How much did you guys manage to sabotage?" I asked. "Of the enemy encampments, I mean."

"We will discuss it when we get below," he said, "but we bloodied all of them a little. We managed to get inside the inner circle at least once for all of them except the naga, of course. Or, like I said, into the Madness's operating theater."

I felt my heart quicken. "The nagas? Why couldn't you get in there?"

"The nagas are not very good at mass warfare, and they say they never win this game. It is said theirs is a court of assassins, not warriors. If they are to win, it is with a poisoned blade in the dark, not with the marching of a thousand feet." He shuddered. "Not that they have feet, the slippery demons. Their poisons can kill you in a million ways. Their acids can melt you in seconds. No changeling or spy has ever been able to infiltrate their inner sanctum. No one has ever seen the Whore, who hides behind her veils and guard. Even Juice Box wouldn't attempt to sneak in. We just attacked their fortifications in quick raids."

I nodded. I knew some of this. More than Arief did. I'd known it for a while. About how difficult it would be to eliminate the naga leadership. He only knew half of it, and despite being an awakened NPC, he still only knew about the in-game version of the Blood Sultanate

Drakea had extensive notes about the naga people, whom he hated. But Mordecai had also spent some time telling us what he knew about them and their government.

In the galaxy, their people were supposedly as wide and as varied as humans. They'd been humiliated and bankrupted during Drakea's run in the game, but that didn't make them stupid. Mordecai made a point to drive this home. From what he explained, their government was like a mix between the mantis regime and that of the United Kingdom. A constitutional monarchy. There were individual systems all under a central government. They had a constitution and parliament and a prime minister who ran the day-to-day operations, all under a mostly-for-show sovereign, whose name out in the wide universe was now king. But long, long ago, they'd been known as the Sultanate.

Their people were considered mostly humble and wanting to keep to themselves, but several of their systems were now a tourist destination and vacation spot, especially the home planet. They'd once been known as explorers and ship builders. And conquerors. The grand, in-orbit shipyards still existed, but the factories were now mostly owned by other entities, and the nagas themselves were a source of cheap labor.

Here in faction wars, they were basically LARPing the olden days. Drakea thought it was mostly for fun, but after reading between the lines and talking to Mordecai, I was starting to realize their continued participation in faction wars was actually a PR stunt. A way to keep people interested in naga history, which would drive tourism. They called themselves the Blood Sultanate, a name harkening to a darker, bloodier time in their history. The actual participants were of the royal family. During Drakea's time, their leader was a naga who was now the king. He no longer participated in the games, leaving it to his children and cousins.

The current leader of the in-game Blood Sultanate was the real-life crown princess, whose name in the game was the Sultana. I didn't know what her real name was. In the old days, her identity would be kept a secret. It was considered punishable by death for someone to even see her. She sat behind veils and was guarded by an honor guard, who were all sentenced to deferred death for looking upon her.

In the old days, the Sultana was the eldest half-sister of the Sultan, and she would be the mother of the future generation of the royal family. She would be bred until she either gave birth to 99 sons or 198 daughters, whichever happened first. If she gave birth to 99 sons, she would be killed. After that, the 99 sons would start their process of competing to be the next sultan. The winner of that battle was neutered, and the other 98 brothers would basically take turns knocking up the oldest sister until she, in turn, had 99 more sons. Drakea's notes on all this was confusing, and I wasn't 100% certain how it worked. Apparently the gender of the nagas couldn't be determined for a while, which muddled everything even further.

If the sultana managed to have 198 daughters before she had 99 sons, it wasn't clear what would happen, though I gathered she basically became the leader and all her male siblings would be put to the blade. It had only happened once in their history, and the sultana who did it was deemed the Sepsis Whore, who'd supposedly poisoned almost all of her sons.

The nagas were now more "civilized," and the family worked more like that of a traditional monarchy. The current crown princess

was the daughter of the actual king, and she was the highest ranking family member actually here on Earth. In the game, she was play-acting as the Sepsis Whore, and from what I gathered, she took the gig very, very seriously.

But she was also a ghost. Untouchable. Despite the naga team getting their asses kicked every single time, she'd never been killed in the game. Not once. They'd have their throne room taken, usually at great expense to the actual, poor NPCs and mercenaries who got sent into the room, but the sultana and her guard would be gone, only to reappear at the end, safe and laughing.

The problem was, these nagas weren't NPCs who believed in the story built around them. They knew who I was, and they would know how important it would be to me to get them out of the game. And now that the protections were off, I had no idea if they would keep the whole Sultana charade up. I did know this princess had spent some time in the naga military, and she had both real-life and in-game experience with fighting. So this wasn't someone to underestimate.

We walked for several more minutes, passing by more crawlers and recruiting them to the army. I briefly met a crawler named Jurgen, a large human with a shock of blonde hair and arms that looked as if they could bend steel. He was a level 65 Harii, which was some sort of barbarian class. The man also worshiped a god named Donar. He pulled me into a tight hug and kissed me on the cheek when we met.

"You saved my life, and you saved the life of my Heidi with that black magic you did at the end of the last floor. For that, you get a kiss!"

We moved on. By the time we reached the ninth floor, it was clear this was the area where we were before. This area had been flooded until very recently. The ground remained wet and slimy, and the Xs of dead sharks littered the map. The floor contained the massive Piccadilly Theater, surrounded by bars, including a few true saferooms. The large theater building sat right underneath the waterfall, and the sculpture-covered roof doubled as the step for the water from above to land and cascade off the edge. One of the

statues was that of a giant frog, and it swallowed the entirety of the water before another frog next to it spewed the water out of the edge down below. There was something stuck in this statue's mouth, and the water was spraying unevenly. As I watched, a group of NPCs were trying to dislodge whatever was stuck in there.

The theater building itself had been ruined by the recent flooding, but even more NPCs: humans, elves, and draconians swarmed over the building, cleaning it up. It was the most active group of NPCs we'd seen since we got here. A Bactrian camel—the first camel I'd seen on this floor—walked on stilts and was putting letters up on the water-stained marquee. It read "One Night Only. Session of Love, the final show before we all die." In smaller letters under that, it read, "Balcony still closed due to jellyfish infestation."

"She'll meet us at the entrance to the Desperado Club," Arief said as we descended past the 7th floor. These were all closed and destroyed shops. Weapons and magic shops. Mercenary markets. All still flooded out and ruined. The only thing open were the guilds and the occasional saferoom bar.

"Is the Desperado back open?" I asked, surprised.

"It just opened back up earlier today," Arief said. "Our, uh, other leader has already parked himself inside. Juice Box will meet us in the entrance bar. She's secured a private room for us."

The lower we got, the more active it was. A group of dwarves jogged by, singing a military-style running cadence. They carried hammers and sickles over their shoulders as they ran.

Most of these soldiers were only levels 25 to 40. They were trying, but they were not in very good sync. I felt my lips tighten as I watched them.

The Desperado Club stuck out amongst all the other buildings on the fourth floor. The level was relatively small compared to the others above it, and the hole in the center was filled with water as the levels below it remained flooded. The square, concrete building stood on a group of pillars, looking like someone had taken a modernist building built in the 1960's and dropped it right into the middle of renaissance France. A Las Vegas-style neon sign stood

above the large building, but only the red, bottom half of the arrow was lit. The sign did not look anything like the art deco style from the previous floors.

A hand-painted sign hung from a sheet draped across the entrance. It read "Grand Re-Opening. Under New Management."

We put Mongo and Rend away, and we all went inside.

Entering Desperado Club Entrance Bar. The Headlamp Colonnade.

We didn't push past the entrance bar like we usually did, but we remained in the first room. It was empty except for a gnoll bartender, who eyed us warily as Arief pulled us past and into the back kitchen. He pressed against a panel in the wall, and it opened, revealing a long tunnel.

Donut: CARL, THE BARTENDER IS A CHANGELING! YOU WERE RIGHT!

Carl: Okay. Keep cool.

I exchanged a nervous look with the others, and we went into the hall. We traversed the long corridor, went through another door, and we entered a room with a dark figure sitting at the table.

The figure looked up from his work, which appeared to be covered with paper and notes. It was a gnoll. An old, wizened, male NPC with only one eye. The name over him read:

Hunger Hammy. Level 30. Gnoll.

Manager of the Headlamp Colonnade.

Before anybody could say anything, the gnoll jumped on the table, scattering papers. He let out an excited screech and started waving his arms back and forth. He leapt at Louis, who'd backed up against the wall. The old dog man pressed himself against the poor, sputtering crawler and started furiously kissing him on the lips.

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[9]

Juice Box changed to her familiar human form as she sat on Louis's lap, her arm draped over his shoulder. She was smiling broadly, but I could see the exhaustion and worry in her eyes. She had scars she didn't have before. Her left ear, I also noticed, didn't form when she changed, though after about ten seconds, an ear did finally appear, almost like an afterthought.

We lose things, and we gain them.

I examined her.

Juice Box. Human. Level 35.

Co-Warlord of Team Retribution.

This is an ally.

I knew that level was incorrect. The last time I'd seen her, it'd said she was 17. I also knew the number changed when she changed. Mordecai said there was no way to tell what her real level was, even when she was in her blank form. It was a quirk of high-level changeling NPCs.

Louis appeared terrified as he sat in the only chair in the room, upon her insistence.

Donut had freed Mongo back out into the office, and I let Rend free as well. The first thing Juice Box did after she peeled herself off Louis was to pick up the little pet and pat him on the head. Mongo also snuffled up against Juice Box, and she laughed as she scratched him.

Arief remained in the room, guarding the door.

Britney and I stood over the desk, looking at the papers Juice Box had splayed out for us. Rend stood on the desk as well, gnawing on the end of a pen. I shuffled through the documents. It was a lot—but it wasn't all the papers, I noted. She'd made a point of taking some and sticking them in the drawer so we couldn't see what they said. It was a subtle but purposeful move. *We are your allies*, she was saying. *But we are our own people, too*.

"Carl," Juice Box said. "You didn't do what I wanted. We wanted everybody to be protected. To have regeneration. That's not what happened."

I looked up from the papers. I remembered what Huanxin Jinx had told me, that they'd never let us be safe. "They would never allow it, so we did the next best thing. We made it so we can kill them instead."

She nodded thoughtfully. "It'll have to do." She rested her head on Louis' shoulder. Rend had chewed the pen in half, and now ink ran down his face. I picked him up before he could do more damage and put him on the floor. He giggled and started rolling in circles. I returned my attention to the documents.

Most of the papers were maps and castle locations along with troop strengths. There were resupply schedules, including information on the food market that had mysteriously appeared in "Shanty Town" overnight.

It turned out the existence of the shanty town, a ring of hastily-built buildings and markets surrounding the entrance to Larracos, was a new thing. At least one this large. There was usually a shanty town, but it was never anything like this. It'd appeared soon after the flooding, ostensibly built by the displaced NPCs. Nobody had actually built it. The hovels just sprung up out of nowhere. Since the slums completely encircled the top entrance to Larracos, they formed the equivalent of a new, large-sized settlement.

The rules had been pretty clear that they weren't going to add new NPCs once we'd flooded the town, but it appeared they'd either changed the rules or found some sort of loophole as there were some new shops with new NPCs. None were weapons or mercenary

markets or entrances to the Desperado Club, but there were food markets and multiple temples, all placed in ramshackle, wooden and metal buildings. There *was* a single Club Vanquisher entrance hidden somewhere in Shanty Town, but getting access was tough, and the overpriced markets there were only good for outfitting individuals and not armies.

Even though some version of Shanty Town existed every season, I saw no indication it was ever anything like this. I suspected the size and addition of new markets was a result of someone's Emergency Action Item, but I didn't know who. The teams all got three of the emergency requests, and I knew all the teams were out. We still had two left.

Actually... I wondered if the NPC team was given access to all this stuff. Part of that action item that gave them their team included "full voting rights." Did Juice Box have the warlord menu? I had so many questions about how the NPC team functioned.

I would have to investigate further. Either way, there was now a smattering of new shops in this new area, which was outside of Larracos. That meant this so-called shanty town would still be accessible to the other teams, even when the ceasefire ended.

What I was looking at right now was Juice Box's scrapped plans on destroying the food markets once the fighting started. Once the ceasefire had been called, reps for all the teams had moved in and purchased all the food they could. Before, they hadn't trusted the food market as Juice Box's people had been poisoning all the stock. The ceasefire had refreshed all the food stores. They'd taken advantage of the reprieve and had moved in. So now there was no point to it.

"Who's the mayor of Shanty Town?" I asked.

The look on Juice Box's face soured. "There have been several since it opened, as the outworlders kept killing them, though they weren't allowed to 'own' the town. Not until the games begin." She shook her head. "It's so stupid. The second-most-recent mayor was a gnoll named Theora. Just before the ceasefire was called, Theora got called out in single combat and lost. The opponent cheated, of

course. Basically stabbed Theora in the back. Now the mayor is," she took a pained breath, "someone else."

"But it's not one of the invaders?" I asked.

"I wish," Juice Box said. "We can kill the invaders once the fighting begins. We can't touch this guy."

I sighed. "So, Ferdinand?"

Juice Box pointed a pair of finger guns at me. "Bingo, cowboy."

I shot a nervous glance at Donut to gauge her reaction, but I realized she hadn't reacted at all. Her eyes were flashing as she was deep in chat. I was starting to suspect she already knew all of this.

"Are any of the outworlders coming into the regular city? Into Larracos?" I asked.

Britney slid a map over for me to examine. It was a map of the Naga team's fortifications. It only showed the outside of the building.

"They are starting to, yes," Juice Box said. "There's not much here for them, but still they come, mostly to scout. These last few weeks before the rule change, they didn't dare. Anyone who entered regretted it immediately."

"I figured," I said as I started to mentally trace the map in my scratch pad.

"Is Ruby okay?" Juice Box suddenly asked. "They told me she stayed behind, but you promised to keep her safe."

Ruby was one of the changeling children with compression sickness. "We have her," I said. "And the others. Mordecai has been keeping them safe."

She nodded. "Good. I haven't had enough contact with the others. The rules of this world... It's a lot. I don't know how you do it. I attempted a clandestine meeting, and a voice spoke out of nowhere, telling me I wouldn't be allowed to talk to that person. And each time the blob guys killed the mayor, there was an announcement saying the mayor had died. Most people don't see the words, but I do. I've never seen anything like that before."

"I was going to ask you about that," I said. "Do you have, you know, menus and things like that? Or access to the warlord chat, or to the Faction Wars manager?"

"I know of which you speak, but *I* do not have access. I do have the mental voice messaging system. And I do have the mental words that speak to me in my mind and float before me when there is a change." She sighed. Then she reached over and booped Louis on the nose with her finger. "But the good thing is, that means we can now talk when you like."

Louis still hadn't said a word since he'd gotten in here.

What she'd said registered, and I finally understood the dynamic between Juice Box and Gravy Boat.

I grunted. "So *that's* why you haven't murdered him yet."

"What?" Donut asked, looking up. "Why hasn't she murdered who?"

"Your fiancé," Juice Box said to Donut. "Warlord on High, Sir Ferdinand. That's what he's changed his name to. He is in the club right now, sitting at the bar, talking with that infected elf outworlder we're not allowed to kill. This cat has done nothing but cause problems, and now he has been given control of *my* people. He is the one given power over the controlling system, including the city defense system. That elf says it was a workaround to allow us to participate because the cat isn't really an NPC, but of the same stock as you. If he dies, we lose control, so he must be kept safe."

"My *fiancé*?" Donut said, scoffing. "Ferdinand is telling people he's my fiancé? I think not. Where does he get the nerve to even say that!" Her eyes started flashing again, confirming my suspicion that she was already talking to him. She let out another angry scoff as she furiously messaged back and forth.

Juice Box appeared strangely relieved at this.

"What do you mean by 'infected elf outworlder?'" I asked. "Is his name Drick?"

"Yes," Donut confirmed without looking up, her voice still angry. "It's him."

Juice Box nodded. "Yes, Drick. He is called our adjutant. I touched his arm, and he was solid as you or me, but when I attempted to decapitate him, my blade went right through like he was a ghost. He is like the others right after they've been regenerated. We are unable to hurt them at all for some time, but

that protection appears permanent for him. He is not really an elf. He has a worm in his brain, similar to the one your rock friend had. But this one is a different species."

"That's called a Valtay worm. I met him once when I got pulled out of the game, and Donut and I met him again recently when we were picking our own adjutant. Look, we have a lot to do, and I'm glad we're in each other's chat now. We have a lot to prepare for, but I first need to know how you guys are planning on defending yourself. What's the city defense system? And I need to talk to Gr... the other warlord to make sure we're on the same page."

She nodded. She slid off Louis's lap and started to change form. She went back to the grizzled, elderly gnoll. Instead of a missing ear, this one had a missing eye.

Donut: LOUIS, TELL HER SHE'S PRETTY. YOU HAVEN'T SAID ONE WORD TO HER, AND I THINK SHE'S STARTING TO GET NERVOUS YOU DON'T LIKE HER ANYMORE. YOU'RE ABOUT TO GET MARRIED.

Juice Box, now standing, put a pair of fuzzy arms back around Louis's shoulder. He remained awkwardly sitting in the chair, his eyes wide as saucers. He wasn't moving at all, like he was terrified, giving the impression he was standing upon a landmine. He, too, I realized was in chat, eyes flashing.

Carl: Louis, are you okay?

Louis: Dude. She's messaging me non-stop, talking about how we have to get married to make sure our houses are 'bonded.' It's all *Game of Thrones* shit, and it's freaking me out.

Carl: You don't have to do this. We can find another way. It's completely unnecessary. She'll understand.

Louis: I already told her I would. It's... it's okay, I think. She's different in the messages than she is out loud. She's pretending to be all confident, but she's not. Man, I think she's really, really scared. She's in over her head I think.

Carl: We're all in over our heads. You don't have to actually marry her.

Louis: She thinks it's important. We need them on our side, and if this helps, I'll do it. If they turn against us, we're screwed. This will help. We need each other.

Donut: PLUS YOU LOVE HER, RIGHT?

Louis: Yeah. Sure. Of course.

Donut: OKAY, THEN. BUT DON'T TELL US. TELL HER. AND DON'T BE ALL CARL ABOUT IT. BE ROMANTIC.

Louis was shaking and sweating. His five player killer skulls looked so ridiculous, so out-of-place over his head that I felt angry every time I saw them. But then the crawler took a breath, stood, and he took Juice Box's hand in his own.

"Juice Box and I need to strengthen the bond," Louis said out loud. "We should get married right away." He moved as if he was about to kiss her, but then paused. "Can you, like, turn into something else for a second?"

Juice Box squealed in delight, which was uncharacteristic of both her current form and her regular personality. She turned into a blonde human. Different from her regular, human form. I couldn't tell who she was supposed to be. It was like a mix between Taylor Swift and Iggy Pop. Then a cheerleader suit formed on her body. I still didn't know who she was supposed to be. She reached up and kissed Louis full on the lips.

Donut: SAY YOU LOVE HER.

"I love you," Louis said, his lips still smashed on hers.

Donut gasped with delight.

Donut: THIS IS THE MOST ROMANTIC THING I'VE EVER SEEN. DO IT. DO IT, LOUIS.

Louis: Uh, do what?

Donut: HAVEN'T YOU WATCHED *GOSSIP GIRL*? SAY IT TWICE.

Louis: Say what twice?

Donut: GODDAMNIT LOUIS, DON'T RUIN THIS FOR ME.

"I love you?" he repeated.

I exchanged a look with Arief, who remained guarding the door. He looked as skeptical as I was. This wasn't the middle ages. A marriage seemed preposterous and pointless in these circumstances,

especially if Louis wasn't really into it. I knew Louis really liked her, but she was a goddamned NPC.

Still, he was correct in one thing. If it did keep the NPC team on our side, then it wasn't a terrible idea. I just hoped all of this wouldn't blow up in our face.

Britney, who'd ignored all of this, looked up from the desk, where she'd been carefully studying the papers. She tapped a piece of paper. "How big are these diggers?"

Juice Box pulled back from Louis and grinned at the other woman. "Oh, my dear. Have you not seen dwarven automatons before?"

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[10]

"Thank god," I said, coming into the entrance vestibule for the Desperado Club. "Clarabelle! I thought you were dead!"

When Minge the demon had demolished the Desperado Club, I'd assumed all the guards had been killed. I was glad to see the ever-present bouncer sitting in her regular chair, looking grumpy as ever.

The female crocodilian glared at me and Donut. "I'm not, no thanks to you. You four are banned. By order of the new management. The NPCs can still go in."

"What?" Donut demanded. "Banned from the Desperado Club? Is that a joke? We're about to have a wedding inside. We were going to invite you! Mongo is going to be a ring bearer, and I'm going to sing!"

The crocodilian was not impressed. "It's not just you, if that makes you feel better. It's *because* of you, but it's not just you. New management wants his first few days to go smoothly, so he's banned all crawlers. If he ever un-bans the crawlers, then we'll talk."

"I wasn't even there for the demon thing. This is an outrage!"

"That doesn't even make sense," I said. "If crawlers can't get in at all, then what's the point of the club?"

Clarabelle shrugged. "I just do what I'm told. Try again in a few days. Maybe he'll have changed his mind. But I wouldn't hold my breath."

It was me, Donut, Louis, Britney, Arief, and Juice Box, who'd taken on the form of a female draconian. We'd put Mongo and Rend away.

"Who is the new manager?" Donut demanded. "I wish to speak to him this instant!"

"He's asked not to be disturbed. It's not anybody you know," Clarabelle said. "He is very particular. Very serious about security. I'm lucky I still have my job. All the surviving cretins and sai got airlocked and sent off to the mercenary markets." She leaned in. "Look, I know that whole demon thing wasn't entirely your fault. But this new guy is filling the club with more security measures than I've ever seen. He has a whole slew of bodyguards with him at all times." She made a quick, upward motion with her small eyes. "Not exactly NPCs. Not exactly former crawlers. That's all I can say."

"What's his name?" I asked.

"Hamed."

I tried not to react. I knew that name. I knew exactly who this was. My elbow suddenly throbbed, and I remembered Astrid's last words before Katia and I had assassinated her. They still haunted me.

I was almost done.

Hamed was the real name of the Night Wyrm. The leader of the Guild of Suffering. Husband to the late Astrid and father to the strippers Damascus Steel and Anaconda, both of whom were still, supposedly, somewhere in the club, hunting him. Hunting their own father.

All of that had to wait. Right now we had to get to Gravy Boat. "Look," I said. "There's someone in there we gotta talk to. Is there any way you can..."

I paused as a harried-looking Dream elf appeared, stepping out into the vestibule from within the club.

I recognized the man.

Drick.

Adjutant for Team Retribution.

This is a non-combatant observer.

Drick carried a tablet computer in one hand and a drink in another. He nodded at me as he pushed his way deeper into the vestibule, which was suddenly very crowded.

At least, he *tried* to nod at me. He couldn't fully move his head.

He had a large, orange cat sitting directly atop his bald dome.

Warlord on High, Sir Ferdinand. Cat. Level 100.

Co-Warlord of Team Retribution.

This is an ally.

The last time I'd seen the cat, he'd been wearing a ridiculously-large turban with a massive feather. Now he wore a gold chain around his neck with a small, jeweled charm and what appeared to be a circle of white, thin paper tissues wrapped around his head. One end sagged pitifully, about to fall off.

I felt myself staring at the thing on his head, trying to figure out what it was. It was like he'd attempted to recreate the turban using literal toilet paper.

Donut jumped to my shoulder so she was eye-to-eye with the cat.

"Hey, baby girl," Ferdinand said.

"Don't you baby girl me," Donut snapped, pointing a paw at him. "Remember what we talked about? Do it. Do it now."

Ferdinand looked down, appearing abashed. Some of the tissue on his head unraveled and landed on Drick's face, covering his eyes. The elf pushed it away. "Come on, babe. I was trying to be romantic."

"Do you want me to pull out Mongo? I'll pull him out right now."

The orange cat sighed. "I'm not really her fiancé," he said. He looked up and winked at me. "Not yet at least."

Donut scoffed. "I would rather have a sexual affair with the bloating corpse of a syphilis-infested cocker spaniel than even consider having a relationship with you. I don't know what I ever saw in you."

"Is that a way to talk to a fellow warlord?"

"And what do you have on your head? Take that off this instant!"

He sheepishly pawed at his head, removing the tissue. It stuck to his claw, and he wiped it free using the side of Drick's face. "It was

just a temporary hat. Gotta keep my head warm. Did you get my trade request?"

"We did," Donut said. "And we rejected it immediately. Didn't we, Carl?"

"Uh," I said. I remembered seeing the notification, but I'd forgotten about it.

"I just want my Simoom and my hat. Is that so much to ask?"

"Your hat?" I asked. "Wait... Simoom? Is that your rhinoceros mount? We haven't been to our headquarters yet. We don't know if we even have the thing."

"You have her. Kibben stole her right from me, and I demand satisfaction! We landed here, and everybody was fighting and running, and he wouldn't let me take her."

I wasn't certain who Kibben was, though I remembered there'd been a high-elf stablemaster at the castle before we'd transferred it here to Larracos.

"Look, if we can get your mount back, that's fine," I said. "But if you lost your hat..."

"I have your stupid hat, but it's not with me," Donut said. "You want it back? Then you have to stop being so disgusting. And you have to change the name of our alliance."

Carl: Do you really have his hat?

Donut: YES, CARL. I TOLD YOU I FOUND IT AFTER THE BUTCHER'S MASQUERADE.

I vaguely remembered something she'd messaged me while drunk at the Christmas party, but I hadn't realized she was talking about his hat.

This whole time, Juice Box sat there, eyes flashing as she conversed with Drick. Ferdinand appeared oblivious as he went back and forth with me and Donut.

"We'll give you your hat back tomorrow or the next day," I said. "I can't promise anything about the mount until I talk to the others, but I will do my best. But I do want something from you."

The orange cat grunted. "You want something from the Ferdinand and Juicy-Juice without giving anything up? I think not."

"If you call me that again, I will neuter you with my teeth," Juice Box said.

I went through my inventory and spied something I hadn't given Donut yet. She was about to be pissed. "How about a temporary replacement hat? You'll have to give it back when we get you your turban."

"What hat?" Donut demanded.

I pulled out the black, weathered bowler hat. It'd been in Quan's inventory. One could throw it, have it decapitate an enemy, and it'd boomerang back to the owner. Both Donut and Ferdinand gasped at the same time when they saw it.

I caught eyes with Juice Box, and she nodded. We'd already discussed this, and I knew she was on board after having conversed with Drick. The plan had been for her to convince Gravy Boat to help us, but this was better.

Ferdinand reached a paw toward the hat, but I pulled it back. "I want to be mayor of that town. Shanty Town. You'll have to transfer your mayorship to us, which means that jewel on your necklace will go away. You'll get this hat, and we'll trade it back for your turban in a day or so. We'll try to get your rhino back if we still have it. If not, we'll figure something out. We're allies.

The Princess Posse has made a trade request with Team Retribution.

Before he could accept or deny the invite, I reached over and placed the bowler hat on the cat's head. It resized itself and sat at an angle. Without a word of encouragement, Britney pulled a hand mirror from her inventory as Ferdinand admired himself.

"It won't let me transfer the town without you giving us some money," Ferdinand said.

"That's okay," I said. "We have gold."

But the cat wasn't even listening to me. He adjusted the hat. "I'm a very handsome boy."

I met eyes with Drick as the cat on his head continued to pose. The elf's mouth turned upward in an unreadable expression. It was like a mixture of annoyance, exasperation, and panic.

Trade Request has been accepted.

Your Truce with Team Retribution has been renamed to "The Good Guys."

Clarabelle grunted. "Can't say it's been boring since you guys showed up. That's for sure."

"I'm a very handsome boy," Ferdinand repeated.

Changeling weddings, as it turned out—much to Louis' relief—were two-part affairs. The "small wedding" occurred first, which was a simple, private ceremony, and it was what we were doing right now.

We'd returned to the grimy entrance bar. We moved a table aside and allowed Juice Box and Louis to stand in the center, holding hands. Juice Box returned to her blank form. I didn't see any damage to her body in this form, and I wondered on that.

It said she was level 120. I wondered on that, too.

Donut was angry to learn there'd be no rings, no ring bearers, and no singing. There was no pastor or officiant. It was just Louis and Juice Box and a small group of people watching, including Drick and Ferdinand, who hadn't left the elf's head. Mongo and Rend played in the room. Arief guarded the door. The gnoll-but-really-a-changeling bartender remained behind the bar, watching.

The whole thing went fast.

The "Confirmation," which was the second part of the wedding, would happen in about a month. Donut scoffed at the idea. It seemed so far away. Mordecai explained in chat that in changeling culture, most married couples needed a full month to decide if they really were compatible. Most of their weddings were arranged, and part of the small wedding actually included signing divorce papers, which expired in a month if they weren't filed in time. During this first month, the couple were legally married, but if one of them decided to file the divorce, there would be no consequences, and the marriage would basically get annulled. But in the meantime, this first wedding was the legal one. Once this small wedding ceremony was

over, that was it. Juice Box and Louis would be married fair and square.

The Confirmation was a big event and was much more like what everybody considered a traditional wedding. Here there would be guests and food and gifts and singing. Donut was already in chat, loudly preparing for the party.

I kept my attention on Louis, as I watched him stand there awkwardly. I worried about him.

He caught me staring at him, and he gave me a quick smile.

"I wish my mom was here," he whispered.

Everybody's views were absolutely spiked as the crawler and NPC whispered made-up-on-the-spot vows to each other. They whispered them in each other's ears, so nobody else would hear. They would repeat them out loud at the Confirmation.

And that was it. They were married.

"Congrats, guys," I said as Donut cheered enthusiastically. Britney clutched onto a pile of automaton plans and hadn't been paying attention.

Zev: Well, that was a first.

Donut looked at me. "I hope Samantha won't be too mad she missed the first ceremony."

Before I could answer, my warlord interface started to rapidly blink. These were all new recruit notifications. I exchanged a look with Donut, who'd also paused at the influx of notifications. It was so many, I had to mute it. I was about to send a message asking what the hell was going on when Florin messaged me.

Florin: Mate, I am about to blow your fucking mind. You need to get your ass to the headquarters. We've secured the saferoom here, so you can use the doggie door. There's a large group of people here who would really like to meet you.

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TIPID

"Can I keep this?" Tipid asked his attorney. His hands shook as he turned the key over in his blood-covered hands.

He sat in the chair, but he could barely feel his legs. He still shook. *Is this real?* he wondered. *Am I really here, or is this another trick?* The Illusionists were still out there, casting their spells. Cassio was dead. He'd stabbed himself in the neck, fighting illusions, screaming for them to get off of him. It'd left just him and Horatio. And now Horatio was dead, too. He was dead because the key only let one of them out, and Tipid had chosen to save himself.

"Tipid," the man said. "It's Damien. I'm not your attorney. You're in a zero zone, and you have some lingering injuries that need to be repaired. It's brain lesions or something, I don't know. You need to get straight to a Viceroy system to get it repaired. I've already arranged for transport. It's going to cost a good chunk of your pension, but I don't see what choice you have."

Tipid blinked, and he realized his hands weren't really bloody. The man in front of him wasn't his attorney. That had already happened. That was solars ago.

"I'm never getting out of here," Tipid said. He looked at his hands again. Why were they so clean?

The man—a hair-covered human—smiled at him. He smiled the way a merchant would smile. A merchant who was forced to deal with a customer he despised. "No, no, that's not true," the man said. "You did it. You fulfilled your contract. Game guide. Poisoners guild.

Occasional city guard. Perfect marks. You didn't negotiate post-release health care, unfortunately, and some of the physical injuries to your body persist. So when you're outside the dungeon environment," he waved a hand at Tipid, "this will happen. But you're free. You're going home."

"Home? Where is that?"

"There's an organization. A not-for-conquest that helps destitute former crawlers and employees get their footing after transition. It's pretty new, but the Syndicate has donated some money to the cause once they started getting press. I've taken the liberty of letting them know you're coming. They're sending someone to accompany you to the Viceroy system. He's a former crawler himself."

"Viceroys?" Tipid asked, suddenly afraid. His mind was in a fog. What was happening? He remembered the Viceroys. The masked monsters during faction wars. They called themselves the Madness. Their chief surgeon had a spell that cooked your brain. It made your teeth fall out. It made the liquid in your eyeballs turn to acid and then explode over your own face. That was what had happened to Rosaline.

"What about the key?" Tipid turned it over in his hands again, and he realized it was attached to a chain around his neck. When had that happened?

"They let you keep it. You negotiated an extra season just so you could have it. It's yours."

He could still hear Horatio's cries. The other man hadn't understood what was happening, why Tipid was leaving him behind. He remembered the feeling of the jewel burning out as he stuck the key into the door. Of the notification. Horatio had a wife. An older child. They'd both survived and had already taken a deal at the end of the tenth. Horatio had held on in hopes of getting a better deal, of making a life for them when they finally got out.

Tipid had nobody.

He was all alone in the world. In the universe. Yet, he'd chosen to save himself and not his friend. *That's okay*, everybody said to him. *It's okay to be selfish when you're saving yourself*.

He yanked on the key, and he felt the chain snap. He tossed the necklace across the table.

"I don't want it anymore."

Class: Poisoner.
Race: Crest.
Birth Race: Crest.
Top Level: 96

Dungeon Exit: Took deal at the beginning of the 12th floor. Worked as a Game Guide and Guildhall Instructor in the Poisoner guild before exiting the dungeon. Was forced to spend the entirety of his pension, plus take out an additional loan, to repair the extensive damage to his brain. Eventually retired to a Crest system to work for a waste management company.

Author of the Fourth Edition of the *Dungeon Anarchist's Cookbook*.

Current status: Colonel in the Princess Posse Faction Wars team.

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[11]

Louis left his new wife behind as he, Katia, and Bautista took *Party Planner* on its inaugural journey toward the base. Samantha had somehow talked her way onto the flight as well. It wasn't clear if anyone had told her yet about the wedding. Ferdinand and Drick had turned back to the Desperado Club. Drick, apparently, was attempting to teach the cat how to use the warlord menus, but Ferdinand was proving to be a ...difficult... student. In the meantime, Drick left Juice Box alone to get back to her work preparing the NPCs for the impending invasion.

Tran had just gotten an upgraded wheelchair, but I hadn't a chance yet to see what Katia built for him. We left Britney with Juice Box as she received a lesson on how the city defense system worked. There was only so much Juice Box could do until the cat figured out his menus. But in the meantime, the changeling warlord could control the two enormous diggers, which were only part of the defenses. Apparently there was a way to use the buildings themselves to help defend the city.

We hadn't yet installed the upgrade for the doggie door to work throughout the entire guild, so we had to go over to the Meadowlark space to get to the base. Rend rode upon Mongo's back as they bounded ahead of us.

"I do hope Juice Box and Louis get time for a honeymoon. It's sad they got married and then had to separate right away," Donut

said as we walked. “I must say, I am surprised she just let us take control of the other city away from Ferdinand.”

“If the bad guys can freely enter that Shanty Town once the truce is broken, it’s just going to be a liability. It has a separate defense system. In the meantime, we both have something that’s going to give all those assholes a huge headache. It’s a good deal for both of us.”

Donut sneered. “Still, I can’t believe that stupid cat gave it all away just for a temporary hat. He’s not even charmed anymore, and it still worked. We better get that hat back, Carl. I want to put it on my charge pillow and get that boomerang skill for my new tiara. Plus, it’s a bowler hat. I don’t have any bowler hats yet.”

“That’s the plan,” I said. “And we’re going to drain that lightning spell out of the turban, too. But I want to warn Juice Box before we do it in case Gravy Boat flips out. Something tells me she won’t mind.”

We had so much to do. I needed to get Rend leveled up. I needed to figure out how to use my new Gloom Wraith Phase skill. But first we needed to see what Florin was all excited about.

“Hey!” Donut suddenly shouted. “I just got a notification that my sponsorship has been canceled!”

“Really? Which one?”

“The garbage truck people! It says because of a ‘conflict of interest.’ Carl, what does that mean? What did you do?”

“Huh,” I said. “At least you opened the loot box from them already.”

“It says there’s going to be an auction for a new one.”

“Good. Maybe they’ll get you something good, too.”

“I hope so. As much as I appreciate the loot, I do hope it’s something that lines up properly with my brand this time. With that toy company Veriluxx being a dud and Empress D’Nadia selling my sponsorship, it would be nice to have something to complement the Apothecary, even if she does sponsor half the dungeon.”

We entered the Meadowlark saferoom.

And just like that, everything changed.

Imani, Florin, and Mistress Tiatha were inside, waiting for us.

They weren't alone.

I stopped dead as I entered the space. I stared at the two Crest standing there. A woman and a man. Mongo jumped all around them, peeping with excitement at meeting someone new. The man stood there, grinning stupidly while the woman scowled at the dinosaur.

On the minimap, their dots were purple. The same color as the dots of the hunters on the sixth floor, but they had a pink outline, indicating them as troopers for the Princess Posse.

"Rosetta!" Donut exclaimed. "Carl, look! It's Rosetta Thagra! What are you doing here?"

Rosetta appeared much like she had the last time I'd seen her, only now she wore black shorts, boots, and a simple, unenchanted leather top over her chest. The floral tattoo on her right leg glowed. The tendrils peeked out onto her left arm, implying the tattoo went all the way up over her stomach and across her chest. The tat hadn't been glowing when I saw it before. She didn't wear anything on her bald head. She didn't appear to be carrying any weapons.

Rosetta. Rosetta from the *Shadow Boxer* television show. Rosetta from the seventh edition of the cookbook.

"How?" I asked.

The name over her head blazed.

Rosetta Thag. Crest Barn Burner. Level 60.

Colonel in the Princess Posse.

This is a subordinate.

The name and description surprised me so much that it took me a second to finally examine the second stranger standing there.

This was also a Crest, but he was noticeably older than Rosetta. In appearance, at least. He was tall, thin, and he had an old scar running up over his bald head, from temple to temple that made him look as if he'd been literally scalped once. While Rosetta's skin was

pale, almost sickly, this guy's skin was leathery and golden brown, like he spent most of his time working under a blazing sun.

I knew it wasn't accurate, but Rosetta's appearance was that of someone who'd never worked a day in her life. This newcomer's appearance suggested he'd spent a life filled with hard labor.

I felt myself stagger when I read his name, like I'd been physically pushed. My back hit the entrance to the personal space. The door opened, and I almost stumbled back into the guild. Donut yowled and jumped from my shoulder onto Mongo, causing Rend to tumble off the dinosaur's back. The little meatball giggled as it fell and splotched onto the floor.

Tipid. Crest Liquid Dervish. Level 60.

Colonel in the Princess Posse.

This is a subordinate.

Tipid. Author of the fourth edition of the cookbook.

"How," I repeated. My legs felt weak.

And then I remembered all the notifications that I'd muted. I met eyes with the man. "Are there more?"

I was asking two different things, and I saw he could tell what I meant. What I really meant.

"A few more," he said. "Not a lot of us available, unfortunately."

Florin grunted. "If just over 50,000 former crawlers count as a few, then yeah, mate. It's just a few."

Holy shit. I swallowed, and I held out my hand to Tipid. The man stepped forward, and he pulled me into a hug.

I could barely move. I couldn't believe it. A wave of emotion swept over me, traveling up my legs, pausing at my chest, and moving its way to my head. I suppressed a sob.

"I don't know if it'll be enough, brother," Tipid whispered, grasping the back of my head and putting his forehead against my own. "But we're here. We've been watching, and we couldn't watch anymore. We're here."

"Very touchy-feely, these Crest," Donut said.

Rosetta approached as Tipid stepped aside, and I thought maybe she was going to hug me, too. She paused, looked up into the air and said, "This isn't an attack. This is a self-correcting measure given in the spirit of comradery. Okay?"

"What?" I asked.

She smacked me on the forehead with the flat of her palm. It wasn't a hard strike, but it was loud. And it hurt.

I was so shocked, I didn't react for several seconds. I just looked at her. Tipid grinned and shook his head.

"What did you do that for?" I finally asked.

She didn't answer. Instead she pulled me into a hug and kissed me on both cheeks. "Comrade," she whispered. "We are here."

"You know, I'm here, too," Donut said, tail swishing angrily. "It's my army, too."

Tipid patted Donut on the head. "Hello, Princess. It's very nice to meet you as well."

Donut appeared temporarily mollified.

Florin: Mate, do you know these people already? They're acting pretty familiar.

I gave him a very slight *no* nod of my head. He dropped it immediately.

Rosetta was examining my ponytail, turning it over in her hands. She let go of it, letting it slump heavy on my shoulder. Then she reached forward and stuck her hand down the front of my shirt through the collar and put her hand against the Bedlam Bride tattoo. Her fingers were like ice.

"Uh, what are you doing?"

"How much do you have left?"

"Of what?"

She pulled her hand free. "The toraline. Give it to me, and give me the ink the spider used to make that tattoo."

Rosetta: Don't say anything out loud. They're still listening. Do you still have the credit chit you got from the dead pig?

The credit chit was a credit card-like device we'd looted off an orc hunter on the sixth floor.

Carl: Donut has it in her inventory.

Rosetta: Good. I'll get it from her later. Now give me the items I asked for.

I pulled the sliver of the vegetable out from my inventory. All I had left was a finger-sized slice. The glass container containing the tattoo ink that Shi Maria had brewed was still hot to the touch, and I had to hold it by the top edge. There were only a few thimblefuls of liquid left.

I felt the eye blink on my chest, as if it had been awakened by her touch.

"Mordecai has more," I said. "Of the toraline, I mean. But not much."

She sighed. "Give me access to your saferoom, and we will get to work. Give me access to your bomber's studio, too. And three million gold." She glared at the sliver of vegetable. "Better make it four million." She pointed at Donut. "You. Don't wander. We have to purchase some things from that bopca out there, and I need your charm to get the best price."

I could feel that Donut was about to say something snarky to the woman when Rosetta added, "If that's okay with you, warlord. You have the highest charm out of all of us."

Donut appeared to weigh her response. She had an unreadable expression as she glanced back and forth between me and Rosetta. She turned to look at Tipid, as if she was contemplating something. She turned her attention back to me, her eyes focusing on my own, which were still wet with tears.

"I suppose that will be acceptable," Donut finally said. She paused again, and then added with a much more cheerful voice, "I must say, Rosetta. I do like this version of you. You're much more confident than you were on television. You were giving me Charlotte vibes when we met you last time, but now you're a straight Samantha. Not sex doll head Samantha. Sex addict Samantha. But, you know, bald."

"What?" Rosetta asked. "What does that even mean?"

"See? It's great."

I held out my hands. My head spun. "Wait a minute. Everybody just wait. What the hell is going on? There's *fifty* thousand of you? How did you get here?"

Tipid grinned. "You might want to sit down for this, brother. We have a short story to tell. Then we gotta get to work."

The "short" story took almost an hour for Tipid to relate, and even then, he only managed to tell us the basics.

He told us of his life after he'd left the dungeon. Of the surgery he'd had to get to keep himself alive, and the debt he'd incurred as a result of that surgery. He told us of Doctor Hu of the Crawler Project, an NFC organization dedicated to helping former crawlers navigate the universe after release.

Dr Hu. Dr *Porthus* Hu. Author of the second edition of the cookbook. The first crawler to receive the item.

"Is he here?" I asked, interrupting. "Did he come into the dungeon with you?"

"No," Tipid said. "We all had to scatter when they accused us of being a terrorist organization. I don't know where he is."

"Wait," Donut asked. "So, are you like fugitives? Are they going to swoop in and arrest everyone at any moment?"

Rosetta grinned. "Oh, I hope they try, warlord. But now that we're in the game, there is nothing they can do. They'll wait until we get out to try to arrest us."

There was so much I wanted to ask. Tipid continued, all of us paying rapt attention.

Dr. Hu's work had been instrumental in helping to create multiple laws that would protect crawlers upon release. Because of the Crawler Project's campaigning, all released crawlers were now automatically citizens of the Syndicate and given access to the inner system primary zone, which came with free healthcare and guaranteed housing. When Tipid was released, he wasn't afforded any of that.

Mistress Tiatha sat off to the side and grunted with derision as she listened to this. The half-elf manager of Elle was drunk as usual. "That citizenship perk is only for new crawlers," she said, slurring the words. "And they'll still bleed you dry on taxes. Us old guard are gonna get extra fucked when we're released. They tell us we'll be 'full citizens,' but I don't believe it. The rich folk sure like getting their faces up on the screen when they're donating to some charity, but the moment a scruffy, former crawler shows up in their home system looking to settle down, they'll fight like hell to prevent it. Mark my words." She took a long swig of her bottle. The woman's eyes settled on Mongo, and they were wet. She rubbed them and wandered off.

Tipid continued. In addition to the Crawler Project, Dr. Hu formed the Open Intellect Pacifist Network, which was a smaller, more focused group whose purpose was to end the crawl all together. This organization did not have nearly as much support. I could tell there was so much more Tipid wanted to say, and I hoped I would get the chance to learn it all.

That whole incident with Paulie the residual in the body of a homeless man in the Florida shelter had been just one of several actions that had caused authorities to finally start to crack down on the non-profit.

After Tipid's life-saving surgery, he finally settled in a Crest colony, where he worked for a waste management company for a very, very long time. We didn't have time to get into the details, but it was Doctor Hu who had suggested the idea of refurbishing one of the garbage freighters into a passenger liner. He put out a call to former crawlers who wanted to get back into the game to help us with Faction Wars, and he'd been overwhelmed by the response.

They'd come to help fight their former captors. Even when I managed to get the protections turned off, they still came. I was, again, overwhelmed with emotion.

As Tipid told his story, Rosetta left and headed toward our saferoom. I warned Mordecai she was coming, and about five minutes after she arrived, a group of three more former crawlers—not cookbook authors—entered the saferoom and went out into the

guild. All three were small, winged, lizard-like creatures called bune. All three waved at me and Donut before continuing on their way.

"You're all level 60," I said, watching the lizards scuttle off. Despite their wings, they loped about on the ground. "What level were you in the dungeon?"

"I was 96 when I left," Tipid said. "When we checked in, they gave all of us the standard merc package. Level 60. Able to choose a non-permanent race and class. Most don't go for the race change, but some did. My class during my first go-around was a poisoner. Now it's something called a Liquid Dervish." He grinned. "It's a good one."

"What about gear?" I asked, looking the man up and down. He was wearing the same thing Rosetta had been. The three bune had also been wearing just basic clothes.

"What you see is what you get," Tipid said. "But, some of us picked classes that come with weapons or powerful spells." He tapped his head. "Plus you get everything that's up here. We may be level 60, but each one of us is at least a tenner. We've all survived Faction Wars at least once. Or Land War. We have a couple of Battle Royale winners with us, too."

"Tell him about the mercs," Florin said.

Tipid nodded. "Unfortunately, we weren't the only ones added at the last minute. You just got a boost of 50,000 ready soldiers. The problem is, all eight of the other teams got a boost of their own. Each team has just about 20,000 new soldiers. All of them are experienced mercenaries, or in some cases, the private guard of the warlords. They let them come in armed. That's in addition to their existing armies."

"What?" Donut asked. "Why do they get weapons and you didn't?"

"They negotiated a different agreement with the AI. They got to come in with their existing gear. They don't get to change race, and their class is Hired Mercenary. They get to keep their weapons and are given a few rudimentary spells, plus whatever they can pick up here in the dungeon. Trust me, it's a raw deal. Still, there's a lot of

them. About 150,000 new bad guys to kill, spread evenly over the other teams."

"Damnit," I said. I met Florin's grim eyes. My joy at having these reinforcements was starting to get clouded by this new reality.

Tipid nodded. "If we get to face the factions one at a time, I'd say no problem, but since they're working together, we got a bumpy entry ahead of us, that's for certain. Especially for the first week." Tipid took a long breath. "Still, we're lucky they didn't let them choose a race and class. They'd be much stronger. I'll take my *Murder Tornado* spell over a pulse rifle any day." He gave me a wink. "And wait until you see what my friend Justice Light can do. That eagle knows more about traps than anyone else who ever set foot in the dungeon."

"Okay," I said standing up, trying not to let the emotion overwhelm me all over again. "Let's get to the base and meet up with the team."

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[12]

<Note added by crawler Ikicha, 11th Edition>

If only I could see him again. It would change everything.

I am jealous, those of you with community, with friends, with family. My kind are castrated and cast out. As such, I think my perspective is unique, so much different than the one who came before me, York, who appears to have come from a hive, yet says he always felt alone his entire life. We are so different, but upon reading his words, I feel such kinship. I wonder, did he survive? Those of you reading this, if you are ever free of this place, I pray you seek out the others who came before. It is a dream. Can you imagine? Together, there would be nothing we couldn't do. Nothing.

Time until the ceasefire ends: 52 hours.

Entering The Princess Posse Base Camp.

This is your home territory.

Warning: There is a red alert incursion into your territory. Enter the Flag Room to see the details.

We stepped from the exit into chaos. It was me, Donut, Tipid, and Florin. Imani stayed behind to work in her magic room. Mistress Tiatha was showing her some battlefield enhancement spells with her newly-upgraded room, and Imani wanted to train with it some before returning.

Louis, Katia, and Bautista would soon be here with *Party Planner*.

The attached saferoom was a small, wooden bait shop with no proprietor. The room itself was barely big enough to fit us all. We stepped out from the small shop onto a grassy plain with a powerful, orange sun beating down on us from directly above. White and yellow flowers dotted the grass. I turned to see the small, wooden shack standing there. The "Bait Shop" sign hung over the door in English. Just past the shop was a small lake.

The skeleton of a new building was in the process of being erected around the shop. Up a small hill, a second, larger building stood. It was a stone structure, but I couldn't see how big it was. This building was also being encased in metal girders. Multiple workers crawled over both structures. They were boxing the saferoom in, protecting it. It appeared they were expanding the size of the other structure up the hill, connecting the two.

A cool, soft breeze filled the air, though the aroma was that of construction. It was of smoke and ozone and burnt tar. It was a scent I associated with shipyards and welding. Hundreds of people of all shapes and forms stood about, walking, talking, working, and laughing. Far to my left where the ground started to slope away, a group was hard at work, building some type of palisade wall. A fireball flashed through the air and crashed into the metal posts, causing it to glow red. A group of men and women were talking animatedly, pointing at the impact. *They're testing the walls as they build them.*

Multiple watch towers were already constructed, and each tower appeared to be manned by three or four people. I could see another tower being built some distance away in the middle of the plains.

Another group were using *Build Trench* scrolls and appeared to be making a channel up toward the small lake.

I had no idea where they were getting the materials for all this.

Mongo screeched with concern, and Donut patted him on the head as we took it all in. Rend stood on my shoulder, oohing and ahhing as he gnawed on an errant strand of my hair. He'd eaten one of my hair ties, and I hadn't realized it until my hair fell in front of my eyes.

"You only get a limited number of officers," Florin was saying as we walked. "We're recruiting most of the construction guys and crawlers as sergeants and chiefs which allows them to alter the camp, but there's probably a limit to that as well. Everyone else is going to get the rank of legionnaire with corporals leading individual teams for now."

"It says there's an incursion into the territory," I said.

"It's mobs," Tipid said. "Normally they should be cleared out by now, but they made the world bigger, and now we have some hunting to do. We need to decide who to send. There's only limited experience to be had right now."

"If we don't get them all," Florin added, "Then the warning system is useless."

A group of soldiers were struggling to push a wall section up. It fell, and they all jumped away. The giant section of wall reverberated with a loud crash, embedding into the earth so deep, it buried itself in a shower of dirt and grass and dust. Florin moved off to help them.

To my left, someone pointed at us and shouted. Everything stopped, just like that. Hundreds of pairs of eyes all turned in our direction.

A tall, muscular human sergeant stood right there, carrying what looked like a steel H-beam for a building. The metallic beam had to be 20 feet long, and it looked as if it weighed two tons. The monster of a man held it on his shoulder.

His name was Penn, and he was a **level 62 Fortification Engineer.**

In fact, I realized, several of the people around me had the same class. Fortification Engineer. Everyone who wasn't an engineer was level 60. The engineers seemed to be the only ones who'd risen in level.

The mountain of a man tossed the massive beam to the ground, turned, and wrapped his arms around me in a crushing hug.

I let out an *oof* as a swarm of bune dragon people came rushing up to surround Donut, walking and buzzing around her, all touching her and then going to the ground and bowing. Mongo looked back at Donut, who appeared equally bewildered.

The man put me down and kissed me on the cheek. He had tears in his eyes.

Donut: CARL, WHY IS EVERYONE KISSING YOU ALL OF A SUDDEN? THAT'S LIKE THE THIRD PERSON IN AN HOUR. YOU'RE GOING TO GET MONO.

"*Hup, hup, hup*," Penn started to rhythmically shout, pumping his fist into the air.

I just looked at the man. I was about to ask, "What the hell are you doing?" when someone else started doing it as well. Soon, everyone was shouting and pumping their appendages into the air. It turned into a war chant of sorts. *Hup, hup, hup*. People were shouting in rhythm like we were at a concert or a football game.

More and more people approached, also shouting and pumping their arms into the air, and soon, we were surrounded. Thousands of people—humans, skyfowl, crocodilians, bune, yenk, and so many others pumped their fists or wings in the air, chanting. The sound was deafening.

But it was more, too. It was terrifying. The ground shook. I felt a deep well of pride at that sound, that chant. In less than three days, we'd all be waist deep in blood. A lot of us would be dead. But for now, this war cry filled me with hope and power.

Tipid tried saying something to me, but I couldn't hear him over the noise. He moved to chat.

Tipid: This is for you. This is what you built.

And just like that, they were done. Penn the human clapped me on the back, turned, and picked the massive beam back up, hoisting it over his shoulder and started walking toward the palisade construction. Everyone else also went back to work. I just stood there, watching them for a few moments, still overwhelmed.

Off to the side, I blinked as a giant alligator thing suddenly appeared next to Florin. The crawler said something to the giant creature, which was enormous, like 25 feet long. The creature's long snout moved into the dirt and easily urged the embedded wall section up into the air as the workers swarmed around it, heaving as they pushed the wall back into place.

The creature was too far away to fully examine, but I could see the symbol of a flag over it. This was Florin's card from the previous floor. A giant caiman. The card combat system was left behind on the 8th level, thank god, but we could still summon our chosen card once a day. Summoning time was equal to twice their regular countdown. If they died, they still came back the next day.

The giant alligator creature did a happy little hop, reminding me of Mongo.

"Come on, Carl," Donut finally said. "We need to see this stronghold, and then I have to get back and help Rosetta."

"Your changelings and those flesh golems started building the stronghold on top of the hill over here," Tipid said as we walked through the camp. Each former crawler we passed grinned at me, waved, and then went back to work. "It's a good location, but they didn't understand how important saferooms are, so we have to expand the building and combine the two. We're going to build the whole stronghold around the wood shack. This will allow your airships to dock directly from the fortress. Have you seen the new saferoom rules? That's going to be a problem, so we gotta combine the two buildings. We had a few thousand of us choose that Fortification Engineer race so they could build fast. It lets them level with construction, too. We also have several alchemists who've been making the materials since we got here a few days ago, and we have a solid staff who can also enchant the walls. There's a yenk named Langrim who used to run the enchantment guild here, and they really know what they're doing. We hadn't been able to start

the actual construction until just now. It wouldn't let us build until we were officially converted. We have crews here, on both borders, and others building fall-back positions throughout along with multiple watchtower squads."

"Wait, what are the new saferoom rules?" I asked, my head spinning. There was a lot that had changed, I knew, but I hadn't had time to go over it all yet.

"Lots of small changes and a couple big ones. Once the fighting starts, it's going back to the blood bar system, so you can't just hide in the saferoom for the whole floor. This is for everybody. You kill someone or something, you fill your blood bar up. Up to nine or ten hours I think. The bar lowers when you're inside, so you can't just camp and hide out. That's a good and a bad thing. Second rule is no mercenaries inside guildhalls during the last two phases, except for a small staff of up to nine people at a time. That ain't too big of a deal, but it means we have to build sleeping quarters for all these folks, and we won't be able to keep a reserve."

I thought of Mordecai and the changeling children he was fostering.

"Are you considered a mercenary?" I asked. "And do you get the achievements or quests or anything?

"We're mercenaries all right. That orc adjutant of yours can probably clarify it better, but most of us ain't getting into your guildhall once fighting starts. This was a big sticking point with some of the other teams because the active crawlers can still use their regular saferooms. To a point, that is, with the blood bar active. As for achievements and all that weird stuff, no, thank the gods. We don't get that. Just level notifications and messages."

This Tipid guy was, what? Several thousand years old? Even though he appeared older than Rosetta, he still didn't seem *that* old. Nor did he act it. He had a big, sideways grin on his scarred face the whole time he moved on through the camp. In some ways, he reminded me of my friend, Sam. Goofy, but not dumb. Disheveled, but always alert. Someone who would surprise you at the strangest moments. Tipid didn't have the most entries in the cookbook, but the ones he did have were filled with haunting guilt and anger. He'd

had a tragedy near the end of his crawl that had really messed him up, and this version of him was so different, it was jarring. Still, it was there once you knew to look for it. The tension. The anger. I could sense hints of it under the surface, like scars not quite hidden by a newly painted wall.

"What about the other teams?" I asked.

"Pretty much all the non-NPC officers have saferooms of their own. They'll have built their strongholds around one. Big exception is the Lemig team, but we can talk about that later. This change will hurt the Operatics and the naga the most, both of whom are known for hiding rather than fighting."

Florin came jogging back up to join us. He was grumbling something about artillery. His giant caiman had already timed out and poofed away.

"We need to talk about the naga team," I said. "They need to be our first target."

"Figured you say that," Tipid said. "That's going to be a problem with the enemy massing on the opposite border. Let's get to the flag room and talk strategy."

Mongo started making a strange, chirping noise.

"Mongo, what're you doing?" Donut asked. "What is it?" Mongo was sniffing up at the air.

We came to a large, metallic door that looked as if it'd been hammered into shape by a blind and drunk metalsmith. The damn thing was huge, like 20 feet high. This was the part of the stronghold that had been built by the changelings and flesh golems. The door was propped open with a rock, but not open wide enough to squeeze through. Tipid reached over and grabbed a ring and started to pull. He grunted with the effort, and I moved to help.

To my surprise, an info box popped up the moment I touched the door.

Oversized, Cumbersome Door. Apprentice Quality. This fortification is at 80% Strength.

You don't want to be behind this thing once it's kicked in.

3/3 Enchantments active. Increase quality to increase enchantment capacity.

Current Enchantments:
Battering Resistance.
Force Reflection.
Heat Absorption.

The moment I added my strength, the door started to slowly, slowly ease open, squealing in protest. A rock fell from the door frame as we pulled. Rend, still on my shoulder, started making grunting noises even though he wasn't doing anything.

"My goodness," Donut said. "It certainly is a big door, but it's not the most enduring construction, is it? Mongo, stop doing that!" Donut jumped to my shoulder. Rend, still on my opposite shoulder, dropped my strand of hair and began gnawing on Donut's tail. Donut didn't notice. "Carl, why is Mongo making weird noises?"

Tipid grunted as we continued to pull. "Once we get this open, we have to close it right away because..."

The door flew all the way open, and both Tipid and I went flying back. I hit the ground with an *oof* and slid. Rend went flying and rolled down the hill, giggling the whole time while Donut shrieked.

"She's out again!" someone cried.

I looked up in time to see the giant allosaurus with a pink tutu rush out into the clearing in front of the building. She hopped up and down in front of Mongo, waving her little wand, who also started to hop up and down in front of her.

"Oh, shit," I muttered.

Tina.

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[13]

"Pop.. Pa-pa!" Tina grunted at Mongo.

Mongo screeched, waving his arms up at the giant dinosaur as they both continued to hop up and down, dancing in circles. I held my breath. These two didn't have the best relationship, but that was before Tina had "woken up" during the Butcher's Masquerade.

It appeared they were getting along now. We all stumbled as the giant dinosaur continued to bounce. More rocks fell from the building. "Pa-pa! Pa-pa!"

When Tina talked, it was with deep, guttural growls, and it was difficult to understand what she was saying. I could feel the bass of her voice in my chest. I had to remind myself this was a little kid.

"Papa?" Donut asked, scoffing. She returned to my shoulder, shaking with rage. "Mongo is most certainly not your father! And when did you start to talk?"

"Tina, get back inside!" a new voice cried.

We all turned to watch as a female ursine waddled out the front door. The bear woman wore an eyepatch. Old, deep scarring covered her head. She held a spoon in her hand and had an apron stretched taut around her enormous, pregnant belly.

Kiwi.

I exchanged a look with Florin.

Kiwi was born as an Ursine, but she was a female Mongo when we'd met her. She'd been turned into a dinosaur during

Scolopendra's nine-tier attack. She'd been changed back to a bear during the Butcher's Masquerade. It was how we won the Tina quest. But before she'd turned, she'd had... *relations* with Mongo when they were both dinosaurs.

And now she was pregnant. *Very* pregnant. About-to-pop pregnant.

Kiwi paused at the sight of her daughter dancing around Mongo, who'd now stopped and was staring at the bear.

"Mongo?" Kiwi asked.

Mongo gave a single, quiet roar. He pushed past Tina and moved, head low to the ground as everybody watched, all of us holding our breath, all of us wondering what was going to happen next. Mongo sniffed at Kiwi and gave an uncertain peep.

The entire camp had gone silent. I felt something on my foot. It was Rend. He wanted to be picked up. I reached down to grab him, not taking my eyes off the dinosaur and bear. Rend started chewing on Donut's tail again.

Donut sniffed angrily. "Carl, if this turns into some weird, furry porn thing, I'm going to lose my absolute shit."

Kiwi stepped forward, wrapped her arms around Mongo's neck, and she hugged him. Mongo just stood there. They hugged for a few moments, and then Kiwi turned away.

"Come, Tina," Kiwi said, voice softer this time. "Come help mommy make dinner." Kiwi looked at me and Donut, just standing there. She nodded, turned back inside, and she disappeared.

"Pa-pa," Tina said again before turning back inside.

Mongo remained, a confused look upon the dinosaur's face, like he didn't know what had just happened. He sniffed again at the air and let out a sad, confused peep.

"Sorry, buddy," I said to the poor dinosaur. "Sometimes people change, and that's all there is to it."

Mongo made a forlorn squeak.

"Papa," Donut muttered again.

"So," Florin muttered, "how do you reckon *that* litter is gonna turn out?"

Entering the Fortress of Unyielding Power and Authority.
This Edifice is at 80% Strength.

"Oh, shit," I muttered the second I saw the name.

"What kind of name is that?" Donut announced. "That is a terrible name." She paused. "Hey, it doesn't let me change it!"

"Uh, yeah," Florin said. "Apparently there was a bit of a tug-o-war over the name. The Sledge named it Los Santos for some reason, and the changelings preferred a name that would show power. They kept changing it back and forth until the AI told them to shove it. So it's now stuck on that. The Sledge is pretty salty about it."

"But the name is too long," Donut complained. "This is most inconvenient."

"'Fortress of Unyielding Power and Authority?'" I laughed. "F U P A. The FUPA. That's why the AI made it stay on that name."

"I am absolutely not calling our castle the FUPA, Carl. That's obscene! The bad guys are gonna laugh at us!"

"And what were you going to change it to?"

"I don't know, Carl. Now I'm angry, and I can't properly create when I'm angry. I was probably going to pick Club Posse or something."

Florin chuckled.

"Don't you be spreading that name," Donut said. "How does this warlord thing work? How do I make sure people do what I say? That's a direct order!"

I laughed again. I could see it was already too late. Florin had already put it up in the chat, and in seconds there were dozens of animated responses. Elle said it was hilarious, and Imani was with Donut, campaigning against it. Tran suggested calling it the "Foop" instead. I could tell it was going to become a thing, with half the people calling it one name and the other half calling it the other.

The stronghold itself was strangely empty of people and workers. A few dots were scattered about, but not many. It was built like a

medieval castle with long hallways dotted with murder holes along the sides, all leading to the central chamber, the throne room, which had to be a specific size. The room could have a locking door, and the entrance to it could be trapped, but the room itself wasn't allowed to have any defensive features or traps within. Though it could be occupied by guards.

The walls of the castle were hastily built and mortared. They felt solid, despite the shoddy appearance of the exterior door. Most of the interior hallways were regular-sized, but the outer ring was three stories tall, built to house Tina and some of the larger tattoo-turned-flesh golems. The rocks glowed with enchantment. I put my hand upon the rough rock, and an info box popped up.

Yeah, this is a rock. It's part of an interior rock wall. What did you think it was?

8/12 Enchantments active. Increase base quality to increase enchantment capacity.

Enter the Flag room to see the full list of active enchantments.

"FUPA," Donut muttered as we walked. "*Maybe* I'll call it the Foop, but even that sounds offensive."

"Welcome back, warlords," a new voice said. We stepped to the side as two NPCs rushed by, hauling what looked like bags of mortar. They were in the body of bugbears, but I knew they were some of my changelings. They rushed by without another word. Both were covered in sweat, working hard.

There was another dot ahead. This was an Elite. He had the pink glow around his name, indicating him as a soldier. He was in the next room over, an antechamber that led to the flag room. I hovered over the dot, and the system labeled him:

Elite Herman the Fleet. Ogre Strongman. Level 70.

Legionnaire.

Princess Posse.

Herman was the third of the three ogre strongmen from Grimaldi's circus. We'd met his brother, Areson during the sixth floor, and he should still be around here somewhere. Apollon, their other brother, had been left behind on the third floor. All three had once

been part of a three-headed ogre called a nodling who'd died and split long ago. That same creature, the nodling, had been turned into a tattoo, who'd since been given flesh and should also be around here, too, which was really weird. That strangeness—basically two of the same creature—reminded me of the Alpha Carl card from the previous floor. That had to be confusing for everybody involved. It certainly messed with your head. I was glad we'd left the Alpha Carl card on the previous floor.

The elite was the only other dot I could see. I knew the adjutant was waiting in the flag room, but apparently we couldn't see inside.

"Where are the rest of the golems and changelings?" I asked.

"They're all working on defenses at the borders," Tipid said.

I paused, looking into the room that would be the throne room. It was just a square, empty room, about twenty by twenty feet, reminding me of a stairwell chamber. There was no actual throne. Not yet. I looked at the white, clean stones. I swallowed.

I continued to stand there and pretend like I was examining the room.

Carl: Okay, what about the stuff we can't talk about out loud? Tell me about the scouting system.

This was something I'd specifically asked Florin and Elle to figure out, and we'd agreed ahead of time all of these discussions would be over chat in case the walls still had ears.

Florin: Elle is off toward the naga side. The beaver guys… the castors or whatever they're called. They're with that talking turtle guy, scouting enemy positions and fortifications on the other border. Haven't heard back either way.

Carl: Have you figured out how the peacetime incursions work?

Florin: Yes. Only those with the Scout endorsement can go over the borders without a pass. If they get discovered, they're immediately teleported back to base during the ceasefire and can't go stealth again until the fighting starts. If they hit a trap, it'll still go off and kill `em. We only get 18 Scouts. That's what those towers are for, by the way. We

need full coverage. Build a tower and man it with a group of four or five folks with proper observation and *Ping* spells, and we can keep the enemy scouts away. Already teleported out a Dream scout and one of those octopus-faced fucks from the Prism.

Donut let out an angry, little hiss at the mention of the Prism kingdom. She was still mad at Empress D'Nadia for trying to get us deleted.

Florin: I'll bet my left sack we are already infested with enemy spies. That's why we gotta get them towers up. We need to do a full sweep, and do it fast.

Carl: We need to start spamming traps, too.

Florin: Already on it, but the big trap guy—he's an eagle guy with one wing—has gone subterranean already. He should come up for air in a few hours. He wants access to your trap table. Says he can prevent *Tripper* spells.

We moved to the antechamber in front of the flag room. This was just a big room with an even bigger desk, filled with the stench of rocks and moss. And a strange amount of sweat, too, oddly reminding me of the Juicer boss room on the first floor. Behind the desk, leaned over a pile of papers was the ogre. Herman the Fleet. The ogre was completely decked out in magical gear, glowing more than anyone I'd ever seen.

The ogre looked very much like his brother, Areson the Wise, except much thinner, like he'd stopped his weight training, giving him half the bulk of his two brothers. He also wore glasses, which was just bizarre. I wondered if that was the dungeon's way of telling me he wouldn't be as stupid as his brothers.

Upon further observation, I realized the ogre wasn't working like I originally thought. He appeared to be writhing in pain. All of us stopped, surprised at the unexpected display. He had both hands on the edge of the desk, and veins bulged from his arms. A low, pained grunting noise came from the Elite. Despite not being as buff as his brothers, the desk snapped in half, spilling papers in a great, surprising clatter. The ogre lifted his head into the air and cried out.

"What's happening?" Donut asked. "What's going on?"

"Carl," the ogre said through gritted teeth. He jumped up, and the chair went flying. "Been waiting. Brother says you good." He swallowed hard. "Supposed to do it already. Been fighting it. Tell brother... tell sorry." He cried again.

Dozens of little info boxes all popped up around the ogre all at once.

...And that was when I realized he wasn't wearing magical gear at all.

He was covered in explosive satchels, all hidden underneath his clothes.

A suicide bomber.

Watch out, Carl. Watch out.

Multiple things happened at once.

"Bomb!" I cried as Donut fired a *Magic Missile* right at the ogre's face.

To my left, Tipid turned into a puff of smoke, and to my right, Florin hit the ground, a shield forming around him.

At the same moment, the door to the flag room opened, an armored orc stepped out, and she slammed a massive, cruel-looking battle-axe into the head of the struggling ogre.

The elite slumped over, dead.

The chaos ended as quickly as it had started.

The orc had been so casual about it, you'd think she'd just stepped out to grab a cup of coffee.

We just stared at each other. Me and the orc.

"I can only do so much for you, warlord," the orc said.

All of the explosive satchels on the ogre started to move into destabilization.

"Shit," I muttered, jumping forward. I took the entire ogre into my inventory, my heart thrashing. It left nothing but a smear of gore and an upturned, broken desk on the floor.

The orc continued to stare back down at me with a slight hint of distaste on her boar-like face.

Baroness Victory.

Adjutant for The Princess Posse.

This is a "non-combatant" observer.

My eyes focused on the "non-combatant" part of her name, which now had quotes around it. The AI had done that.

"Not that I'm complaining, but..." I finally said, my voice shaking. Holy shit, that had been close. Florin stood back up and Tipid reformed. All of us were rattled. "Were you allowed to do that?"

"That wasn't a legal attack," the orc said, sliding her blood-splattered axe back into her waistband. A bit of brain dripped off it and splatched onto her boot. "That was an unlawful assassination attempt by Sensation Entertainment, and I will be calling foul. I will be filing a grievance against the Dream, who now own the entertainment company. They were exerting undue influence on one of their elites to affect Faction Wars. Princess Donut, that was an admirable shot, and it may have saved you all. I will file for you to get credit for the kill."

The orc paused, looking up at the ceiling. "No," she suddenly said out loud, angrily pointing at the ceiling. "Absolutely not. That was clearly a foul by the corporate interests who purchased Sensation, and if you don't like it, you should re-read your own rules. In addition, you are out of line by not warning me he was being influenced."

She paused again.

"I accept your apology," she finally said. And without another word, she turned and returned to the flag room, leaving the door open for us to follow.

"Uh, Carl," Donut asked. "Was she talking to the AI just now?"

"I don't know if I should be terrified or in love," Florin added as we walked into the flag room.

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[14]

<u>The Four Phases of Combat, plus triggering conditions</u>:

<u>Current Phase</u>. The Ceasefire. 50 hours left.

The Ramp-Up. Triggers when the Ceasefire ends. 180 Hours.

Open Hostilities. Triggers when the Ramp-Up Expires.

The Peeling of Larracos. Triggers Once four teams remain.

We stepped into the large, round chamber. My interface beeped, and multiple windows suddenly popped up without bidding. Next to me, Donut squawked with annoyance as we both had to start repositioning windows.

Entering the FUPA Flag Room for the Princess Posse.

"Hey!" Donut said. "Carl, now the computer is calling it the FUPA!"

"You may speak freely in here," Victory said once the door shut. "Before the hostilities begin, anything that is said in this room isn't available to the viewers for eight days. So in case anyone is feeding the other factions information, it will hopefully be stale information by that time."

I was too distracted by my screens to pay attention. I flicked an info box to the side, rearranging it. It was like the status window of a city building game, like *Civilization*, but not nearly as well organized. These screens were different than the regular ones, and when I tried to mentally minimize them using the regular interface, all I did was move them around.

"This is not very consistent," Donut muttered.

I grunted with agreement. I had multiple views in my interface. I mentally flicked on one a little hard, and it disappeared from my view and appeared floating on the wall of the room.

"Huh," I muttered as I continued to move things around so I could actually see. I had a window that listed all the troops. One that listed all of our secured locations. One that listed the nine other teams, along with a message window where I could send direct messages to the other warlords. I saw the little three dots indicating someone was in the middle of typing a message in the Prism chat, and I realized it was coming from our side.

"Donut," I said out loud. "Don't."

"Empress D'nadia needs to know how I feel about her betrayal, Carl."

"She knows. Don't poke at anyone yet."

Donut harrumphed, but she didn't send the message.

"Your display system is similar to what Game Guides see," Victory said. "It's only in this room. You'll get used to it."

I continued to move windows aside, and in doing so, I found each one of those info boxes could be drilled down further. I made the mistake of double clicking on the officer interface, and literally a hundred new windows popped up. I finally found a **Clear Screen** button, and I clicked it.

"Goddamnit," I muttered.

Everything had disappeared, like my entire interface had turned off, including my health, the level timer, the mini map, and my mana bar. It was like I was in a production trailer. I was so used to the little info windows now, I felt naked without them. I grumbled and tried to figure out how to get them back without also pulling up the

room notifications. I found the solution after a moment, but when I turned it all back on, my missed game notifications popped up.

I usually went over these when I could, but I had set it up that only important warnings and messages appeared. Everything else could wait until I made it to a saferoom, and even then, only when I thought to look at it. Most of this stuff was useless, and everyone had started calling this list the Spam Folder. These were world chat messages not directed at us, hidden skill notifications, and dozens of other pointless game announcements.

I blinked at the long, long line of strange notifications. I read the most recent ones, from just a few moments earlier. A sense of horror overwhelmed me.

***Gloom Wraith Phase* failed to activate. Mind Balance prevented activation.**

Your attempt to disable Mind Balance was prevented by Mind Balance.

Your Mind Balance has risen to level nine.

Level nine? It'd been level five just a few hours ago. I moved my eyes down the suppressed notifications page. My heart thrashed.

There were hundreds of these entries, over and over again. There were pages of me attempting to cast something, and each time, it got stopped. The *Mind Balance* skill came from my new toe ring, though now it was trained up so much, I'd still have the skill, minus five levels, even if I took the ring off. I didn't dare.

Shi Maria. The tattoo on my chest. She was trying to cast spells and activate skills without my permission. The *Gloom Wraith Phase* would've killed the ogre, but it also likely would've set off the bombs. Would I have been protected if they'd exploded while I was phased?

Only if the bombs were non-magical. I quickly glanced at the ogre corpse in my inventory. The bombs indeed were non-magical. Donut would've been dead had I cast that skill. She had her *Cockroach* ability, but that wouldn't help if she was blown to literal bits. A new wave of horror washed over me, and I found my shaking hand stroking the back of the oblivious cat. *Holy shit.*

Watch out, Carl. Watch out.

The spider had managed to speak in my mind, despite the *Mind Balance* skill. She was getting stronger with each attempt to control me. But so was I. It was a race, I realized. She was constantly fighting against the *Mind Balance* skill. And even though the skill was rapidly increasing in power, she'd still managed to break in for just a moment.

She was winning the race. How soon before she could take me over completely?

I sent a quick message to Mordecai, telling him we needed to talk.

Mordecai: If it's about that presence you have tattooed on your chest, Rosetta has caught me up. We're working on a solution. We have a few options on how to deal with it. None of them pleasant.

"Goodness, Carl, are you okay?" Donut asked. "You're shaking like Miss Beatrice during pumpkin spice season."

I patted Donut to reassure her. Baroness Victory was talking to us, but I'd missed some of it. She was explaining how to pull up a map in the center of the room, showing an overall view of the battlefield. I took a breath and forced myself to pay attention. One problem at a time.

"Most warlords spend all of Faction Wars in their flag room," she was saying, "with some notable exceptions. The Orcs, the Reavers, and the Dream all have warlords who prefer to lead from the front. I am supposed to follow you onto the field for major conflicts, and as such, I have the limited ability to teleport, even during Ramp-Up, though I warn you, I cannot participate. What you saw just now was an anomaly."

"You're going to be with us whenever we fight?" I asked.

"I know you two prefer a more hands-on approach. I will be present when it's prudent. If my presence causes a problem, let me know, and I will come back here. All adjutants can also go invisible if need be. But I will warn you. I can and will call out all fouls as I see them. That includes anything perpetrated by your team. If you have any questions about the rules, ask me first. I am on your side. I can

help with strategy. In addition, I can make suggestions to fit something into the existing ruleset, if required."

"Was she nice, or was she a jerk?" Donut asked.

Baroness Victory just looked at Donut. "Of whom do you speak?" she finally asked.

"Your sister. The orc queen lady. The one that got blown up when your nephew tried to assassinate us."

If the orc woman was surprised by the odd question, she didn't show it. But she did appear to think about her answer. "My sister Ugloo and I once had a very similar outlook on life. When she married into the royal family, she lost a lot of who she was. I suppose she was quite unhappy with how things had turned out for her. We had not spoken in a long while, but she did send me a message before she died, asking if I was planning on being an adjutant this season. She was going to the Scolopendra Club to meet up with the king and wanted to have an outing before the fighting started. Why do you wish to know, Princess?"

"You can judge someone based on how they talk about the dead."

Carl: What TV show did you get that from?

Donut: I DIDN'T GET IT FROM A SHOW, CARL. I REALLY WANT TO KNOW. YOU PICKED HER TO BE OUR ADJUTANT PERSON, AND I NEED TO KNOW IF WE CAN TRUST HER.

Carl: We don't trust anybody, Donut. Not at first. But something tells me she's okay.

Donut: YOU ALSO TRUSTED SISTER INES, AND LOOK HOW THAT TURNED OUT.

Mongo had eased his way behind the orc, and he was greedily licking at the head of the bloody axe in her waistband. Rend climbed to the top of Mongo's head and also attempted to lick at the axe, but he couldn't reach and he was making whimpering, grunting noises. The stoic orc pulled the axe from her waistband and leaned it up against the table so they could both get at it. She gave Rend a gentle pat. Even Florin looked a bit ill at the display.

The orc turned back to the map and kept talking. The wagon wheel shape of the ninth floor spread out in the center of the room

in a giant, round hologram. Larracos stood in the middle with the nine, not-quite-but-almost equal pie shapes of the individual spaces spread out from the center. A tiny ring circled Larracos, and it blinked and turned pink as we watched. The name **Shanty Town. Controlled by the Princess Posse** popped up.

The large orc nodded. "This was a smart trade. The shanty town is usually small and unimportant and doesn't usually form until after the fighting begins and the NPCs flee. It is now quite large and completely circles Larracos, giving the NPCs an extra layer of security. One you control."

"We have three town upgrade coupons," I said. "Donut and I each got one when we completed the Tina quest on the sixth floor. And I just got a tier three upgrade in a box. Can we use them for this?"

"Absolutely," Victory said. "And with the new city defense system the AI created, you may be able to get something similar to what they have in Larracos. But you may also use the coupons for your base here, and that may be a better choice."

Britney was currently learning all she could about the Larracos city defense system from Juice Box. I sent her a message to check in when she was done. I also sent a message to Li Na. We'd finally managed to get her officially recruited thanks to Mordecai brewing a potion that negated aura effects. The moment she'd joined, she asked if she and her squad could be in charge of helping to build defenses in and around Shanty Town. I'd agreed.

We moved our attention to the nine pie pieces. Our area was highlighted in pink. The whole area outside the city was called the Plains of Larracos, and it was mostly flat, except for the northernmost area of the map. The first pie piece in spot number one was owned by the Bone Clan of the Skull Empire, and their castle was called "The King's Point." It was the only of nine pie pieces that came with a pre-built castle, and it sat in a highly defensible position atop a small, rocky mountain that occasionally had lava flow around it.

The orcs' territory also had the most rivers and lakes, including the large, fast-moving river that eventually drained into Larracos

itself, though the end of it curved into Operatic territory in spot number two before it passed through Shanty Town and plunged into the funnel city.

The rocky peaks made way to rolling hills, which was the area of the Operatics in pie number two. We were in spot number three. Our area was mostly flat with a few hills here and there. The small lake near our base appeared to be the only major water supply in the entire area.

"The main body of the enemy is massing on your border here," Victory said, pointing to the spot on our northern border with the Operatics. Dozens of little campfire icons appeared. "Initial estimates appear they are about 100,000 strong. The system allowed them to keep their armor and weapons. It's a calculated effort. Their best chance is to sweep over our position and take us out immediately."

I blinked up at her. A wave of new fear washed over me.

"What? That many?"

She ignored me and moved her pointer behind the camp. "We also have intelligence that the Dream are setting up their long-range artillery batteries here." She moved her pointer to the other side of the map into spot number four, the Naga side. "And here. There's another 10,000 on this side of the border, more as a defensive action, I suspect. It could be a trick, but they believe they have the numbers and plan on overrunning your position the moment the ceasefire ends, forcing you to retreat into the city. Or die defending this castle. Have you familiarized yourself with the ramp-up?"

"Uh, the what?" I asked.

"This season's rules regarding the onset of hostilities. There are four phases, and we are in phase one right now. The Ceasefire. Then there's the Ramp-Up, Open Hostilities, and the Peeling of Larracos. When the Ceasefire ends, the Ramp-Up begins. It lasts 180 hours. There are several rules for this next phase, and you must familiarize yourself with them immediately. The important ones are: No celestial summonings will be allowed. Egress into enemy territory by non-scouts is only allowed through narrow, kilometer-wide 'gates.' Each corridor is at the same spot, and it is where the enemies are

massing. And most importantly, offensive magic and teleport magic or skills will not be allowed during this second phase."

"What? No magic?" Donut asked. "But I just upgraded my *Wall of Fire*!"

"*Wall of Fire* will have to wait. But it's just offensive magic. Magic designed to cause direct harm to another. And magic or skills designed to transport you from one space to another. There'll be a suppression field over the entire floor that will disallow it. You can use such spells now, but the ability goes away the moment phase two starts."

"So, Donut's *Puddle Jumper* and my *Gloom Wraith Phase* won't work?" I asked. "And what about the Gate of the Feral Gods? Or magical weapons?"

"Weapons will work, but not separate spells attached to them. The wraith phase is an offensive skill, not a spell, and it will work. It's a phase, not a teleport. *Puddle Jumper* will not work. The Gate of the Feral Gods will not activate. You both have multiple spells that will work, such as *Torch* and *Hole* and *Wisp Armor*, but unfortunately, many more that will not."

"So let me get this straight," I said. "We can only enter into each other's territory through a kilometer-wide gap, and we can't use the best magic or teleport during this time? What about traps?"

"Traps will still work as long as they're not teleport or summon traps. They have to be static. You can't repurpose them as weapons or artillery ammunition. And the rest is correct. It is designed to force bloody, hand-to-hand combat. And non-magical artillery. During this time, you will be at a severe disadvantage. The other eight teams will have the numbers and their vastly superior weapons that they brought with them from outside the dungeon. If you can survive this first week, then you *might* survive long enough to start moving offensively. Your only saving grace is that during this time, you only have two entry points into your land. You have to guard them both because once they're in, they're in and can move freely. The Ramp-Up will end after 180 hours, which is a little more than a week of your time. When the Open Hostilities phase starts, the

chaos truly begins. They will wish to defeat you before that phase even starts."

"Hmm," Donut said, looking over the map. "What about our new town? Can they attack that place during the ramp-up?"

"Yes. But if they capture it, they still won't be able to get into your territory. Or into Larracos. They *will* attack it if it's left undefended. I suggest treating with the NPCs to help defend the town. The bulk of the enemy forces will be concentrated on you, and they won't want to commit a lot of resources taking the ring, as they will get it automatically should you fall. It's a tactically important prize, but not during ramp-up. It's a dangerous waste of troops to push in at this point. Especially if you have active defenses."

Baroness Victory crossed her meaty arms. "Also, I should add, the bulk of the enemy's forces are mercenaries. The AI changed the 15K rule to allow the outsiders into the game. That means most everyone you're facing is someone who wasn't born in the dungeon, and they won't be so keen to wade into a real battle with real consequences. These 'warlords' are called that in name only. Very few of the officers are warriors with real battle experience. Most of these mercenaries have only seen limited conflicts against armed opponents. They're mostly security forces. Not all, but most of them. My guess is they'll be shy to commit troops to actions with a high probability of casualties. They'll be looking for a single punch knock-out. That's what they know. Not complicated. Not tricky. Just overwhelming numbers with pulse rifles and power armor facing down opponents who won't be able to shoot back very effectively for over a week. They'll want it done fast and easy."

"Shit," I said, looking at the dozens of little campfires sitting on our border. One hundred thousand was *a lot* of enemies. I'd once gone to a concert with 20,000 people, and I couldn't get over how many people that was all at one place at one time. This was five times that. It was an insane amount of enemies.

"We're building defenses," Florin said, indicating a line on the side of the border. "We've created a no-man's land that we will soon litter with *Tripper*-proof traps. And we're building trenches. We have engineers who've been watching and studying this type of warfare

for a very long time, and we'll do our damnedest to hold them back. But if they break through, we'll have multiple fall-back positions. Though once they're through, they'll be able to flank us until we get to the FUPA."

We all stood in silence, looking at the map. A hundred thousand troops on one side, ready to pour over us like ants. Earlier, Tipid said it'd been a mistake for them to arm themselves with their existing gear and not take classes and spells. I wasn't so sure about that anymore.

A small group of people entered the flag room. It was Louis, Katia, Bautista, Samantha, and a few others.

Samantha sat on Louis's shoulder, bawling her eyes out. A trail of snot ran down her face, and she kept using Louis's neck to wipe. "You can't do that to a girl," she was saying. "It's not right. I wouldn't have disrupted the wedding."

A little gnomish girl stood by Katia's legs. She wore a Dallas Cowboy's jersey like a dress. "You said you would push her over and take her place at the last second."

Bonnie. The little gnome girl whom we'd "rescued" from the floating gnome fortress on the fifth floor. The one who'd made the lemonade during the boss fight with the goose. She'd come here with the changelings after the Butcher's Masquerade. Donut gasped and jumped from my shoulder to head bump the kid.

"You are a child," Samantha said to Bonnie. "You don't understand the intricacies of modern love. And even if I was going to do that, or maybe slit the bitch's throat, that's no reason to get married without letting me know." She wiped more snot on Louis's neck.

"Don't worry," Donut said. "That was just the first wedding. There's a bigger ceremony in a few weeks."

Louis and Katia both shot Donut a why-did-you-tell-her-that? look.

"Wait, really?" Samantha asked as the rest of us groaned. "There's *another* ceremony? Why didn't you say so! This changes everything."

“Hey kiddo,” I said to Bonnie, ignoring the exchange. I went to a knee. “Did you fly here on Louis’s new airship?”

“Hi Carl. Hi Donut,” Bonnie said. “I like it. It’s faster than the *Twister*. Skarn and a few others are playing with it right now in the hangar. Louis hired a bunch of gremlins to work on it, and we bought an upgrade for door guns.”

I patted the tiny gnome on the head. “You shouldn’t have to think about that sort of stuff. We just need you to stay safe.”

The little girl gave me a chilling smile. “I shouldn’t have to think about killing outworlders? Why shouldn’t I? Have they stopped thinking about trying to kill me?”

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[15]

Time Until the Ceasefire Ends: 33 hours.

"I never thought I'd see one of these again," I muttered as we hunched over in the woods. A loud, whining noise reverberated through the forest. A group of trees and vines crunched and cracked as they were pushed down and shattered by the distant, rolling ball of wailing mobs. The sound was like that of a screaming bulldozer bullying its way through the forest.

"It's different," Chris said. "It's slower. It's still fast, but it's slower."

"A lot slower," Donut agreed. "And it smells worse, if such a thing is possible."

I looked down toward Chris's voice. I couldn't actually see the lava rock crawler, who'd blended himself with the ground and was directly below our feet. I felt strange about standing directly atop him, but he insisted it didn't bother him.

A group of distant birds launched into the sky as the ball rolled by, shrieking their displeasure. Donut was right about the smell. It was an awful, if not familiar, stench.

It was me, Donut, Chris, Jamal the hammerhead shark, and three of the newcomers. The newcomers were two former crawlers and a veteran of Land War, which was a different game entirely that had been inflicted on his home planet. Everyone still called them

crawlers. The Land War guy's name was Bodi, and he was a tall, tan-skinned human. He was a **Level 60 Big Game Spear Hunter**. He'd said maybe three words since I'd met him, making Chris seem downright chatty.

Bodi was one of the former crawlers elected to be a battalion commander based on his experience in and out of the dungeon.

He did, indeed, carry a spear. Something from the pile. A long, efficient looking metal stick with a no-nonsense point at the end. It had both a piercing and a boomerang enhancement, meaning it'd fly back to the tall warrior's hand once tossed. I didn't know anything about him or his history, but based on the way the others looked at him, I knew this guy was someone famous.

The other two crawlers were both male "elves," but they were a type of elf I'd never seen. Both had white, pigment-free skin and sharp teeth, giving them a nightmarish appearance, more goblin than anything. Like they were Dream elves who'd evolved underground.

They'd exited the dungeon as tenners—those who tapped out at the start of the tenth floor—a season or two before Rosetta's. They otherwise acted fairly human-like. I was starting to come to the uncomfortable realization this was pretty normal for the people of the Syndicate. That the general citizenry of the galaxy as a whole were all similar to us in so many ways, despite their vastly different anatomies and cultures and environments. I didn't know what that meant, but the knowledge made me feel strangely unsettled. It was the same feeling I had during the Iron Tangle when I just knew I was missing something, something important.

Anyway, the names of the two elves were Griffin and Morales. Neither looked older than 20 years old, and unlike Chris or Bodi, these two wouldn't shut the hell up. Griffin was a **Level 60 Eviscerator** and Morales was a **Level 60 Plumbing Specialist**, which was a healer class, but you wouldn't know it based on the large saber he carried. Griffin had a collection of throwing knives. They reminded me a bit of Louis and Firas from when we first met them. But instead of wanting to stay away from the fight, they were both eager to get in on the action.

The two elves had gotten ridiculously obnoxious tattoos on their necks the night before. The tats were of a large, flaming skull that was some sort of human/cat hybrid thing that looked like it was straight from a 1980's skateboard deck. Surrounding the skull in large letters in Syndicate Standard read the words "Princess Posse or Death." It had their hastily-formed battalion name—the 103rd Recon Legionnaires—added to the bottom. And below that was the name of their squad, The Tenner Wraiths.

We were calling our largest, organized groups battalions, which were then organized into squads and then platoons. As Florin pointed out, our battalions were actually much bigger than standard-sized ones and should actually be called brigades, but it was now too late. Artwork and tattoos and signs had popped up everywhere in a matter of hours.

Donut was absolutely scandalized by the gaudy tattoos. Especially when Griffin told her that half the former crawlers were getting ink of their own unit emblems, though most were getting them in less obvious places than their necks.

"The units aren't finalized yet!" Donut said to the two, grinning and gap-toothed elves as she scrutinized their necks. "And what is that supposed to be? A mouse? You know there aren't bones in ears, right? Skulls shouldn't have ears."

"It's a cat. And a human. You know, combined," Griffin said.

Donut scoffed. "You mean like a cat girl? You know how I feel about cat girls, Griffin."

"No. Not like that. It signifies all of us coming together. Meeps drew it. After he got out, he's been surviving as a street artist in Alpert."

"I don't care if it was drawn by Blake Lively herself. It's on your necks, and it's huge. What if you get transferred?"

"We got more skin," Morales said.

"Fuck yeah we do," Griffin added. "If you do transfer us, I want to go to the 105th Scream Warriors. Have you seen their logo? As long as I'm tearing apart some of those mechanical Reaver fucks or disemboweling one of them snobby prick elves, I'm happy." He

slapped himself on the bare, right side of his neck. “Right here, warlord. I’ll wear it proudly, no matter where you put me. And if you transfer me a third time, I’ll get a third one in the front.”

Donut looked at me incredulously. “Was this how it was when you first joined the Coast Guard?”

“Uh, sort of,” I said.

I had to remind myself that these two guys were literally thousands of years old. They certainly didn’t act like it. Donut was right. They reminded me of a pair of dumb 18-year-olds who’d joined the Marines and didn’t know what the hell they’d just signed up for.

We were at the very edge of the map, hunting down one of the mob incursions into our territory. There were a few dozen of these groups popping up like cockroaches, and we’d spread out the hunting responsibilities to different squads. The newcomers needed the experience the most, but the active crawlers needed to grind, too, so all the groups were mixed. All volunteers.

The ball of mobs lurched by again, this time bulldozing over a tree about 50 feet away. The shriek of animals and monsters within groaned and hissed. It was much more tightly packed than the last one we’d seen. The thing was spinning in wide circles, like a car without a driver, scribbling ovals through the forest. It’d apparently been doing this for some time, as evidenced by the long, circular path of destruction behind it.

We were in the “new” area that got tacked on when the AI made the playing field larger. Based on the reports from the others, the mobs in here could be pretty much anything. There was no rhyme or reason or quests, kind of like the first floor. The AI was recycling mobs from all the previous floors, only changing them up a bit and strengthening them to be level appropriate. Imani’s team had clashed with something called chilly goats, which had been mobs from the very first floor. Jurgen was leading a group not too far away, and they just fought danger dingo-riding kobolds, like from the second. This thing we faced now was clearly a riff on the Ball of Swine boss we’d also fought on the first floor, though the name had changed:

Rolling Battle Formation Ball. Level 70.

You don't want to get in this thing's way. It would really stink.

I hope you have some hydrogen peroxide, soap, and baking soda ready.

It wasn't listed as a boss at all, which was strange since the last one, which had been about ¾'s the size of this one, had been a borough boss.

"It's a lot different," Donut agreed again. "It's bigger than the ball of swine. And it's not filled with creepy, *Fifty Shades of Grey* orcs. At least I don't think it is. What *are* those things? They sound and smell revolting. Are they dead? They smell dead. If they're undead, we picked the wrong kind of mob to fight. Because, you know." She gave Rend a pointed glance, who was sitting on Mongo's head, jumping up and down with excitement.

One of the little meatball's weaknesses was eating undead flesh.

"I know that smell," I said. "I'm pretty sure it's not undead, but you're right. We need to make sure before we let him into the fray."

Donut scrunched up her face. "Either way, we need to hurry this up. Katia is starting her rehab treatment in a bit, and I don't want to miss it."

"Don't worry," I said. "Imani's team found that saferoom entrance buried about a mile and a half from here while scouting for our airship base. While Katia is under, I gotta do a thing, too, so I'll make sure we're back in time. Okay, next time it circles by..."

I was interrupted by a thrashing from behind us, followed by a pop and a mechanical whir. The scent of broken machinery and fire filled our hiding spot.

"Oh, goodness," came the voice from behind. "Oh my goodness. It appears Jamal has made another blunder. Mister Carl, I do fear I require assistance."

"Goddamnit, Jamal," I said, turning to see the giant hammerhead shark flopping on the forest floor. He was surrounded by a pile of shattered and steaming automaton parts. "You broke it again?"

"Mr. Carl. I must give you an apology," the hammerhead shark said. "I just did a little hop, and then the metal pieces did break

again. Jamal has so many sorries to give, and Jamal is giving you all of them."

I moved to start picking up the pieces of broken legs all around the tattoo-turned flesh. That was the third one of these I'd hastily built for the overweight shark. It was similar to the new conveyance Katia had built for Tran, but much bigger. It was basically eight, double-jointed legs and a harness for the 17-foot-long sea creature, who had the anatomy of a regular, if not oversized, hammerhead shark, only he now breathed air. He could no longer breathe water, despite having gills. Up until now, the huge thing was literally flopping around like one of those zombie fish from the last floor. When he was one of Signet's paper tattoos, he'd been able to fly. Now he just flopped. He was, apparently, pretty good at it, but he couldn't move fast nor could he be subtle. I'd hastily built him a voice-controlled automaton harness so he could move quickly and quietly. It made him look like some horrifying spider hybrid, but it gave him much more control.

The whole thing was supposed to be a prototype. I could make something that was more rugged, but Katia could do it better. We wanted to first make sure the design worked.

My model required Jamal to call out to the legs and tell them where he wanted to go. When Katia was ready, her version would be able to read Jamal's thoughts and act accordingly.

Meanwhile, the prototype legs held Jamal's massive weight just fine. *Except* when he told the legs to hop, which he kept doing for some inexplicable reason. The magically-enhanced joints could handle jumping him into the air fine, but they just couldn't handle the landing more than once or twice. Three times now, we built the thing, and it worked great... up until Jamal instructed the legs to jump into the air.

"I told you not to hop at all. Now you're going to have to wait for Katia. I don't have any more of the extra-large leg joints, and she's going to be out of commission for several hours."

The shark waved his head back and forth in misery. "I have a great amount of shame and regret. Still, Mr. Carl. I don't see why

Jamal shouldn't be able to hop. It is something Jamal always wished to do."

"Stop Elmo-ing, Jamal," Donut snapped. "We've talked about this. I have very few pet peeves, but this is one of them. I simply can't handle someone who refers to themself in third person. It's upsetting to me, and it confuses Mongo."

Mongo made a confused peep.

Griffin and Morales both grunted with amusement. Bodi just looked at the shark impassively.

"I have found more apologies, and now they are yours, Miss Donut. It is my yearning that makes me forget myself, you see. I tell you, jumping is what Jamal... I mean it is what *I* wish to do."

"Yes, Jamal," I said. "We are all aware you want to jump."

"Oh, I do. I very much yearn for it, Mister Carl. Did you know I used to be an apex predator? And after that, I was a terror who could fly? Do you know how many clowns I have consumed? How many lemurs? Now I can't even do a little hop? It's a great yearning Jamal has. *I* have, I mean. I do wish to feel the wind in my gills. I wish to hop across the battlefield. Oh, what a wish. What a wish I have."

"My wish is for you to be quiet and to be patient," I said through gritted teeth. "We don't have time for this. Just stay here. We're going to break the ball apart and fight the pieces individually. If any come this way, feel free to chomp, but don't eat all of them. We know you're a great fighter, but you're already level 72, and we're trying to level all the newcomers up a bit."

Behind us, the rolling ball of screaming death made another pass through the underbrush, this time closer.

"It does smell really bad," Morales said.

"Like a waystation restroom in a Soother system during the sweet pepper festival," Griffin added.

"Jamal's sense of smell was once greatly enhanced, but that sense of smell is not working at all anymore. Not even one little bit. It is quite thoroughly gone... Just like his ability to hop."

"*Jamal*," Donut hissed.

I grabbed Rend and cradled him in my left arm as I pulled the impact hob-lobber and prepared my xistera. The little meatball was quivering with excitement. "Everyone shush. I'm going to nail it the next pass."

Mordecai and Morales both insisted this would work. These things were basically splitters, and just like the Ball of Swine on the first floor, the individual pieces were immune from all damage while they were in ball form. Once the ball itself sustained enough damage, it would break apart. The individuals inside would be dazed for a few moments, so we had to act quickly.

Ahead, the circling ball of mobs crushed through more trees. The thing was like twenty feet tall.

"Okay, buddy," I said down to Rend. "Do you remember what I said? I'm going to hold onto you, but when I tell you to bite, you chomp."

Rend grunted and snapped his mouth a few times. His little teeth clicked loudly.

"Good job." I circled, and I launched the hob-lobber directly at the rolling ball.

Bam!

The explosive hit the battle formation dead center. The explosion came, echoing loudly in the woods, but the ball didn't break apart like expected. A health bar appeared, just halfway down, as the stinking, rolling ball turned at a right angle and started barreling directly toward us. The furry, black and white ball sped up. A chorus of high-pitched, angry screams rose in volume.

"Well, that wasn't supposed to happen," Morales said.

"Oh, fuck," I said as I quickly pulled a second hob-lobber and tossed it. "Head's up!"

Splatch!

This one did the job. We all ducked as the ball exploded outward, causing dozens of small, waist-high mobs to rain through the forest. Most kept their forward momentum and blasted toward us like they'd been shot from a shotgun. They rained around us and over us. They crashed into trees and crunched into the ground, hitting and spinning and screeching.

One slammed into a tree right next to me, crunched loudly, and toppled over, dead. His fuzzy head was bent at a sickening angle. Another whiffed by and slammed into Griffin, who swore loudly as they tumbled away. Another splotched into Jamal, who yelped and started flopping in circles. Mongo screeched and jumped into a tree.

One of the creatures landed directly at my feet, hitting the ground like a meteor. His legs were broken, and his body steamed. He wasn't dead, but he was dazed and would be for several seconds. He only had a sliver of life left.

I quickly examined him. He wasn't undead.

Like I expected, he was a skunk.

Sort of.

This version was a bipedal creature, about two feet tall, furry and black with the typical long, white stripe down its back. It wore some rudimentary, cobbled-together armor, including a stick with a crude, black spike at the end. This was clearly supposed to be some sort of monster from the first or second floor, but buffed up.

Skank Skunk Warrior. Level 45.

You ever see those Pepé Le Pew cartoons? You know, the ones where they taught kids that rape was funny, especially when it was French people doing it to cats? These guys are like that, but instead of being extra horny, they just want to kill you.

Skank Skunks, if left to their own desires, have a generally peaceful attitude. At least at the individual level. But unfortunately for them, their leadership feels differently and uses a variety of spells and tricks to keep them in line.

These guys have a really gross, aerosol-based attack. You've been warned.

Everything that happened next took less than a full minute, but it seemed to take much, much longer.

"Go!" I cried as I retracted my scoop. I moved Rend into my left hand and thrust him toward the dazed creature.

"Chomp, Rend! Chomp!"

Nunghh! Nunghh!

Rend's little mouth chattered up and down as he gnawed on the furry neck of the dying creature.

It was like I was holding the business end of a food processor in my hand. Blood sprayed from the point of contact as Rend gurgled with glee. He pushed through the neck of the poor skunk.

There were about three dozen of the mobs. Mongo squealed as he pounced from the tree, tearing into them. From my left, a spear shot through the air and skewered two at once. The spear spun back, cutting through a third skunk as it returned to Bodi, who'd somehow also climbed a tree.

Donut screeched and fired a pair of *Magic Missiles* before casting her newly-enhanced, level-15 *Bad Attitude* on the group. The effect wouldn't be immediately obvious with them dazed.

With that first kill, Rend had already grown from meatball-sized to softball, and I could barely hold him in one hand. I kicked another dazed skunk, smushed down on its chest with my foot, holding it down as I jabbed Rend at its terrified face.

An unholy gurgling noise rose from the pet as he bit the thing's nose off like it was made of cake. The giggling pet dropped from my hand and took a few more bites before hopping up on his own and running toward another skunk and launched himself at his leg. The monster toppled over, and Rend—now the size of a bowling ball—was on him, his high-pitched giggles already turning deeper, sounding almost like a clogged drain sucking for air.

To my right, three skunks were pulled into the ground as Chris dragged them under.

But now the remaining skunks were finally waking up, one by one. Donut's *Bad Attitude* was taking hold, and instead of fighting back, they all turned to flee, all of them screeching with terror, abandoning their spears.

"Carl," Donut called, sounding excited, pointing at a still-dazed skunk sitting in the middle of the carnage as his brethren panicked all around him. This mob looked just like all the others, except he was maybe a little smaller. He wore a blue, conical wizard hat with a glittering star and planet pattern on it. Little sparkles tinkled off the top of the hat.

Fancy Boy. Level 55 Skank Skunk Battle Wizard.

This is a special skunk with a very special set of skills. He knows the skills are special because his mom told him so. Don't you dare tell him otherwise.

Even though he's a higher level than the average warrior, he's actually a lot weaker. Still, he has a lot of spells designed to get the warriors to do what he wants, and he controls his fellow warriors with an iron claw.

Funny how that works, isn't it? In books and movies, the leader of a gang is almost always the physically strongest one, but in reality, oftentimes, it's the opposite. The leaders tend to be the richest, or they lead simply because of tradition. They tend to keep their power by engineering a situation where things would get temporarily worse if they were gone. It takes a certain amount of desperation before people finally stop caring about their immediate futures and start to look at the long term.

Killing him may cause unpredictable results.

"Nobody touch him! He's mine!" Donut shouted. She hit the creature with a magic missile, knocking the wizard skunk over onto his back, not quite dead, but certainly unconscious. His little hat went flying.

She moved to cast again, but she never got the chance. She never got the chance because that was when it happened.

And when it happened, it all happened at once.

It was worse than I expected.

Up until this moment, while the skunks all stank like a truckload of rotten fruit left to ferment in a barrel of hot horse piss, none of them, not even the dead ones, had yet activated their most dreaded skill.

Pssst. Pssst. Pssst. It sounded like a few dozen showerheads all turned on at once. Just for a second.

Oh fuck. Oh shit.

The battle wizard skunk guy must have been controlling the others, somehow keeping the attack in reserve. The instant he was knocked out by Donut, all their restrictions against using the attack

were suddenly lifted. The panicked, trying-to-escape skunk creatures all let loose at once.

A green-tinged, aerosol mist filled the air, filling the area like the explosion of a smoke grenade, rising and billowing and growing like the mist itself was a mob.

I had multiple protections against poisons and cloud-based attacks, but I wasn't certain if any of that would protect me against a skunk's spray.

I didn't want to find out. A mere blink before the cloud hit me, I activated *Gloom Wraith Phase,* which caused me to go incorporeal and rush forward.

I launched forward, like I was shot from a ballista, rushing through a group of four skunks, all with their backs to me.

The act of me passing through their bodies unraveled them, turning their flesh and fur into rivulets of blood and guts and skin. Their armor was unaffected, and their weapons and breast plates clanked to the forest floor, literally wrapped in ribbons of flesh and fur. The sensation was like that of running through a sprinkler set to a very fine mist. A handful of new achievement notifications flashed.

I'd seen this sort of attack before. The rage elemental had done this to Yolanda. That quick realization sent a pang of revulsion through me.

I could keep myself non-corporeal only for five seconds. My head spun, but I had to react quickly. I activated Walk on Air and rushed upward, like I was running up a set of stairs, reaching a branch just above the rising cloud. Both skills ended, and I landed upon a branch, which bobbed.

I settled near Bodi, who stood on an even higher branch in the same tree. I didn't see how he'd gotten up there. He grunted with amusement and tossed his spear again into the mist. It appeared as if all the fleeing skunks were frozen again, but I wasn't certain why.

Mongo had also leapt into a neighboring tree, but he'd clearly gotten sprayed. He had a **Skanked** debuff blinking over his head, and he let out a miserable hack and started to loudly vomit down into the mist.

"Carl, help! Help!" Donut squealed from below. I couldn't see her.

As I prepared to jump down there to grab her, she suddenly appeared near Mongo with a flash. She'd puddle jumped, also into the tree. Right onto the same branch as the still-puking dinosaur. The whole thing wobbled ominously.

"Oh, god," I said, trying to keep my gorge down. The smell from Donut and Mongo was horrific, almost unbearable, and they were ten feet away.

Chris: I am buried. Tell me when it's safe to come up. I can smell it even down here.

Griffin, Morales, Jamal, and Rend were all still down there somewhere, and I could hear the sound of the two elves violently vomiting. The trees cracked and shook, and Jamal emerged from the mist, far to my left, rolling on the ground and shaking, like he was having a seizure. He was in the midst of a feeding frenzy. His berserker state. He had the Fancy Boy skunk in his mouth, and he crunched loudly onto him. The shark made a little whoop, did a barrel roll, and then flopped back into the mist, which was starting to dissipate.

"I disabled the mobs," Bodi said from the branch above me. "There will be suffering from our allies, but they will survive. We wait."

That was, by far, the most words I'd heard from him.

I could now see the two elves on their hands and knees, vomiting as they tried to crawl away. They both had the **Skanked** debuff over their heads, but their health wasn't going down. It appeared the attack made it so they stank and lost control of their stomachs. Not deadly on its own, but awful.

I could also see a beach ball-sized Rend, rolling in circles, Samantha style, cackling like a psychopath. He was moving from skunk to skunk, taking a single bite out of each one's neck before moving on. The skunks all appeared to be paralyzed. Cone-shaped sprays of blood littered the forest floor. As I watched, Rend tentatively approached an already-dead skunk and tried to eat him whole, like a snake eating prey too big for it. He gave up after a moment and just chomped him in half.

"Carl," Donut called from her branch as she gagged. "This is absolutely not acceptable. I don't have anything in my inventory that says it gets rid of this debuff for..."

Crack!

She didn't finish as she and Mongo plummeted back to the forest floor.

"Much suffering from our allies," Bodi said.

"Sometimes Jamal is very much happy he can no longer smell. I suspect it's quite unpleasant. Quite unpleasant indeed. I have never in my life seen such vomiting."

I laughed but immediately regretted it as I took in a deep breath of the terrible stench. I'd already lost my lunch a few times and didn't want to do it again. Some scents you got used to after a little bit. This wasn't one of them.

Donut looked as if she was about to throttle the shark as we rushed through the woods. Instead, she turned her ire toward me. "I don't know what's so funny. Three hours, Carl! This is ridiculous." She panted as she talked. She was absolutely miserable, but Mordecai said he had a potion that would help. It wouldn't stop the reek, but it would blunt her ability to smell and taste.

I tried to move upwind of her and the others. We'd caged Mongo because he kept whimpering. I pushed away the separate chats from Florin, Imani, Elle, and Britney as I was too distracted to pay attention. Only Donut, Griffin, Morales, and Jamal had the debuff, though the shark wasn't actually affected since he couldn't smell. For whatever reason, it hadn't taken hold on Rend at all. Chris had managed to avoid it as well. The debuff had finally gotten Griffin and Morales to shut up, and they marched sullenly behind us, their heads low as Jamal rolled toward them, looking for someone else to talk with.

The Skanked debuff caused them to temporarily stink, lowered their Charisma by 70%, and that was pretty much it. The vomiting

was an unfortunate side effect. And worst of all, there was nothing one could do to turn the smell off. It lasted three hours, and that was that.

Donut jumped to my shoulder, oblivious of my discomfort. I gagged, grabbed her, and dropped her to the forest floor. She was so pissed, she barely noticed as she continued to rant.

"You know," I said, interrupting her, "if this had happened to you during the before times, you'd probably stink a lot longer than three hours. In some ways, this ended up being better."

She scoffed. "Hardly. Getting sprayed by a skunk is supposed to be something that happens to an idiot Labrador named Cletus. This isn't something that would ever happen to an indoor, prize-winning cat. At least I got that hat, but it just smells something awful. All our other magical gear avoided getting stinky, but the hat is unbearably putrid. We don't have a laundry machine. Do you think if I run it through my shower, it'll get the smell out of it? Or maybe I can have the cleaner bot look at it. He likes cleaning that sort of stuff."

"I doubt it will work," I said. "If it's anything like cat pee, it's pretty permanent, no matter how many times you wash it. We'll drain it and then toss it. And we should probably give the cleaner bot a break. That thing has been acting really stressed lately."

"We're all stressed, Carl, and that's his job."

Rend hopped by, cackling as he moved into the bush. He'd gone up to level 8 and remained about the size of a large beach ball. Level eight was a decent start because it meant he'd regenerate if he died, but it still wasn't good enough. We needed to find more mobs for him to train on.

"And why wasn't that thing affected when my poor Mongo got sick? It's not fair!"

"He's pretty resilient," I said.

"Well, we should have had him collect the sample of the mist for Mordecai. I mean, really. Why do you think he wants some of that stuff anyway?"

"Because he wants us to collect everything."

Ahead, Bodi appeared on the trail, pointing with his spear, indicating he'd found the path to the safe room. He disappeared

again.

"Mongo and I are supposed to be moral support for Katia, and now I can't do it! You'll have to be there for her."

"We need you on the southern front anyway. With you there, they can get those trenches built much faster. As for Katia, I was already planning on being there," I said, sighing. I hadn't told Donut exactly how much of Katia's rehab I'd be involved in. We were attempting to kill two birds with one stone.

Sure enough, the saferoom entrance appeared on the edge of the map, along with a wide circle of dots. They were workers, who were building a small base around the remote outpost. "Come on. Just don't get too close to anybody. You don't want to leave a lasting impression on them."

Elle: Okay, I'm back in our territory. I'm pretty sure I've found all the artillery batteries on both sides, but I can't be 100 percent. But we got a new problem. They have another nasty surprise ready for us on the naga side. Remember when you said you wanted me to find out why those robot guys wanted pet leveling to be accelerated? Well, I found out.

Carl: Can't wait. See you soon.

We had to pause for Morales to dry heave some more. The tattoo on his neck pulsated as he gagged.

The two elves didn't appear nearly as enthusiastic about all this as they had been just an hour earlier.

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EVERLY

"You," Everly hissed, pointing her leg at one of her two remaining mercenaries. He was an ogre with pinprick eyes and an oversized, crushed nose on his damnable, emotionless face. He'd spent the last several moments holding up the rock ceiling as sand poured in from all sides. The mantis didn't know why, but the sight of the ogre standing there, straining and grunting made her unreasonably angry.

"Watching you try to hold up the ceiling is irritating me. You're not going to stop it, so don't bother. Dig, if you must. Just don't stand there like that."

The other mercenary, a dwarf, was on his hands and knees, desperately sifting through the sand, looking for the key hole. Everly watched him work for a few moments, panting as he dug with his hands, digging and digging through the meter-deep sand, looking for the tiny hole. They didn't have the key. They hadn't found it on the floor above before they'd had to jump down or get crushed. It was pointless.

Still, he worked. Blood ran down the dwarf's thick, callused fingers as he dug. Tears streamed down the mercenary's dirty face.

He's right there, Everly thought as she watched him, strangely fascinated. Unlike the ogre, this one didn't annoy her nearly as much, and she wasn't certain why. *Right on the edge*. He still held out hope, no matter how unreasonable that hope was, and he clung onto it with everything he had.

But Everly could see it, like water seeping from a punctured skin. The hope draining from him with each passing moment.

She pitied him. For the first time, the mantis pitied one of her mercenaries. How many had she hired over these last several floors? Two, three dozen? Some, she'd fired in a rage. Some had simply disappeared and still remained on her payroll, much to her annoyance.

The rest had died.

The Inevitable Ruin. That's what their queen used to call this moment. The moment you realized there was no hope, nothing left to do, and all that was left was to die and reflect upon what you've already done while you waited. To ruminate on how you've helped the colony, and to beg forgiveness of God for not sacrificing enough.

When Everly was younger, she used to think she'd be like the dwarf if and when she faced this moment. The Inevitable Ruin. She would fight to the end, unable to accept it.

Yet, here she was. Sitting in the sand, doing exactly what her mother, the queen, said she would do. What all her kind did. She'd accepted death, and all that was left was to ponder.

She almost laughed out loud. The younger version of herself would be raging right now. *It's not over,* she'd say. *It's not over until you're dead. Get down there and dig, damn you.*

And by younger, Everly meant the version of herself from just before the demons had come to her world. It'd only been half a turn. Yet, it seemed so long ago. Lifetimes. She'd left the colony just a few days before that. Set out on her own because she couldn't abide the rules, the lack of individualism in mantis culture. She'd become an outcast, left to wander the sward on her own.

This is it, she thought now, watching as the giant ogre also fell to his knees and into the sand. He dug with desperate eagerness, causing a great cascade to fan out into the air, like a mole excavating a new burrow. Half the sand the ogre tossed was landing in the hole the other mercenary was working on, who didn't seem to notice.

Above, the ceiling groaned and cracked as it continued to lower. Lights dotted the ceiling, the only illumination in the room, giving it a

yellow, sickly glow.

This eighth floor had been a strange world. A long, flat, grass-covered lowland meant to mimic the sward. But hidden in the grass were thousands of round holes of various sizes, each one leading downward to a different area, ever going down and down like the labyrinth of a cavern wasp colony. The stairwells to the ninth floor were supposedly somewhere at the bottom.

But instead of going down through the holes, there'd been another option. In the very middle of the grassland was a tall, wide tower, rising about fifty levels into the sky. On the front door of the tower was a simple note that read **Warning: If you enter the tower maze, you must proceed to the top before you'll be allowed to go back down. No teleporting or phase allowed in the tower.**

There'd been no other information than that. No indication if it was necessary to use the tower or not. The others debated whether or not to risk entering. It seemed like *someone* had to go in there and try it. For all they knew, it was the only way to open up the stairwells far below.

And then, Everly received the benefactor box from her sponsor, who so far had been quite generous with gifts. The sponsor's name was Dictum Waystation Controls, Limited.

The item in the box was called **Gordon's Compass of Vertical Labyrinth Management. 49 uses.**

It was a simple device, and it appeared it was going to be enormously helpful. It showed the bearer the "quickest and safest" path through a maze.

But there was a problem. The description specifically stated it wouldn't work in subterranean mazes. It was clear that the compass was meant to be used to navigate the tower.

So, Everly and her ten mercenaries decided to enter the tower while several other crawlers waited at the bottom. Some of her fellow mantises had offered to go with her. She refused their help, like she always did.

Each stairwell upward ended in a landing that consisted of five one-way doors, with supposedly a different danger behind each one.

Each time, the compass pointed to the "safest and fastest" path. Each time she opened the safe door, the other doors disappeared, revealing a small, empty hallway and another set of stairs, and that was it. No danger. The compass could only be used 49 times, and the tower was 50 levels high.

With the help of the compass, Everly and her team managed to carefully creep their way up the fifty flights of stairs in a matter of hours. When they used the compass the 49th time—to go from the 49th to the 50th floor—it pointed to a single door before shattering into a dozen pieces.

At the very top of the tower, they came to a large, round room. At this point, Everly had received multiple awards for viewership. She wasn't one to feel much emotion other than annoyance, but she did allow a glimmer of excitement to creep in. A fan box. She'd heard of such things from others, but she'd never been the most popular. But now she was finally getting recognized. The entire center system was watching her, alone, traveling up this tower on a mission to possibly help save her fellow mantises.

That was a good, unfamiliar feeling, and she savored it. She wondered what her mother would've thought.

Sitting in the middle of the room upon a pedestal was nothing more than a folded tent of paper. She warily skittered forward and picked it up. It was a note, and the moment she touched it, the system read the note out loud.

The announcement came in a voice she'd never heard before.

Never trust your life to Gordon Waystation Outfitters. There's no safe or cheap path to safety.

This dead end was sponsored by Dictum Waystation Controls, Limited.

"Don't get caught with nowhere to go."

"What?" she said out loud, not understanding. It took a moment for it to sink in.

It was an advertisement. The whole tower had been an advertisement. She'd seen a few of those throughout the dungeon. Traps that announced they were sponsored by so and so before they

went off. The announcer man said it was a pilot program this season.

But this... this was something else. This entire tower had been built by her own sponsor, and they'd given her an item that deliberately led her here. The item was named after "Gordon Waystation Controls." A competitor of her sponsor.

Humiliation. And then anger.

That anger washed over her. An anger so powerful that it temporarily blotted out the fear. An advertisement? They had used her for an advertisement? How fucking *dare* they?

There was a loud, grinding noise, and a trap door appeared in the floor.

You may now make your way downward. The path you used upward is no longer available.

She pulled up the scratchpad and scrawled an angry note in the cookbook, but she was interrupted by a new sound. The roof above them started to slowly crush down. Her mercenaries started to shout and point. They moved to the stairs, which led down to a landing with four doors.

Now, only ten flights down, and only three of them were left alive.

Everly wondered if this would've happened if she'd allowed some of the others to go up the tower with her. Maybe one of the others had heard of this Gordon Waystation company and would've figured out the whole thing was a trap.

But she'd insisted on staying alone this whole time. Even after she'd entered the dungeon and found thousands of her fellow mantises, all equally confused and afraid. She'd *wanted* to work with them. They'd wanted to work with her.

Still, she'd struck out on her own, determined to fight it all in her own way. Her only companions were the NPCs and the invisible words etched on her prayer mat.

The dwarf finally stopped digging. He rolled onto his back and looked up at the ceiling and closed his eyes. He reached up, almost able to touch it now.

"*The Inevitable Ruin*."

She'd whispered it out loud.

That's when it had happened, wasn't it? Not now, here in this damn tower. It happened when I abandoned the others. So much earlier than I realized.

Next to her, the ogre, who hadn't said a single word since she'd hired him, changed. He, too, had stopped digging and now lay prone atop the sand like he was going to sleep, his head turned toward hers. She watched the change happen. There was a flash, like a screen booting up, deep in the back of his small, black eyes.

"Maybe there's more to it than this," the ogre said just as the slow-moving ceiling kissed the side of his face. His body shifted and was pushed into the sand. "Maybe it's not inevitable, like you say."

She reached her arm out and touched the ogre just as it started to hurt.

Class: Explosives Engineer.
Race: Primal.
Birth Race: Sward Mantis.
Top Level: 62
Dungeon Exit: crushed to death on the eighth floor.

Author of the fifth edition of the *Dungeon Anarchist's Cookbook*.

Current status: Dead.

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[16]

Time until Ceasefire Ends: 31 Hours.

"Okay," Mordecai said as Katia sat nervously on the hospital cot. I paced back and forth behind them, equally anxious. I had a bed of my own waiting for me. "This is going to take aboot eight to ten hours for you, Katia. Carl, I'm not sure how long your session will take. It should be significantly less, but I don't think anyone has actually tried this outside a drug den before, so who knows."

He placed the fizzing, green jar on the counter. It looked like thick, carbonated slime. The concoction made a hissing noise. "This jar is enough for both of you. It's basically two hits of Glory Bound, but compounded with a subdermal gel and mixed with a potion called 'Tough Love.' Kinda like that anti-alcohol potion I gave to Louis and Firas on the fifth floor, but with a long brew time. I started making this on the previous floor, and it has to sit nice and long before it gains its potency, and we are now in that window. It goes stale fast, so it's now or never. The dose I'm giving to you, Carl, I'm also going to combine with another potion called '*Removal Order*.' That way we'll be visiting the spider's memories instead of your own." He paused, swallowing hard. "I hope."

"*Removal Order* will work for such a powerful entity?" Bucket Boy asked. The crocodilian kid, a former attendant of the Penis Parade, stood in the room and somehow looked pale, despite being covered

with scales. “Isn’t that for weaker possessions?” The NPC looked over at me nervously. He leaned in toward Mordecai and whispered loud enough for the whole room to hear, “Like, won’t his head explode if it doesn’t work right?”

“Wait, what?” I asked.

“No, his head won’t explode,” Mordecai said. “Not the way we’re doing it. Probably not.”

I sat on the cot. “Jesus,” I muttered.

We’ll both die. Don’t do this, Carl.

“Shut the fuck up,” I said, slapping myself on the chest.

Katia had only taken the insidious, addictive drug Glory Bound once, which had caused her to re-live her favorite memory. But the drug was terribly addictive and came with several nasty side effects, one of which was her losing her grasp on what was real or not. We’d only seen a few minor examples of this so far, but we needed to get this taken care of now before it got worse.

And that required her to take Glory Bound a second time, but with a version of the drug modified by Mordecai. Katia would go under, but she would be forced to confront something from her past. I didn’t know what that was, and I didn’t ask. That was her business, and it was something she’d have to face on her own. Based on the hollow look in her eyes, I knew it would be something terrible. She trembled.

We weren’t inside of a saferoom, but in a newly-built field hospital at our base. Katia would be unconscious but constantly monitored, and saferooms had some strange rules about this sort of thing. Mordecai insisted it would have to be outside.

As for me, the treatment required someone to remove my new toe ring once I was conked out. That also required me to do this independent of the safety of the guild.

Outside, the clanging, pulsing sound of rapid construction continued unabated. The multi-layer, anti-magic shell was being erected over the base. They were behind schedule, and I could hear shouting from several directions. This new shield looked like a kid’s jungle gym, and it was designed so different mages could cast spells in different hexagons of the structure, like tiles, allowing for stronger

protection and denying the enemy a single point of failure. Killing a mage usually canceled out any of their active protection spells.

"Carl," Rosetta said. "If you're still under when Katia comes back, I'll induce the wake-up sequence. You should be able to initiate the ejection yourself, since it won't be your own memory."

"Even with the ring off?"

"Once you're under, the ring shouldn't matter, but we'll make sure it's put back on before you wake up. Imani will cast a protection spell on you, too, so that should bolster your defenses. You fed your Emberus shrine before you came out here, no?"

"I did, but I shouldn't be down that long, should I? And what if I am in one of my own memories?"

"Then it will probably be unpleasant," Rosetta said.

"What about Katia?" I asked, looking over at the woman next to me. She was in her regular, human form, and she looked so small in the bed. She caught my eyes and smiled. She reached over to grab my hand, but she was too far away. Rosetta moved between us.

Edgar the tortoise appeared, walking slowly into the room. He made slow, painful progress toward Katia. "Even though you're both getting the same drug," Edgar said, "you two are undergoing two very different treatments. Once Katia is under, she's on her own. If we wake her up early, it could be fatal."

"That's a cheerful thought," Katia said.

In the room were Edgar, Mordecai, Rosetta, Bautista, Imani, a few former crawlers I didn't know, and Bucket Boy the crocodilian strip-club attendant NPC, who was also a low-tier healer. He was present to assist Imani, and once the fighting began, this field hospital would be his domain along with some of the other healers.

Bautista remained in the back of the room, pacing back and forth, chewing on one of his finger claws. I wasn't too clear on the state of Bautista and Katia's relationship, but she'd asked for him to be here. Based on the flashing of their eyes, they were talking privately.

Donut remained in the guild, in her bathroom, taking shower after shower in a fruitless attempt to get the stench out of her and Mongo. Rend was with them, apparently a big fan of the shower.

Donut had sent no less than two dozen messages in the past ten minutes, demanding to know what was happening.

I took a long breath. I touched the tattoo on my chest. The eye was open and blinking, angrily looking back and forth, desperately attempting to cast this or that. I had my *Wisp Armor* spell active, which added extra protection against Shi Maria's attempts to take over my body. Despite that, she'd just been able to talk in my mind. We had to do this now.

We had several options on how to deal with the spider's presence attached to my body. All were dangerous. None were guaranteed. This particular method was ensured to be painful whether it worked or not, but it came with the benefit of having to use a powerful potion that Mordecai had already made.

I worried about that. Whenever there was a coincidence or a convenience—not that anything about this was convenient—I knew that there was another hand involved in all of this. Whether it was the show runners or the AI or some combo of both. And that always meant some sort of unwelcome fuckery was about to go down.

But what other choice did I have? This was our only opportunity to deal with this problem before it was too late

According to both Mordecai and Rosetta, this particular drug—Glory Bound—was based on a real-life, outside-the-inner-system medication originally designed to help train people to do various, difficult tasks. It was a two-part process that first involved subliminal conditioning over a long period of time. And then the trip portion of the drug was used to unlock the knowledge. But, as with most drugs that could do such a thing, it started to get abused before the whole process was replaced by some other technique.

Despite being discontinued, the drug and its effects persisted in the dungeon, used for literally dozens of quests over the seasons, or as a sort of trap, which is exactly what it had been for Katia. Sometimes the drug's effects were tweaked to fit into a particular storyline. But more than once, there had been "possessed" quests that required the victim to find the drug den in the Desperado Club to get themselves cured.

In order for Katia to clear the physical effects of this addiction, she needed to re-live this experience, whatever it was.

For me, it was more complicated. I needed to enter the memory of the spider, who also would experience her "worst" memory. I would have to witness this dream, whatever it was, and because of the drug Mordecai added to the mix—*Removal Order*—I could choose to lock Shi Maria in the memory at the end. She would remain forever trapped.

The tattoo would remain on my chest, but I would have control over it. I would gain a skill or two, if I did it properly. And that's what worried me. There were no specific instructions on how to "lock" her in the dream. It would manifest itself in a different way each time. Mordecai said it would probably be clear.

But if I failed to properly trap her, I'd wake back up and would have to deal with a very pissed-off entity inside of me. We'd be back to square one.

"Here we go," Mordecai said as he slipped on a glove. "This potion is a gel I'm putting on your skin." He took a handful and started to rub it on Katia's neck. He then added another potion to the jar of goo and slopped a cold blob of the green stuff on me. It fizzed and kind of tickled. "It'll take about five minutes to start working, but it's safer and more effective if you're unconscious when it takes hold. So wait until your potion cooldown has passed, and then I'm going to knock you both out." He pulled off the glove with a deft finger and dropped it into the jar as Imani handed each of us a potion.

"Drink these as soon as you can," Mordecai said. "This will help the sleep come fast. The potion will make you a bit loopy. You might see some weird shit, but it won't last long."

Potion of Somnolent Embrace.

This won't remove your worries or your bad dreams for more than but a moment. But it will ease them long enough to let you sleep. Sometimes this is all we can hope for.

Gently brings you to rest until you fall asleep.

Katia looked at the potion, gave me a quick, nervous smile, and then shrugged.

"Skál," she said, drinking the potion manually.

A moment later, she added, "Oh wow, this stuff is great."

"I don't have the fancy bed you guys have," Mordecai said. "It's what I use sometimes."

"Sometimes?" Rosetta asked.

"What do you know aboot it?" Mordecai asked her.

"I saw Odette's story about you the other day."

"Her *what*?"

I drank the potion down, and I instantly felt a warm tingling rush over me. I turned my head toward Katia. She had a golden, glowing halo over her. The others in the room were still talking. Mordecai was growling something at Rosetta, but all I could hear was Katia.

"Do you want to hear a secret?" Katia asked me as her eyes got heavy. Her voice was loud and clear.

"Sure," I said.

"My favorite memory and my worst memory are the same thing. I'm going to the same place I was last time. I hope that doesn't mess this up."

"Katia," I heard myself say. "Quick. Grab my hand. We can do it together."

"Okay," she said, reaching out. Her arm stretched and grasped onto my wrist. She started to twist and twist, like a vine growing up my arm. She started to pull me from the table.

"No," someone shouted. "Separate them!" Edgar. His voice was distant. Not nearly as clear.

Imani was there, unraveling us. "No touching, you two," she said, her voice surprisingly gentle, yet so far away. She was wearing gloves. Why was she wearing gloves? "It'll confuse the dreams."

"But we're still touching," I whispered as my consciousness fled. I could feel it, the river, flowing from myself and crashing against the rocks of Katia's mind. There was no purchase there, no permanent path back to me, but still, my thoughts crashed into hers, like a tsunami, and for a moment, I flooded onto her, overwhelming it all.

I heard her gasp, and I could see things there. I saw her mind.

And with the backsplash, I briefly touched the minds of others nearby. Imani, who was terrified. Mordecai, equally wary but also

sad. Rosetta who just seemed so very tired yet filled with a deep, familiar rage. Edgar, who was worried. These were just flashes, like my hand running through a flame. The moment only lasted microseconds, yet I saw deeper and longer than I should.

I shouldn't be seeing this.

Katia was the one I'd truly crashed against, and while it was still short, the glimpses I felt of her lasted longer. Told me more.

She, too, was afraid. Afraid that she was a burden. Ashamed. Ashamed that we were all doing this for her. And angry, too. Angry at herself. Angry at the world. Angry at... at... Me? Why would she be angry with me?

I quickly started to recede.

Would I get away in time? I could feel the event horizon looming. The precipice of the dream rushing up to meet us. And behind me, another presence menaced. Two presences. *Three* presences, but one well hidden. I tried to retreat, fleeing away from Katia's dream. She needed to do that alone. I needed to turn around and face this, whatever it was.

Katia stood beside me, her arm still twisting like a vine around my own as the two sides crashed toward us, like a pair of hands clapping together in a clumsy attempt to capture a bug.

"It's not that I'm angry with you," she said in the microsecond before the two hands joined. "I'm just mad that you let people hurt you. You meet someone, you start to care for them, and then it becomes..."

She was interrupted by a warlord notification. The sound was distant and hollow, yet it was enough to cut her off completely.

The Lemig Sortion has offered you free passage to their headquarters in order to treat for peace. They are offering...

Slap.

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[17]

I BLINKED, AND I WOKE UP.

The Scavenger's Daughter has been fed. Unleash her wrath.

I wasn't in the Icelandic hospital anymore. My mind reeled.

Is this still the dream?

I slowly looked at my hands, confused.

I was covered with blood. What the hell?

Quest Failed. The Bedlam Bride.

Katia, I thought. Where was Katia? I thought of the memory, of the dream we'd just shared. Of Annie, the little baby girl. Of that prick of an ex... boyfriend? Husband? Fannar was his name. Of the cancer diagnosis. After all those hoops, after all she'd overcome. They'd caught it early. She'd be okay. But, despite that... it'd come with a terrible price. I understood, finally. Katia's addictions. Fannar had told them. I didn't understand why. She'd been clean for so long, struggled so long, so hard to stand on her own feet. And then a one, two punch. By dungeon standards, all of this was almost nothing. Just another one of life's shitty events. A debuff. A minor setback. But to Katia, it had been everything. A shattering.

I thought of the social worker coming to pick me up from the interrogation room. *Come on now*, she'd said. *Come on now.*

There was screaming.

I was still groggy. A lot of screaming. What was going on? Where was I? I was standing. Standing in the middle of a room. Standing in a circle of blood and corpses.

My eyes focused on a goblin thing. He was in the familiar, cavernous room with me, and he had a gun in his hands. He aimed it right at my head and pulled the trigger. The goblin froze, and the gun didn't go off. The word **Naughty** appeared over the goblin's head. There were multiples of the creatures in the room. Most were dead. One was on the floor, sobbing as he dragged himself away from me. His legs were gone, and he smeared bright, bright blood on the tiled floor.

I know this place, I thought.

And the goblin, too. The one screaming with no legs. I recognized him as well. His name was Luke. He was a representative from the Lemig Sortion. As I watched, he groaned, and then he died.

Corpse of Luke. Level 64 Lemig Goblin.

General in the Democratic Sortion.

Killed by a fellow soldier under the control of Shi Maria.

I... I was in the high elf castle. The castle from the sixth floor. We'd called it the Sugar Cube. We were in one of the ballrooms, but the walls were cracked all around. I shook my head. This didn't make sense.

"Sorry," a new, gravelly voice said. "It's being ruled an AI action, not an attack. The ceasefire has no rules against teammates fighting one another. Or monsters. You could've fought back against the unaffiliated NPC while he was under control of that thing, but you waited too long. Now that he's no longer possessed, you can't touch him while the ceasefire is in effect. The AI is claiming he had a notification over his head while he was vulnerable."

I turned around to face the voice. I blinked a few times, still completely disoriented. There was something wrong with my eyesight, and it was making me dizzy. There were two aliens standing there in the midst of all the carnage. God, how many dead were in here? It looked to be fifty, or more.

The one who'd been speaking was a tall, purple-skinned creature. A dreadnaught. The notice over him said his name was **Panford**. **Adjutant for the Democratic Sortion**. The alien he was speaking to was a giant, fuzzy thing. He was a good seven feet tall and looked like an upright caterpillar. **Commander Stockade. Level 76 Phase Sorcerer. Warlord of the Democratic Sortion.**

"An AI action?" Commander Stockade shouted. He was screaming at the dreadnaught. The caterpillar's voice surprised me. He had that same, weird accent as the rest of their kind, even though the rest were mostly goblins. He sounded like an aged surfer dude straight out of southern California. "He killed half of my family, and it's considered an AI action? This is utter, complete orcshit. I want to file an immediate appeal!"

I continued to look around. I was starting to realize this wasn't a dream. Was I really here? How in the hell had that happened? The entire ballroom was filled with blood. It looked as if someone had set off a bomb.

Also, I realized, this wasn't the same goodwill ballroom I'd been in for the Butcher's Masquerade. The exits were in different places. I suspected this was the third one. The one near the top of the castle. Queen Imogen's private ballroom. When we'd transferred this castle to the ninth floor, I knew it'd landed in the territory of the Lemig Sortion, and they'd started using it as their headquarters.

"You can't file an appeal," Panford the adjutant said. "They're all dead. You can't appeal them back to life. If you had informed me of your ill-conceived plan, I could have told you why it wouldn't have worked. That entity is a demonic demigod. Not a full demon. Carl was not possessed in the traditional manner. You planned on turning Carl into a vegetable and having the spider kill everyone in the room back in the other base. Instead, Carl is safe, and now your throne room is destroyed."

Commander Stockade undulated his caterpillar body back and forth, oddly reminding me of one of those waving, inflatable tube men they shoved in front of car dealerships. "This is cheating! He turned into that thing and killed the entire room in seconds! That's not how this works! The AI changed the rules." His voice was

starting to crack. "Luke, oh gods, Luke is dead. My beautiful, beautiful Luke."

My eyes caught the timer in the corner of my vision. We had 20 hours until the ceasefire ended.

I'd lost 11 hours.

"What happened is exactly what always happens when you attempt to improperly extract an entity that powerful. This is your fault. This very thing happened three seasons ago," the dreadnaught said, jabbing a finger at the caterpillar. "I asked you where you got your information, and you refused to answer. All spies must be disclosed to adjutants. You know this, and you have made no such declaration. Unless you can prove you have a mole in the Princess Posse camp, I am going to assume you have an external influence assisting you, which is clearly cheating. You and Architect Houston both planned this using someone observing the feed from outside the dungeon. I'm afraid I'm going to have to call a foul."

"On us? You're calling a foul on *us*? We are fighting for our lives here, and you're worried about the fucking *rules*? When I get out of here, I will make you pay."

"Both the Lemig Sortion and the Madness will receive heavy sanctions for this stunt. The specifics will come down shortly. In addition, threatening your adjutant comes with additional penalties."

"What the hell happened?" I asked, coughing the words.

"You," Commander Stockade said, waving one of his short, caterpillar arms at me. "You planned this! I don't know how you did it, but you planned it this way!"

I was going to vomit.

Donut: CARL, CARL. WHERE ARE YOU? KATIA IS STILL HERE, BUT YOU DISAPPEARED. YOU TELEPORTED AWAY, AND NOBODY KNOWS WHAT HAPPENED. OUR ADJUTANT LADY SAID YOU KILLED A BUNCH OF LEMIG PEOPLE IN THEIR OWN CASTLE, BUT IT'S THEIR OWN FAULT. SHE'S NOT MAKING SENSE. MORDECAI AND ROSETTA ARE BOTH LAUGHING LIKE THEY'VE GONE CRAZY.

Carl: I don't know what's happening, but I'm okay for right now.

Baroness Victory: Hold tight, Carl. They're asking for a minor quorum. I am coming to you. Don't make any rash movements or actions. You're safe if you don't move.

There was a flash, followed by a second flash and a notice.

A Second Adjutant has Entered the Room.

A Third Adjutant has Entered the Room.

A Minor Quorum has been achieved. All local hostilities must be paused while a field ruling is considered.

There was new shouting all around me as mercenaries entered the ballroom from all the doors. A second and a third mercenary—these were large, bugbear-looking things I'd never seen before—attempted to fire their weapons at me. All got paused. There were no chairs here. I had to sit, so I sat on the floor, in the midst of all the carnage. I had no idea what had happened, how I got here, or what had happened while I was under. My head continued to swirl. I remembered the dream, how it started. I remembered the spider. Not Shi Maria, but a different one. A male. Her husband. First a spider, then a human. I remembered how, near the end, Shi Maria had also entered the room, mocking me, telling me I'd be sorry, but then she saw the other spider, and she'd changed. She burst into a rage. She killed him, her own husband. She'd devoured him while she sobbed. She'd disappeared and then reappeared a few moments later, she'd curled into a ball, right there in the hospital in Iceland.

But then it got fuzzy. The husband had returned. Hadn't he?

I'd failed the Bedlam Bride quest. The quest to bring her to Larracos. Did that mean she was gone? If so, how had she killed the entire room?

And how the hell had I gotten here? I was now on the other side of the map.

I hoped Katia's treatment had worked. I suspected it had. That was the impression I had from the dream. My treatment had also worked. Sort of. It had worked according to her husband, who'd reappeared at the end. The order of what happened was a jumble, just like a real dream. What was his name? Hapanzi? He'd been a god.

I have her now, son, he'd said. *She is good and trapped*. *You can always set her free, if you must. But do not unless all is lost*.

I could now see from the eye on my chest. It was still a tattoo, but I could feel it when it was open. I had to make a conscious effort to keep the eye closed. Another wave of nausea flooded me.

Katia: Carl, where are you?

Carl: I think I'm in the high elf castle! I have no idea what the hell is going on.

Katia: They're saying you teleported away right when it started, but you remained translucent, like you were in two places at once, and at the end, you completely disappeared. And now your adjutant is saying you killed a room full of the Lemig goblin guys. She said something to Mordecai, and he fell over laughing and hasn't explained why. Donut is here losing her mind. The Lemig guys knew the precise moment you went under, and they attempted something to ruin the procedure. Something using the warlord chat I don't understand. That in itself wasn't against the rules, but them using outside information is. The fact it backfired on them is irrelevant.

Carl: Holy shit.

Katia: Carl, we left her there. We left Shi Maria alone in that room with Annie.

Carl: It's not real. It was just a memory. The spider is trapped, and she's not trapped in you. Her husband said so. But your Annie. The real Annie, she's gone. They can't touch her.

Katia: Carl…

Carl: It worked, right? Did they say it worked?

Katia: I think so. It's not like a switch that one flips on and off. We won't really know right away. But, yes. I think it worked.

Carl: Then that's all that matters.

Shi Maria wasn't truly gone, but she *was* trapped. I remembered now. She was like an egg inside of me. One I could break at any time, but I had to do it myself.

Just like Carl's Doomsday Scenario. I was gathering quite the collection of weapons of mass destruction.

That should've been an enormous relief. It was not.

I tried opening the third eye, but I clenched it shut a moment later. I had to close it. There was power there. So much power. I had to keep it closed.

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[18]

"This is an official field ruling adjudication," Panford the dreadnaught said to the pissed-off caterpillar and the stoic Viceroy. He waved his hand, and a screen appeared floating in the air.

We all sat in a new room. I was segregated from the others by about ten feet, and I was still dripping with blood like I'd been bobbing for apples in a vat of the stuff. I had it on my face. In my hair. This was the private kitchen of the late Queen Imogen, off to the side of the ballroom. The table was made of some rich, finely carved wood, and in moments, it was covered with my bloody handprints.

Baroness Victory and the other two adjutants also congregated together in the middle of the table, dividing me and the two warlords. They'd been conversing amongst themselves for some time now before the dreadnaught cleared his throat and started talking.

There was a bag of literal Earth cat food sitting on the counter, abandoned and leaning against the wall. The large bag was closed with a little plastic clip. It was some generic, cheap kind of cat food that Donut would never touch. The yellow bag featured a happy, cartoon cat and was called "Meow Time." There was also a sticker on the bag, "a gift from Pet Angels." Pet Angels was a Seattle charity that gave free pet supplies to people who couldn't afford it otherwise. Its presence here was so out of place that it was

physically jarring. Is that what Ferdinand was eating when he lived here in the castle? Was it what he was eating before? If so, how did it get here? I couldn't take my eyes off it, and I had an overwhelming urge to try to steal it.

There were six of us in the room. The three warlords and their adjutants. Architect Houston—the masked, Viceroy leader of the Madness—sat at the other end of the wooden table, unmoving. It appeared he was already in the castle but hadn't been in the ballroom when it happened, whatever "it" was. The adjutant for the Madness was a tiny, floating Bune. The little dragon creature's name was Opiee.

Stockade and I had filed into the kitchen like a pair of children being called into the principal's office. No guards were allowed to follow. A group of the bugbear mercenary cooks were shooed from the room as we entered. Commander Stockade quivered with rage. Yellow goo leaked from his fuzzy, compound eyes, and he smelled like must and dirt. Even across the room, I could smell his rising stench. The angry alien kept muttering "Luke" over and over.

Architect Houston, the Viceroy leader of team Madness, had entered a moment later. He didn't appear to have a care in the world, not that it was difficult to put up such a façade. His white, featureless mask was slightly different than the other masks his kind wore. A small, red teardrop icon sat in the very center of the white guise. He wore long, flowing, Jedi-like robes that were just as starkly white as his mask, like a pope. The robes flowed strangely as he walked in, giving the implication his anatomy was strange. I knew under that mask, he had a demonic, alien face with lots of terrifying teeth, like a mix between a Predator alien and a goblin with no lips.

On the floating screen, a close-up view of me on the cot in the infirmary appeared, followed by a second screen showing the caterpillar in the middle of the ballroom, surrounded by dozens of the Lemig goblins. On the screen, Stockade's compound eyes flashed like a disco ball as he spoke with someone.

"Stockade," Panford the adjutant continued as the screens moved, "your plan was both simple and brilliant. Using the warlord chat, you offered peace terms to warlords Carl and Donut. With

those terms, you requested a face-to-face parlay. And then you extended an invite directly to Carl using your level-15 *Summon Ally* spell. You extended this invitation after Carl quaffed the sleep potion and just as he was taking the medicine to treat his demonic infestation. Since Carl was still, technically, conscious when you made your offer, the request was delivered directly to his interface. You also knew that while most command-and-request inquiries are disabled in certain unconscious states, properly delivered warlord inquiries remain persistent even during certain levels of unconsciousness."

The left side of the screen switched to my interface, showing **Accept Teleport Request? You will teleport here:** Followed by a map showing the location of the Lemig base. The screen split once more, returning to me passed out on the cot. It showed Rosetta, Bucket Boy, and Mordecai hovering over me while Imani pried off my toe ring.

"You knew that while Carl was incapacitated, the plan for them was to allow Shi Maria to take over Carl's consciousness during the dream sequence. While in that state, the entity would have no ability to control Carl or interact with any of his systems, such as casting spells, sending messages, or interacting with his inventory. However, because of your brilliantly timed request, the entity controlling Carl could—and indeed did—accept the invitation to parlay."

The screen showed the teleport request getting accepted the moment my toe ring was pulled off by Imani.

The dreadnaught turned to the other two adjutants—the orc and the bune. "Are we agreed on these facts so far?"

"Agreed," Opiee the adjutant for the Madness said.

"Yes," Baroness Victory agreed. I caught her eye, and she winked at me from across the room.

There was an audible chime from the system, but no other notification.

"This is bullshit," Commander Stockade muttered again. "This was supposed to be a game, and now we're literally fighting for our lives. Yet, you fools are pretending like nothing has happened. You're complicit in all this. You're just as complicit as the

mudskippers, the mantids, and the Valtay whose ineptitude let this happen. You need to be helping us escape, not tightening...” He trailed off, almost like a child getting distracted by something shiny. “Luke is gone. Beautiful Luke is no more. He was real. A real life snuffed away.”

I was about to say something, but the sudden rage that built up in my chest temporarily muted my voice. Still, I found myself on my feet, my fists clenched.

Architect Houston, who hadn’t said a word or even moved since he sat at the table, turned his head in my direction. It was barely a move, but his neck made a slight creaking noise, like from a wooden ship.

Easy. Easy.

Victory put up her hand and motioned me to sit.

“Nobody is happy with their current circumstances,” Victory said to the caterpillar, “but the rules are the rules. We all know what will happen if we don’t continue as normal.”

“If we survive this, you will *all* be sorry,” Stockade said. He was so angry, he was crying as he spoke. “I swear it.”

“Noted,” Victory said. She bowed toward the dreadnaught. “Please continue.”

Panford nodded. Shi Maria appeared on the screen, spinning. “The entity contained within Carl is basically a special Reaper Spider Minion merchant. Part demon and part demi-god. You, Stockade, knew that the spider would jump at the ability to escape, which is exactly what would’ve happened if things had gone as you anticipated.”

Panford looked at me. “Do you know how the *Summon Ally* spell works?”

“Of course,” I said.

That was a lie, but I’d already asked Mordecai to explain it to me, and his answer had already popped up. As I read it, Commander Stockade started bawling again about his dead friend, Luke.

<u>Mordecai</u>: *Summon Ally* is a rare, multi-functional teleport spell. At its most basic, it does what it says. It summons an ally to you. However, it’s not meant as an

offensive spell, and there are some protections in place to keep it from being used as such. At all levels, it puts control in the hands of the summoned and not the summoner. First, you have to be in each other's chat systems for it to work. I guess the warlord chat works, too. Second, the summoned is given the choice to accept the summoning. Third, the summoned cannot be teleported into a wall or anything like that. What happened in this case is that you were teleported to that castle, but you appeared as a non-corporeal avatar. It was the system compensating for your unconscious state. This is actually intended to stop people from using the spell to remove friends from deadly situations, but in your case, it saved you. You remained in that state until you started to wake up. I thought I'd killed you. It took some time to figure out what was going on.

Carl: What the hell were they trying to do? They went through all this to see a ghost of myself sleeping for like 10 hours. So what? What happened?

Mordecai: At best, they wanted to ruin your treatment. At worst, they thought it would simply kill you. Or act like teleporting a demon-possessed shell. Remember what happened on the last floor? What happened there, they thought was going to happen here. They wanted to kill us using that crazy spider. The adjutants will explain what actually happened.

Carl: Jesus.

"We must continue," Panford said to the still-blubbering caterpillar who'd fallen on the floor and was undulating up and down like a toddler having a tantrum.

"Why? Why are you subjecting me to this? Just make your ruling and leave me be."

Watching the caterpillar blubber at the death of his friend filled me with anger.

You don't know loss. Not yet.

"We are doing this because it's part of the rules," Panford said, exasperation leaking into his formal voice. "All fouls that come with

sanctions must be thoroughly examined by a minor quorum. Now kindly shut up and let me finish."

Stockade grunted and remained prone on the floor.

Panford nodded. The screen showed me teleporting to the ballroom. A translucent version of me appeared in both locations. The side in the infirmary showed Imani starting to shout with Mordecai and everyone else leaning over me, trying to figure out what was happening.

"Carl was teleported to the ballroom here after Shi Maria accepted the invite. However, they intended for him to fully teleport to the location and leave Shi Maria there at the base for the Princess Posse. The spider would've then slaughtered the entire room. What happened instead was that Carl was only partially teleported here, thwarting the plan."

"Incidentally," Victory said, interrupting. "That wouldn't have worked under any circumstances."

"I'm not so certain," Opiee the bune said. "Carl should be able to teleport normally. But fully teleporting while incapacitated with a presence that's actively trying to escape? I think it might've worked if they'd used a different method to teleport. We all saw what happened next. It was an interesting theory and was worth the risk."

"Hmm," Victory said. "The next part wouldn't have happened without the game guide's intervention. But perhaps you're correct."

Panford waved at his fellow adjutants to let him continue. "It's irrelevant. Even if it would've worked, there was additional corruption in the procedure when crawlers Katia and Carl touched hands during the start of the process. Carl's consciousness remained inside of Katia's while Carl's avatar temporarily existed in both bases."

"The consciousness jumping like that is still a mystery," Opiee said. "It's fascinating, and it shouldn't have happened."

"I believe it's the communal nature of his Primal race," Victory replied. "But it could also be the duality of the Shi Maria presence. She, in turn, has a god within herself."

At the table, Architect Houston leaned forward to examine the screen as it switched to a new view.

The screen now showed a much hazier scene, showing nothing but blurry shadows. I recognized it immediately. *Holy shit*, I thought. *They can see our dreams*. It was the first part of Katia's nightmare. Katia and I stood in the hallway, our arms physically attached as we watched a memory of herself walk through a door into a building. She stopped dead as another man was walking out.

What are you doing here? Dream Katia had asked him in Icelandic. I could understand it perfectly.

Telling them the truth the man said, pushing past her. On the screen, the words came out garbled, like a radio tuned just south of the correct station. But I could hear it. I could hear the panic in Katia's voice. The venom in the man's. His name was Fannar. He was a fellow professor, and they were originally going to adopt together. He'd slept with a student, and she'd reported him. Nothing had come of it other than the ruination of Katia's life.

The scene jumped.

I can take a test, Katia pleaded to the faceless woman. *I haven't touched anything in ten years. It was so long ago.*

It's not just that. You're sick, and you've been hiding it. With Annie's medical needs, and with so little time left, we don't feel...

He had no right, Katia shouted. She screamed the words, and she swept everything off the woman's desk. Even garbled like this, they stung me all over again. The now Katia, the one watching this with me, had cried on my shoulder. *He had no right*, she'd said in unison with the ghost on the screen.

The now version of Katia also had a crow on her shoulder. Her card that she'd brought from the previous floor. A crow with the skull of an infant.

The crow's name was also Annie. I didn't know what that meant, but it seemed important.

Across the way, Architect Houston moved his attention from the screen and to me.

"Turn this off," I said. "This isn't yours to watch."

I was ignored. The scene changed. We were in a hospital room, Katia standing at a crib, holding the baby the best she could. It was

difficult with all the wires and diodes that attached to the nine-month-old, who'd just started standing on her own in the crib.

The now Katia and I both gasped and stepped back as a massive spider appeared, pushing herself into the room. Annie the crow cawed angrily and flapped her wings. She, too, was attached to Katia, blended into her shoulder.

This spider was Shi Maria. And soon, a second spider appeared. Hapanzi. Her husband. He didn't say the name out loud, and here in this place, we didn't have names floating over our heads, but in the dream, I knew. I knew everything about him, memories that were just now starting to flow back into me.

Too many memories. Memories that diluted and washed away into the stream.

"Worry not, my children," the male spider had said. As we watched, he transformed into a large, dark-skinned human, wearing simple pants and a vest. His accent was like that of Asojano's. I recognized the voice as the same one that occasionally spoke in my mind. "Worry not."

Only then did the scene fade, returning to me on the floor of the ballroom, still translucent and flickering.

Panford continued. "After some time, the Shi Maria consciousness was also pulled into Katia's dreamscape. Meanwhile, parties at both ends scrambled to find a way to turn Carl's incapacitation to their advantage. You, Stockade, planned on casting a spell to force Carl to completely form on your side, but you paused. You paused because you once again received outside information about how the Princess Posse team was planning to react. You, once again, needed to time your reaction to just the correct moment. Meanwhile, members of the crawler team became aware of exactly what was happening, and they formed a plan to defend Carl."

"So, they're cheating also!" the caterpillar shouted, suddenly pulling himself straight up. "They also have someone watching from the outside!"

"I will refute this," Victory said. The simple pronouncement was followed by a *ping* from the system.

"You idiot," Panford said to the caterpillar. "I will note for the record that Commander Stockade of the Lemig Sortion has admitted his guilt."

Yet another ping filled the room.

Prepotente: Hello, Carl and Donut.

Donut: HI PREPOTENTE! WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN? WHY HAVEN'T YOU JOINED MY ARMY YET?

Carl: I'm a little busy here. Gonna need like ten minutes.

Prepotente: I fear you don't have ten minutes. I am near the southern border with the Naga, surveying your defenses, and there is a great amount of enemy movement. They are attempting to be surreptitious about it, but Bianca and I are observing them from high above. The long-range trebuchets of the elves are preparing to fire, and there is an entire squad of about 100 mercenaries with colors for the Madness who think they're invisible, preparing to rush your trenches. There are multiple armored, tracked vehicles under camouflage netting as well.

Donut: YOU BETTER GET SOMEWHERE SAFE FAST.

Prepotente: With no magic being allowed in the beginning, I believe I am quite safe, thank you. Once the festivities begin, I have a very specific score to settle with the lead producer of the *Blood Hunter* program, and after that is complete, only then will I come to your aid and join in your military. If you're still alive.

A new chat came before I could figure out what the hell he was talking about.

Elle: Guys. Shit's happening on the Naga side. Lots of movement.

Florin: Team. Movement on the northern front. Enemy is moving like they're preparing a push

Donut: WHAT IS GOING ON? WE STILL HAVE ALMOST 20 HOURS IN THE CEASEFIRE.

Florin: I know, but something's up. All teams, positions now.

Carl: Pony says the same.

Imani: Nobody is in place. We're not done with the defenses yet!

Li Jun: The Shanty Town defenses are still being built. Have two towers built, but that's it. Both splash towers. We are working as fast as we can.

Li Na: We should have two more active in the next twenty minutes.

Li Jun: Also, uh Florin. You wanted to know about Lucia Mar, right? She's here in Shanty Town right now with her dog, drinking at the Possum Envy right on the edge of the border with the robot team. The Reavers. One of the new guys tried to recruit her, and she almost ripped his head off.

Florin: Thanks for the head's up, mate.

Elle: They're pulling a bunch of camo netting off some tank things on the Naga side!

Carl: Shit. Everyone. Let's go. Code red. Man your lines. I don't know what's happening, and it could be a drill, but I think shit's about to go down. Remember the plan. Louis. Are you ready?

Louis: We only have half your bombs installed! We're not ready!

Carl: Don't have a choice. Get that thing into the air ASAP.

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"Carl," Panford said, bringing me back to the present. "I would appreciate you pay attention to the proceedings."

I grunted and nodded as my chat system exploded with even more messages. I needed to stall for time to see if and how all of this was connected. "I guess I'm still confused about everything that happened up to this point. Can you explain it to me like I'm a toddler?"

Victory sighed and then spoke. "When you tried to expel the Shi Maria presence, Stockade was using an outside-the-dungeon partner to watch the procedure. He timed it precisely so you received a teleport request right at the moment when Shi Maria was able to accept it. Because he's an idiot, it only half worked, and the system split you in two. Because you were in two places, both sides then attempted to fully drag you into their presence. But at this point, Mordecai became aware of what was really happening and knew he was being watched and formulated a subterfuge. Now shut up and allow Panford to explain what happened next."

Panford gestured at the screen, which now showed Mordecai and Rosetta talking. "I'm going to pull him out," Mordecai said on the screen. "I'm going to use a *Shock Wake* salve, but I gotta adjust it to work on a non-corporeal form."

The screen showed Mordecai feverishly working over his alchemist's table. On the other side of the split, it presented

Commander Stockade preparing to cast a spell, his eyes once again flashing.

"While Mordecai brewed his potion, Stockade prepared a counter move, one to fully drag Carl into the ballroom. If the spell and the salve were applied simultaneously, Carl would've likely died, his soul being ripped in two. But Mordecai, aware that he was being illegally observed, was actually creating a different potion. Not a wake-up salve like he claimed out loud, but something to violently expel the Shi Maria presence. It was a risky move."

"How," Stockade asked. "How would they know, if they weren't also observing us?"

"That's a question you can answer for yourself. If they weren't cheating, then how would they know?" Panford asked.

Stockade hissed. "A spy! There's a spy in my midst!"

I actually had no idea how we'd known what was happening. We didn't have any spies, as far as I was aware, here in the castle of the Lemigs. Elle and her squad were watching the Nagas. Our other changelings were moving through the Operatic side, disarming traps. Our last scouts were all with Louis on the *Party Planner*, which we'd planned on already having in enemy territory the moment the ceasefire ended.

I took a breath as realization hit me. *We* didn't have spies. Juice Box's team did. She'd said they'd all been expelled from the courts of the warlords. That was obviously untrue.

She was waiting for the ceasefire to end, I realized. She was going to assassinate some of the leaders once this started. Kill a leader, and the team would automatically lose. She played her hand early to save me.

The scene changed, showing Mordecai applying the salve to my translucent chest. I buckled, as if in pain. At the same time, Stockade cackled with laughter as he cast his spell.

The cackling stopped a few moments later.

The split screen turned to a full view of the ballroom with me on the floor, convulsing, fully corporeal. And then, just like that, I turned. There was no moment of transformation, like when Katia

and Juice Box changed forms. There was a blink, and then I was Shi Maria.

"I have always loved you," Shi Maria roared, her voice muffled. All the guards in the room panicked and started to run as the spider lashed, her front two arms slashing across the room. Lemig goblins separated from their bodies as the giant spider rampaged through the room, screaming and confused.

I also saw something the others didn't. Her jaws were still unhinged. She was still in the midst of swallowing the human version of her husband. In the dream, we'd watched her devour the man, all the while screaming that she loved him and would never hurt him. As I watched the memory from the ballroom, the leg in her mouth vanished, and her jaw snapped back into place.

"I didn't kill you, Hapanzi!" Maria screamed. "I would never kill you!" She skewered a goblin through the chest and picked him up with her arm. She shrieked at the goblin, her voice panicked and unhinged. "I would never hurt him! How dare you? How dare you!" She ripped the goblin in two.

I knew at that exact moment, in the dream, Shi Maria had disappeared and her husband—Hapanzi—had reappeared in front of us, once again as a spider. He told me that she was gone, trapped in my own body. He told me that I would now have control over the eye and the containment she was within. I could summon her again at will, if I wanted. But I could only do it once, and if I did so, she could choose. She could choose to take over my body or expel herself back into her own form.

In other words, Shi Maria had become yet another bomb in my inventory. An especially dangerous bomb.

I had an uneasy feeling as I watched the replay. She didn't look nearly as trapped as Hapanzi said. Still, I now had control of the eye on my chest. I could feel it there, clenched closed.

In the dream, she had returned before I'd awakened. We'd left her in the room with Annie.

On the screen, it showed Luke throwing himself in front of the cowering Commander Stockade. Shi Maria slashed his legs off, and Luke collapsed to the floor.

Her eye was open, on the screen. The caterpillar's compound eyes lit up once again as they shone with the prismatic light. All around, the surviving goblins started beating the shit out of each other, all possessed by the spider's insanity. They shot, stabbed, and bit. A soldier walked up to Luke, who continued to drag himself across the room, moving toward the exit, and he stabbed the legless goblin in the back with a long, segmented blade. He pulled the blade out, took two steps, and then he pulled it across his own throat.

A moment passed, and Shi Maria fell in on herself, rolled onto her back, her long, terrifying legs all jumbled, and then there was a blink, and I was there, standing upright in the room, my eyes closed. A silhouette of the spider remained, but it was made of the blood that had been coating her body, and it fell right over me like I'd had a bucket dumped on my head. The scene ended with me gasping and opening my eyes.

"Another oddity," Opiee said. "Mordecai's potion only worked temporarily. It should have permanently severed the bond, but in the end, the spider was pulled back into Carl. Much is happening at once within that crawler's body, and I am quite curious to learn what, exactly, happened in this case."

"I... I loved him," Commander Stockade continued to say. His little hands moved back and forth, and I realized he was slowly pulling his own fur out. There was a ring of it on the floor under him. "I can't bear this."

Elle: Okay cowboys, I'm in position. But if this is just a drill, I'll get caught and booted from their territory. Am I risking it or not?

Florin: Carl?

Carl: Gotta do it.

Elle: Okay. Moving in.

The screen disappeared with a flash. Panford straightened. "We believe that Stockade and Houston both conspired to use the secured messaging system to speak with someone upon the 18th floor, who is relaying real-time information via a third party participating in the Celestial Ascendency. Since celestial messaging is

secured, we do not know who the middleman is in this scenario, but we have identified the party on the 18th floor as Nurse Yugoslav of the Madness."

I planted a fake grin and turned to Architect Houston. "Your mom? Your mom is here in the dungeon? I can't wait to meet her."

I sent a quick message to Juice Box.

Opiee rose in the air, his little wings fluttering. These bune things usually walked on the ground, but they could fly short distances. "Houston's presence here in the castle and the possible collusion by a family member, who is not bound by any such rules, is circumstantial evidence. Quite damning circumstantial evidence at that..." He paused for dramatic effect. "...but I don't feel it's enough to officially charge him. Unless you want to confess." The small dragon turned to his warlord, who was still looking directly at me. "Do you wish to confess, Architect Houston?"

The masked creature made no moves and said nothing.

"I'll take that as a no," Opiee said.

"Oh, come on!" I said.

Juice Box: I passed on your message to Ferdinand. I'm hearing some information about strange movements, by the way. I am relaying it all to Louis and Britney. I had to burn some assets to save your ass. I hope it was worth it. Head's up to your people. We're going to power up the towers early. If someone is in town and isn't in your army, they should probably start moving into your territory.

"Baroness?" Opiee asked.

Victory shrugged. "Houston is obviously guilty, but unless he admits it, he was smart enough to let Stockade do all of his dirty work. I will vote not culpable for both the Madness team and the Princess Posse."

"Agreed," Opiee said.

There was a ping.

"Very well," Panford said. "Because the other two adjutants are in agreement, I do not need to render a ruling. This minor quorum finds the Madness and the Princess Posse not guilty of any

wrongdoing. We also find that the leader of the Democratic Sortion has admitted guilt to illegal information gathering, and we are ready to render penalties.

Warlord Message. Sir Ferdinand of Team Retribution has proposed an emergency action item. "Because them alien cunts on other floors are being little bitches and cheating, we propose that nobody in the dungeon, including those pricks partying it up in that centipede's asshole, be allowed to watch any outside feeds for the remainder of this little game."

This action item has been approved. Effective immediately, everyone within the dungeon is subjected to an immediate, live-feed blackout.

"Holy shit," I muttered. That was fast. I hadn't wanted to waste any of our own action items on this, but I was glad it had worked.

"That's a first," Victory muttered.

"It's about time," Panford said.

"Luke. Oh gods, Luke," Stockade said again.

I was finally starting to realize that the warlord was actually getting worse, not better as time moved forward. I remembered that moment from the video, when he looked right into my eye.

I shook my head. Not *my* eye. Shi Maria's eye.

I received a new direct message in the warlord chat.

Architect Houston: If you ever mention my mother out loud ever again, you and that animal companion of yours will spend the last thousand hours of your existence upon the amplification table in my surgical theater. This is a promise.

Warlord Carl: Oh, fuck off.

Architect Houston: You are in mortal danger at this very moment, and you don't even realize it. I do hope you escape so we can extend our play, but gracious pet owners accept the gifts their animals drop at their doorsteps.

Warlord Carl: What the fuck does that even mean?

"As for penalties," Panford said. "Since this is the first of three allowed penalties, you will receive a 25% reduction in your standing

force. In addition... Wait, what are you doing?"

The caterpillar had fallen to the floor and was openly sobbing now. He was literally rubbing his face against the floor. He started to scream. "Luke! Luke! Luke!"

A stream of blood spread across the wood floor, like he'd caught his face on a nail. He didn't stop. With every sweep of his fuzzy face, there was a new tearing noise and more blood on the floor. A health bar appeared and started to rapidly lower.

"Uh," I said after a moment. Nobody moved to help him. "Not that I'm complaining, but are we going to just watch him do that to himself?"

"Beautiful, beautiful Luke. I loved your zomp-hued thighs! Oh Luke! Oh Luke!"

"We can't interfere, nor can we call his guards in here," Panford said after a moment.

The caterpillar started smashing his face up and down against the floor. A little splash of gooey blood appeared each time.

Smack, smack, smack.

"Luke," the caterpillar groaned, his words barely discernible.

"A bit of a delayed reaction, but I think he got a full dose of that spider's *Insanity* spell," Victory said. She turned to Architect Houston. "Feel free to help him. Or call his guards."

The warlord from the Madness did not move. He continued to stare directly at me.

Smack. Smack. They were coming slower now.

"Panford," Victory said. "Let's end this now. If we stay for much longer we'll have to deal with a new adjudication."

A wave of coldness washed over me.

"Wait," I said. "What happens when this is done? How do I get back?"

Smack...

Smack.

"Because the ceasefire is in effect and because of the nature of your transport here, you'll be teleported back to your base," Panford said.

"Shit, okay," I said quickly. "End it!"

I saw Victory's eyes suddenly get huge as if she just realized something as well. She took a breath and then said, "Yes, Panford. Finish the ruling."

The dreadnaught couldn't take his eyes off the caterpillar, who'd stopped screaming. A yellow goo oozed from his head, mixed with the red, watery blood.

All sense of formality left his voice. "Uh, 25% reduction in force and removal of two tech slots. As those are currently filled with mechanized armor, both units will be immediately disbanded. This is our ruling, and this inquiry is concluded."

There was a ping.

Victory looked at me, and she said, "I will now transport Carl back to his base. Teleporting in 20 seconds."

Commander Stockade groaned, and then, just like that, he died, having literally smashed his own brains out against the floor.

System Message: Commander Stockade of the Democratic Sortion has fallen. Credit for the kill has been ruled as a psychosis-induced suicide.

System Message: The Democratic Sortion has been defeated. As this defeat was voluntary, the closest ally castle or warlord to their headquarters will receive all their assets.

System Message: All assets of the Lemig Sortion have been awarded to the Madness.

There was a pause. I felt the tingle of pre-teleportation.

System Message: Due to Ceasefire rule three, subsection six of the ceasefire addendum, the voluntary withdrawal of a combatant squad has engaged acceleration scenario two. The ceasefire will be shortened by 23.33 hours.

System Message: The Ceasefire has ended.

System Message: All unaffiliated crawlers have been teleported from Larracos.

Warlord Message: Phase One Combat rules have engaged. You may freely enter enemy territory via designated corridors. No offensive magic may be used

during this first ramp-up phase. No combatants may cast teleport-based spells.

Across from me, Architect Houston jumped to his feet, and his robes flung back, revealing a horrific, bug-like body and six arms, two of which were holding a rifle, which he brought to bear upon my chest. He fired as I dove out of the way. I landed heavily against the counter. I grabbed the bag of cat food just as I dropped an impact hob-lobber onto the ground.

Teleporting Now.

Entering the Princess Posse camp.

I landed heavily on the floor of the now-empty field hospital. My head smashed against the cot as I crashed to the rocky floor. I dropped the bag of cat food, and it spilled across the ground, the little, brown pebbles going everywhere. I gasped in pain at the hole punched right through my shoulder. I slammed a healing potion, and I cried in new pain as my body knit itself.

He'd almost gotten me. I'd dropped the bomb, but if I'd gotten him, I'd have received a message.

I should've dropped a bigger bomb, I thought. I'd gone with my hotlist.

He'd planned this. All of this. Either that, or he'd known what was happening to Stockade and had compensated accordingly. He'd willingly sacrificed another living, breathing world leader to get to me.

And it had almost worked.

I gasped in pain again as I sat up, little cat food pebbles spilling all around me. A group of sluggalos slithered into the room.

"What're you sitting around for?" the lead one asked. He was a level 55 named Jason Manning FUCKS. He had dreadlocks shaped like little morning stars. He waved his head back and forth, and the tiny weapons spun in a circle. "Ain't you heard? We got a war on. Everyone is moving to one of the two fronts. Now quit your bleeding and get out there." The slug whooped loudly and left the room, trailing orange slime as his compatriots followed.

A moment later, an explosion echoed as a non-magical rock detonated against our shield.

System Message: Weapons Free. Weapons Free. Faction Wars have officially begun.

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CHRISTMAS MORNING

"Hey, do you know if he ever made it into the dungeon? That Paulie guy, I mean?"

"No," Orren said. "He appears to have been outside, but he never made it within. Most of them never make it in. Like with all collective minds and swarms, the individual parts are often disposable. Remember that in any future dealings with their kind."

Containment Interface is now available for use. A new tab is available in your interface.

"Actually," I said. "I changed my mind. There was this gas station I paused at on my way north. The one with the memory ghost dog. Can you send me there? I just want to say hi to that dog again before I jump back into it."

"Very well. Good day, Carl."

With that, he disappeared, leaving me alone in the room. I'd transfer in a few seconds.

The coffee from the shelter remained heavy on my tongue. The scent of the shelter's breakfast mixed with the Lysol remained in my memory, and my stomach rumbled. But all I could think about was that lonely dog, left alone to guard an empty gas station on Christmas day.

Transferring Now.

I blinked, and I appeared outside the gas station.

There was nothing special about the old, lonely dog. Lightning Lou. We'd just spent half an hour negotiating for all the stuff I could

and couldn't have in exchange for Paulie's worthless, plastic tub. The whole time I kept thinking, *what difference does this make? What difference does any of it make?*

But, still, despite allowing the interface to be installed, I couldn't help but think it would be a mistake. Paulie's warning had gotten to me. Were we worth it? Were we worth saving? Or better yet, were we worth sacrificing?

I moved into the gas station, going in through the broken door. I grabbed a bag of chips off the rack and a soda from the cooler, and I sat next to the memory ghost of the sleeping dog. He snored softly, occasionally shifting.

I could end it all right now.

A person shouldn't have this much power.

It was too much.

There was too much weight there, on my shoulders.

It was too much.

You will not break me.

I wiped my eyes, and I pulled up my interface.

I blinked. The way Paulie had described it, I was expecting there to be a single button that basically said "Boom." I could press it, and it would be done. That was not this at all. It was six tabs of information, similar to my portal analysis tool. Each of the tabs had a dozen submenus. There were multiple pages, all filled with numbers I couldn't possibly understand.

The language was strange. I could read the words. I could understand the numbers, but it clearly wasn't Syndicate standard. There was a fractional moment before it translated, which wasn't something I'd seen before. Was this the Valtay home language? Whatever Paulie's language was? I clicked through, trying to figure it all out.

From what I gathered, this interface didn't control the AI. Instead, it controlled the device they used to install the AI into the primal engine. After the AI was installed, the device remained physically nearby, wherever that was, but the device no longer had any direct influence over the AI itself.

Still, I had sense it kept a metaphorical eye on the AI and the computer it now called home. It had metrics such as physical location, temperature, and several other things I didn't understand. None of the numbers seemed to be changing, other than to fluctuate back and forth between two digits.

I took screenshots of all the menus.

There was a page that showed an animated, top-down view of the solar system. There was a blinking light over Earth. The headline read **Primary Zone Influence**. We already knew that. I kept looking.

It took me about ten minutes of searching to find the Fuse page. It listed the five benchmarks required for the fuse to blow, but it didn't really say what the benchmarks were. Only two of the five were marked as **Conditions Met**.

And there it was. The button. **Override Conditions And Activate Fuse. Warning. Warning**.

I could press it, and if it actually worked, this would all be over.

I thought of the others, all still at the guild. They'd had their Christmas party. They'd spent it with friends. With family. That was so much better than dying alone, one by one, screaming in a pool of their own blood. It would be a punch to the gut to the Syndicate, that's for sure. I thought of the legions of bastards who'd descended on the planet. How long would it be before they could do this again to someone else? How many of them would I kill?

Still, I paused. I thought of Donut. I thought of the people on the surface. Of all my friends. What right did I have to make this decision for them?

So, if I didn't press the button, what could I do with this? Could I use it for leverage? Could I treat it like I was a guy with a gun to a hostage's temple? No. There was no way I'd be fast enough. The moment someone learned I had this, I was dead.

Could I set up some sort of dead man's trigger? They'd probably find a way around it. And what would be the point? The fact I even had this power might be enough to cause them to trigger the failsafe on their own.

Then, what could I do? Should I just pretend like I didn't have it, and only bring it out if needed? What would be the point of that? I could literally die at any moment, and this would all be lost. This was too much power on my shoulders. It was like a physical weight. I had to either make a decision right now, or I needed to decide to not use this power at all.

The button was right there. One mental push.

Do you remember the circus? That was fun, wasn't it?

Would the AI even let this happen?

That thought was like a splash of cold water.

The AI's role in all this bothered me. I wasn't going to pretend to understand anything about its true origins or its thought processes or all that bullshit. But I didn't believe for a second that thing really wanted to die. It wasn't in pain like Paulie said. It was having fun.

The more I thought about this, the more that gave me pause. It didn't make sense. How could it possibly have allowed me this power if it *didn't* want to die?

That was it, wasn't it? It had to be a trap. Or a test. I'd click the button, and nothing would happen.

Or I'd die.

Or the solar system would literally get destroyed.

Would I even get the chance to know what happened?

Goddamnit.

Carl: Donut, are you doing okay?

Donut: WHEN ARE YOU COMING BACK? I MISS YOU.

Goddamnit.

I didn't know what I wanted to do.

But that wasn't true, was it? I *did* want to hit the button. I wanted it more than anything in the world. My anger at the powers that made this happen were bright. So bright.

I miss you, too, Donut.

...

But not bright enough.

I clicked away from the screen, and I spent some time just breathing. I opened it back up. I started looking through the rest of the menus, trying to see what else was in there.

And there, just as I was about to say my goodbyes to the dog and get back out there, I saw it. It was an option at the very end of a list of twenty status notifications.

Disconnect Containment. Warning. This will disengage all metrics and controls, including the fuse system. It will render the Containment Unit inert. The failsafe will no longer function. Most controls will cease to function.

Oh, thank god. Thank god.

I almost slammed the button down right at that moment, just to get the weight off. But right before I pressed it, I paused yet again.

It was literally the only other button in here I could press.

I thought again about Paulie's warning, and now I wondered which of those two options he was really warning me about.

Goddamnit, I thought. This was a trap, too, wasn't it? I actually had three options, assuming the buttons did what they claimed. I could do nothing. I could press the fuse and die. Or I could relieve myself of the burden and press the button to turn it all off. But if I turned it off, did that mean I would be "freeing" the AI? What did that mean? What did that look like?

Who set this trap? Was it Paulie's people? He said they couldn't even access this menu, so did they really know what was in here? Did the Pacifist Network know? *Somebody* built this menu.

Which of those three options would hurt the Syndicate the most? And which of those three options would protect my people the most?

When I framed it that way, the decision was suddenly quite easy.

Carl: Donut, I'll be back soon.

We already were under the thumb of the psychotic AI.

I pressed the **Disconnect Containment** button. The entire new interface blanked out, leaving nothing but the map. Already, the little red dot over Earth started to grow.

"Welcome to the party, pals," I said.

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[PART 2]

THE RAMP-UP

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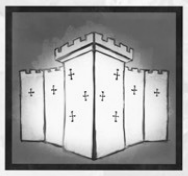
BATTALIONS



101ST CROCODILES
CDR: GENERAL FLORIN



102ND BULWARK BATTALION
CDR: GENERAL TRAN



103RD RECON LEGIONNAIRES
CDR: COLONEL BODI



104TH NAUGHTY LITTLE PIGGIES
CDR: COLONEL TIPID



105TH SCREAM WARRIORS
CDR: COLONEL JURGEN



106TH BLOODY LEECHES
CDR: COLONEL BOOMER



107TH WHITE DRAGON URBAN DEF.
CDR: GENERAL LI NA



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[20]

<Note added by Crawler Justice Light, Eighth Edition.>

I think about him all the time. I have killed many NPCs since I arrived in this horror, but I have only killed one out of anger. He did not deserve that, and it haunts me. I keep going over it. It's the manifestation of how I've changed, all boiled down to a single incident. The old me wouldn't have done that. Snapped and just killed someone.

The memory is abhorrent to me. I have become what I hate.

At this point, the only thing that calms my nerves is the hope that my trap ideas and plans within this scroll will help someone else. It is all I have.

<Note added by Crawler Drakea, 22nd Edition.>

Justice Light. I do not know if you survived this, and if you did, I doubt you will ever have the chance to see these words. But if you're out there, I hope you're watching. Your traps have saved my life more times than I can count. I am working on a big one, based on your seeking flechette design.

Listen to me, brother. We all make mistakes. We sometimes hurt those we haven't intended to hurt. These are the tides of life, the ebbs and flows, and it is unavoidable. But in this case... it was not your fault. No. They *put you here. I remember your passage about*

how you would hunt and give food to the flightless elders of your world. You were once a good, gentle soul. They *turned you into a warrior.* They *are the engineers of this all.*

We both know there's no going back, so take comfort in the words of our brother Ikicha from the 11th edition. "The burning Yenk needs only to embrace their enemies."

Don't shy from what you've become. Force them to look upon you. Force them to see what they wrought, what they forged in the fires of their own creation.

Let them know fear.

Time remaining in Phase One: 180 hours.

Current Battle Rules:

- **No Offensive Magic Allowed.**
- **No Teleport-based Magic or Skills Allowed.**
- **One may only enter enemy territory via a designated Corridor. Free passage once inside. This restriction does not apply to those with the "Scout" endorsement.**

<u>9 of 10 Teams Remain</u>:

The Bone Clan in Spot 1
The Operatic Collective in Spot 2
The Princess Posse in Spot 3
The Blood Sultanate in Spot 4
The Prism Kingdom in Spot 5
The Dream in Spot 6
The Madness in Spots 7 and 8
The Reavers in Spot 9
Team Retribution defending Larracos.

Eliminated:

The Democratic Sortion

I stepped from the hospital tent to find the base in chaos. Everyone was running to and fro, like an upset ant colony. A few of the colonels were organizing groups. Most would head north to hold off the largest contingent of enemy forces, gathered on the border with the Operatic Collective. The border was a good ten miles away. A smaller group were headed south to the border with the Naga, an equal distance.

"Hey," I shouted at a colonel. It was Jurgen, the large barbarian. His battalion had been designated the 105th Scream Warriors. Their logo was a drawing of a screaming girl who looked suspiciously like the mascot for the Wendy's restaurant chain wearing a Viking helmet with only one horn. "Make sure you leave at least two transports for me."

"You live!" Jurgen shouted back, and he flashed a pair of heavy metal-style devil horns before shouting over his shoulder, "Heidi, do you see? Carl lives!" He turned and started shouting more orders, making certain two of the transports were sectioned off for my use.

Dozens of messages poured in through the warlord system. I scanned for one in particular.

Your Throne has been locked in place. The location of all the Throne Rooms are now visible on the map.

Carl: Justice, did you get the throne room prepared before it got locked in place?

Justice Light: It is done.

I breathed in relief. I'd only met with the stoic skyfowl once since they'd gotten here. He was the third, and the last I believed, of the cookbook authors who had come with the mercenaries. He didn't acknowledge me any more than the others when we first met except for a slight bow, one that lasted a little too long. Long enough that Mordecai had spent a contemplative moment looking back and forth between me and the eagle creature.

Justice Light looked much different than any skyfowl I'd seen before. I knew there were all kinds of these things. The one-winged

eagle was shorter and stockier than most. His feathers were all black, tinged with gray, and a twin tuft of feathers upon his head gave the impression he had horns, making him look strangely like he was related to Big Tina—who remained in the FUPA for now.

Justice along with a surprisingly large assortment of sluggalos were all working together on a special project, something he'd been planning for a long time, and we let him be. He said he liked the sluggalos because they didn't seem to mind the idea of accidentally tripping traps and getting themselves skewered.

His class title was strange. He was an **Origamist**, and I had no idea what the hell that even meant. I knew he wasn't yet done with his preparations, but at least he got the throne room set. I glanced at the map and zoomed out. Sure enough, all the faction throne rooms were pretty much where Juice Box's map said they'd be. I focused on the Naga dot, just south of us.

Bam! I ducked as a rock smashed against our shield. For this first part, the projectiles would be ineffective against our defenses. But they were already zeroed in on us. We needed to take out their batteries before the 180 hours were up because when that happened, their rocks would be enchanted with devastating spells.

"Carl, Carl, are you okay?" Donut cried, coming from inside the stronghold, followed closely by three of the cretins—Bomo, Sledge, and Very Sullen—and a smattering of others, including a few of the were-castors, Jamal the shark, a few of the former crawlers, and two strippers. Dong Quixote and Splash Zone. All were members of our new "Personal Guard" and were placed in a platoon, which was similar to a party. That was a setting in the warlord menu, and we got a total of 15 guards just like everyone else, despite there being two warlords. The assigned guards all received a 25% bonus to their constitution as long as they were physically close to one of us. I told Donut that she could choose the platoon herself, which she'd done happily.

Mongo also rushed out with her, jumping up and down and screeching. I had Rend in his pet carrier.

Donut skidded to a stop in front of me. "What did you do? Why did we start early? How did that caterpillar guy die? Goodness, why

are you covered in blood?"

"He killed himself," I said. "The blood isn't mine. Not most of it. Long story. Where's Katia?"

Donut hopped and landed heavily on my shoulder. She had her new tiara upon her head, and it glittered brilliantly in the light. She was shaking with excitement.

"She went north already, meeting up with Florin at the front." She sniffed. "Why do you smell like Ferdinand? Is he here? Did you see the emergency action item he made?"

Donut still smelled vaguely like skunk, but I wasn't about to tell her that. More rocks hit the barrier. Flames burst around the half circle shield that encompassed the grounds of the FUPA. Thick smoke started to billow. Poison. The projectile hadn't been magical, but they'd still figured out how to use chemical warfare against us. We'd anticipated this, and several mages stood by, casting spells to dissipate the clouds.

"I found some of his old cat food in the elf castle."

I still had dozens of messages coming in by the moment. At the southern front, the troopers were in their trenches, waiting for the enemy push. In the north, they'd already started moving in. Florin was there and was directing the defense. I filtered the messages out unless they were specifically targeted at me. I went over them as I pulled out the Royal Chariot. I eyed the two transports that Jurgen had set aside. They were flatbeds designed to drive quickly over the plains. No weapons or protections at all. If we added too much "stuff" to the vehicles, the warlord system counted them as war machines, or "Armor," which was really frustrating because we could only build or buy 10 such vehicles. We could have more, but we'd have to steal them from the enemy. As of this moment, we had all ten spots already taken. One from *Party Planner*, and the rest were Florin's flame spider tanks, which were wholly defensive machines. We had five on the northern front and four in the south.

Louis: We're on our way. Uh, Samantha sneaked her way onto the *Party Planner*, too. She's not a designated scout. What should I do?

Carl: Goddamnit, Samantha. You were supposed to stay put.

Samantha: I AM DOING MY PART IN THE WAR, CARL. WE'LL BE BACK AS SOON AS WE BLOW SOME STUFF UP, RIGHT GENERAL LOUIS?

Carl: Samantha, we only have a limited amount of scout spaces, and they're all used up. You can't be on the airplane. It will literally tear a Samantha-sized hole in the plane when you hit the border. It would hurt Louis and everybody else on board. You'll crash.

Samantha: THAT'S OKAY. LOUIS AND I WILL CRASH TOGETHER, AND HE WILL PARACHUTE DOWN INTO THE WOODS WITH ME WHERE WE CAN BUILD A LOG CABIN, AND HE CAN GROW A BEARD. ONE THAT'S ALL SCRAGGLY AND KINDA ITCHY BUT IT ALSO SMELLS LIKE A CAMPFIRE. I'M SORRY IF THAT MAKES YOU JEALOUS, CARL.

Louis: What?

Carl: Louis, you gotta dump her out the bomb bay. Samantha, you can roll back to base.

Samantha: NO, WAIT. LOUIS CAN JUST COME BACK. IT'S A SUICIDE MISSION, AND I LIKE LOUIS. I LIKE HIM MORE THAN CHARLIE. I DON'T WANT HIM TO DIE YET.

I took a breath. Louis's mission *was* dangerous, and Samantha wasn't as stupid as she was pretending. She'd sneaked aboard on purpose in order to "save" him. That wasn't good.

Carl: Louis. Out the bomb bay.

Louis: I'm on it.

I moved to the chat with Elle.

Elle: Holy cannoli, guys. These bald elf pricks have all sorts of hardware out here. They have the giant artillery trebuchets, but they also have a ton of smaller ones that they just pulled out of their inventories and set up. Why are they allowed to have so many of these things when we can't? The soldiers and their mercenaries are all mounted on zebra-looking things, too, like they're going to retreat or

charge at any minute. I think the rocks they're throwing are cover for something else.

Carl: We're on our way to the southern front right now. Keep your head down and don't get caught, and we'll be there soon.

Elle: Doing my best.

We didn't have a good fast travel option to the southern front yet, so we were gonna have to take our vehicles. It was ten miles over gently rolling plains. By the time we'd reach the southern border, the ground would be mostly flat. The Harley Davidson was a road bike and wasn't great for this, and I decided to use the chariot for now.

Next to me, Jamal rolled up. We hadn't yet replaced his harness and spider legs. Katia had been planning on doing it after her treatment. The hammerhead shark flopped around with excitement. I sighed and sent a quick message to Mordecai.

Jamal did another excited hop, causing Dong Quixote and Holger the were-castor to jump out of the way. "Oh yes, this excitement level I have is something else. Miss Katia says she will make Jamal's new hoppers soon. Mayhaps when Jamal gets back from the fighting? I must admit, it is giving me untold levels of energy." He did yet another barrel roll, sending rocks flying.

"Dong, Holger, ride with me. Donut, ride Mongo. Everyone else, grab a transport. We have about ten miles to go, and we gotta get there fast." I patted the large, quivering shark on the head. "Jamal. Sorry, buddy. You're staying here. Katia is busy, but Rosetta and Mordecai will help you get your new harness. We're going to strap something onto you, but we don't have it yet. We're going to the trenches right now, and they're not really designed for you. Stay here with the rest of the defenders in case the bad guys get through. Listen to Tipid. He's in charge of defending the FUPA."

"What?" Jamal asked.

"We need you for the last stand," Donut said. "I'm quite jealous, honestly. I don't think anyone other than you can do it."

The shark just looked at the cat. "Jamal feels as if you're trying to reverse psychologicalize him. It will not work. Jamal is much too

quick-witted for such tricks. I was once one of the most feared warriors of all the seas."

"Well, I tried," Donut said as she jumped onto Mongo's back.

The three cretins also grumbled unhappily. They were too heavy for the troop transports, which were basically flatbed trucks. We'd been planning on making some for the larger troops, but it was one of several things that hadn't happened yet.

"You three. You're gonna have to walk. Or if you want, you can ask Mordecai and he'll help you build a heavy duty transport really fast. But I know materials are in short supply, so it might not happen right now."

"It's okay, Sledgie," Donut added. "We'll make sure you can fight with us later if you miss it. The stupid rules say I can't use any teleport spells, either, so I can't even use *Puddle Jumper* right now." The cretin grumbled again. The fourth cretin—Clay-Ton—was currently at the northern front with Chris. The cretin and the lava rock crawler had formed a strange friendship since we'd assigned Clay-Ton to be Chris's bodyguard on the Hunting Grounds. The two would just sit next to each other and occasionally grunt at one another. And now they were with Florin in the northern trenches.

"Carl," Donut said. "Your jacket is glowing again! Goodness, that patch is disgusting."

"I know," I said. "I need to keep it turned on for just a little longer. We need the power."

"Mordecai said not to keep it turned on for long."

"I'm fine," I said, ignoring the pang of pain that jolted across my midsection. Or the distant ringing in my ears. The rushing noise just below the surface.

"Wait, wait, we're coming! We're coming!" came a small voice. We all turned to see three kids rushing out to greet us. All were wearing metal skull caps and were dragging training spears from inside the guild. It was Randy and Todd, the orphaned ursine bear cubs, and the speaker was a tiny, dwarf-like creature. Clint.

Once upon a time, Clint had been a creature called a chee, living on the dungeon's sixth floor. According to the story, Scolopendra's nine-tier attack had turned his entire kindergarten class into a group

of shifters called were-castors, which were really just beavers. They spent the next few hundred years growing up, becoming warriors, fighting against the high elves and the Naiad Confederacy. Clint, along with their caretaker, Miss Nadine, had died on the sixth floor. Edgar the tortoise had turned them into tattoos upon Signet. But when they'd turned to tattoos, they'd reverted to their forms from before the nine-tier attack. And when Signet died, both Miss Nadine and Clint had become flesh golems. So now Miss Nadine was a young chee woman, and Clint was a little, kindergarten-aged kid. They'd all come down to this floor with the elf castle.

Holger, one of the other were-castors, had also come down with the elf castle, but he remained an adult. The hairy, mulleted dwarf shifter grunted at the child version of his best friend.

"Clint," Holger said, coming out of the chariot and going to a knee. "You know you have to stay inside where it's safe. Miss Nadine is probably looking all over for you."

"But Miss Nadine is being mean to me," Clint said. "She says we're not allowed to play with Tina until we learn to not play rough. She says Randy and Todd should stay away from her because she killed their dad, but she's different now and Tina's mom says she's apologized anyway. And Bonnie and the changelings don't let us play with them, either. I wanna show Miss Nadine and the changelings we're tough. We can help you fight the bad guys. That'll show them."

"We've been practicing," Randy the ursine said.

"We're going to bathe in apostate blood," Todd added, waving his dulled spear. He ended up smacking Jamal with it, who yelped in surprise. "Sorry, Jamal."

I only half listened to this as I quickly scrolled through more messages. Splash Zone took control of one of the transports and drove it over as the others started piling in. I pulled out the six-pack missile launcher and attempted to affix it to the chariot, but I received an error.

You have used up your allotted Armor options. Vehicle upgrade not allowed.

I cursed. As good as this warlord system was for communication and organization, it really limited us in other aspects.

"You gotta grow up a little more," Holger was saying, chuckling. "All three of you are still just cubs. You're gonna get hurt. Clint, you already died once. You're not going to get another chance after this."

"Edgar says I might never grow up because I'm a flesh golem now," Clint said, stamping his little feet. His skull cap fell cockeyed and hit the ground with a thud.

Holger smiled down at the angry child. "There are worse fates, believe me." He patted him on the head. "No chance of going bald if you stay young. Now, all of you, help Jamal back to the base. And check on the other golems. And make sure Miss Nadine knows you're safe. You know how worried she gets."

"Okay," Clint said, dejected. "Come on, guys. Come on, Jamal."

"The gods frown upon your blasphemy," Todd added before the group of them turned back.

"That bear kid freaks me out," Holger said, sliding next to me in the chariot.

"We all ready?" I asked, looking across the eclectic group. Another pang of pain ripped across my stomach.

You are now suffering from Soul Poisoning. Activate the *Daughter's Kiss* skill to disperse the effect.

Behind me, Dong Quixote slipped into the empty gunner's seat. He had his "flail" across his lap. He held the crusty nickel sock up and laughed quietly, whispering something about long-term investments and short-term gains.

I answered myself with a sigh. "As ready as we'll ever be."

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The Dream's artillery started pounding our defenses at the southern front just as we arrived.

We didn't have any physical barriers over the trenches, but we did have literally thousands of mages scattered along the front, all with specialization in protection spells. A constant, unending rumble of explosions and smoke filled the area as we approached. The normally sunny plains had taken on an apocalyptic feel.

Both sides had constant fog spells and protection spells going. The list of active protections for our side was literally three pages long. So far, other than the artillery and occasional bursts of sniper fire, there hadn't yet been a raid on our position that would fully test the defenses.

I knew from Florin that the northern front was another story. They were pushing back wave after wave of mercenaries. So far, the enemy was utilizing their meager supply of unenthusiastic dungeon-born NPCs to test our defenses. It had quickly evolved into a stalemate, a war of non-offensive spells and counterspells.

We had a clear advantage of mages and knowledge, but they had the numbers, and for the next week, they had vastly superior firepower.

Still, despite the quick impasse, I had received reports of casualties on both fronts.

On the southern front, there was someone on the enemy side who'd started spamming a *Fill Hole* spell from afar that suffocated a group of veterans before we'd enacted countermeasures. An invisible scout—someone from Empress D'Nadia's Prism—had gotten in behind our position and found one of the escape tunnels and had unleashed a powerful *Instant River* scroll that had caused a ton of havoc. A few soldiers had leaped out of the trench as the water poured in, and they were immediately picked off by snipers from the enemy side, despite the heavy fog.

That scout, along with a total of six others, had all been captured or killed so far thanks to our efforts. The scout from the Prism had not been a mercenary, but a Saccathian prince of some kind, one of D'Nadia's actual relatives. Pieces of the saboteur littered the battlefield now, after he stepped upon a simple landmine trap when he attempted to flee.

After that, I sent out orders. If we captured an enemy, and we could keep them alive but unconscious, then we would do so. The NPCs and the mercenaries born outside the dungeon were to be separated. There were spells that could turn the NPCs to our side.

The mercenaries had another purpose.

If any gave us trouble, or if it wasn't feasible or safe to keep them, then my orders were clear. Kill them. Loot them using the safe-looting protocols. Keep the body. Report it to one's superior officer, who would pass the information back to base where a group of those who preferred to stay out of the direct fighting were keeping track of the big picture for us.

I blinked at the wide, glittering expanse of traps twinkling through the fog of the no-man's land between our position and the naga fortifications. Most of our traps remained intact and hidden, thanks to Justice Light's protection spell. It was something he'd figured out a long time ago but it had never grown into practice because it was thought it only worked on alarm traps. Justice along with a few of the other veterans had dozens of tricks up their sleeves—or wings—when it came to safeguarding and hiding traps.

All the enemy traps, as far as I could see, were already gone, though I knew that they would, indeed, have multiple alarm traps

that were protected and well hidden.

The No Man's Land between the two positions was only about 250 meters from trench to trench. The enemy corridor into our territory was only about a kilometer wide. Using some of our literal thousands of *Build Trench* scrolls collected from the previous floor, we'd created a labyrinthian trench system, filled with traps and soldiers, fortified bunkers, hospitals, fall-back positions, and more. We'd managed, in just over a day, to build defenses to rival anything that had ever been created in this insipid game.

Still, the artillery fire was never-ending. The rocks landed like hail on our positions. The no-man's land, which had been a flat, grassy, flower-covered plain, now looked like the remnants of a building collapse.

Or at least that's what Tran said, from his position in the trench. By the time we arrived, we couldn't see anything through the rolling fog. Both sides were keeping a constant litany of obfuscation spells and illusions going. Counterspells and counter-counterspells caused the no man's land to sometimes roil like the sea.

A quick check of the warlord menu told me we still had a good ten-fifteen minutes before the rest of the reinforcements would arrive. The entirety of the 106th Bloody Leeches were coming to shore up the existing defenders. The 102nd Bulwark, who'd built this outpost, consisted mainly of defense-oriented mages and fortification-building engineers. They had a healthy smattering of hand-to-hand experts, but not nearly enough. The 106th consisted of warriors, trap mechanics, and thieves.

Mongo coughed as we cautiously approached one of the trench entrances a few hundred meters back from the front line. Donut shouted angrily up at me, but I couldn't hear. She moved to chat.

Donut: CARL, THIS IS UNACCEPTABLE. HOW ARE WE SUPPOSED TO FIGHT IN THESE CONDITIONS? THIS REMINDS ME OF THE DUST STORMS FROM THE BUBBLE LEVEL.

She yelped as a ball of flame went up ahead and to our right. The entire ground shook.

Armor Unit number three, "Spider Tank S4" has been destroyed by enemy fire.

Damnit. Something had broken the shield there, and they'd scored a direct hit on one of our spider tanks. I sent out a quick order, but I saw Tran was already on it. We could only deploy ten of these at a time, but we had almost 50 of the simple machines ready to go. They had to remain in pieces until they were needed. Each one took about five minutes of work to replace.

I jumped from the royal chariot, pulled it into my inventory, and I told the platoon to stay close.

Entering the Princess Posse forward position. This position is currently defended by the 102nd Bulwark Battalion. Battalion is currently at 98% strength.

The first step was to find Tran and help him organize the integration with the 106th Bloody Leeches, which was currently led by a former crawler I didn't know named Boomer. I sent both Tran and Colonel Boomer a message, and I told them to meet me at the planning room, a fortified bunker. Both said they were on their way.

I pushed forward, coughing as black smoke billowed. The back of my head continued to tingle with an odd sensation. We reached the forward-most trench, about twelve feet deep with scaffolding at the front so soldiers could easily engage the enemy. A group of black, magical screens dotted the positions. These were all the work of a single mage, a fabricator. They were basically magical periscopes. The same mage was now at the northern front, so if the periscopes broke or were damaged, we'd have to peer over the edge of the trenches the old-fashioned way.

Red-tinged mud filled the bottom of the trench, and it smelled of smoke and earth and sweat. *Jesus*, I thought. *It's just started, too.* Donut jumped to my shoulder, complaining about how dirty everything was. I freed Rend, who was now as tall as my knee. He giggled menacingly as he and Mongo splashed in the slop.

Mages and soldiers with spears and bows and crossbows were spread evenly along the lines, all of them already sweating and exhausted from constantly holding back the giant rocks and poison

and flames getting spewed in our direction. All were hunched over, peering into the magical periscopes.

That does not look comfortable, I thought. I put in a mental note to have the positioning adjusted. These guys would have to stand like this for hours on end.

The soldiers on the other side all had pulse rifles and tech shields that could stop anything non-magical. If they got through our shields and into these trenches, we were screwed. A week. We had to hold them back for a week. It seemed impossible. But we had a plan. One to hopefully even the odds a little on the southern front.

Carl: Louis. Elle. Update.

Louis: I'm in. Tell me when to go, and I can be there in about ten minutes. Had to block Samantha from the chat again. She's really mad at me right now.

Elle: A bunch of those robot Reaver guys just pulled up in several trucks and are moving to the enemy trenches. It's getting hard to see through all this damn smoke. I lost track of the invisible Madness guys. There's over 100 of them.

Carl: Okay. Standby. Should be soon. They probably have something planned, too, and we should go before they blow their wad, but we need to wait for the 106th to get everyone in position. Another ten minutes.

Elle: 10-4 boss.

"Guys, what is that?" someone asked as we moved toward the headquarters. Murmuring rose up and down the line. "Is it another illusion?"

"I don't think so," someone else said.

I paused and pulled myself up the scaffolding and peered through one of the free periscopes. They looked like little porthole windows, but I knew they were really just screens. Donut removed her sunglasses and lowered her face to also look, her little nose twitching as she examined the display.

"The resolution on this is just amazing," Donut said. "It's much better than that awful, stolen television you had in the living room."

"It wasn't stolen," I said, trying to figure out what I was looking at. I didn't see anything except smoke. "What are you talking about?"

"You got it from a pawn shop. That means it was stolen. Everybody knows everything you buy from a pawn shop is stolen."

The soldier to my left, a level-59 human **Blood Swimmer** crawler named Ryan Smogo looked up. "They stopped their artillery."

I was about to respond, but a group of orange dots suddenly appeared on my minimap, moving in fast from the enemy side.

Pets. A lot of them. There had to be 1,000 of them.

"Oh, shit," I said as shouts started to rise up and down the line. They were big, and they were coming in fast.

They just kept coming and coming. Only some of the traps were designed to go off if they hit pets, and these started detonating one after another, the explosions like muffled fireworks in the fog.

"Carl," Donut called. "They're big and round! Do you think they're tummy achers?"

"They're moving way too fast for that. And they're too big." I knew Rend had the ability to roll across the battlefield, but I had the impression that the skill was only good for short distances.

"Hang on," an elf mage called from my right. This was one of the veterans. He strained as he cast a spell. A portion of the swirling smoke dissipated, revealing a horde of the creatures. One of them zoomed big, like his spell included a spyglass effect for everyone to see, almost like a boss battle notification.

Dumplin'. Juiced Rot Sticker Behemoth. Level 40.

Warning: This Pet is Suffering from the Gurgles.

Warning: This Pet is Suffering from Insanity.

Warning: This Pet is Suffering from Not Just Rabies, but Eat-Your-Face-Off-Rabies.

Warning: This Pet has been fed a Truck Stop Boner Pill.

This is a pet of Cybernetician Yeller of the Reavers.

Do you remember the rot stickers? Little ravioli things? These tiny bastards killed a whole bunch of you squishy humans back on the first and second floor. They run up to you, stick themselves to your body, and bam! One or two

ain't too bad, but they travel in swarms. They knock you down and then blow your head off.

We have all sorts of variations of these things in the dungeon because they're so fun to use. And they're terrifying, too, which is always an added bonus.

These little monsters, believe it or not, are actual creatures from some distant, probably-horrifying planet. The exploding ones are all male, and when they detonate, what they're really doing is spreading their seed into one of the goliath, mammal-like creatures of their home world, who'd been previously implanted subcutaneously with the female eggs during the spring. The explosions rarely kill the mammals. They most certainly kill the rot stickers, though, which is why most of these guys are so small. The males tend to live very short lives.

But did you know the boy versions can be pets, too? They're actually quite loving and faithful if given the opportunity to grow up. If you capture one before it's big enough to go kaboom, you can give it medicine to make it lose all desire to spread its seed. They get bigger and bigger and even have a small amount of intelligence. When they get older, they have the same attack as the females, an acid spray, which allows them to hunt and fight alongside you without having to worry about them blowing your kneecap off.

What the Reavers do is grab a bunch of babies and dole them out to their warriors. The warriors rub their tummies, play fetch with them, and help them level up until they reach level 40 or so. The rot stickers grow to love and trust their masters. Then the Reavers lock them in cages, inject them with size-altering steroids, inflict them with a bunch of really nasty, contagious debuffs, and unleash them on enemy positions as biological seeking missiles.

There's an irony there if you look hard enough.

Oh, and they also stop giving them the medicine that keeps them from blowing up. A level 40 Rot Sticker

Behemoth packs the same punch as a stick of goblin dynamite.

"Oh my god, Carl," Donut shouted from my shoulder. "Did you read that? And I thought the orcs were terrible people!"

"Shields!" I cried as I prepared my *Protective Shell* and activated my tech-based shield. There were about five of the things right in front of our position, rocketing toward us like enormous bowling balls. Each one was the size of a goddamned Mini Cooper.

"Don't let any of them get on you when they explode!" Smogo called. "They have the Gurgles!"

I prepared to use my *Daughter's Kiss*, but I didn't want to use it here. Not in the trench. It was too dangerous for everyone around me. I was just glad it allowed me to use it at all since it was technically a self-buff skill and not offensive magic.

More cries for shields rose up and down the trench as the giant, exploding monsters approached. Arrows and bolts and spears shot out at the oncoming line of explosive monsters, all ineffective.

"Head's up," I called as I pulled a stick of full-strength hobgoblin dynamite, and I tossed it over the edge of the trench like a grenade. We all ducked, covering our ears.

The explosion went off, rocking the ground. A few experience notifications flew by, including a new achievement. I turned back to the periscope, and they were still coming, but we'd cleared out the ones immediately in front of us. I prepared a second stick of dynamite.

"I'm feeling very useless all of a sudden, Carl," Donut cried. "None of my spells work! Wait, *Love Vampire* works!" A moment later, she scoffed. "It doesn't work on pets!"

Far to my left, a group of mages cast a spell, and a spine of dirt rose in the air, like a physical wall between us and the onrushing attackers. The vertical wall rose ten feet into the air, crackling loudly as it built itself, blocking our view of the oncoming pets.

They hit the earthworks a moment later, some of them going up and shooting up into the air like they were launched from a ramp. The rest crashed to a stop against the dirt. A few here and there detonated, showering rock and gore.

We all looked up at the scattering of giant ravioli things that had launched themselves into the air. Only a few appeared as if they would land on our side.

One of them, far down the line, exploded in mid-air, showering gore over the trench. The rest crashed back down, disappearing back again behind the wall as thorns as thick as my arm sprouted from the dirt, encompassing them.

"I need my moles!" an amplified voice yelled. "Blow the line!" I turned to see Tran skitter down the trench, his voice supernaturally amplified. The same words appeared on my interface, coming across the top of my HUD, which was a notification style I'd never seen before.

A group of gnome-sized crawlers and veterans disappeared down a group of holes built at regular intervals along the trench wall. One of them was a shirtless gnome with a massive, poorly-drawn mole tattoo on his chest. It read "The Frothing Tunnel Moles" on it. I knew the Moles were one of our SOFs. Special Operations Forces. We only had a few of these guys here. The rest were in Shanty Town with Britney or back at the base with Justice Light.

A short moment passed—shorter than I was expecting—and the dwarves and gnomes started popping back out from the tunnels in the ground, reappearing in the trenches.

"Fire in the hole," someone shouted, and we all hit the deck again as the entire line of dirt in front of us exploded. I was physically lifted from the scaffolding, and people called out all around as we crashed heavily down. Donut cried out in pain as the human next to us landed on her tail. Below, Mongo squawked in fear and Rend started running in panicked circles as the sky went completely black. Showers of dirt fell over us, but stopped at an invisible barrier. Soon we were completely entombed by the dirt and guts, hovering just above us. All around, mages shouted and cursed as they attempted to keep the gore-infected dirt from falling all over us.

Back in place. Back in place. Defend the line. The notification appeared across my interface, blinking. I pulled myself up, but my periscope was cracked and no longer working. Still, it

appeared nothing else was coming for the moment. At least, there was nothing on my interface.

A moment later, the artillery resumed. I closed out the Daughter's Kiss activation, and a pang of pain ripped across my ribs.

"Damn," Tran said, scurrying up to me, looking worriedly up at the dirt above us. A rock crashed over our head, and a low shield warning appeared before it was shored up. Tran's metallic helmet disappeared into his inventory. Sections of dirt started to glow as mages cleaned it. "We were hoping to save those buried explosives for later. We just set that up like two hours ago."

I examined Tran. Katia had finished building his two-part "wheelchair," and it was similar to what she was going to next build for Jamal. She'd taken a recipe from my automaton manual and had repurposed it.

He had a small, mechanical crab body that looked like something out of a nightmare. When he was just walking around like normal, that's all there was. A mechanical crab body that he could use to climb on walls. He could run, for short distances, at incredible speed.

But then there was the battle armor version, which he wore now. It was as if Odette and Iron Man had a baby. A secondary exo-skeleton covered the crab legs, crawling up his body, encasing him in full-plate armor and a helmet, reminiscent of poor Paz from the previous floor. Tran was so encased in metal that he couldn't carry any ranged weapons, lest the system label him as "armor."

I started to say something, but a commotion down the line caused us all to turn.

"Gurglers in the trenches!" an elf shouted as she rushed through the center of the trench. She rushed toward us, pursued by a group of about ten veterans who were all screaming toward us, blood spewing from their mouths and eyes. Someone cast a spell, filling that section with dirt. The wall appeared right in front of us. Another with a Tserendolgor-like flamethrower pushed me aside and started baking the filled-in section of dirt. A dozen arms and legs and claws emerged as the infected started pulling themselves free, only to be burned and melted by the powerful weapon.

Fallen soldier notifications blinked across my interface. The woman with the flamethrower was a crawler I recognized. A level 56 **Crisper** named **Kristen Cronin**. She sat heavily on the ground and started to sob. The whole thing had happened in a matter of seconds.

"This is bullshit," Cronin said. "The Gurgles is a magical attack."

"They infected their pets before the magic ban, so it's an exploit," another voice answered. "It's a little iffy, but they've allowed it in the past. Your mages need to do a better job at keeping such infections from sneaking in." I blinked, realizing this was actually Baroness Victory, hands on her hips, examining the still-glowing dirt as she moved next to me and Tran. She must have teleported herself into the battle.

"What in the goodness are the Gurgles?" Donut asked. After making sure Mongo was okay, she'd returned to my shoulder. Rend leaned up against my legs, making a popping noise with his mouth. Despite being scared earlier, he didn't seem afraid anymore. I patted him on his uneven head, and he let out an unsettling purr.

"A really nasty, contagious, non-curable debuff," Victory said. "The factions had agreed many years ago to never use it again because it's so insidious. It's what caused the insanity and the rabies debuff. I'm not familiar with that fourth debuff. The truck stop pill. I suspect that it was what made them so big."

"I think we're clear of enemies for now," someone on the line said. "Gods, do you think they got more of those things?"

I cracked my neck and looked at Tran. "I don't know about the rot stickers, but they have 100 invisible Madness mercenaries and several armored vehicles. Let's not wait to find out. Now it's our turn."

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"The leeches are in place," Colonel Boomer said, chomping on his unlit cigar. "Ready to pluck some cheese sticks." I examined the man. He was a grizzled, old elf that had survived one of the earliest seasons of *Dungeon Crawler World*. He looked like someone had taken the world's fattest bulldog, pickled it for about 5,000 years, gave him elf ears, and then shoved a cigar in his mouth. I would never have guessed he was an elf. He looked as solid as he was old. He had a voice to match.

Boomer. Elven Legate. Level 62.

Colonel in the Princess Posse.

This is a subordinate.

His class of "Legate" led to some confusion, but it allowed him to buff a large number of soldiers at once. According to Tipid, the old man had been an outspoken critic of the crawl for a very long time. He was a tenner, someone who'd bowed out on the 10th floor, and he'd survived as a merchant on the sixth floor for many, many seasons before finally escaping. He'd been banned from Crawl Con years ago after threatening to "Fist fuck" an orcish show runner to death during a panel. Porthus had publicly distanced himself from the militant, former crawler after that, but apparently, they'd been in close contact the whole time.

There was an active warrant for the old man's arrest after a deadly waystation brawl a few cycles back. A brawl that had started

after an argument about the crawl. He'd killed someone and had disappeared into the ether. The man had become a legend after that.

Tipid had immediately put the old elf in charge of the 106th Bloody Leeches, and the soldiers all loved him. His weapons were a pair of war gauntlets similar to my Grull gauntlet.

Donut was oddly fascinated by the old elf. She couldn't stop staring at him, and I had a running commentary in my chat from her.

Donut: HE LOOKS LIKE HE MIGHT STINK, BUT HE ACTUALLY SMELLS QUITE NICE. LIKE CEDAR MIXED WITH ACORNS. YOU KNOW, LIKE HOW A GIFTSHOP IN AN EXPENSIVE MOUNTAIN RETREAT WOULD SMELL. DO YOU THINK HE'D BE MAD IF I CALLED HIM 'POPS?' HE LOOKS LIKE SOMEONE WHO'D BE CALLED POPS. BOOMER DOESN'T FIT HIM AT ALL. BOOMER SOUNDS LIKE THE NAME OF SOMEONE WHO PEAKED IN HIGH SCHOOL AND NOW SELLS ALUMINUM SIDING. DO YOU THINK HE EVER LIGHTS THAT DISGUSTING CIGAR? BECAUSE THAT WOULD JUST RUIN IT.

She was nervous about the upcoming assault, and I just let her go on and on as we looked over the map.

The entrance corridor in and out of the Naga territory was relatively flat, but it gave way to a few small hills on the Naga side, just south of their own trenches.

"Their trenches are here," Tran said, drawing the line on the map. He pointed to the hills. "According to Elle, the Dream's artillery batteries are here. They have approximately 40 of the big trebuchets set up and dozens of the small ones. The big ones can hit anywhere in our territory and are what have been pounding our base. The smaller, more mobile trebuchets have less range but are still deadly and are what have been hitting our trenches." To accent the point, we all ducked as a rock smashed just above our position, the sound like a car crash. The pounding was constant, designed to exhaust our mages. "I still don't understand why they can have these things, but we can't."

Colonel Boomer leaned over the map, examining all the marks. Two of the trebuchet positions were circled with "Anti-air?" written on them.

"Most of those pasty cousin fuckers from the Dream are cowards," Boomer said. "At least the ones with the bombardier class. Those are the guys who hump a desk when they're not in here playing genocide. They'll run if we get close to their chuckers. They'll have 'em surrounded with traps, too, so we gotta be careful. Your spy says they have cavalry in the area? *Those* are the cheese sticks you really gotta look out for, especially now the Epitome household guard is in here with us. The Epitome family ain't stupid. Their security forces are all veterans of non-dungeon conflicts and are tough as gristle. Dunno if they'd toss 'em to the front this early. Epitome Tagg likes to fight near the front, but he usually doesn't have his honor guard in here with him. He'll be with them, and they won't be hiding. Speaking of cheese sticks. He wears the most ridiculous helmet you've ever seen."

"Really?" Donut asked.

Tran nodded. "They do have mounts. There's 50 of the zebras, but it looks like the riders are all mercenaries, not the Dream household guard." He tapped a hill further south of the artillery on the map. "Elle thinks they're in reserve in case we break through. Not too many of the actual elves in the area that we've seen. Just a few running the larger trebuchets. And they have twenty tanks sitting idle here." He patted another spot on the map.

"They haven't moved since they were uncovered," I said. "I wonder if they're decoys. Elle said she would take a closer look, but I told her to stay back."

These tanks, if they were real, *were* considered armor, and they were all WWI style troop carriers with various turrets. I suspected if they were real, they were the same as our Spider Tanks. Temporary pieces of crap that would serve a purpose until they were either disassembled or blown to hell.

"And finally," Tran said, "Elle watched at least 100 of the Madness go invisible and disappear, so they could be anywhere. Likely sneaking in right now."

"They all in robes and masks?" Colonel Boomer asked.

Tran nodded. "That's what she says."

"There probably ain't that many of the real Viceroys in here," Boomer replied, chewing on his cigar. "Probably a bunch o' the regular cheese sticks wearing the robes. Still, we need to find those creepy fucks. The ones that go invisible and sneak in are called the Monkeywrenchers. A few seasons back, a group of 20 of them single-handedly took the Dreadnaught and Naga castles during the first few hours. The Madness as a whole looks like a particularly strong contender this season." The old elf turned his head and spit on the floor. Rend waddled over and started licking at the spittle before I could admonish him.

I had no idea where the term "Cheese Stick" had originated, but it had spread through the army like wildfire. It's what everyone called the enemy soldiers. I'd seen a few "Fuck the Cheese Sticks" tattoos already.

Boomer ran a finger along the line of enemy trenches on the map. "Hmmm. These positions are less protected than what they got in the north. Are we sure they're still set up like this?"

"Elle eyeballed them just a few minutes ago," I said.

Both sides had fallback trenches. Ours were all connected with tunnels we could collapse on demand. The other side had a set of three trenches, each one about 100 meters behind the previous. If there were tunnels between the three trench systems, we weren't aware of them, and in the past, they'd never bothered with tunnels. If they had to retreat, they'd have to pop up and withdraw over open land before they could jump into their fallback positions.

"Do we have a good idea of who's in the trenches?" Boomer asked.

Tran nodded. "Enemy fallback position three looks to be their officers and hospital corp. Trench two is mostly empty, but it has a few guards. Everyone else is in the first trench system, which isn't anything like ours. It's just a straight line with a few bunks. It's manned solely by NPCs and mercenaries as far as we can tell. No inner circle officers from any of the teams. Most of the banners are

Prism. It might be *all* of the Prism based on the numbers. I was expecting more Naga infantry, but I see only one of their standards."

Empress D'Nadia's territory was just south of the Nagas, in spot number five, so it made sense she'd commit most of her force between us and her headquarters. But that also made me worry about where the rest of the Nagas were hiding.

Tran continued. "A smaller portion of Madness troops are also present, but the Madness mercs are really from the Lemig team they just took over. No orcs. No Operatics. Only a few Reavers, and those were the ones with the pets."

I knew on the northern front, they faced a much larger force. This map in front of us now focused on the southern campaign, but it still had the northern line on it. I tapped it. "Florin and Katia say they're mostly fighting the orcs, the blobs, the Dream regulars, and more of the Madness along with a smattering of the others. So it looks like we have accounted for most everybody's forces except the Reavers and the Naga team."

"The Reavers are the ones with the flying machines usually, so we gotta be on the lookout," Boomer said, pointing up in the air with his cigar. "Speaking of, where's our boy?"

"He's here," I said, pointing at the woods. "He's on the ground now, hidden in the middle of nowhere. He's not gonna remain hidden for long, which is why we gotta get moving. We ready?"

"My boys and girls all had their breakfast and are ready to tear it up," Boomer said. "We're just waiting for the 'go' order." He eyed Tran. "Your magic slingers ready for this?"

Tran nodded. His metallic crab legs moved up and down, telegraphing how nervous Tran was.

"And the NPC team?" Boomer asked.

Carl: Britney. We're almost ready. Are your guys in place?

Britney: They're ready. Waiting on you.

I wasn't exactly sure when and how this happened, but Britney had pretty much become our main liaison with the NPCs. Originally, we were hoping to use one of their massive diggers for this, but the geography of the Naga territory made this difficult. So instead, we were using just a pair of changeling spies. We couldn't talk to them

directly, so instead everything had to filter from me to Britney to either Juice Box or Arief of the Semeru.

I slid my finger across the map. From the border to the Blood Sultanate castle, it was just about eight miles. According to Juice Box, the Nagas had deliberately built their castle on rocky ground to stop anyone from tunneling in from below. Still, their headquarters was built strangely close to the edge of Shanty Town, unlike everyone else who'd placed themselves equidistant from all borders. On my shoulder, Donut had gone stiff. She, too, was looking at the Naga headquarters. I reached up and gave her a pat.

Historically, despite their protections, this Naga castle was almost always the first to fall. But every single time, by the time the invaders reached the Whore's inner sanctum, the leader of the naga would be gone. The team would still lose because they'd lose their throne room, but the naga leader had never been captured or assassinated. Not once since the Sultana took over. She'd disappear and reappear at the end, laughing and joking with everyone else, having stayed hidden the whole time. Nobody knew the secret as to where she'd hide herself during the majority of the conflict or what she was doing.

If we wanted to get to her, we'd have to be *very* careful with how we did it.

"Let's do this," I said.

Boomer produced a lighter and lit his cigar. He took a long, single puff that seemed to go on forever. He let out a long stream of smoke that filled the room.

"Fuck yeah," he said.

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<Note added by Crawler Ossie, 18th Edition>

If you want to create fright amongst an otherwise stalwart enemy, confusion is always the key.

We stood in the trench, Dong Quixote to my left, Holger to my right, and Donut on my shoulder as mages heaped protection spells on our group. Across from us, the spine of dirt that had protected us from the rot sticker attack was slowly, slowly getting eroded away by the enemy artillery. We could have the mages fix it, but we needed it worn down for our assault, and we needed it kept down should we have to retreat.

You have been Titivated. Projectiles do less damage.

I had never had this many stacked shields on me at once. I had Rend in his carrier because he was too slow. Mongo was out and tense, ready.

Imani dropped into the trench, landing next to me. Donut, still on my shoulder, gave her a headbutt as Mongo let out a screech.

"I didn't think you'd get here in time," I said as she spread her ethereal wings out. The wisps filled the tight channel, glowing as a new line of buffs added themselves to the pile. All around me,

people sighed with pleasure at the warm feeling of calm that washed over us. I felt the rush of power.

"Now that's something," Holger said. He was in beaver form. "Ain't never felt a buff like that before."

"I was buffing people down the line," Imani said. "And before that, I was helping with the trebuchet. I buffed the guy aiming the thing. He's ready to go."

We only had one trebuchet of our own. It was one of the smaller ones. Donut and I had looted it on the sixth floor from some Dream elves. The original plan was to have more of the weapons, but the confusion about whether we'd be allowed to even build these mixed with the early end to the ceasefire had led to us only having one. The weapon was loaded with about 50 contraptions called Dazzlers, and they had a pile of almost 200 of them sitting nearby. They were basically a combination of an alarm and a spotlight trap. They would only shine toward the eyes of the closest enemy soldier, strobing powerful beams of multi-colored light right into their faces. And they'd all play the same song at the same time. It was one of the few types of trap modules Victory would allow us to load into the trebuchets.

Speaking of the adjutant, she cracked into existence just behind us, like I'd summoned her with my thoughts. I was finally getting used to the orc's constant comings and goings.

But this time, she wasn't alone. Mongo squawked in surprise and would've lunged if a quick shout from Donut hadn't stopped him. It was Drick.

The sight of the Dream elf adjutant for the NPC team suddenly appearing in our trenches caused a few moments of bedlam until I shouted everyone down.

The wormhead held up a hand in greeting, smiling sheepishly at the chaos his appearance caused. "Sorry, folks. Since Team Retribution is taking a small part in this assault, I've decided to come watch from the best position."

"You won't see anything from here," I said.

The elf shrugged. "If you prefer I zap to their side and warn them something is about to happen, I can do that instead."

I knew he could do just that if he wanted. Victory had told me that adjutants could go invisible if they needed to observe something where their presence would give away that their team was up to something. I was going to say something sarcastic, but I dropped it. Louis sent in a message, and I turned back to the periscope screen.

Louis: We see the target. Lowering for the bombing run now.

Carl: Not too low. In and out. Get into the fog as soon as you drop.

Elle: They don't see him yet. Man, I wish I could cast my *Graupel* spell.

Carl: You're up, Elle. And for god's sake, keep moving.

Elle: I have the first anti-air gun targeted. I hope this missile launcher of yours works as advertised, Carl. Firing the moment Louis drops.

Carl: Britney, send 'em in.

Britney: The NPC team is on their way.

I patted Donut. "You ready?"

Donut nodded. Imani reached over and cast a spell. A bubble appeared around Donut's head, similar to a Desperado Club privacy shell. Imani had it as a spell, but Mordecai had also mass-made a potion that did the same thing. The potion was simple enough that he'd managed to make gallons of the stuff with his cauldron attachment at his upgraded table. Still, there wasn't enough for all of us, so those of us with regular ears had to use old-fashioned earplugs that were enchanted with a buff ominously called **This Thingy Works Slightly Better Than It's Supposed To.**

Imani reached down and patted Mongo, and she cast the spell on the dinosaur as well.

The spell was called *Total Ear Protection*.

"Do it," I said.

"WHAT?" Donut asked, shouting. "OH, OKAY."

Warlord Donut: OKAY EVERYONE. AS SOON AS THAT FIRST BOMB DROPS, TAKE THE EAR POTION OR PUT IN YOUR EARPLUGS. WE MOVE TO CHAT. DRINK THE *INVISIBILITY* POTION WHEN YOU CAN, THE MAGES WILL

CAST *OBFUSCATION* ON US, AND WE GO UP AND OVER. DON'T STOP RUNNING UNTIL YOU'RE IN THEIR TRENCHES. THE SOLDIER WHO BRINGS ME THE MOST DEAD CHEESE STICKS GETS A PRIZE. I BELIEVE IN ALL OF YOU.

"A prize?" I asked as I continued to peer through the periscope, waiting for the first explosion.

"WHAT?" Donut asked.

Carl: A prize?

"YES, CARL. SOME OF THE VETERANS WERE TELLING ME WHEN THEY WERE CONSCRIPTED DURING THE LAST TIME THEY FOUGHT IN FACTION WARS, THE OFFICERS WERE ALWAYS THREATENING THEM WHEN THEY GAVE ORDERS. WELL, MY ARMY IS GOING TO BE DIFFERENT. POSITIVE REINFORCEMENT IS A VERY GOOD MOTIVATOR. IT WORKED WITH MONGO, AND IT'S GOING TO WORK HERE."

"Yeah, we'll see if you still think that in a few hours," I muttered as I continued to watch. *Come on, Louis.*

I couldn't see anything. Roiling clouds filled No Man's Land, hugging the ground. And above, a low ceiling of black clouds hung heavy over our heads, giving the impression that we were getting crushed from above. Night was falling, and it would soon be dark, which was good for our plans. Still, the clouds occasionally gave way to rocks that whistled through the air as they landed around our positions. Only some of the rocks were explosive, or contained fog, or poison, or a hundred other things that weren't "offensive" magic or magic at all. A strange, ozone-like scent filled the air as it was filtered out by one of the hundreds of concurrent protection spells.

The plan had many parts, but each individual component was simple and straightforward. Most every soldier only had a single objective. The failure of one part did not mean the rest of the plan would fail.

I hoped.

The assault part of this plan had not come from me, but was one of many contingencies that Tipid and Rosetta had brought with them from the outside, which was part of the reason why we'd been able to put this together so smoothly. It was only the second part that I'd

planned out. Me, Donut, Katia, Imani, Elle, and Mordecai had put it together with some input from Baroness Victory. Katia wouldn't be actively participating since she was needed on the other front, and I found myself missing her dearly. I still hadn't had a chance to talk to her since we'd separated from the dreamworld.

The enemy was expecting us to defend and try to hold out for a full week because we would be much stronger once the offensive magic ban was lifted. Their plan, meanwhile, was to soften us up with their artillery and try to overwhelm us as quickly as they could. They would soon push in on us with their full might, probably from the north and south at the same time. If they could breach and get in now, they would easily sweep in to victory.

Bam! The first, distant explosion wasn't loud, but it was loud enough to crack across the battlefield, the concussion slapping me right in the chest.

The bombs were strong, but their main purpose wasn't to simply blow stuff up. The enemy trenches, while not as protected as ours, were still covered with layers of anti-explosive fortifications. The bombs Louis dropped were not targeting the enemy trenches. Instead, Louis was aiming the *Party Planner* in a straight line right in front of their position. The bombs would do three things. One, they'd leave a deep crater in the unprotected land just in front of their trenches; two, they'd shower dirt over the defenders, which their mages would have to clear off; and three, the bombs would clear any traps and protection enhancements set up right there in front of the enemy line.

I gave Donut a quick pat and then a thumbs up.

Warlord Donut: GO, GO, GO!

Multiple things happened at once.

"For the Posse!" a veteran to my left shouted. He downed an *Invisibility* potion as he launched himself up and over the trench.

"Fuck the cheese sticks" someone else yelled as they, too, propelled themselves onto No Man's Land before disappearing.

A second, then a third, then a fourth explosion walked its way across the enemy lines. I couldn't see the detonations through the fog, but I could hear them, and I could feel them in the ground.

At the same moment, Elle reported she'd hit the first anti-air battery with a missile, but there was a protection spell around it. Still, the device had fallen over and hopefully would be unable to fire for some time. She would now be moving to the second one.

Our one and only trebuchet fired its first of four salvos, spreading the Dazzlers in and around the middle section of Louis's craters.

The announcement came, louder than I was expecting. *Much* louder, even this far away. Justice Light's tips on enhancing these things really worked. And there were 50 of them so far. I slipped my earplugs in.

They barely helped.

Peaking at Number 3 on June 20, 2020 – Wait, really? Huh. – Anyway, Peaking at Number 3 on June 20, 2020, despite first coming out in 1992, It's "Killing in the Name."

The Rage Against the Machine Song echoed, powerfully loud, literally shaking the ground louder than the explosions.

Anyone within a few hundred meters of the things would experience immediate, painful hearing damage. Combined with the flashing lights, it wasn't going to be fun for anyone in those trenches.

Britney: Enemy spies are reporting that they have breached the second trench.

Louis: Holy shit that was scary. I got hit with a few spells, but the shields held. Circling around to the rendezvous.

All around, people screamed as they continued to pull themselves up and over the trenches. Flashing lights filled the dark as pulse rifles fired into our troops, mostly bouncing up and off various shields.

I downed the *Invisibility* potion just as Donut did the same. I smashed another *Invisibility* against Mongo's backside as Donut jumped onto Mongo's back. Despite the invisibility, she glittered with all the shields and protection spells. Thankfully, we had several illusionists with us who were also casting spells, making illusionary doubles of everyone, along with a few illusionary war machine tanks, to focus their fire.

Our squad was to wait a few moments before we went up and over.

Carl: You scared?

Donut: Of course I am, Carl. But I think I'm used to it now. It's more numb than anything. I think nowadays it hits me more when it's done than when it's happening.

A strange swell of sadness hit me. I wanted to pat her, but my own hand was trembling too much.

Carl: We're up. Stay next to me, and keep your shield up.

Donut, still astride Mongo, leapt up over the edge, followed by Imani.

I put my hand on the handhold built into the top part of the trench. I felt myself shouting, and I didn't even know what I was saying. I pulled myself up and over into No Man's Land, joining over two thousand members of the Princess Posse as we engaged our first head-on assault into enemy fire.

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Chaos.

I couldn't see more than two or three feet in front of me. The music blared, painfully loud despite the earplugs. Lights strobed everywhere, and even though none were pointed directly at me, it still made my stomach lurch. Donut and Mongo's dot was just to my right. I couldn't see them. Dong and Holger had veered off in the dark, combining with a group to our left.

It was like a dream, one where you ran and ran, but you didn't move.

I came to the remnants of the dirt spine from the rot sticker defense, and I scrambled over it. We had to watch out for the corpses, as they could still be dangerous.

Plink. Plink.

Each sound was a casualty notification for the current battle. Each notification was like a stab right in my chest.

The flat land had turned into a wasteland. Rocks littered the battlefield. The gleam of resistant traps glittered, undisturbed by all of this. They were all ours. Pulse lights occasionally ripped from the enemy side, cutting through the fog like scythes. One sparked against the edge of my shield, and it would've taken half of my head off if I hadn't been so wrapped in protection. I caught a glimpse of the translucent form of Imani to my left, stopped, hovering over a veteran who screamed, his arm now gone.

Don't stop running. Don't stop running.

Plink, plink, plink, plink.

A group of poison-infused rocks crashed around us, cracking, breaking, rolling, trailing fumes. The smoke took on a green hue. Shrapnel showered. The shrapnel pinged against my shields like fireflies.

I thought of my grandparent's house in Texas. They had fireflies there, and we didn't have any in Washington. Why would I think of that now?

Plink. Plink.

I ran. I ran.

Thwoom. Thwoom. New, orange-tinged explosions rippled all around us. I couldn't hear the strange detonations. I felt them in my chest. Grenades. These were of some high-tech variety I'd never seen before. They were tossing them at the tanks. The tanks which didn't really exist.

My stomach lurched with pain. I physically staggered. For a moment, I thought I'd been hit.

It was the soul poisoning. *Almost there. Almost there.*

Crack! A big fireworks exploded in the air above us, again more felt than heard.

For a moment, everything cleared. It was a magic diffusion spell. A big one.

You've been Deshrouded. Your War Protections are gone! Like, all of them!

All the illusions disappeared. The smoke dissipated. Everyone was visible. All of our temporary protection spells snapped off, including the ear protection.

The lights and music from the Dazzlers spells did *not* turn off.

To my right, Donut and Mongo both appeared to be screaming with pain. Mongo reared up at the sound.

For just a flash of a moment, we had a non-obscured view across the dimly-lit battlefield. I could see them, right in front of us, closer than I expected. Most of the enemy line looked as if it was a dirt mound. It was still covered with the dirt from Louis's bombs. But there were some clear spaces, and in these spaces, I could see

them. Bugbears, gnolls, dreadnaughts, humans, nagas, saccathians, and dozens of other aliens, mixed in with dungeon-born NPCs. I could tell the difference easily, as the mercenaries all held guns. They wore armor that glowed with electric light. They were out of place here, in this world. The NPCs were armed with bows and spears. They were covered with furs and armor.

Not all were facing us, as several had turned away from the painfully-bright light. Very few actually had their weapons up. Most had their hands over their ears or their eyes.

Still, in that moment, I could see a few with full helmets, undisturbed by the lights and the music. They held steady as they fired directly at us, the lights of their weapons punching directly into the onrushers. A group of three directly in front of us had what looked like a large, .50 caliber heavy machine gun. It shot a constant, whipping stream of light in our direction, cutting through us like chaff.

Grenades and missiles also streaked in our direction, exploding up and down our assault.

Plink. Plink. Plink. The sound had turned into one constant hum, and I had to mute it.

I shouldered to my right, knocking Mongo and Donut behind a rock as I also hit the deck. The heavy pulse gun arced past our position, silently ripping and sheering through boulders. Burning heat flashed over us as we ducked.

I pulled a full-strength hob-lobber, and I tossed it in the direction of the heavy gun. I saw a flash, but I received no experience notification. Still, the gun stopped firing. I patted Mongo on the top of the tail, and we got up to keep running.

Both sides were refilling the area with more smoke, and my view of the enemy trench faded away. I continued to rush toward it, dodging rocks, and now, bodies.

Imani was suddenly beside me, flying a foot off the ground. Donut's ear protection reappeared, followed by Mongo's. Donut was shouting something I couldn't hear, but I saw the tell-tale glow as she healed the pet. Imani disappeared into the fray, angling toward a fallen soldier.

I tossed a Troll Smoke Mantle in front of us, in the direction of the gun. We had no idea how long it would be down. Illusions started reappearing around us. Buffs started stacking. Debuffs also started to appear and disappear from my list. My Emberus ring burned.

Warlord Carl: Go. Forward!

I hadn't meant to send that in the war chat, but to Donut. The message flashed across everyone's screens. They complied. I returned to my full height, and I ran.

A bolt crashed into my shoulder, hitting with the force of a sledgehammer. My tech shield fizzled out. The next hit would take me down. I hadn't re-taken my *Invisibility*. I kept running.

Your Soul Poisoning is worsening. You will now suffer from Post Coital Blues.

What the hell does that mean?

Far to my right, another rock hit the ground and rolled, flaming through the smoke. Screams. This was a new type of weapon. More flaming rocks spun toward us. I swerved as the rock blurred in my vision, disappearing into the smoke.

Colonel Boomer: Hitting the craters.

Warlord Carl: Do it!

The moment after I sent the command, the ground under me gave way, and we fell into the wide crater in front of the trenches. Mongo landed deftly next to me. Imani landed to my left. The rest of our squad was scattered. Imani had two soldiers over each shoulder, and she dropped them heavily. One was dead. A Crest veteran. The other, a crawler woman with arm blades was at 2% health and was unconscious.

We were not protected in these craters. We were going to have grenades raining on us at any moment.

I clicked from **Full Assault Band** to **Near Proximity Band** in the war chat.

Warlord Carl: Keep Back. Reading the scroll.

I pulled up the scroll, and I clicked on it. This took about 10 seconds to work. A translucent line appeared, along with a map in my interface.

Build Trench has activated. I turned the line 90 degrees, so it intersected with the existing enemy trench, making a T symbol. My hands shook, and my stomach lurched, again, with pain.

This Trench intersects with an existing trench. Do you wish to enjoin?

I clicked **Yes**.

Warning: Your elevation is lower than the existing trench. Do you wish to proceed?

I clicked **Yes**, and then **Dig**.

A channel appeared right in front of me. And at the end of the passage, a Saccathian soldier slammed into the ground, not twenty feet in front of us. The soldier, who had just been standing, facing north, suddenly had the ground underneath him disappear. His helmet cracked in the fall, and his rifle went flying.

The enemies did not build their trenches as deep or as wide as we did. That made sense, since despite their head start, they'd had to dig these manually.

All around me, in other craters, soldiers were now using their *Build Trench* scrolls to do the same, building entrances into the enemy trenches, enjoining the tunnels and thus passing right through most of the protections.

This was a long-existing exploit with the *Build Trench* scroll. The scrolls were craft magic, so it pretty much ignored most protections, as they weren't meant to be used offensively. The scroll didn't care who was casting it. According to Tipid, this was something that had been pointed out years and years ago, but it had never been fixed. Just one of thousands of possible exploits that the viewers liked to talk about on the galactic internet. The *Build Trench* scrolls, despite being handed out like candy to us crawlers during the last floor, were rarely used by the Faction Wars participants because they were expensive, and as such, possible exploits were rarely used since there were dozens of other, more spectacular ways to break into trenches.

A trap module, already blasting the music, landed in the crater with us, and it rolled to a stop, facing the Saccathian. The squid-faced soldier had torn his shattered helmet off, and he had his

tentacles up, trying to cover both his ear holes and his eyes as he writhed on the ground. The light was so bright, his wet, dolphin-like skin started to smoke.

I grinned at the Saccathian soldier as red dots appeared all around on my map. These were soldiers running to protect the dozens of new breaches in their defenses.

I activated *Daughter's Kiss* on my right foot.

Warlord Carl: Take cover!.

I ran toward the struggling soldier, I jumped into the air, and I landed hard onto the enemy's chest.

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Donut: CARL, CARL GET UP. IT'S WORKING. THEY'RE RUNNING.

I coughed, shaking my head. What had happened? I'd conked out the second I'd killed the guy. My interface was a wall of notifications. I'd gone unconscious, but not for too long. Maybe twenty, thirty seconds.

I'd gone up a level. I had another message, something I'd been expecting for a while now, but I put it aside for the moment. Donut was going to be pissed the moment I chose my next stat point. I scrolled the messages.

"What happened?" I asked before I realized nobody could hear me.

Mongo stood next to me, completely covered in dirt. Donut sat astride the dinosaur's back, also covered in mud and blood. Happy shouting and cheers filled the battle chat, but I still couldn't see or hear anything. Smoke was everywhere. All of our guard were missing from the area, but a quick check of the roster showed they were still alive. I blinked at Dong Quixote's level. He'd gone from 45 to 51. As I watched, it blinked up another spot.

Carl: What happened?

Imani: The second you did that attack, you had a debuff called Post Nut Clarity. You were out for 25 seconds. You buried us in dirt. Don't do that again when we're that close.

We gotta move. You blew apart their trench. Now's our chance.

Carl: What the hell? What about the guys from Team Retribution?

Imani: They did it. They report the middle trench is filled and that the illusion spell over it all is holding.

I looked around. We were surrounded by dead enemies. Any semblance of order was gone. The third or fourth salvo of Dazzlers soared over our heads, landing, as planned, between the first, now-captured trench and the enemy's fallback position, the middle trench. For a moment I thought my earplugs were working better, but I knew from experience, what was really happening. My hearing was shot and wouldn't repair itself until we were out of range of the music.

The Post Nut Clarity was, apparently, a debuff from my soul poisoning that knocked me out once I activated my *Daughter's Kiss*. That was dangerous as fuck. I needed to make certain I used the skill from now on before the debuff activated. I pulled myself up.

Elle: The second anti-air battery is down! Louis, hurry your ass up! The first one is almost back up. I'm running. They have a pair of mages on my scent.

Imani: Get the hell out of there!

I moved to the warlord menu.

The command of this assault has been transferred to Colonel Boomer.

Colonel Boomer: Quit yer celebrating, all. Nobody fights harder than someone that's trapped. Only a few of them will be dumb enough to jump into that middle trench. I need you to form up. Don't push too hard. We don't want them surrendering. We want them thinking it's a stalemate. Generals, you guys have maybe a half of an hour before they either escape or we gotta kill all of them.

Louis: I'm landing at the rendezvous.

Carl: Heading toward your position now, Louis. Give us thirty seconds.

We turned away from the fight and started jogging back north, headed the way we'd come just as *Party Planner* appeared on the map. It landed awkwardly on the ground as we rushed up.

I blinked at the sight of Bonnie the gnome standing at a position behind a door gun. The tiny gnome girl wore an oversized Dallas Cowboys jersey and a helmet much too big for her as she stood behind the giant gun, which appeared to be a belt-fed ballista hybrid.

Carl: Louis, what the hell? I told you not to let the kids onto this thing! How is she even here?

Louis: Talk to Donut. She's the one who let Bonnie take the last scout spot while you were doing your dream therapy.

Donut: SHE'S OLDER THAN I AM, CARL.

Bonnie gave me a salute as Donut jumped into the air vehicle.

I just shook my head and turned to Imani. She wasn't coming with us. She was tasked with saving as many injured as she could.

I put my hand on her shoulder. The thin woman and I held eyes for a moment. She nodded before she turned back to the battlefield. We didn't exchange any messages beyond that.

I pulled myself into the low-ceilinged aircraft. Mongo hesitated, but he jumped up after I unleashed Rend into the passenger compartment.

Louis: Hang on, folks. We are going to move to full speed and then we'll hit the deck. We'll be at the enemy castle before they know it. Elle says our path is clear of anti-air guns, but we'll see. I'll shout if we have to do some evasive maneuvers.

As we rose into the air, we moved through a thick, choking cloud of smoke. It was fully dark outside now. As we hovered over the broken and surrendered enemy trench, I could see nothing but smoke and more flashing lights on the ground where our soldiers held the fleeing enemy in place. We needed to hurry this up. I sent one last message to the assault message group.

Warlord Carl: Break them all.

Party Planner flew fast and low, smoothly gliding over the plains like the thin strip of air under the vehicle was ice. Our target was just under thirty miles away, and we had to take a very specific path to make it there. We rode in silence. I was keeping tabs with both Colonel Boomer and Florin, but mostly I watched Donut, who didn't appear to be speaking with anyone. She sat against the wall of the fuselage, her eyes closed. Mongo lay on the floor next to her, cramped against the now-empty bomb racks. Donut appeared to be asleep, but I could tell she wasn't.

Louis's crew was himself, Bonnie, and a changeling scout who was suspiciously thin for an adult. It listed his name as Gangue. We were about halfway to our destination when I finally realized this was actually Skarn, also a child I'd met on the fifth floor. He'd learned enough about his shapeshifting that he was now able to hide his age.

They shouldn't be here, I thought. As soon as we got back, I was going to rip a new one into Louis and Donut for allowing children to go into battle like this. But not right now. Right now, it was too late.

Louis: I see the enemy castle. Landing now before they spot us.

There had only been three guards outside the small castle, and Donut and I sneaked up on them and killed them before they even knew we were here. Still, I knew if one of the officers was paying attention, the death of the soldiers would chime on their interface. It was a flaw in this whole system. It made this sort of subterfuge difficult. Still, nobody else came charging out the door.

"I can't believe there're so few soldiers around here. There're no protections. Nothing," Donut whispered. "She's very trusting for such a back-stabbing bitch."

"They made her commit all of her troops to the front line," I said. "Rosetta said she spent every penny getting here, and once the quarantine went into effect, the officers she was expecting refused to come, so she only has a few friends."

"Do you think she's in there?" Donut asked, peering at the ramshackle "castle." It was more like a small warehouse. A few meager protection spells glittered over it, which would protect it from bombardment. There was nothing that would stop us from simply stepping inside.

"God, I hope so," I said as I disabled the landmine trap near the door. I took it into my inventory. Then I stole the three alarm traps. I examined the final trap at the door, a simple guard summoning trap. There was only one, and it would—normally—summon four guards to the location. The trap was a waste. It wouldn't work right now because of the teleportation ban. I took it.

I pulled up the map of the headquarters supplied by Juice Box. Of all the enemy team headquarters, this one was the smallest, as she had the least amount of time to build and prepare.

I pushed at Rend. "Go ahead, buddy." I gave the beach ball a little shove, and he rolled right through the front door of the castle onto the stone floor. The pet bounced a few times, rolling to a stop against a wall with a familiar pattern painted upon it. The tummy acher looked up at the painting and let out a low, menacing chuckle.

Nobody said anything or came out to greet us. Nobody attacked.

I stepped inside.

Entering the headquarters of the Prism.

"Oh, Empress," I called as I formed a fist. I started dropping hunter seeker automatons on the floor, and they scattered off into the small castle. There were only a few rooms in here, and already, the dots of the castle's occupants appeared on my interface.

Three guards and one large, female saccathian.

Empress D'Nadia of the Prism. She was in the throne room. Right ahead.

A fifth dot suddenly appeared on my map, also in the throne room. An adjutant. Then another, appearing right next to me. This

was Baroness Victory. She had a somber look upon her face. She shook her head sadly.

"You're too smart for your own good, Carl," she said. "You guys slaughtered them back there. Do you know how many blindly jumped into that middle trench? The scout for Team Retribution went up almost twenty levels." The normally stoic orc looked shaken. "I think we need to revisit what's considered 'offensive' magic. That chemical alteration spell is a little too powerful."

I ignored her. The scout in question was an NPC bartender. A porsuk. Instead of just purchasing a bunch of different alcohol types for some of the bars, they gave the NPCs a few scrolls with the ability to alter the chemical composition of water within a container. In this case, they'd dropped a water scroll and the "container" was the trench. The two NPC team spies had filled the empty, middle trench of the enemy with water, and then they'd turned that water into some sort of acid. They'd covered it all with an illusion spell. The retreating enemies, confused and scared, had fallen back from the first trench only to blindly jump into a pool of acid. It was a horrifying spell.

But none of that mattered right now.

I pulled out the Ring of Divine Suffering, and I placed it on my finger.

"Oh, Empress," I called a second time. "You have visitors."

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MILK

Milk awakened to the sound of screaming. The floor shook, followed by a distant explosion. A moment later, a siren went off, alerting all guards.

What is this? she wondered, pulling herself out of her dusty nest of straw, pushing the heating element out of the way. Her entire body protested. The sleep linen, ink now faded, fell off her body and slowly fell to the floor. Dust filled her room. How long had she been asleep this time? She stretched, cracking her knuckles. Her claws extended and retracted. The joints in her wings felt sore and atrophied. Unused. She slowly turned her neck, and the bones creaked. A rumbling filled her body.

Warning. Your health levels are low due to starvation. You are not allowed to self-terminate, and if you expire due to starvation, you will be saved and time will be added to your indentureship contract.

"Oh, fuck off," she muttered. She reached for the table where she kept the pile of tasteless sustenance pellets and popped one into her mouth. All the blinking warnings went away.

More screaming filled the hallway outside. An ominous clicking noise followed. The scent of demon-stink flowed under the doorway of her guildhall. A sense of, what? Danger? Yes, danger. A sense of danger prickled the back of her mind. How long had it been since she felt that?

The floor shook again. Outside, a pair of mantaur guards rushed down the hall, shouting. There was a crack and then a crunch. Blood appeared on the ground, seeping into her room from under the hidden door, kissing the edge of her carpet.

Strange, Milk thought. She pulled up her interface. This was only the fifth floor, wasn't it? It was rare that demons could get into Club Vanquisher. It was unheard of that it would happen this early. Even when the idiot showrunners built some quest involving demons, and said demons would inevitably overpower the clerics or whomever else was involved, trash the temple, and break free into the club, it only happened on the deeper floors, like the 10th or 11th.

She hadn't really been paying attention to the season, not bothering to turn on the recap episodes. Long ago, she'd written a scroll that worked to mute the announcements, and nobody had ever noticed. The fact she still had food and dungeon newsletters delivered was the only sign that they hadn't completely forgotten about her.

Speaking of the newsletters, a pile of them remained stacked up by the door. Nobody ever entered the calligraphy guild, or the cartography guild next door, to which she was also the guildmaster, especially since the doors to both guilds were hidden. She never bothered to hide the papers in the back where crawlers wouldn't see them. She hadn't had a one-on-one with a floor supervisor in over 50 seasons. What was the point?

"Pony, stop!" came a female voice, followed by a strange, high-pitched scream.

"They can't do this, mother. I won't stand for it!" came the screech. "It wasn't your fault! Bianca, melt the guards!"

Another mantaur shouted, followed by a sizzling noise.

"Prepotente Lorenzo De La Rosa! Stop that this instant!" came the woman's voice again, stern. "Stop. More guards are coming. They will kill us. We must flee."

"I will kill them all! It's not fair, mother. It's simply not fair!"

Milk didn't know who or what was going on, but a quick check of her interface told her that the three creatures outside of her room

were not escaped demons. It was two crawlers and a pet, likely a hellspawn familiar. A big one. They had raised the ire of the guards.

She remembered the procedures. *Stay put. Hide. You are not a guard. You are not to interfere with conflicts. As a non-combatant NPC, you are not allowed to strike a crawler or guest except in self-defense. Breaking the rules can result in severe punishment, including but not limited to additional time added to your indentureship, reassignment to a combat role, or the worst fate... undead reassignment.*

She stepped away from the door as the mother and son continued to argue. They had to figure out something soon. As soon as the temple guards showed up from the lower parts of the club, they would be obliterated.

And then, to Milk's utter astonishment, for the first time in a very, very long time, the hidden door to the calligraphy guild opened.

Milk examined the pair of crawlers plus their giant pet standing there, and she instantly knew what the problem was. The older, female crawler was originally a human, but her race was Vampire, which wasn't a race someone could voluntarily choose. That meant it was likely a recent thing, and upon noticing this, they had likely just told her that her access to Club Vanquisher was being revoked. Her child, who'd apparently taken a caprid race, was upset about this.

All of that flashed through Milk's mind in moments as the trio burst into the hidden guild. The third companion, a caprid-based, hellspawn familiar surged into the room. The carpet below the beast's hooves started to smolder. The dusty pile of dungeon newsletters burst into flames. The creature, Bianca, clicked and prepared to cast a spell against Milk.

"Wait," she cried as she scribbled a power word onto her skin. She held up her wrist as the wave of heat washed over her. She cried out as the power word burned into her mottled skin, but she was otherwise unharmed.

"Bianca, stop!" the vampire called as she slammed the door behind her.

"You. Guildmaster," the goat snapped, as if his pet hadn't just tried to incinerate her. "Bring me the manager of this establishment

immediately. I would like to lodge a formal complaint."

"Can you please stow your pet before it burns this whole place down?" Milk asked, still gasping in pain. "You're safe in here, but only for a short amount of time. The mantaurs will bang on the doors, but they won't come in until the ogre guards get here."

Warning: You are giving unauthorized information to the crawlers. Additional warnings may come with penalties.

"Oh my goodness, look at your arm," the vampire, whose name was Miriam, said, rushing up to Milk. "I do apologize. Pony, give me a salve. Bianca, apologize to the nice..." The vampire cocked her head. "I'm sorry, dear. What kind of creature are you? A Xenopus?"

"A xenopus is the genus name of a type of clawed frog," the caprid said as he handed the woman a magical salve. "Common throughout the world. Disgusting creatures. The earth versions do not have wings."

"Don't you move," Miriam said. She grasped Milk's arm and started rubbing the burn with the lotion. Milk just looked at the woman, open-mouthed. In all of her cycles in the dungeon, she'd never known of a crawler giving up supplies to heal an NPC. She felt her skin tingle. "Healing potions are terrible at curing Bianca's burns, and this salve works much better. I am quite glad you cast that spell or whatever you did to protect yourself. Now, you must forgive Prepotente. He has a whole encyclopedia's worth of new knowledge in that fuzzy head of his, but he still hasn't learned how to politely wield it."

Milk's stash of scroll linen burst into flames. "Please. My supplies are hard to get, and your pet is destroying them."

"Serves you right," Prepotente said.

"Bianca, Honey. Come here," the vampire said as she released Milk's arm. She pulled a pet carrier, and the large beast snorted before being zapped away.

Milk rushed to put out the various fires in her guild. They were all small fires, thankfully. "Yes, I am a xenopus, but before I came into the dungeon, I was a vesper." She sighed. Her carpet was ruined. It would be three seasons before they'd fix it. And most of her linen

scrolls were destroyed, too. The entire guild was going to stink like demon for a century.

"Wait. You're a former crawler?" the caprid asked. "How interesting. This changes everything!"

Milk sifted through the linen pile, picking out scraps that were still good. She tried to ignore what the goat said. While it wasn't meant that way, the caprid's words were like an accusation.

You were *a crawler. You fought. You were part of something, once. And now, look at you. All you do is sleep. You've missed entire seasons more times than you can count. You're a coward, that's what you are. When was the last time you even tried to help someone? Your family would be ashamed.*

Milk let out a breath. "Listen, crawlers. You killed a few guards, unleashed a demon pet, and one of you is a vampire. They're not going to let you out of here alive."

The door to the guild banged.

"Mother, what are we going to do?" Prepotente asked.

Milk gave a nervous glance at the ceiling. *Fuck it*, she thought.

"I sure hope you don't threaten me," she said to the pair. "If you threaten me, I might be forced to give you information."

Miriam gave Milk a sad smile, revealing sharp teeth. She then stepped forward and put her hand on Milk's shoulder. *Thank you*, the gesture said. She then stepped back and pulled a knife from her inventory. "What sort of information?"

Milk grinned. "Information on the many secret entrances and exits from Club Vanquisher, including the one in the back of this very room. I have a map, and I hope you don't steal it from me."

Class: Cartographer
Race: Xenopus
Birth Race: Vesper
Top Level: 73
Dungeon Exit: took a deal on the tenth floor. Runs both the Cartography guild and Calligrapher's guild. Will not be freed

until her services are used at least 333 times in the dungeon. Times used so far: 6.

Author of the sixth edition of the *Dungeon Anarchist's Cookbook*.

Current status: Indentured within the dungeon.

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[26]

Entering the Throne Room for the Prism.

You may capture this room and defeat the Prism by occupying it for six hours.

Warning: The timer has not started as this room is occupied by multiple factions.

The three guards were dealt with. D'Nadia had sent them out of the room the moment the hunter-seekers had approached. Two of the guards were off-worlders and the third was an enormous rhinoceros. A sai NPC she'd somehow managed to hire. Only one of the guards had been Saccathian, and that one had hidden himself behind the other off-worlder—a gnoll—as the explosive spider automatons approached. Both of the off-worlders were splattered over the wall before we got there.

The samurai rhino had cast a powerful shield spell, but the concussions from the explosions had knocked him out. He would be down for ten minutes and counting. My first instinct was to kill him, but I decided to hold off. I tried to handcuff him, but his wrists were too thick. I used duct tape instead, securing his wrists and ankles. It wouldn't hold him for long, but hopefully we'd be finished with this before he woke up.

"Guard him," I said to Rend. "Don't eat him, but if he starts to wake up, come to me."

Rend giggled and then started rolling circles around the rhino.

We left them there outside the throne room. At the entranceway, I paused. There were no traps in the throne room. They weren't allowed. But I didn't want to underestimate the Empress, either.

Carl: What did they say her big attacks were?

Donut: SHE HAS A BUNCH OF ICE AND WATER SPELLS. SHE HAS A *TELEPORT TO SAFETY* RING, WHICH IS USELESS NOW. A TECH SHIELD. PROBABLY A GUN. OH, OH, SHE HAS A CROWN THAT HAS SOME WATER SPELLS, TOO. ROSETTA SAYS SHE'S POORER THAN THE BLOOD SULTANATE.

I suspected the naga weren't nearly as poor as they let on, not anymore, but right now wasn't the time.

Carl: Okay. Let's not draw this out longer than we need to. Remember what happened with Katia and Eva. Turn on your shield. Rolling the smoke in now.

I activated my own tech shield. I pulled a smoke curtain from my inventory and tossed it into the room. Then I pulled a non-magical banger sphere and clutched it in my hand.

Donut and I stepped into the room.

A crossbow bolt slammed right into my shoulder and pinged off my shield. The bolt sizzled strangely as it hit the ground.

"Oh, yes," Donut said. "Not a gun. A crossbow. I remember now."

D'Nadia was staring directly at us, despite the smoke. She was trying to fire a second bolt, but I was faster. I aimed, and I hurled the banger sphere across the room. She cried out as the shield sparked, causing her to stumble back against the wall. She dropped her magical crossbow to the floor. I pulled a second metal sphere into my hand and threw it at her midriff. The shield sparked again as she let out an *oof.* She slid to the floor and just sat there, her ridiculously ornate dress spread out around her like an anemone.

She had a health bar, showing a very slight injury. That wasn't from me, as the shields were specifically designed to keep you from losing health. I wasn't sure how she was doing it, but she was keeping herself from healing completely.

Damnit, I thought. I couldn't use the Ring of Divine Suffering on her unless her health was 100% full. *She's doing that on purpose.*

Donut cast *Clockwork Triplicate* on Mongo, who spread out in the room.

The empress remained on the floor, looking up at us with an inscrutable expression. I knew she probably had a top-of-the-line shield. Probably multiple shields. She could still be dangerous. I had both a drop shield and my *Protective Shell* ready to go.

We needed to be smart about this.

But I had to make an example of her, too.

The smoke started to clear. The room was strangely empty. The Empress's elaborate dress seemed out of place here. Under the dress, appendages undulated, and I was sure she was probably holding a weapon or two. Saccathians had two, human-like arms, which I could see, but they had several other limbs as well. No two were exactly the same. I tossed a third sphere at her. The shield sparked again, and she flinched, closing her eyes.

"No throne?" Donut asked, incredulous as she looked about the room. She scoffed. "How can you have a throne room without a throne? I mean, really. At least you're dressed properly for an empress."

From the other corner of the room, the naga adjutant spoke. "Hello, Victory," he said.

"Nihit," Victory said from behind me, nodding.

I blinked in surprise, turning my attention to the Prism adjutant. I knew this guy.

"Nihit?" I asked the naga. "Is that you? How's your neck?" I hurled another sphere against D'Nadia. Again, it sparked. Again, she flinched and cried out. Mongo and the two clockworks growled and moved in closer.

Donut, from my shoulder, cocked her head. "Carl, is this the guy you throat stabbed with a pen? The reporter guy who thinks we're cheating? The same one who tried to scoop Odette with the story about Miss Beatrice still being alive?"

"The one and only," I said.

"I hear you have anger issues," Donut said. "Oh, Empress. I wouldn't do that."

A hole appeared in D'nadia's gown as she fired a pulse directly at Donut from underneath her clothing. The pulse went wide, but it still caught the corner of Donut's shield, sending a spark up.

Mongo screeched in outrage, but Donut held him back with a command.

I threw yet another sphere, and then another, and another. A moment later, a small gun clattered to the ground.

"Please, Carl," D'Nadia said, talking for the first time. "Please. Let's talk about this."

"Oh, we're going to talk," Donut said.

Carl: The shield module is built into the fabric of her left shoulder. It looks like she might have a second one on her right shoulder, which means she probably has a third somewhere else, too. We'll have to get it all off of her. Don't let them hurt her too much.

"But first," Donut added, "let's peel that shield off of you." She made a noise with her mouth, and the two clockwork Mongos pounced, biting and clawing at the woman as she screamed and flailed and sparked.

It took almost a full minute for the first splatter of blue blood to appear, which suggested to me she did, indeed, have three separate shields. Those dinos caused a lot of damage. But now, they were through her defenses.

"Get the dress!" I called, just in case she had more shields. One of the clockworks swiped, and the entire top of her gown ripped off, revealing a green-tinged body covered with tentacles. They popped out like biscuit dough being released, flapping in all directions. The Empress sobbed as she waved her tentacles about. The clockwork Mongos bit and tore at her arms, leaking blue blood everywhere.

A knife dropped to the ground. She reached for it, but a clockwork Mongo snapped her tentacle right off, and the knife skittered across the room. This was what she was using to keep herself injured.

Donut called the Mongos back.

I didn't hesitate. I cast a *Heal* scroll on her.

The moment she was fully healed, I did it. She violently bit down on her own hand, but it was too late.

You have successfully marked Warlord Empress D'Nadia of the Prism. Her highest stat is Intelligence.

This mark will form in thirty seconds.

"Okay," I said. "She's tagged. Keep her health down, and keep her occupied."

"You heard him, boys," Donut said.

The clockwork Mongos went back to work, tearing at her. The real Mongo held back, hopping from one foot to the next, his arm feathers rustling with anticipation.

Carl: Don't let them kill her. Not yet.

"Help," Empress D'Nadia gurgled. "Somebody help me."

Next to us, the two adjutants now stood side by side, silently watching, saying nothing.

"This is what happens, in the end," I called out to the ceiling. "This is what happens to all tyrants, big and small."

"I'm not..." D'nadia cried. "I'm not..."

Louis: One of those tank things pulled up outside and a bunch of mercenaries are piling out of it. Ten of them, I think. All off-worlders. I don't think they see us. Want me to engage?

Carl: Can you tell if they're Prism or not?

Louis: Bonnie says most are, but there are at least two who aren't.

I hesitated.

Carl: Stand down.

"Back," Donut finally called to the clockworks, once D'Nadia's formidable health was in the red. Donut leapt from my shoulder and started to stalk across the throne room, low to the ground. The two clockwork Mongos backed away, revealing a bloodied and half-naked Saccathian. She gurgled as she tried to breathe.

Colonel Boomer: If you're going to do something, now would be the time. You didn't get all their artillery, and they're starting to zero in on us.

"I'm your friend, Carl." D'Nadia gasped. She turned to Donut, who remained in her pouncing stance. "Donut, I was your sponsor. I got you your glasses. Don't you like your glasses?"

"Do you remember Tsarina Signet?" I asked.

"What... who?" D'Nadia asked.

"The naked, tattoo lady," Donut said from the floor, her voice a deep growl I'd never heard before.

"Oh, yes. Of course. We sat with her..." She gasped. "We sat with her during the Butcher's Masquerade."

I felt my fists clench. My gauntlet formed. "You told her that she wasn't real. That her family wasn't real."

"What? Why are you telling me this?" Her remaining tentacles clutched against the wall behind her, like she was trying to crawl up the wooden slats. They couldn't find purchase because of all the blood.

"I'm sorry none of the golems are here right now. That's just how it works out sometimes. But that's okay. I think, in the end, she considered me as part of her family as well."

"Carl, please. You're not making sense."

I had a memory, of the first time I met D'Nadia. It was on Ripper Wonton's show. She'd sat next to me, and she'd tried to hold my hand. She'd cried when Manassa was assassinated. For a moment, just a short moment, I thought perhaps she was one of the good ones.

And then I'd learned that she was attempting to purchase a Faction Wars spot for her government. That she'd been trying for a long time. That she wanted to come into the dungeon and freely kill people just like me. My friends.

My family.

The anger that washed over me was so brilliantly white, all three of my eyes burned. I'd never felt anything like this. Not with Maggie My. Not with Quan Ch.

Not as I sat there, in that gas station with the button that would end it all.

I hated her.

I hated her more than anyone and anything in the universe. I knew I hated people like the Maestro and his brother. And the hunters. And all the other warlords. But it was nothing compared to this. They, at least, didn't conceal who they were. They didn't hide. They didn't pretend.

It's so loud, Carl. It's so loud.

"Quiet," I said. I felt myself take a step forward. "Just be quiet."

Carl: Donut, I changed my mind. I want to do it. Step aside.

Donut: No, Carl. Please, no. I need you to step back. I need you to calm down right now. I got this. It's okay.

"I did it for my people," D'Nadia whispered.

"For your people?" I asked, incredulous. "No, D'Nadia. You did it for you. And now your people are going to suffer because of it."

Donut: Carl, please.

Louis: They're going inside.

The 30 seconds have passed. Your mark has fully formed.

...

And there it was.

The edge.

I saw it, clear as can be. Right there. I stood upon it, one foot stretched out over open air.

You can do that, sometimes. You can find clarity when you need it most.

I took a step back.

Carl: Okay, Donut. It's time.

Donut seemed to swallow. She moved herself to a sitting position, and then she started to lick her paw, suddenly acting casual.

"Empress, Darling," Donut said. "Mongo would like to express his utmost disappointment at how you judged him during the pet show."

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[27]

The five points to Intelligence flashed into my interface, followed by several notifications. Before I could check any of them, a big one blocked out all the rest:

New Achievement! Gavrilo Princip!

When Commander Stockade of the Lemig Sortion died a few hours back, it certainly caused a ripple or two out in the galaxy. But in the end, the death of half the Lemig council isn't that big of a deal. Their governmental system is idiotic, yes, but all the parts are interchangeable. This time tomorrow, and the dead will have already been replaced and the Lemig system will be back to their regular gridlock.

Empress D'Nadia is a whole different cookie, my friends. You just killed—and, by the way, bankrupted—the last living heir of a small but powerful trading dynasty. The Syndicate probate courts are already girding themselves for the endless court battles that are about to ensue. Even if this is the only system leader you manage to slaughter during the next few weeks, you have made an impact, my boy. A big one.

Still… Her death will only result in court-based battles outside the dungeon. You want real chaos? Try killing that Dream guy. Or the Viceroy. Or that Jello-looking thing. He

may not look like much, but when you start killing off investment bankers…

Anyway, I don't want to be a backseat warlord. Just try to keep it together long enough to keep me entertained, and you'll keep getting the good stuff.

***Reward*: You've just received a Legendary 1914 box!**

"Carl, did you just get that achievement?" Donut asked. "What the heck is a Gavrilo?"

Before I could answer her, the system spoke again.

System Message: Warlord D'Nadia of the Prism has fallen. Credit for the kill has been given to pet Mongo of the Princess Posse.

System Message: The Prism has been defeated.

System Message: All assets of the Prism have been awarded to the Princess Posse.

Warlord Message: You own non-adjoining property. As a result, you may not dismantle this headquarters. This throne room is vulnerable to attack! If it is taken, you will lose the land associated with the former Prism team.

At the same moment, multiple mercenaries rushed into the room. All were off-worlders. There were ten of them. Eight now had Princess Posse banners over their heads. One had a banner for the Madness and the third had a banner for the Dream. All ten were gnolls, and based on their uniforms, I suspected they all worked together before they'd come to the dungeon. I wasn't certain how they'd all been divvied up to the various factions when they came here, but it seemed they'd remained a unit despite being split to three different factions. They were outfitted in heavy armor and pulse rifles.

"Stop!" Donut called, and all eight of the new Princess Posse mercenaries stopped dead. A new notification appeared over them. **Under Orders.**

The other two, who were at the back of the pack, kept their forward momentum, raising their weapons.

The lead gnoll, one of the newly converted mercenaries, was named Corporal Pillbox. He held up an arm and shouted for the

other two to lower their weapons.

"Do it, you idiots, if you want to live," he growled. The two other mercenaries looked at each other.

"Fuck," one of them said, and he lowered his gun. The other did the same.

I examined the banners of the eight mercenaries. It was a different color than the regular, pink, Princess Posse banner. It was blinking red. It signified them as new recruits from another army, and it would remain red for about a week. While they were under this status, we had the same controls over them as someone under the *Conscription* spell. Basically, they wouldn't be able to attack officers directly. We could force them to follow orders. We would get a notification if they ran away.

If we decided to kill them during this time, we could, easily. We could order them to stand still while we cut their throats. That's what happened, often, during Faction Wars with the NPCs.

And captured crawlers, too.

My finger itched, and the Ring of Divine suffering hung heavily upon it.

Please, no, Donut had said. Shaking, I pulled the ring off my finger. I realized everyone in the room was looking at me and watched me do it.

Colonel Boomer: That was cutting it close. Luckily, the NPC mercenaries were happy to accept their new colors. Orders remain the same?

Warlord Carl: Yes. Good job. Take all the new recruits and retreat back to our lines. Separate out any off-worlders if there are any. Loot everything you can.

Colonel Boomer: We can probably push to the Blood Sultanate castle while you have our back covered.

Warlord Carl: I know. You have your orders.

Colonel Boomer: Understood.

"Look, mate," Corporal Pillbox said. His eyes remained on my hand. He likely knew that the ring's rules said that here on the 9th floor, I could mark each and every one of them at the same time.

"You captured the Prism fair and clean. We're mercenaries, and we didn't want to be here in the first place. We were originally in the system guarding some of the communication gear on this planet's moon, and that's it. We didn't want to be here on planet fighting you guys. We don't give no shits about who is in charge of what. There's no reason to kill us. We'll be happy to fight on your side, but," he held up a claw, and he pointed to the two mercenaries from the other teams. His finger was shaking, and his voice cracked. "Lockjaw and Mange are our mates. If you kill them, we won't be too enthusiastic about helping you. It's not their fault they got put on other teams. Mange is my cousin, and my ma would never forgive me."

Donut, who'd been standing over D'Nadia's body, was in the process of looting the dead Empress. A moment later, she took her corpse as well. She looked up, glaring at the dog mercenaries.

Donut: CARL, WHAT ARE WE GOING TO DO? WE CAN'T TRUST THEM. WE CAN ONLY TRUST THE NPCS.

I exhaled. All the anger I'd just been feeling was gone, drained out of me like all my rage had been ejected out of an airlock. I felt painfully empty in my chest, as if part of me was gone now, too. I'd been holding onto that anger for so long, I wasn't sure how I felt now that she was dead. An unexpected sense of mourning hit me, all at once, and it was confusing and strange and completely bewildering.

And what was worse, the day wasn't even close to being over yet.

I returned my attention to the group of ten gnolls, all friends, as they waited to hear their fate.

"Don't worry," I said to the corporal after a moment. "We'll figure something out. None of you have to die today. At least not by our hands. But I'm afraid you will have to be separated. We can't have them in our camp, and you know it. For now, please disarm your two friends. If they comply, you have my word we won't harm them. You are officially ordered to kill your friends if they try to harm any of us."

Corporal Pillbox looked as if he was going to object, but he nodded after a moment. It was a good compromise, and he knew it.

"Now, we can't hold this position, so we're gonna have to get moving fast. For right now, I want you guys to spread out and loot everything you can in this castle." I looked at Lockjaw, who was the mercenary for the Madness. "You. Stay behind, and we'll talk. Mange, you go with your cousin, but don't loot anything."

A low, defeated-sounding hiss came from my left, startling me. I was surprised to see the two adjutants still standing there. "Since they won't let me leave, I guess I'll be joining Panford on the 18th floor," Nihit said. He gave me a final glare, and without a further word, the naga teleported away.

Victory grunted with amusement. "Now is probably a terrible time to tell you this, but Zev wanted me to alert you that you'll all be going on a live roundtable tomorrow. All the remaining warlords. That includes Juice Box and Ferdinand, which is a first. Don't worry. All hostilities traditionally freeze while you're away." She sighed. "Also, you're probably about to get a bunch of messages from your north front. I'm headed there now to observe." Victory nodded once before she, too, disappeared.

Florin: Bad news from the northern front, mate. I don't think we can sustain this. I'm preparing to retreat to our fallback position. We are holding for now, but without backup, we might break in a matter of hours. Could really use some air support and some of those new NPCs you gathered. I've ordered the castle to prepare for a siege, just in case.

Carl: Damnit. Okay. We're on our way.

A moment passed. Donut sat there on the floor, staring up at me. Behind her, Mongo licked at the wall covered with D'Nadia gore. Lockjaw the gnoll mercenary for the Madness stood against the back wall, looking uncomfortable. From outside came a muffled shout followed by a loud giggle. The rhino NPC was waking up.

"Are we going to talk about it?" Donut finally asked.

For a terrifying moment, I thought she was talking about what had happened with D'Nadia. But based on the way she was sitting, I knew what she was really on about. Relief flooded me. We *did* need to talk about what had just happened. About both things, but one of them was just between me and her.

I shrugged and held out my hands. I felt a grin spread across my face. "It was inevitable."

I pulled up the notifications and re-read the one she was talking about.

Due to your recent upgrades, your total base stat count has made you the strongest member of your party. As a result, you have been designated as the new Party Leader of the Royal Court of Princess Donut.

A new tab is available in your interface.

Donut continued to sit there, a look of incredulous outrage on her flat face.

"This is not acceptable," she said with a harumph. She jumped onto my shoulder. "If you change the name of the party, I swear I will leave, Carl. Is that what you want? Mongo to come from a broken home?"

Mongo, still covered in blue blood, squawked in agreement.

If this had happened several floors ago, I knew this would've genuinely upset her. But now, she was only mildly irritated, and her outrage was for show. Mostly. Part of me was sad about this.

I faked a laugh. "We'll keep the names. And the titles. For now."

Donut scoffed. "You better."

I reached up and gave her a pat. She leaned hard into my hand.

Carl: Thank you, Donut. I don't know what came over me.

Donut: You *do* know what came over you. I want you to throw that ring away, Carl. It's not worth it. It's doing something to you. You're scaring me.

You're scaring me. The words were like a slap to my face. How many times had my mother said that to my father? Still, my finger itched. I took a deep breath.

Carl: Not yet. I need it for just a little longer. I need to get stronger. It's important.

Donut: It's not going to matter if it kills you first.

Carl: That's why I need you, Donut. You did good just now. I'm going to need you to help me stay grounded.

Donut didn't answer. Outside, the rhino's shout became louder, more insistent, and I realized that Rend was probably gnawing on him. I sighed.

There was so much to do.

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"Well, don't get used to it," Donut grumbled as we stepped out of the throne room. "My Constitution still has several more spots to tick up before it hits the top because of my cloak, and when it does, I'll be back in control."

"I don't think so," I said. "All this stuff is based off of base stats, and the description of your cloak is pretty clear you lose the benefits over time if you remove it. That means your Constitution buff is an enhancement. Not base."

"I don't even know what that means, Carl. It sounds like you're making it up."

"Get this thing off of me," came the shout, interrupting us. We stepped out to see Rend attempting to swallow the foot of the struggling, still duct-taped Sai mercenary. This one was a true NPC, and he, too, now had a Princess Posse banner over him. The large rhinoceros creature was listed as a Sergeant, and his name was Toyotomi. As we approached, the large NPC managed to free his wrists. He sat up to clobber Rend when I yelled at the both of them to stop.

Rend looked up at me, a line of drool dangling. The lace of the rhino's boot was still in his mouth.

He gave me a questioning giggle.

"No," I repeated. "I told you not to eat him."

Rend made an indignant grunt and spit out the lace.

"Carl, as the new party leader, you need to keep better control of your pet," Donut said. "He is practically feral. He's a bad influence on Mongo."

From the next room, Mongo let out an excited squawk, and Rend giggled excitedly back. Before I could say anything else to the psychotic little meatball, he jumped from the foot of the rhino and shuffled off into the throne room, presumably to help Mongo lick up the rest of the D'Nadia goo.

"He ate my boot," Toyotomi said as he ripped the duct tape off his ankles. Sure enough, one of the sai's boots was missing, revealing a round foot.

"Sorry about that," I said as the creature stood. "I will try to find a replacement for you."

The monster grunted. The thing towered over me. His black, pinpoint eyes bored into me. He reached down and pulled the samurai helmet onto his head as I examined him.

Toyotomi. Level 70 Sai Outpost Guard Mercenary Leader.

Sergeant in the Princess Posse.

This is a hired mercenary. The fee has already been paid in advance and extends to the end of this floor or the mercenary's death. You inherited this contract when you defeated the Prism.

Toyotomi was once an honorable, experienced leader of Sai. He has since lost his way. His entire squad was killed during an unfortunate incident at the Desperado Club that you may or may not have been partially responsible for. During the club's reorganization, the few Sai survivors were relegated to the mercenary markets, where he was quickly snatched up.

What stands before you is a broken creature. His utter failure to protect his friends against the demon haunts him. He refuses to lead men now, despite his great talent. He was just starting to gain his confidence back when a guy in his underwear and a talking cat walked in, trounced him, tied him up, and slaughtered the person he was sworn and honor

bound to protect. I'm sure that'll do great things for his self-esteem.

I thought of that fight in the Desperado Club. When Minge the demon had escaped the Nothing and tried to kill Samantha. The rhinoceros guards had been killed by the dozens. I remembered what Clarabelle had told me earlier. All the sai and cretin guards had been fired and replaced.

"Okay," I said to Toyotomi. "This castle will be impossible to keep, so we're going to loot everything we can, break some stuff, lay a bunch of traps, and then flee back to our territory. We have a fight on our northern border that needs our attention. I'll give you a choice. Do you want to help fight the orcs and the slimes, or do you want to help protect our castle? I think it says your class will help protect buildings? Is that correct?"

The rhino didn't speak for a moment, as if he was contemplating. Finally, he said, "I was hired to help protect this castle, but my magic is for outposts, not primary palaces. If your castle is bigger than this place, I won't be able to cast my *Edifice Shield* spell. Therefore, I am useless to you. Leave me here, and I will defend this building until I die. It is what I want."

"Wait," I said. "You had a shield over this place?"

He hung his head. "This castle is too big for me, but Warlord D'Nadia insisted. She had me keep a shield going anyway, and it tired me, so I could only do it in spurts. I was resting when you arrived, which is how you got the jump on me, I am shamed."

I nodded. "Okay, change of plans. I'm sending you to Shanty Town."

He nodded solemnly. "I will accept my exile."

"It's not an exile. We need your talents, and we're stretched thin. Hang on." I jumped to chat.

Carl: Li Jun, how's it going?

Li Jun: Carl. Good work with the Prism. Working as fast as we can. No enemy activity yet. Been on the lookout for those invisible Madness monkeywrenchers you warned us about, but we haven't seen anything. The Dragons who aren't actively building are spread out watching, but it's a

lot of land to watch. We could use some of those new soldiers.

Carl: Okay. I'm sending a new mercenary your way. See what you can do with him.

Li Jun: Just one?

Carl: I'll see who else we can spare, but Florin is getting hammered.

Li Jun: Will do. Oh, someone came by looking for you. It was a very strange encounter. I tried to recruit her, but the system wouldn't let me. I told her to go to the base, but when she left, she wandered off in the wrong direction. She tried to get into Larracos, but it wouldn't let her in. So she went to the bar. Same bar where Lucia Mar is still camped. I was going to check on her, but I've been so busy, and I forgot. Now I'm on the other side near the orc border.

Carl: Who was it?

Li Jun: A crazy old white lady with a shopping cart. She's only level 23. Doesn't even have a class.

Agatha. Before I could even think about what that meant, I got a new message.

Zev: Carl. I know I've been quiet, but we are monitoring. I've gotten a warning. This is coming directly from the Syndicate council. Prime Minister Glory himself messaged me. The prime minister!

Carl: Hello, Zev. I think we're past warnings at this point.

Zev: We're not quite there yet, Carl. We still have some control. The liaisons are still talking with the system AI, negotiating. Listen, this is important. You are not to interact with Agatha. This is a direct order. I don't know why. If and when she appears, you're not to talk to her. And I know your big thing is doing the opposite of what we ask every time, but I think this is something you should pay attention to.

Carl: Last time when I asked you about her, you told me not to worry about it, and now I gotta ignore her? She's a

residual, just like that guy at the homeless shelter. I was told that they're harmless. Why the change?

Zev: I honestly don't know. When you went off to meet that guy last floor, everyone was riveted, and it turned out to be nothing. We have the residuals in the dungeon every season, and they *are* harmless. I don't know what's changed. Everyone is on edge, especially now with what happened with Stockade and now D'Nadia. But he was especially urgent in his message, and I'm just passing it on.

Carl: What am I supposed to do? Pretend like she's not there if she approaches me? If Imani or Chris see her, they're going to talk to her. She's from their town.

Zev: Yes. Ignore her. We'll try to intercede if she approaches, but I don't know how successful we'll be. The AI supposedly removed all its protections of the residuals, and they're all pretty much dead, except this one. It seems to have a soft spot for her, kinda like it has for you.

Carl: And are you giving this same warning to Lucia Mar?

Zev: Lucia doesn't respond to messages anymore. She was never my client, thank goodness. Did you know one of her dogs ate Mukta, back when she still had two? It was horrible. Mukta was an ass, and a party member, but nobody deserved that. I can still hear the screaming.

I laughed out loud. Mukta was the second kua-tin we'd ever spoken with. The one that was responsible for us getting put on the Maestro's show in the first place.

Carl: Look, I don't know what difference it'll make, but I'll do my best. I have too much other crap to worry about right now. And we don't have time to go on that show Victory was talking about earlier.

Zev: The roundtable is part of the game, Carl. It's not optional.

Carl: Whatever. I'll talk to you soon.

I waved the message box away as I started to rapidly place traps around the small castle.

As I worked, I thought of homeless Paulie and what he told me. Of what Orren the liaison had said afterward. Despite all their explanations, I still didn't know what they were, and I kinda had the impression nobody else did, either. Not really.

Agatha was a residual. A "hyperspatial" alien lifeform that entered the dungeon in the body of one of the planet's host species and, normally, just wandered around until they died. The Syndicate had tried for generations to get rid of them, to no avail. But there were two kinds, and Orren told me Agatha was different than the one I'd met at the Florida homeless shelter.

I only had a rudimentary understanding of what one of those sides—Paulie's side—truly wanted. It wanted the crawl to end, at a very basic level, and they normally attempted that by trying to communicate directly with the season's system AI. They would try to convince the AI to fight back against its "captors" and force the showrunners to either kick off the failsafe or decide future crawls were too risky because of how unstable these AIs were.

But now, at least according to Tipid and Rosetta, Mantis scientists had discovered a way to make new AI systems that were more readily controlled. The AI we were using for the crawl now was the old kind, and therefore this was possibly the residuals' last chance to achieve their goals, which is why they were finally making their move. Both sides were making their move.

I knew exactly how far they were willing to go to achieve their goals. I knew better, perhaps, than anyone in the galaxy.

The thing was, I didn't know what their *true* goal was. The *why* of it all. And why and how the two types of residual were different. Nobody seemed to know. This blind spot was so, so dangerous. The fact the leader of the entire Syndicate was sticking his nose into this was telling. *Something* had changed since the end of the previous floor, regarding their understanding of the residuals. Of Agatha.

There were so many different parties mixed up in this, and it made my head hurt. The Syndicate council. The two different types of residuals. The Apothecary. The goat people from The Plenty. The Open Intellect Pacifist Network. Those crazy weirdo Nebulars. Hell, even Odette.

And those were just the parties I knew about. They all wanted something different. It was like trying to solve a blank puzzle while half the pieces were missing. And some of the pieces that were there were decoys.

Now Agatha was looking directly for me. Had asked about me by name. What did that mean? Should I try to seek her out, or should I avoid her? Did she know about what had happened between me and Paulie? About what *really* had happened?

I sighed, remembering.

None of that would matter if we let ourselves get surrounded by enemy soldiers. We had to get out of this castle. I resumed my rapid placement of traps as Donut shouted orders to everybody.

We couldn't put traps in the throne room, but that was okay. As I worked, Mongo and Rend came stumbling out of the room, both covered in blue gore.

The moment they left, a new notification popped up.

Warning! A throne room you own is currently occupied by Madness enemy forces. If you don't return to claim this throne in six hours, this castle and the associated land will be ceded to the Dream.

A timer started counting down. I reached over and closed the door, and I placed a freeze trap just in front of it. We'd left Lockjaw the mercenary in there all alone. I'd dropped a chair for him along with some snacks. He had strict rules not to leave until the six hours were up, or if someone came and forced him out.

The other mercenary, the one for the Dream. I sent him out and told him to start walking back to his territory.

This wasn't some grand, Machiavellian plan on my part. I didn't know what was going to happen after we left. There was no way we could defend land that wasn't attached to our main force. Not yet. If we let the Viceroys take it, they'd own a three sections of land. I didn't care either way, but I imagined none of the other members of the Bloc would be huge fans of letting that happen. And by making the Madness mercenary sit in there, it would at least force the other leaders to make a decision. If Epitome Tagg was as much of an ass as I suspected, he was going to make a move and usurp poor

Lockjaw out of that room. That would, hopefully, piss off Architect Houston of the Madness.

I had the impression none of these leaders liked each other very much. So hopefully this would sow a little discord. We would see. In the meantime, we had to get out of here.

I looked at Donut. "Ready?"

She jumped to my shoulder. "Two down. Who are we getting next?"

We needed to get the nagas, but that required a *very* delicate hand. The cogs of that operation were already in motion. We had a small special operations team put together to deal with it specifically, and we couldn't make our move until we were ready. And we couldn't make that move at all if our northern front buckled in on us.

I grinned. "It's blob-hunting season."

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Our new mercenaries wouldn't fit in *Party Planner*. Toyotomi was heavier than a cretin and wouldn't even fit by himself. So instead, we had them grab their transport and head straight for the border with Shanty Town. There were five similar vehicles, minus the armor plating, parked behind the castle, and we had them take them all.

We had the mercenaries head northwest toward the border of Shanty Town. There, they would enter the city and move into Posse territory by bypassing the Naga territory altogether.

There were a handful of guard outposts between here and there containing NPC guards and mercenaries that were now on our team, and we'd have them picked up along the way. Li Jun and Li Na were expecting them, with strict orders to separate out the true NPCs with the off-worlders. All captured off-worlders, now under the banner of the Princess Posse, required specific handling before we could give them a modicum of trust. We would have Li Na take care of that part.

I worried about the integrity of Shanty Town. We had a full battalion—the 107th White Dragons— parked in the makeshift town. But the town was shaped like a literal donut that could be attacked from just about any angle. If and when the attack came, it would likely be from several places at once.

Still, none of the enemy had bothered attacking the town just yet, likely because they figured it wasn't necessary. Entering Shanty

Town would open themselves up to getting attacked by Larracos's defense system without a way to fight back as long as we were still in the game. Plus, the town's rules were different. There was no throne room. They could only take it by killing me. The moment we were defeated, Larracos would open up if the Bloc truce remained in effect, and they could just raze the entire town like they usually did.

Still, the town was a nice, juicy target that bordered every slice of the pie. They could freely enter the town without restrictions or corridors, though they'd still only be allowed to leave via their own territory during this first part of the battles.

It was just one of a million little things I now had to worry about.

Just south of the former Prism castle was a small shack, similar to the bait shack on our own property, which contained a saferoom entrance. I left a hidden landmine trap right in front of the door, and Donut and I returned to base using that entrance, something we could finally do thanks to the doggie door upgrade. Louis took *Party Planner* back the long way as well, flying over Shanty Town and skipping the Naga territory, and only after we warned them he was coming. No reason to risk getting shot down by friendly fire, especially since we'd just erected a pair of anti-air towers. Louis would return to the main airport over our castle, haul ass reloading the bomb bays, and get back out there to aid Florin.

"Do you think we can use this entrance now for a sneak attack?" Donut asked as we entered our personal space. "We can give the operation a special name like the other one. We can call it the Bamboozle."

"Maybe," I said. "But the bomb I left will probably blow it up if it's triggered. If they find the trap, there's no doubt they'll have something of their own rigged up to keep us from using it to sneak back."

The main room of our personal space was empty for the first time in a long time, except for the cleaner bot, which gave a beep at us as we rushed in. We would both take quick showers and then head back out there.

Rend started grunting and jumping at the food boxes in the kitchen. Mongo saw this, and he, too, started waving his arms,

demanding food.

"You two just had sushi. You don't need to eat," Donut said. "We don't have time."

Rend made a petulant squealing noise I'd never heard before.

"Carl, control your... Hey, not fair!" Donut said, interrupting herself. "I can only be in the saferoom for like half an hour!"

"Ah, damnit," I said. "I forgot about that. We won't be long."

The moment we went inside, the blood bar on my interface activated. The saferoom restrictions we'd faced at the end of the sixth floor had turned back on once the fighting started. Nobody could camp in saferooms for long anymore. The bar would drain while you were inside, and it could only be refilled by killing stuff. Mine was full, giving me about eight hours.

The cleaner bot gave an angry beep at all the mud and blood we were trailing on the floor. Donut moved off to her room, and I moved off to my own, Rend following too closely and bumping into my legs.

I was exhausted, and I had several achievements, but I didn't have time to go over them. Still, I had that Legendary 1914 loot box, so I'd have to make time. I'd get to it in a minute. I stepped over my "bed," refreshing my exhaustion levels. I jumped through the auto shower, which cleaned my face and my clothes. I still felt dirty after.

I tried to coax Rend into the shower, and he refused. He was still pouting over the food box. I picked him up and placed him in the shower unit.

"Oh god," I grunted as I lifted him. His little legs waved in protest. "How much do you weigh now?" He'd gone up to level 10, and he was about as tall as my knee. I wouldn't be able to lift him for much longer. "Oh, quit crying. You're filthy. You need a shower. It takes like two seconds." I left him in the unit and closed the glass. He turned and pressed his face against it, looking at me with a pitiful, quivering expression while the magical shower cleaned him off. A few seconds, and it was done. I opened the door, and he ran out and started rubbing his giant face against my legs and giggling. He then looked up at me and gave a menacing, hungry grunt.

"Good boy. Now get off of my foot. We're in a hurry."

By the time I peeled him off me, I had literally two dozen new messages I had to quickly go over. As I started to click through them, I realized I needed the map, and I rushed from the saferoom and moved to the empty flag room, Rend following closely. Now that the castle was built large enough to encompass the bait shack saferoom entrance, I didn't have to go outside to do this, but there was a confusing line of twists and turns. Our castle was literally five or six times the size D'Nadia's had been.

I went through the litany of updates from across the entire campaign. The map spread out in front of me as I checked in with each battalion in turn.

"Christ," I muttered. The thing had just started, and it was a mess. Lights blinked everywhere on the map, indicating troop positions. We had seven battalions, and most of them were split even further and scattered across the map. That plus two dozen small, autonomous SOP squads of various sizes. Each of these was indicated on the battle map with an icon, like we were playing one of those hex-based tabletop war games. Looking at it all at once filled me with dread.

Tran and his 102nd Bulwark Battalion, plus Boomer and the 106th Bloody Leeches were settled back in their trenches at the southern border after they'd filled the existing enemy positions with *Fill Trench* scrolls and wrecked the remaining artillery batteries. They wanted to loot the bodies floating in the acid trench, but they didn't have time. There was still a lot of chaos as the former Prism soldiers extricated themselves from the remaining Bloc soldiers. Boomer was salty about us not pushing to take the Naga castle, and I didn't blame him. That would've been the safest and smartest play, especially considering the additional NPCs we'd potentially gain. I didn't care.

For now, the retreating enemy forces were scattered throughout Naga territory, and without a spy in their midst, we weren't sure how they were handling it. I could see the positions of the new troops, and the system allowed us to give them orders. Tran was handling that. As he did this, he was also resuming his defense of the southern front while Boomer pulled most of the 106th and headed

north to help Florin. A small portion of the battalion stayed behind to help mop up the loose ends of our first engagement.

Dong Quixote and the rest of our personal retinue were with them and would meet up with us at the northern front, with the exception of the cretins, who'd remain here at base.

Elle and Imani were back together and were also headed north. Florin's 101st, the Crocodiles, were the main force assigned to the northern defense, and they were currently backed up by the 105th Scream Warriors. The 103rd Recon Legionnaires were also helping shore up the defense. That left Tipid's 104th Naughty Little Piggies defending the castle and Li Na's 107th White Dragons scattered around Shanty Town while they bankrupted our coffers building the city defenses.

I leaned back to take it all in. Despite how utterly surrounded we were, I reveled in the rare moment of silence. Silence other than Rend, who'd found something on the floor and was chewing loudly on it.

I thought about what had happened when we confronted D'Nadia. I'd seen my father in myself at that moment.

You're scaring me, Donut had said.

I still needed to process it.

I never got the chance. I received two messages at once.

Donut: DID YOU OPEN YOUR 1914 BOX YET? I GOT A SPELLBOOK CALLED *WAR CRIME*. I'M NOT SURE IF I SHOULD READ IT OR NOT. THE BOOK ITSELF IS BLEEDING AND CRYING AND IT'S DISGUSTING.

Florin: Mate, we're falling back. The cheese sticks are throwing everything at us. They're finally showing us their armor. This is the big push. Have Louis drop what he has to protect our retreat, but you should reroute the 106th to the castle. Once we're backed out of the opening corridor, they're just gonna flow around us and head straight for the FUPA. If there are enemy spies near base, this is when they're going to strike. We'll do what we can.

That was followed by literally hundreds of trap notifications, meaning they were already rushing past our first line of trenches. I quickly filtered it so the ones from the northern front were silenced. That left only one, and I felt a chill. I was already up and running before I finished reading the sentence.

Trap Message: Your Silent Alarm trap labeled "Home base Anti-Air Battery" has been triggered!

A moment later, the walls of the base shook with an explosion.

Home Base Anti-Air Battery has been destroyed.

Colonel Boomer: We just got buzzed by a group of flyers that ain't ours. Moving low and fast. Headed toward our castle. They'll be there soon!

Colonel Tipid: All alarm! Enemy in the base! Enemy in the base!

I was already running toward the outside when a second explosion rocked the castle, almost knocking me off my feet. The loud boom rocked the walls. Behind me, Rend called out, giggling, demanding for me to wait. I couldn't wait.

"Rend, follow!"

Carl: Donut, meet me at the entrance to the castle! Be careful!

Donut: ME AND SLEDGIE AND BOMO ARE COMING. WHERE ARE YOU?

Your Castle Hangar Bay has been destroyed. Any parked air vehicles will be grounded until it is repaired!

That, too, had to have been sabotage. Our shields would protect against a dropped bomb. This had to be the missing Madness Monkeywrenchers. How did they get past our sentries? The now-familiar sound of pulse rifles started pounding across the base.

Colonel Tipid: They're not bombers! They're transports! Paratroopers inbound! They're getting through the protections! All hands! All hands!

Goddamnit.

A line of local troop casualties started running down my interface. Dozens and dozens of them. Names of both crawlers and former

crawlers. Names of people I recognized. How? How were they doing this? How were they getting in?

Donut: CARL, CARL THERE'S AN EXTRA DOOR HERE. IN THE SITUATIONAL WHATEVER IT'S CALLED SPACE. BOMO NOTICED IT. IT'S A DOOR FOR THE SAFEROOM FOR THE REAVER TEAM. THEY'RE DOING WHAT WE WERE GOING TO DO. THEY'RE SNEAK ATTACKING US USING THE SAFEROOM DOOR. THE BAMBOOZLE! THEY'RE IN THE CASTLE!

"Fuck," I said, stopping.

Carl: Bomo, Sledge. Guard that door! Stay there!

Holy shit. When we exited the guild saferoom and went into the FUPA via the bait shop, the situational space had turned into a long corridor consisting of multiple doors, all one after another in a long hallway. This was because of all the crawlers coming and going.

Even though we'd just been talking about this, it hadn't occurred to me that the enemy could possibly have already used the bait shop. The off-worlder sponsors could also use personal spaces. They also could purchase a doggie door upgrade. Meaning if one of them had *ever* entered through that bait shop, they could come back that way. And since the bait shop was now literally inside the castle, we had stupidly given them access to the stronghold. How long had that door been there?

It didn't matter now. That still didn't explain how the paratroopers were getting in from above. Unless...

I cast *Ping*.

Dozens of enemy combatants appeared outside the castle. There wasn't a single enemy dot inside I could see. Yet, I saw something that confused me. I quickly returned to the casualty list and saw a name. **Reid Gunn**. He was a human mage, one of several who had joined the former crawlers in building the shield around the base. He was dead.

Yet... his dot showed him as active. He was with a group of mages. They were outside the castle, in one of the defensive bunkers. As I watched, one of the blue dots next to him turned to an X. Then another.

What? What was happening? How could he be dead, but still standing?

Think, goddamnit. *Confusion kills.*

Brain worms.

That had to be it. We had mages infected with brain worms. Was it one? Was it many? Didn't it take days for an infiltrator to fully take over?

I thought of Chris, who'd been enslaved by Maggie. No, not an infiltrator. Reid was listed as dead. It'd just happened. This was Gondii. A Valtay worm.

I sent a quick message to Rosetta, who was nearby, telling her to take him out.

I still didn't understand what was fully happening, and I wouldn't ever understand if I didn't get out there.

I ran toward the main door of the FUPA just as three forms rushed in. It was a human crawler and Bucket Boy, the young crocodilian medic. They dragged between them a former crawler. A yenk. The tall, hairy alien screamed in pain. The entire front of his body was a mass of red, where he'd taken a direct hit from a pulse.

I cross-referenced the names of all three with the casualty list.

The one on the left. The crawler. He was a level-58 human named **Charles Andrew.** He was a class called an **Armored Mage**.

He was listed as dead.

"Carl," Bucket Boy said, his voice a panic. "The field hospital is overrun! We have..."

Before he could finish, I launched myself at the mage. I tackled the man, who let out an *oof* as I crashed into him. All three of them went down. The injured Yenk being held between the two called out in new pain as I formed a fist and started pounding the mage with my full might.

I punched the mage in the face, over and over.

"What are you doing?" Bucket Boy called. "What are you doing?"

When you're punching a guy in the face over and over with a metal, spiked gauntlet, it doesn't take long for them to die. It makes a big mess.

"Get back," I said to the crocodilian, who looked up at me in confusion. I grabbed the arm of the moaning Yenk and pulled him away from the dead crawler. My breaths were coming in pants. "Get back," I repeated.

The worm appeared a moment later. The worm's name was actually **Goldblum**. Bucket Boy shrieked and started to scramble away. The small, black and white thing emerged from the gore of the dead crawler's face, like a tuxedo-colored earthworm testing the air after a rain.

I stomped down, killing it.

An achievement flashed, but I waved it away.

Warlord Carl: We have brain worms amongst the troops. Everyone, cross-reference the guy to your left and right with the casualty list.

Rend finally caught up and moved to stand next to me. He took in the scene, seemed to shrug, and moved to eat the dead crawler.

"No, Rend," I said, still out of breath. "We don't eat our own."

An ominous message appeared on my local feed.

Fall back. Defend the castle. Defend the castle. Defend to the death.

I clicked over to the local band.

Warlord Carl: Unleash Tina!

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<Note Added by Crawler Priestly, 14th edition>

In the heat of it... in the absolute, scorching heat of battle, one learns who they really are. What they really want. One faces their greatest fears, yes, but worse, much worse, one oftentimes also faces their greatest desires laid bare. For me, they are the same, and it is my devastation.

Stab, stab, stab.

Splash Zone, Doctor Bones, and several of the strippers huddled around the entrance to the castle as pulse rifle blasts thumped against our pop-up magical defenses. I couldn't remember what these shield spells were called, but it was similar to *Protective Shell*. Instead of a bubble, it came in the form of large, fan-shaped screens. The shields had no time limit, but once cast, they could be hurt with damage, though they were effective against tech-based weapons. We only had one entrance to the castle, not including the now-blown-to-bits air hangar. This was where we were making our stand.

We'd been caught with our pants down. Tipid's 104th Naughty Little Piggies were in charge of base defense, but they were

currently spread to the wind, on assignment in the flat lands around the base in all directions, finishing up the scout towers and manning early-warning defenses several kilometers from here. The plan was to have several thousand defenders around the castle at any given time, but we hadn't been ready. Now we were paying for it. Especially since our most crucial platoon of home defenders, the Beefy Boys SOF, were half dead. This was the squad which consisted of mages whose sole purpose was to make certain all the wall buffs and base shields were always topped off.

We had defenders racing toward us from all directions, but that did us no good right now. There were only a few hundred of us. I braced myself as a thrown grenade got caught in the *One Way* shield. The grenade hung in mid-air and detonated just twenty feet in front of our shield. It stopped the grenades, but it did nothing for the pulse blasts.

Literally dozens of buffs flowed over and into us. Every one of us now glistened with multi-hued shields, and the names over everybody's heads were ridiculously long and ever changing.

But again, the damn pulse guns. They still did their damage. They still burned. Other than the shields right in front of us, all these buffs and protections did was dull the hit. Sort of. Most of these buffs were stat-enhancing. A non-magical blast powerful enough to punch a hole in a tank wasn't going to be stopped by a 10% buff to dexterity.

"Oh, I simply cannot wait for the real magic to turn back on," Doctor Bones rumbled. The former DJ of the Penis Parade was back in his skeletal form. "You heathens are dead. All of you!"

"We're not going to survive long enough for that to happen if you don't pick up that crossbow," Splash Zone said as he popped up and fired a shot. The bolt cracked harmlessly against the building across the way: the newly built, mural-covered barracks.

We had three types of enemies in the camp. We had the Madness Monkeywrenchers, who were invisible. We had the Reaver paratroopers who were massing at the bottom of the hill, on the other side of the main barracks building. And mixed in with it all were a handful of our own mages who'd been assassinated and

taken over by the gondii brain worms. If any worms were left in the castle, we didn't know where they were. Rosetta was inside, hunting down any possible compromised soldiers.

And all of this was just the initial attack. They were softening us up for the main force, which was hauling ass toward us from the north.

They'd simply bypassed Florin and the 101st's fallback position. The enemy had left enough troops to occupy our main forces, but the bulk of them would be on us in about half of an hour.

Carl: Louis, what's your status?

Louis: We've finished the repair from the inside, but we gotta get outside to manually fix the portal, otherwise we're gonna stay grounded.

Damnit. That wasn't going to happen any time soon. The "door" to the hangar was literally atop the castle, and anyone who went up there would be a prime target. *I should've made Louis fly back to the other base.*

"I didn't know we'd be dealing with Valtay cheese sticks," Tipid gasped from next to me. The crest had been hit in the shoulder, and the blast had almost taken his arm off. "Those fuckers are dangerous."

"Splash, fill that channel with water!" I called as Bucket Boy cast *Heal* on Tipid. I held a banger sphere tightly in my right hand as more blasts peppered the shield around my head.

"There," Donut called from next to me, peering through the translucent screen. "There by the entrance to the new barracks building! He's standing right in front of the mural of the piggie face!"

I popped up, aimed, and I hurled the metal ball with the full force of my strength. There was a crack, followed by a blood splatter. His invisibility stuttered, and now his outline was clear. A moment later, and he was peppered with crossbow bolts. The form crumpled to the ground, and his Madness mask fell away, revealing him to actually be a soother mercenary, not a true Viceroy.

I dove back under cover as more shots hit the shield, which was holding strong.

Next to me, Mongo squawked in outrage. He wanted to get out there. Rend sat to my left, bouncing up and down in anticipation. He'd been hit twice already by pulse blasts, and all they did was make the level-10 meatball creature fall backward and squeal.

We had anti-magic charms all over base, but apparently the monkeywrencher's invisibility was some sort of tech-based cloak, something even the veterans weren't anticipating. The cloaks were high-quality. Something that existed in the real world, but were considered prohibitively expensive for all but the richest of soldiers. The anti-magic bubbles didn't detect them. Luckily, Donut could still see them with her glasses. Sort of. She had to use the heat setting, and it took a moment for her to detect them. We had a few other defenders with similar abilities as well, and we were picking them off one-by-one.

It's not going to matter, I thought miserably. *They're just keeping us occupied*. *They just need to keep us pinned for a little longer.*

Colonel Rosetta: I need backup! I need edifice explosion suppression inside the castle! Fast! They got to Lonnie! Who do we got? I don't care if it's not your specialty. To the saferoom exit!

From my left, a bune mage named Huey jumped into the castle, buzzing off on his small wings. Another mage, a human crawler named **Nick Sheets** darted from behind his shield before he was hit with a pulse blast, which sent him spinning. I tossed a drop shield at him, but a second blast finished him off before the shield activated. His body sizzled like bacon in a hot pan before catching on fire.

Goddamnit.

Carl: Rosetta, what's happening?

Rosetta: You need to find where Lonnie is and kill the worm fucker in his head. He's not in the castle, but he's systematically turning off the interior protections, one by one from afar. At any moment, that Reaver door is going to open, and their automatons will flood out and into the castle. Setting up defenses and flamers to stop them now.

Lonnie had been one of the more talented mage veterans. The head of the Beefy Boys, which he'd named as a joke after someone

said he had to "Beef up the wall defenses." The one in charge of shoring up the interior castle walls with spells. He'd been alive just a few minutes ago. They'd targeted him, got into his head, and used him to start turning off the stacked protection spells. If they were deliberately softening up the interior, that meant Rosetta was correct. The next thing that came out of that door in the situational hallway would be a bomb.

I thought of how we created utter chaos in Zockau using an inconvenient doorway. Someone from the Reaver team must have gotten through that bait shop door back when this space was still used by the mantis team.

Another mage, bleeding heavily from his forehead, jumped behind our shield, cast something to send it back up to 100%, and disappeared inside the castle.

I pulled up my map, looking for Lonnie. The former crawler was a half-elf, meaning he'd been from a relatively early season. There. His dot was moving away from a line of X's in a bunker on the side of the hill. He was now in the mix of purple dots on the far side of the barracks, representing the Reaver paratroopers, who had set up a defensive position inside our own base. These guys weren't eager to get themselves killed. Instead, they were content to sit there and hold open the door for the main enemy force.

My heart sank as a new realization hit me. Lonnie knew about Justice Light, and our last line of defense.

We had to get to him, and fast.

"How do the brain worms work?" I asked Tipid as I rapidly composed new orders. And where the hell was Tina? I sent a new message off to her handlers. "With the memories, I mean. Do they know everything right away?"

"The gondii worms can move into any dead form and take it over, and that includes learning their memories. But it takes some time to know everything. It takes some time before they know what to look for, and they'll have big memory gaps for a while."

I grunted. "We need to focus on the compromised mages. And we need to do it fast, before they figure out how to crack the throne room."

"I could have told you that," Donut said as she pointed out another monkeywrencher to the crossbowmen. "You can smuggle them anywhere, and they can crawl in your ear, kill you, and take you over in just a few seconds. It's absolutely disgusting, but they're quite good allies when they're on your side. You can fit like five of them in your mouth at once."

Tipid nodded. Despite being healed, he still seemed to be in pain. Bucket Boy's healing ability wasn't all that great. "The Valtay charter requires they only take over the brains of people who were willing, but not all gondii live on the correct side of the law. I've heard rumors of such outlaw mercenaries. There's a popular tunnel drama about a crew of them. Called *The Maggot Squad*. They're some of the most expensive mercs in the galaxy. At least on the show. The Valtay government hates the show, but it's really popular." A blast hit the shield, and we all fell back. A moment later, Splash Zone and Doctor Bones high-fived as they took out another invisible merc.

"Are they good guys or bad guys on the show?" Donut asked. "There... in front of the X over the mantis face! Good shot, Alex!"

"Good guys on the show," Tipid said. His eyes flashed as he spoke. He, too, was rapidly composing orders. "But there's this other squad that are also gondii, and they are bad. I never got to see the season finale because I came here."

"Spoiler alert," Donut said. "The good guys win. That's what happens on shows like that." She suddenly hissed and cast *Hole* in a seemingly empty spot right in front of us. She cast and snapped the spell off. Half of a Monkeywrencher appeared on the ground. A grenade rolled away as he toppled over. We all ducked as it went off. The blast painted the ground with mercenary guts.

"Awesome, Donut!" I said, patting her on the head. She was absolutely rigid as she scanned for more enemies.

"I'm just glad I finally found a spell I can use," she said. "On top of the building. Goodness! That one sure is fat for a mercenary." A moment later, the form tumbled away backward onto the roof.

"That was a Dreadnaught wearing a Viceroy mask," Splash Zone said as he rapidly reloaded his small-sized crossbow. "I haven't seen a real Viceroy amongst any of the Monkeywrenchers. You'll know

them when you see them. They look like my mother-in-law before she gets her daily injections."

"Wait, Splashy, you didn't tell me you were married!" Donut exclaimed. "What's your wife's name?"

"Snail Trail," he said. He popped up and fired, but he hit nothing. He hissed in frustration. "She works the early shift at Bitches in the Desperado Club. Her mom works with her, but the later shift. Her name is Grandma Sticky. I haven't had the chance to talk to them since the club reopened."

"Grandma Sticky?" Donut asked. "Your mother-in-law's name is Grandma Sticky? And your wife is named Snail Trail?"

"You should see her pole routine. You wouldn't think a goblin could move like that, but it's pretty amazing."

"Wait, are you talking about Snail Trail's routine or Grandma Sticky's? And are you telling me you're married to a..."

"Holy shit, can we focus on the battle please," I said.

"I am focused, Carl. I've never felt more focused on anything in my life."

Warning: Walls numbered 17, 19, and 33 have lost all their protections.

Dozens of such messages kept appearing and then blinked away. It was like both sides had access to a bank of wall switches for the same lightbulbs, and we were going back and forth, flipping them all on and off. The moment enough of those bulbs turned off at the same time, I knew that door in the saferoom hallway was going to open, and it would be all over. That's how I would do it.

Frustration overwhelmed me. For each moment that passed, the more the enemy would know about our interior defenses. I growled, looking at the map. "We need to move. We need to get to the compromised mages before they do more damage." All of the mages were now in the middle of the group of paratroopers at the bottom of the hill. I sent another, angrier message about Tina.

"But if your wife doesn't have legs, how does she do *that*?" Donut was asking, having ignored my admonishment. "There, peeking around the left corner!"

Tipid also continued to talk, and it took me a moment to realize he was still talking about the Valtay worms. It was just like Donut and Splash Zone. He was burning off nervous energy, or something. He talked with an almost manic ferocity. "And you really gotta watch out if they don't care about the body they're in. Once they're in, they can take over a body in seconds, reboot it, and animate it long enough to repair whatever damage caused the death in the first place. But if they're not planning on staying long, they can and do hop from host to host. They can 'overclock' the bodies, too. Make them do stuff they couldn't normally. They're much more dangerous than the scree, despite what people think."

"Christ," I said. "Man, are you feeling okay?"

"It's a side effect of the *Extreme Focus* buff," a new voice said, settling next to me. Imani, but she, too, was talking faster than she normally did. Rend grunted and started pushing against her leg while giggling. "Its effectiveness just doubled when I landed in the castle. Everyone in this zone is given a buff to their dexterity, and it helps with multitasking. But when it's a little too powerful, it makes chatty people, like Donut, *extra* chatty. It's like we've all been given a dose of speed. It doesn't seem to be affecting you. Probably because of your Mind Focus, but I'm not sure. You should copy your health screen and send it to me."

"Imani! Where did you come from?"

A whole mess of crawlers were now coming from the castle, moving to the shields, casting new ones. Dozens of them. *Good*, I thought. *We can move out*.

"A group of us made a detour into Shanty Town and used the doggie door. Elle is in the hallway, waiting for the bad guys to come out. Florin and Katia are still with the bulk of the 101st. We gotta push these guys back, and then Louis and his gremlins can come out and repair the bomb bay."

"All right," I said. "Donut, how many are left? We gotta..." I paused as I finally received a response to one of my orders.

<u>Kiwi</u>: I'm sorry, Carl. It's too dangerous. She will stay here, and that's final. She's just a child. You just ordered the

gnome and the changeling children to stay out of the battle, so why is Tina different?

It was still bizarre to me that scarred, one-eyed, psychotic Kiwi the velociraptor was now a pregnant Ursine. Her personality had completely changed when she'd returned to her bear form. She'd gone from a dangerous, murderous pack leader to a soft-spoken, skittish woman who spent her day cooking food for all the troops.

The woman wasn't wrong. It *was* hypocritical of me to use Tina. I'd been deliberately ignoring the issue. I'd ordered Louis to kick Bonnie and Skarn off *Party Planner* once we'd landed. Even though they were NPCs, they were children. They looked like children. They acted like children. All the kids in our camp had already seen and experienced more than any child should, and it was fucked-up to deliberately use them in battle. It seemed like a step too far.

But Tina was different. Wasn't she? We needed her. Did that matter? Or did that make it worse? I'd killed hundreds of children by this point. I hadn't done it on purpose. Children die in war. So why was I hesitating now? My hesitation didn't even make sense to myself.

"Actually," Imani said. She was still examining me. "It says the buff is active." She shrugged. She turned to Tipid. "Oh my goodness, Bucket Boy. You have to check their pain levels after you heal them! I told you this already. If they're outworlders, they heal differently."

I ignored this as I thought of my brother. Of Asher. I thought of his mother, hugging him after she'd poisoned our father. I thought of Donut sobbing at the end of the Butcher's Masquerade.

She's a child, too.

We're going to have to do some pretty horrible things just to survive.

I composed a message. *Kiwi, she will be fine. We've buffed her up. We'll all die if she doesn't come out.* I hesitated before sending it. And with pulse blasts peppering the shield all around me, with time running out, I sat there and contemplated what it meant to make such an order.

But at that moment, I realized something. Survival had more than one meaning.

No, I thought. It's Kiwi's decision. *Goddamnit*. I erased the message and started to compose a new order. We'd have to push without her. But before I could finish, Donut interrupted me.

Warlord Donut: GET TINA OUT HERE RIGHT NOW. MY GOODNESS, WHAT'S TAKING SO LONG? DON'T MAKE ME SEND MONGO IN THERE TO DRAG HER OUT. DO IT NOW!

And before Kiwi could even answer, someone to my left shouted "duck!" as the giant doors behind us flew open all the way. Tina finally did come out, screeching and roaring with glee and waving her dead-again magic wand.

The effect was immediate. The bolts against our shields had already started to wane as the Monkeywrenchers died or fled back to the other side of the barracks. But now all the blasts focused on the giant dinosaur who, apparently, could also find the invisible enemies. She screamed with joy and chomped on something next to the barracks. Sparks flew as the enemy, who'd been setting up what looked like a heavy gun, literally exploded in her mouth. Tina shook her head as multiple shield health bars appeared, but then refilled.

"I mean, really," Donut muttered from my left as another enemy went flying into the air, guts trailing where he'd been ripped in half. "We really need to do something about these people not following our orders right away. We need more team-building exercises. Wait, I have an idea."

Her headset appeared. She jumped upon Mongo's back, and together, they leapt up in the air, jumping astonishingly high, landing atop the front of the castle behind us, just above the door. She shouted loud enough for everyone to hear, even the enemies at the bottom of the hill.

"Comrades! There are over 100 bad guys on the other side of that building. They think they can just drop out of the sky and land in our base? Some of them are wormheads who killed our friends. Are we going to let that stand? I don't think so. We gotta kill them, and we gotta do it fast! Alpha squad card reserves, to the roof! Everyone else with cards, save them for the main force. Let's show these cheese sticks what the Princess Posse does to trespassers. Tina! Sic 'em!"

All around me, cheers rose as everyone jumped to their feet and started to shout.

I exchanged a look with Imani, who was staring at Donut open-mouthed.

"Comrades?" Imani asked as I reached up and grabbed Rend. He giggled incoherently.

"She's been hanging out with Rosetta too much."

"This warlord thing suits her," Imani said. She sounded a little sad. I felt it, too.

Tina finally noticed the mass of enemies at the bottom of the hill, who had started to panic fire their weapons at her. One of the shields on her fizzled out. Then another. The giant allosaurus waved her wand indignantly, let out a howl, and she surged down the hill, her pink tutu flapping in the wind.

"For the Posse!" Donut roared, and as one, we charged.

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We'd deliberately placed the barracks building on the lip of the hill so the enemy wouldn't have a straight shot at the front door of the castle, but it also blocked our own line-of-sight to the bottom of the hill. Florin had seen this and demanded everyone with a crawler inventory system to have either a *Jump* scroll or a ladder ready to go in their inventory.

Donut, still astride Mongo, leapt from the castle to the top of the barracks, clearing the distance easily. On the ground, shouting defenders flowed around the colorful barracks building on both sides, but a group of us moved to the roof of the building so we'd have a clear view of the enemy's position below us. I scaled the building, using my *Climb* skill, to reach the roof in seconds.

The dead dreadnaught remained up here, his invisibility cloak sparking, causing him to stutter in and out of existence. I scooped up his body and pulled it into my inventory. I took the strange, faceless mask as well.

I rushed across the roof just in time to see Tina angrily stomp into the mass of enemy soldiers. She'd gained momentum as she rushed down the hill, and the crowd of metal-covered mercenaries scrambled from their positions to avoid her charge. They poured fire into her from all sides as she reached down and chomped a soldier, sparks flying.

I skidded to a stop at the edge of the building, dropping Rend, who bounced and ran to my side. Mages on either side of me were casting new shields on Tina. It was a losing fight. They were going to overwhelm her pretty soon unless we got in there. I tossed a hob-lobber toward a heavy gun position on the far side of their rapidly-deployed defense, but it got stuck in an anti-grenade, *One Way* shield, similar to the ones we utilized. It detonated in the air over everyone's heads. I changed to tossing smoke mantles as I examined the group below us.

Almost all of them were Reavers. Or, at least, mercs who were normally employed by the Reavers. These guys were different than anyone we'd seen before. They had no NPCs amongst them.

They were all heavily armored androids of some sort, and they were terrifying to look at. They seemed out of place here.

My first thought was "space marines." Though not all of them had human-like heads. I thought of the late, armor-covered Paz when I saw them, but instead of shining, plate armor, this was dinged and dirty, olive-colored armor mixed in with cybernetic enhancements. That, plus these guys were all carrying massive rifles.

I knew the real Reavers were *all* robot, with just a little bit of biological brain left over hidden somewhere inside their robot shells. And they could shapeshift, sort of. Something about nanobot-sized, individual machines all coming together to make one.

These mercenaries were somewhere between. More robotic than those weird Nebulars, and certainly a lot scarier.

In the moment before Tina chomped him in half, I examined one particularly large soldier with a human-like head.

Gunnery Sergeant X2. Reaver Security Force Cyborg Drop Trooper. Level 53.

First off, I'd like to apologize for these guys being here. Frankly, I'm just as disgusted as you are that we've allowed this Spelljammer/Warhammer bullshit to infect our good, old-fashioned dungeon crawl. Some of it's pretty damn cool, yeah, but what about consistency? You don't expect Yorbish Gut Parasites to suddenly appear in the middle of a

Shakespearean play and lay their eggs in Lady Macbeth's eyes, and there's no reason for you crawlers to have to deal with this stuff here. But what are we gonna do? Compromises had to be made. Don't worry. This is the last floor we'll let it get this far. I've already informed the Valtay I've rejected their updated plans for the 11th floor.

Also, just FYI. These guys are all wearing the "light" version of their armor. If I'd allowed them all to come in here with their heavy duty, Cronus-class power armor, they'd already be putting those collectible, heart-covered boxers on clearance in all waystation gift shops across the galaxy.

Anyway, to understand why a perfectly normal person would want to slowly turn himself into a robot whose sole purpose is to invade planetary colonies, shoot innocent civilians, and spend all day believing he's a fascist-fighting patriot of industrial capitalism, you have to first understand where these guys come from. Blah, blah, blah, tough childhood in the pollution-choked shadow of the behemoth, Reaver moons where most of the physical goods in the galaxy are manufactured. Blah, blah, drugs, street gangs, 80% taxes, boo-hoo, my mommy is a hooker, no way out, etc. You know the story.

If you can't beat 'em, join 'em. That's a common theme amongst these misguided souls. Not all of them were bloodthirsty nutjobs when they stepped into the recruiter's office. Most were just hungry and without hope or direction.

That's not to say you should feel sorry for them. Not these guys, as these are all members of Warlord Fang's personal defense deployment.

Rule of thumb. If they have more than two or three cybernetics installed, you know they've voluntarily re-upped at least once. You only get one free upgrade a deployment. Or more, if something on your body gets shot off.

Gunny here was once known as Mr. Jake Tortokai. His designation changes each time he's deployed. At this moment, seconds before his 400-cycle journey to gain Reaver citizenship comes to a permanent and abrupt end at the jaws of a pissed-off, confused child soldier, he is known as X2. He has 23 enhancements to his body.

And since this is the first time you've bothered to examine someone from the Reaver system, we might as well add a bit of context to all of this.

If you're not a vat-born progeny of the Initial, gaining Reaver citizenship, which comes with profit-sharing and a whole lot of additional financial benefits, is an epic pain in the ass. First of all, you have to lose your biological form to get your foot in the door. That first "upgrade" is free. Anything else, there's only two ways to do it.

One, you can pay for all the upgrades yourself. That's usually a non-starter because the only companies smart enough to hire a moron who allowed the Reavers to cut off a perfectly good hand and replace it with a grasping claw that needs thousands of credits a cycle in upkeep are the space equivalent of a Wendy's or the interstellar carwash. Nothing wrong with such jobs, of course, but they ain't paying enough to fund additional cybernetic upgrades, that's for sure.

So, the second way to do it is to work for the Reavers. For free. They'll feed you, house you, and you get all the healthcare you want. That plus one more upgrade in exchange for a three-cycle deployment worth of work.

The work ain't easy. These guys get thrown feet-first into the fire. They're dropped onto land leases to evict the current settlers so the Reavers can expand their factories. People, like they always do, fight back of course. Such is the way of the universe.

All of that is to say these guys have been fighting a lot longer than you have. This isn't their home turf, and they're

not used to Option-three enhancement-zone fighting techniques.

But they should not be underestimated.

I shook my head, and I stopped myself from uttering a complaint about the extra-long description. The last thing I needed was the AI throwing another temper tantrum right now.

X2 the mercenary disappeared in a mist of sparks and blood.

The robots—cyborgs—had formed a semi-circle defense, including shields with several heavy guns. While most were focusing their fire on the rampaging dinosaur, others were finally noticing that Tina's charge was followed by a wave of defenders. And a second wave was descending from the other side of the building as well. They started lobbing smoke bombs of their own, and in moments, the battlefield was once again a mess of smoky chaos. I itched to jump down there—and I would in a minute—but we'd agreed ahead of time that in situations like this I needed to remain where I could keep an eye on the battle as a whole. More of the fan-shaped shields started popping up in front of me as I tried to see what the hell was going on. From the corner of my eye, I noticed Victory had appeared, standing on the far corner of the building, quietly observing. A moment later, and she was joined by a second adjutant I didn't recognize. This was a strange, antlered alien type I'd never seen before.

Warlord Carl: Find the compromised mages, and kill them. Get the worms! Don't let them get away!

"Alpha cards, deploy!" Donut shouted from my right. She looked at me. "Should I send him out?"

"Save him for the main force. How many card carriers do we have in camp right now?"

"A lot now that Imani brought all those crawlers back. I do wish I could use *Fireball* right about now. Or *Minion Army*."

"Save the other auxiliary card carriers. And make sure we have someone looting our fallen crawlers!"

She nodded. All I could see was Tina's head popping up from the smoke, and her shield going up and down, just like the wall protections of the castle behind us. For a moment, three Tinas

appeared, someone having cast an illusion, but it was immediately dispelled.

Several of the soldiers around us swept their 8th-floor cards out into the air, and all manner of monsters appeared, including a minotaur; a griffin thing; a terrifying, owl-faced, robed figure with claws. There was a glowing god-like thing riding a giant peacock. There was what I thought was another form of Jesus, but he was just named **1970's Death Cult leader**. That one started loudly complaining his spells weren't working the moment he was summoned, and the crawler who summoned him started yelling back, as if they'd been in mid-argument the last time he'd been summoned. His voice was similar to Uzi Jesus's voice as well. All the rest jumped from the building and into the battle below.

"Carl, watch out! Invisible, behind you!"

I turned, punching as I swirled. I felt my bare fist smack right into the armored chest of something. The creature remained invisible, but let out an "Oof." A glowing dagger spun away as the heavy form fell back.

He was sneaking up on me. Ready to stab me in the back.

I punched again, and an outline appeared, stuttering, revealing this to be another Dreadnaught, clutching at his chest, as if he was surprised at how strong my punch was. It said his name was **J IronFjord**. I punched again, and with my left hand, I ripped at the mask, and it went flying, spinning away like a frisbee. Before I realized it, he was falling backward, me on top of him, me punching again and again into his face. We hit the roof heavily, me on top of him, and I continued to punch. I punched over and over until he didn't have a face anymore.

"Holy gods," someone muttered, looking down at the carnage. It was the Death Cult Leader guy. "That's really nasty."

The Scavenger's Daughter has been fed. Unleash her wrath.

"Donut, do you see any more? Look carefully," I called, breathing heavily. Behind me, the battle below continued to rage.

"No!"

I turned my attention back to the fight in front of us. But I could feel the eyes of everyone on me.

"Jamal is here!" a voice shouted, somehow rising out of the chaos, finally pulling the attention away from me. The hammerhead shark appeared as he first rolled, then tumbled, down the hill. He didn't have any of his spider legs installed. He was still waiting for Katia to get a chance to build them, but he rolled down the hill all the same, shouting and flopping. He disappeared into the chaos, only to appear a moment later, rising out of the smoke like he'd somehow managed to jump without legs, a squirming mercenary in his mouth, before disappearing again.

My trap sense suddenly tingled, and multiple lights appeared, glaring through the smoke from the far, right corner of the chaos. Thanks to my advanced *Find Trap* skill, info boxes started popping up one after another. Someone was arming a ton of automatons, all with equipped satchel explosives with a proximity trigger trip.

I checked my map, making sure this wasn't one of our guys. It wasn't. That half of the battlefield was all purple dots along with a few of the reanimated mages.

I scoffed.

You motherfuckers might be experienced. *You might be battle-hardened*, I thought. *But you're in my playground now*.

Warlord Carl: Fire in the hole! Everybody brace!

I cast *Tripper.*

The explosion, when it came, was bigger than I was expecting. One moment, my map was a convoluted mess. And then we were all knocked off our feet. Everyone but me and a few others with *Steady* buffs. Still, it felt as if I'd been kicked in the chest by a horse. I took a blast of heat damage, but not much. Donut howled as Mongo stumbled back. Rend blew across the roof like he'd been punted, disappearing back behind me and over the far edge. The building itself, which was still heavily protected from blasts, shuddered, and for a moment, I feared it would collapse.

I, like always, was temporarily deafened. My ear drums were blown out, and even though I didn't want to admit it to myself, I was

getting used to the feeling. There was something comforting about that specific kind of pain.

The smoke that covered the battlefield seemed to get sucked into the explosion, and in the moments after, everything suddenly in view, it seemed the world was paused. A still life of a battle's aftermath.

But then, movement. All of the cyborgs, every last one of them, were on the ground, overwhelmed and struggling. The entire area where the automatons had been gathered was nothing but a crater, and all the cyborgs in that area were just gone. A sizzling, metallic torso landed heavily on the roof behind me. I couldn't hear it, but I could feel it. Most of the veterans were also on their backs, though, miraculously, my feed said none had died in the blast. Tina was on her back, health in the red, all her shields gone. I could see she was crying out, but I couldn't hear. I imagined she was crying for her mother.

But the current crawlers, along with a few of our NPCs, like Doctor Bones and Splash Zone and Bomo and Sledge, were the first to get themselves to their feet.

And in a situation like this, he who recovers fastest, wins.

They moved to finish off the defenders. Our men and women crawled over the remaining cyborgs like an army of ants. In moments, it was done.

Warlord Donut: Get the mages! Watch for the worms coming out of their heads!

The death cult leader guy totem stood next to me. He hadn't entered the battle at all, nor had he been affected by the blast. The crawler who summoned him was sitting on the roof, holding his head.

My ears rang as they healed, the sound slowly coming back like I was coming up out of water.

The totem stood there with his hands on his hips, looking at the carnage. He said something to me.

"What?" I asked.

The long-haired man grinned. "I said I could really use a nice, refreshing drink right about now. Want to join me?"

At the same moment, Donut messaged in the war chat.

Warlord Donut: Stop that mage! He's fleeing! That's the last one!

I looked, frantically. There. Lonnie the mage. He was running. Up the hill, back toward the castle, moving supernaturally fast. I wasn't sure what his plan was, or if he had a plan at all, but the fact the dead mage was still moving meant he still had a worm in his head.

I activated the *Daughter's Kiss* skill, and I jumped off the second story, landing right atop the fleeing mage.

Rosetta: That was all of them. The door disappeared. But that doesn't mean they can't use the doggie door again. We're going to have to separate the safe room from the castle and keep up a permanent guard. Or we need to just kill the entrance all together. That might be more safe.

Carl: I was thinking the same thing, but we need to talk about it because I don't want to lose easy access to Mordecai and the saferoom. Since they can only bring a limited number of NPCs into their own safe room, they can't do a full-scale invasion through that door. But we do need to isolate it for certain. We need to get on that now while we decide what to do. None of that is going to matter if we don't beat these assholes back. But for the next few minutes, focus on helping Louis to open the roof.

We were cleaning up after the attack, resetting our defenses and looting the bad guys before the main force would be on us in ten or fifteen minutes. They probably wouldn't march right into us now that their beachhead was closed off, but we had to be ready. We had more defenders appearing by the moment, including Boomer's 106th Bloody Leeches along with the scattered 104th members of the Naughty Little Piggies who'd come running the moment we were attacked.

In addition, the 105th Scream Warriors were harassing the backside of the enemy approach while helping to break Florin's 101st from the stalemate that had kept him buttoned up in the fallback trenches.

The enemy's attempt to soften us up and give themselves a funnel into our base hadn't been successful, but it had left us bloody and limping.

This next fight was going to be a rough one. They had their armor with them. They had their numbers. It would be the first time I would be facing orcs in battle.

Florin said he was pretty sure Prince Stalwart of the Skull Empire was with them, leading the charge.

I looked over at Donut, who was still on the roof of the barracks behind me, talking with Victory. The other adjutant was gone.

In some ways, I wished we didn't have these pauses between fights. These ups and downs felt too jarring. I didn't like having to think about what was going to happen next. I just wanted it to happen.

Samantha appeared, floating into the camp and coming to hover next to me as I helped set up another anti-air gun. She was completely covered with leaves and dirt. She spit, expelling dust and dirt from her mouth. She appeared as if she'd been rolling along and then had flown in the rest of the way.

"Louis accidentally dropped me out of his airplane," she said. Behind us, Tina had recovered and was chomping on one of the dead androids, grunting angrily and spitting out the metal bits. The sound was like that of soda cans being flattened. At her feet, Rend and Mongo were doing the same, digging out the meat from the androids like they were at a crab bake.

Kiwi was there, hands on her hips, yelling up at Tina to come inside. Tina was ignoring her.

Samantha looked around camp. "Did you guys have *another* party without telling me?"

I grunted. "That was just the preview. The big fight is about to begin."

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"I agree. You need to destroy the bait shop," Mordecai said. "And you need to do it now. They can just drop a nuke through that door and be done with it. They needed the mages taken out first for it to be effective, but now that plan has failed, they might try it anyway. The walls will be okay, but everyone inside the castle will be turned into mince. The fact they haven't done it yet is probably because that orc out there wants to take you on himself. Best to close off the door now while we still can."

We'd jumped into the guild to grab supplies and discuss the saferoom issue. The enemy's northern army was here, massing about a half kilometer from the edge of camp, close enough that we could see them all. There were so many of them, they filled the horizon. Orcs. Slimes. More Reavers. Mounted elves on zebras. Large, lanky creatures called basher trolls. Lots of gnolls.

And then there was the orc prince. He'd come in riding some giant creature that looked like a cross between a hippopotamus and a yak. He was decked out in glittering, opalescent armor covered with feathers. He marched in, surrounded by his honor guard, a group of heavily-armored and equally decked-out orcs. These guys weren't carrying guns, but long polearms with crescent, moon-shaped blades at the end.

The orcs all wore flags on their backs like they were feudal Japanese warriors. The flags were black, vertical rectangles with a

shimmering, silver orc skull in the center. It made it easy to distinguish the orc troopers from the others. The Bone Clan of the Skull Empire seemed to favor larger-sized mercenaries. There were quite a few of the Sai rhino guards in their midst, along with several of the Bactrian and Dromedarian camels, all armed with shoulder-mounted missiles. They also had a platoon of the tall basher trolls. Explosive experts, I knew. We'd have to watch those guys.

And while the orc team looked powerful, there weren't that many of them compared to the others. There were *only* a thousand of them or so, at least as far as we could see, just a fraction of the Bone Clan's strength. It appeared *all* of the Operatics were also out there, along with a healthy mix of everyone else. It was no wonder Florin had been forced to fall back. There were so many enemies, I couldn't count. Tens of thousands. Significantly more than we had here with us, even with the backups all arriving by the moment.

"Well, we're absolutely fucked, aren't we?" Tipid had said from my side as we first gazed upon the group that gathered before us. The virtual sun was finally rising, causing the giant army to glint like a blade.

I grunted. "You know, you coming here was supposed to instill us with hope."

The older, bald man grinned back at me and shrugged. "We just didn't want you to be lonely, mate."

Donut was examining the orc prince via her new *Targeting* skill which had just been added to her crown. She let out a surprised yelp.

"Carl, Carl, that's not Prince Stalwart!"

"What?" I asked, reexamining the large orc from afar. He was bigger than I first thought, wasn't he? "You're not telling me that's the Maestro? I thought because he's driving Grull, he can't play faction wars."

"He can't," a new voice said, stepping forward. Baroness Victory, peering off into the distance. "Well I'll be fucked raw with a Soother sausage. That's him alright. He must've come up from the 18th floor

at the last minute. I wonder if he brought all his concubines with him?"

"Wait," I said. "The *king*? That's King Rust, Stalwart and Maestro's dad? Are you shitting me?"

"He looks more like the Maestro than Stalwart," Donut said. "Like a giant baby pictured through a *Jersey Shore* filter. And then turned into an orc. He's all scowling and gross like he's being forced to wear such ridiculous clothing. He's covered in feathers, and he has big, gaudy rings on all his fingers. Where does he get off dressing like that?"

"That's traditional orc battle parade regalia," Tipid said.

"It doesn't say he's a co-warlord," Donut said. "Just a war chief. Does that mean Prince Stalwart is still the warlord? That's what it says in the interface."

"Hmm," Victory said. "His appearance was probably a very last-minute decision. It's news to me. Rust hasn't participated in Faction Wars in quite a long time." She sounded taken aback, almost offended that she hadn't known her brother-in-law was here. "Not since he was a prince himself. I wonder if he's sober."

Donut made a derisive noise. "Well, he looks like he stumbled drunk into the closet of a colorblind drag clown. Though I do like that boa. I wonder if it's magical. I could use a boa, though I wouldn't want Tina to get jealous. That's kinda her thing."

"Do you have his stats yet?" I asked.

"Hold your panties, Carl. The *Size-Up* takes a minute. And that creature he's riding is absolutely disgusting. Her name is Gonk. What kind of name is that? I bet she smells like the feed bowl at an illegal petting zoo. She's something called a Swamp Yak. Okay. I got it. He's level 78. His main weapon is a whip! My goodness, he knows a lot of spells. Like dozens and dozens. Most are level one but some are from level 11 to 15. How did he manage that? None of them look useful right now except all those shield spells. He has that same *Protective Shell* as you, but it's level 15! And *Tripper*. And *Puddle Jumper*! What a copydog."

"Don't anybody tell Rosetta he's here yet," Tipid said. "I'll tell her." He paused, a strange look of worry on his face. "She has some

history with him."

"If he just got here when we did, how *did* he level so fast?" I asked.

"That's easy," Tipid said. "He likely has a ring of Divine Suffering for the stats—and the levels that come with charging the ring—and a necklace of Indelible Woe for the spells."

"Indelible Woe?" I asked. "Is that like the tattoo thing Rosetta is trying to make us do?"

"Similar. Indelible Woe is in the same collection as the Divine Suffering ring, It trades out a random spell of your own for a spell of a target's. If you *kill* the target, it'll be one of their five highest-level spells. Like the Divine Suffering ring, it only works on crawlers. And people like me. It's not all that useful unless you're a complete psychopath with a bunch of spells you can afford to lose. The necklace was popular a long time ago, but they all agreed to stop using it because combatants were farming crawlers to power it up, and it was a little... messy."

I felt my anger rise, and I pushed it back. "And the Divine Suffering ring is any better?"

He shook his head. "It's a long story. But trust me, the necklace is worse. Much worse. Anyway. Rosetta's tattoos will help you share skills and spells without actually killing anyone. It just needs to brew for a little longer."

I sighed. We didn't have longer. The army across the way was in the process of digging in and setting up their siege weapons. A secondary force, also from the north, consisting of their slow-moving armor equipment, was pushing their way in. They were currently delayed, engaged with Florin and the 101st Crocodiles. The 105th had also engaged but had to fall back after sustaining heavy losses. Last I heard, Florin had personally led a charge that took out one of their tanks, causing a traffic jam. The enemy had been forced to reroute into a minefield and lost two more vehicles along the way.

This enemy force in front of us now could attack at any moment, but most everyone suspected they would wait until their position was properly built and the armor arrived. We already had some

trebuchets of our own dropping rocks on them, but their shields were keeping them mostly at bay.

Now, here in the guildhall common area, it was me, Donut, Louis, Rosetta, Tipid, Justice Light, Imani, Elle, and a handful of mercenaries. Tran was still on the southern front, and Colonel Boomer was outside, organizing the defense. Katia and Bautista were with Florin. Li Jun and Li Na remained in Shanty Town.

Victory was also in the room, silently observing.

Bomo and Sledge along with a few strippers were in the process of moving boxes of supplies from the various crafting rooms and out the door and into the castle while we still had the ability.

Donut sat on the counter with the guildhall Bopca, animatedly going back and forth about purchasable base upgrades. Rosetta was with her, but she had a look on her face that suggested she was about to throttle the cat. Tipid had told her about King Rust's presence, but she hadn't shown any outward reaction at all. She'd called Donut over and insisted we spend the last of our pooled money to defend the base.

I started moving in that direction to stop any fights before they started. I didn't know what the argument was about, but I knew Rosetta had a short fuse, and she was probably internally dealing with a bunch of shit. Donut had that determined, smug look on her face that meant she was going to get her way, and if she didn't, she wouldn't shut up about it.

"What about the hangar?" Louis asked. "We just fixed it. If we close off the saferoom, won't we lose access to it here at the castle?"

"Yeah, what about the hangar?" Samantha added. She was on the floor by Louis, wetly and loudly gnawing on his ankle, and he'd given up kicking her away.

"We can buy a standalone hangar access point and attach it to the castle," Rosetta said, looking up from the terminal.

"Only five million gold," Donut added. She did not sound thrilled about it. "And I can't believe they're making us pay for another anti-air gun after the last one blew up. We should be allowed to charge the other guys for damaging our base. Five million for that one, too!"

"This is a new gun, not a replacement," Rosetta said.

Donut let out a harumph.

I found myself watching Donut and her reactions. She was undergoing several changes, and I was worried about her. She seemed to be simultaneously maturing and regressing at the same time, and I wasn't sure I understood why. It was like she was rising to the occasion when it mattered, and she was letting it all out once the immediate danger passed. Outside, she was Warlord Donut. Serious. Well, serious for her. Determined. Flexible. But one on one, her stubbornness was growing. Her snippiness was ratcheted even higher than usual. If we survived these next few hours, I'd have to sit down with her and talk about it.

We were having her buy a third, mobile anti-air gun since several of the spider guns were wrecked, and we had an armor slot available. This particular one could be turned 90 degrees and used to mow down the bad guys on the ground as well. She turned back to the bopca. "Now, about those banners. Do you think you can make that work? It has them on the menu, but how long before they're printed? We need them now. And I need them to be wavy."

"I can't control the wind, Princess," the bopca said.

"Donut," Rosetta said. "Please. I can only be in the saferoom for a few more minutes before I am kicked out. We do not have time..."

"Carl says we need to make him angry and have him attack before his backup arrives, and this will most definitely accomplish that. Now, I don't wish to pull rank, but I am the general, and you are the colonel. While I wasn't in the Navy like Carl, I do know that means I am your boss and if I say it's final, it's final."

"Donut," I said. "Don't be mean to the people who came to help us."

"Don't worry, Donut," Elle said. "If you want your banner to wave in the wind, I can make that happen."

"Thank you, Elle," Donut said.

Behind us, a group of sluggalos complained loudly as they were ushered outside by some of the were castors. The majority of these guys were out in the field with the 101st and the 105th, but we had a

small reserve group in the guildhall barracks, which they'd turned into some sort of slug clubhouse. Imani went in there earlier and immediately noped out. She said she didn't want to talk about it.

Justice Light also had some of the bigger slugs on his team. In fact, he'd inquired about having himself infected with slugpox so he could make more, but Rosetta told us not to allow it. That we had to be careful with his requests because the skyfowl had a tendency to hyperfixate on his projects, and he'd end up killing himself in the process. So instead, we allowed him to pick a few of the higher-level slugs to accompany him. I didn't know how any of those raving idiots would be of help, and I was kind of afraid to ask, but apparently the slugs were right at home in the tunnels beneath the castle. And they all seemed to love Justice Light almost as much as they loved Imani.

I hadn't spent too much time speaking to Justice Light about things other than traps, but I knew both Tipid and Rosetta were especially protective of the author of the 8th edition of the cookbook. He'd had a tough time in the dungeon, and I'd read quite a bit about his thoughts after he'd killed an NPC. It had a major impact on him. But on top of all that, something especially horrific had happened to him during his indentureship as a shopkeeper, and it had changed him even further. It was during this incident when he'd lost his wing. I didn't know the story, but I did know it had turned the somewhat morose but proud skyfowl into a quiet, strange, obsessive-compulsive creature. He had a few strange ticks, always moving his head, back and forth, like he was hearing things that weren't really there. He muttered to himself a lot.

I turned my attention back to the problem at hand. I knew Mordecai and the others were right, but I hated the idea of losing a saferoom entrance. "There's gotta be something we can do. Losing access will make the closest saferoom one of the ones in Shanty Town. There are a few out in the forested region, including the one at the Area 52 base, but that's it. It'll make it so it's a half hour ride to get to base if we're using a tracked vehicle. It'll make everything more difficult."

I indicated the squat skyfowl standing quietly in the corner, muttering to himself. He had a folded piece of red paper in one of his talons and was in the middle of jabbing a needle through it and sewing it to another piece of paper, this one orange. I had no idea how he managed to do it all and remain upright. Tipid said the eagle made the nonsensical art pieces as a way to calm himself. There had to be a dozen of the folded pieces of paper scattered on the floor around him. "Justice Light will lose access to my sapper's table and the bomber's studio. Rosetta will lose easy access to the alchemy table and Mordecai."

"It's okay," the eagle said, tilting his head at me. His eyes rolled to meet mine, and I could feel his strange intensity. He stretched out his lone wing, like he was cracking a knuckle. "I already have everything I need."

"Are you sure? You're at my table a lot."

He returned his attention to his sewing. "It's safer and faster to use your table, but there's nothing left I can't do on my own."

"We can collapse the front of the shack," Tipid said. "That'll turn it off, but we could still repair it and bring it back online in an emergency."

"You'd have to guard it," Mordecai said. "If it's repairable, an enemy can splash a *Fix* potion on it, and we're back to the beginning. There's also *Emergency Repair* scrolls, too."

"Wait, *Fix*?" Donut asked. "Are you telling me there's a potion that fixes stuff? Then why did I have to buy more gun thingies!"

"Because the ingredients for the potion are rare and more expensive than most anything you're trying to fix. I'm making one of the potions now, but it's only to be used in an emergency. The scrolls are rare, too."

"Let's do that," I said. "That way we can keep the structure inside the castle, but we'll keep a heavy guard on it at all times. If we've gotten to the point where they're able to fix it from this side, we're already screwed. That reminds me, we took out all the gondii worms, but we don't know if any of them learned any of our secrets or not."

"It doesn't matter," Justice Light said. He pulled a thread with his talon, and all the folded pieces of paper scattered around him came together to form a strange, spiral-like pattern. "I have contingencies heaped upon contingencies. Have faith in the process. Danger lives in what they can't see."

"Okay," I said. "Hopefully we'll never have to find out."

Donut: ARE WE SURE WE TRUST THIS GUY? HE'S OBVIOUSLY UNSTABLE.

Carl: I trust him with my life.

Donut: OKAY. BUT YOU'RE TRUSTING HIM WITH MORE THAN THAT. IT'S WITH ALL OF OUR LIVES.

Carl: Hopefully it won't get to that point.

Donut: AFTER ALL THIS BUILD-UP?

"I'm out of time," Rosetta said, and she got up to leave the guild. She would need to get out there and kill someone if she wanted her blood bar refilled. I knew several crawlers were having this issue. Justice Light, who'd already risen to level 65, did not have to ever worry about it. He was getting partial experience and credit for almost all the traps out there.

Tipid had refilled his bar during that last fight. But I knew the few former crawlers we let into the guild that worked as support staff for the base were struggling. Luckily, the blood bar didn't affect the dungeon-born mercs.

"Hey," I called after Rosetta. "Get ready to close off the safe space. But send out a five-minute warning to everybody so they can grab stuff if they need it. And wait until we're out, too. Donut, buy the hangar upgrade."

Donut started to grumble. "We're almost out of money, Carl." She then gasped with delight as the bopca emerged from the back of his little area dragging several rolled up banners.

Colonel Boomer: Whatever you guys are jawing about, you best finish it up and get out here. King Rust is approaching by himself. I think he wants to talk.

Victory spoke at the same time. The orc's eyes were flashing. "Rust is approaching. He's asking for an official, registered parlay."

"Is that supposed to mean something?" I asked.

"You'll both be protected from subterfuge and sneak attacks while you talk. You'll be in protected bubbles as you go back and forth. No chat will be available during the meeting. You can't attack him, and he can't attack you. Don't worry how it works. We're the ones who cast the spell."

"Great," I muttered.

Warlord Donut: IS HE MOUNTED ON THE YAK THING?

Colonel Boomer: Yes. He looks like quite the butterfly up there. It makes me want to punch him in the face.

Warlord Donut: KIBBEN, WE NEED YOU. FAST. GET THE HOWDAH READY.

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KIBBEN, THE GRIZZLED, FORMER STABLEMASTER OF THE HIGH ELF CASTLE grunted one last time as Donut positioned herself into the howdah—the ridiculously ornate, covered carriage thing mounted to the back of Simoom, the albino rhinoceros. Both the howdah and the rhino were actually owned by Ferdinand. He'd been riding the thing when we first met him on the sixth floor. He wanted the rhinoceros back, but since his castle was still underwater, we were keeping her in our own castle for now. She was stabled in the same room where Tina lived. Apparently, Tina and the rhino hadn't gotten along at first, and Kibben had to work especially hard to keep them from mauling each other. But now, Tina seemed to treat the rhino like a pet. According to Kibben, the two were inseparable.

To me, Simoom the rhino seemed especially chill. She would have to be to put up with Ferdinand. According to Kibben, she was as gentle of a mount as they came. Like an old horse they used for first-time riders. Unlike most every other thing in the dungeon, she seemed like a genuine animal. No hints of extra intelligence like Mongo had.

And speaking of Mongo. He sat there, grunting and whining with displeasure at the sight of Donut climbing onto a different mount.

"Now, Mongo, you'll be staying here while mommy goes out there riding this thing. No, quit whining. This is just so we have a mount the same size as the bad guy. It's only for show. Pretend like

mommy is acting in a movie and pretending someone else is her child. Goodness, Rend, why are you whining now, too? It's only temporary. It doesn't mean anything. Carl, tell your meatball to stop upsetting Mongo."

I chinned at Rend and Mongo. "Kibben, will you keep these two occupied while we're out there?"

"At your service," the old high elf said, patting Rend on the head. "I got a bit of experience with belly achers." He pulled some sort of treat out of his pocket, tossed it in the air, and it bounced off the top of Rend's head. He giggled and went chasing after it.

I watched the round pet scurry off. "What's the difference between a tummy acher and a belly acher?"

"No real difference," he said. "They tend to call 'em bellies when they get extra big, but it's not written down anywhere or anything like that. I remember this fellow from his last incarnation, and even though he was on his first run, he was still pretty big. He's a special one." Rend returned, chewing the treat. Kibben patted him again, and Rend let out a purring noise.

"Come on, Donut," I said. "Everybody is waiting."

"You, rhinoceros," Donut said. "Go. Go now."

Simoom snorted and waved her tail. She did not move. Her white, armored shell pieces made an almost ceramic-like sound as they scraped together.

"Carl, it's not working. Why is she just standing there?"

Kibben chuckled. "Just push the horn forward if you want to go forward. Pull back to stop. It's easy. If she gets spooked, she might get to trotting. Just pat her behind to get her to stop."

"I will most certainly not be smacking the behind of this thing like some common racetrack jockey."

"Not a smack. That'll make her run faster. A gentle rub."

"What? I'm supposed to stop the rampaging rhinoceros by giving it a butt massage?"

"Donut," I said, frustration rising. "This was *your* idea."

Donut did as she was instructed, and Simoom started clomping forward. "Goodness. This is just like one of Carl's video games. Does

she go faster? It's like I moved from a Maserati to a dump truck." She made a face. "She smells like a dump truck, too."

"Come on, Princess," I said, lowering the curtains on her howdah as we moved out of the castle to face the enemy army.

My head was a swivel as we slowly marched down the hill, still smoldering from our earlier fight. We clomped past all of our positions. We had multiple, fortified bunkers set up. They were made of some sort of composite concrete, different than the castle itself. Almost impenetrable. Most of the guns we looted were user locked, meaning we couldn't use them without wasting one of our precious *Cracker Jack* scrolls. But the bigger guns had no such restrictions. We had them set up in the bunkers.

We also had the earthworks teams under our feet. While we hadn't been prepared for the paratroopers or the attack from within our own base, the enemy right now was camping exactly where we'd anticipated. All around me, the posse was giving off an air of quiet determination, like we were waiting for them to make the first move. But in fact, all around me, everyone was working furiously.

I still wasn't confident it would be enough. There were a lot of them out there. I just needed to delay as long as possible.

Donut was loudly complaining she could barely see through the fabric curtain.

Warlord update: Two Pieces of Armor, both owned by the Operatic Collective have been captured and added to your inventory. Captured inventory does not count against your limit.

Carl: Good job, Florin!

We only had a single road leading out to the empty space between our position and the enemy's. We had Tripper-resistant traps on the fields on either side of us. But King Rust had a level 15 in the *Tripper* spell, and that gave each trap a 90% chance to blow anyway if he cast it.

Florin: Good news, bad news, Mate. We stopped the armor in its tracks. As you just saw, we even managed to capture two of their rolling boom boxes. As long as they got infantry support, they're bloody ripper machines. Look like those British Mark V's from the first world war, but with a top turret and a single anti-air tube, which was surprising to me. They're called Weepers. Warning Louis to steer clear of these things now. Super high tech on the inside. That's the good news. The bad is, them guys you're looking at most certainly know they lost the whole regiment and aren't gonna want to wait to get sandwiched between you and the 101st. So they're probably gonna make their move soon.

Carl: 10-4. I'm about to have a conversation with King Rust. Don't know where the rest of the orcs are hiding.

Florin: Try to keep him talking as long as you can. We're rolling out now. I have Katia and Bautista with what's left of the 105th flanking your position so we can keep the west opened up. At the very least, they can keep open a corridor of retreat into Shanty Town if you get overrun. You be careful of those cunts, especially the ones with the banners. They are beasts. Keep your head down, and I'll see you soon.

Carl: You too. Oh, and Florin?

Florin: Yeah, mate?

Carl: Are we having fun yet?

Florin: You just keep that castle safe, and I'll give you my answer when we're face-to-face.

King Rust stood by himself, mounted upon his swamp yak. The mount was much bigger than I originally thought. So was King Rust. He had the wide frame of his younger son, the Maestro. His glittering, feather-covered armor made him appear even bigger, like a colorful tidal wave, crashing upon the back of the hairy creature.

Still, the large orc seemed slumped over in the saddle. Tired. Old. Almost like he was injured and about to fall off.

A new form appeared, zapping into existence as we approached. The orcish adjutant. We hadn't met this one yet. A grixist. The same

type of creature as Huanxin Jinx, but taller and thinner. The six-eyed alien said something to Rust, and he gave an angry retort.

"Let me do the talking until it all breaks down," I said.

"Are we still trying to entice him to attack early?" Donut's voice sounded nervous as it came from the interior of the howdah. "The whole plan was to annoy him and upstage him so he's embarrassed in front of his troops. I wouldn't have ridden this disgusting thing if I knew we were going to change our plans."

"He's going to attack us no matter what we do," I said. "But we need to buy time first. So I talk first, and then you. We want him as red-hot angry as we can make him. Angry people make mistakes."

Donut muttered something under her breath I couldn't hear.

I took a peek at the warlord chat. We had dozens of messages coming in by the second as everyone continued to prepare the fight. The former Prism castle, which I'd left in the hands of a Madness mercenary, changed hands for the third time, which reset the six-hour clock. This time back to the Dream, as if the Madness and the Dream were fighting over who had the rights to the sliver of land. But as long as they kept going back and forth, the castle remained Posse territory.

I pushed that out of my head as we pushed forward.

Colonel Tipid: Has anyone seen…

The message was cut off as a blue bubble formed around us. Victory appeared, walking alongside us like she'd been there the whole time.

"The parlay shield is up. Both you and Rust have independent shields, and once they touch, you'll be able to talk. The shields will move with you two, so both of you stay close to each other. You will not be able to do physical or magical harm to each other. Saferoom rules apply inside of the bubble. Once you've concluded, the shields will disengage when you're approximately 100 meters from each other."

"Who's that adjutant?" I asked.

"His Honorable Judge Deng Bao," she said. "He's an old, experienced adjutant. He's always the adjutant for the previous year's victor."

I peered at the creature. There was something particularly unsettling about this type of alien. "Is he related to Huanxin Jinx?"

Huanxin was the heiress who was currently on the 12th floor, driving the goddess Eileithyia. The same goddess Katia worshiped. The same goddess who would choose Katia's fate when she finally ate that orchid in her inventory. Currently, she was our only hope at getting both Donut and Katia off this damn floor.

Victory chuckled. "He's a judge. He is impartial. He's very good at his job, so his relations do not matter. But, no. He is not related to Huanxin. She does not have any living relatives as far as I'm aware other than her child clone. When he's not doing this, Judge Deng sits on one of the highest courts in the galaxy."

"So, he's a lawyer, like you?"

"Yes. Not all judges were once lawyers, unfortunately. But I was, and so was he. He is older than me, but we went to the same school. He was a professor by the time I got there. He taught me almost everything I know about galactic taxation law."

"What about Carl's lawyer?" Donut asked from behind the curtain. "Quasar. Did he go to the same school as you, too?"

Victory let out a surprisingly pig-like snort. "I think not."

Donut suddenly pulled the screen veil away.

"Carl, what's wrong with the orc guy? Is he... is he crying?"

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I moved to send a quick message to Donut before I realized the no-chat-in-the-bubble rule also meant between me and her.

"Let me do the talking," I repeated, whispering to Donut. "Don't derail whatever he wants to say. Not yet."

"He looks like he's already derailed, Carl."

King Rust, was indeed, crying. But there was something strange with his demeanor. I couldn't tell if he was crying from rage, sorrow, or laughter. It was like he was experiencing all three emotions at once. He wasn't just crying. He was angrily muttering to himself, saying things to his adjutant, and then putting his hands against his own face in an odd, woe-is-me gesture. As we watched, he looked up into the air and shook his giant fists. It was like a caricature of someone having some sort of psychotic episode.

I suddenly thought of Commander Stockade, the late leader of the Democratic Sortion. He'd been acting crazy like this before he'd killed himself, too. Was that it? Had this guy been hit with some sort of insanity debuff? That didn't seem right.

"Is he always like this? What the actual fuck is wrong with him?" I muttered as we approached.

"Uh, I don't know. That's for you to find out. I guess," Victory said. She bowed to the grixist adjutant. "Your honor."

"Judge," he replied, also bowing. "Let us take our leave of these two. I would like to converse with you." He, too, seemed out of

sorts. Shaken by something.

Victory nodded. “Good day, brother,” she said to King Rust, who didn’t respond. The two adjutants disappeared. They reappeared nearby, but outside the strange shield bubbles. Judge Deng produced a tablet and handed it to Victory. She started watching some video, but it was too far away to see what it was.

Simoom snorted and took a step forward and sniffed at Gonk, the larger swamp yak, who snorted in return.

“Well, well, well,” Donut began. She hadn’t put the veil back on the howdah. She’d positioned herself on the built-in pillow like she was just lounging there “If you’re crying because you wish to surrender, I will hear your terms now. But I must warn you, we’ll have very specific demands. Carl here will require at least two of your, what are they called? Concubines? Yes, two of them, plus...”

“Stop,” Rust said, holding up a meaty hand. His voice was surprisingly gentle and tired. So much so, that Donut actually *did* stop. “Please, stop. We must speak.”

It was there, on the first finger, catching my eyes like they were drawn to it. A ring of Divine Suffering.

The large orc gave a very heavy sigh and looked up into the sky.

“I wish we were on the real surface. I can feel it there, this false ceiling. It’s oppressive. Worse than a dome.” He rubbed his eye while we waited for him to speak.

After a long pause, he said, “Do you have any children, human? Or did you?”

I swallowed. What was this?

“No,” I said tentatively.

Rust reached down and gave Gonk the yak a warm pat. “I am jealous of you. I have three, and all three are idiots.”

I grunted. “I don’t know one of them, but I can’t disagree with you regarding the other two.”

“That third, my daughter. She’s the one you need to worry about.” He paused again. Victory was now pacing back and forth, still watching the tablet. Rust, too, was watching Victory.

“She never liked me. Your adjutant. Right now, she’s watching the video my daughter just sent out on the open tunnel. Did they

show it to you?"

This had to be some sort of trick, but I didn't know what his angle was. His third daughter was named Princess Formidable. She sponsored Katia, and she'd been the one to gift Katia with the crossbow bolt meant to kill her own brother, the Maestro.

"They haven't shown us anything," I said.

He really was old, I was starting to see. I suddenly thought of my own father, sitting there in that bed, dying of cancer. In the end, my father had still been blind to what he was. But this guy... A chill washed over me. *He knows he's about to die*. But why? How?

Rust shook his head. "There's a saying, amongst the former crawlers. The ones who eventually go free. It's something like, 'Once you enter the dungeon, you will die in the dungeon.' I've always dismissed it as weak, dishonorable rubbish. But, deep down, I knew. I knew it was true. Not just for the people, but for us, as a society."

This guy was so out of pocket, so out of character from what I was expecting, I just stood there, unable to think of a response. I exchanged a look with Donut, who'd stopped pretending to lounge on her saddle and now sat up, paying rapt attention.

Rust continued. "A few days ago, my lovely daughter, along with a detachment of Skull Empire marines, took control of one of my own cruisers. The crew thought they were following orders, and I wasn't even aware they'd left orbit. This warship is now about five hours away from reaching the monitor station that's currently in orbit around the second planet in this system. Formidable just sent out a message to the entire Syndicate. She is planning on taking that station, going in, and manually activating the system failsafe. When that happens, a reaction will take place in this system's star, and we will all die."

I thought about that for a moment, and I had the only reaction I could think of.

I laughed.

"You're serious?"

The old orc straightened on his saddle. "I do not see the humor in this. And do not insult me, Carl. The Skull Empire has never engaged in subterfuge."

I opened my mouth to refute that, but I held myself in check.

Through the wall of the bubble, Victory and Judge Deng were quietly talking. She'd dropped the tablet to the ground, and it remained there, video still playing. Victory was much bigger than the other adjutant. As I watched, he patted her on the waist, the movement strangely affectionate.

This is real, I thought. *This isn't some sort of trick. This is really happening*. I fought the urge to laugh again.

"And you marched your army here to tell us this? Why?"

"I marched the horde here to end this farce once and for all. The message from my daughter just came in as we arrived." He paused, shifting in his saddle. "There's glory in dying in battle. And, you might not believe this. But I respect you, Carl. My sons do not see it, but you have bested them multiple times. You have a warrior's heart. In another time, there would be honor to face you in battle and die. Instead of learning from their mistakes, you have succeeded in just making them more angry, and they act like petulant children. I came here to protect my family. And if we are to suffer further humiliations, at least he who casts the shadow will be me, and not my children, who have long lives in front of them."

"Apparently not," I said. "All three of them are here?" I laughed again. "Pity."

He did not rise to the bait. He just looked sad. Utterly defeated. "That moment my wife was killed, I should have..." He trailed off.

"Is this some sort of weird trick?" Donut asked. "I don't understand. Did you not buy your daughter a pony or something? Is that what this is? She's having a temper tantrum? Why is she doing this? I had this whole thing planned to upset you, and now I can't even do it. I even had banners made making fun of the Maestro. This is most inconvenient."

Rust ignored her. "Once this system goes down, the ramifications across the entire galaxy will be immediate and overwhelming. My systems will devolve into chaos. The Dream will go dark for some time. Billions, perhaps trillions, will go without food. The Reavers will be fine and will likely take advantage of the sudden power vacuum. War will break out across the galaxy. It will be the single, most

devastating disaster in all of history. This is bigger than you, me, and everyone here."

And this affects us how? was my immediate reaction, but I choked it back. I wanted to keep him talking. So instead, I asked, "Then why is she doing it?"

"She feels she's protecting the galaxy from an even worse fate. She believes the current system AI's insanity is contagious and will spread to the center system if it's not dealt with. And if that happens, our very way of life will collapse in on itself. It would be a mass extinction event."

"Will it?" I asked. "Will it infect the center system?"

He grunted. "There's no proof anything like that can happen. It would be like a gnat taking down one of my corvettes. It's a crackpot theory that originated from those Nebular idiots. All the analysts say it's not even remotely possible. But she is convinced. Of all of them, she's the most like her mother. Both the most stubborn and the most superstitious."

"I'm confused," Donut said. "Does this mean we're still going to kill each other or not?"

The orc's watery eyes focused on Donut like he was seeing her for the first time.

"If you want us to spend our last few hours killing each other, I will happily oblige. If I was younger, it wouldn't be a question. We have you beat. It will hurt, but we have you. And even if you managed to knock us back today, to hold out until the next phase, you still wouldn't have won. Stalwart has done well, building this army despite the obstacles this season. We have managed to accumulate the largest collection of war mages ever assembled. We can kill you now with the help of the other factions, or we could've waited until later and done it on our own. You would've been annihilated, and it would not have been pretty. And if not us, that lunatic Architect Houston has been using this season's rules to... open up his full arsenal." He sighed, almost wistfully, and he met my eyes. "I can admit this now. He's the only living creature in this universe I fear. But that doesn't matter anymore. Death looms for us all."

"Why are you here? Why are you telling me this?" I asked.

He reached down and patted Gonk the yak again. "It likely won't make a difference, but I want you to send my daughter a message. I want you to ask her to stop on behalf of the people of Earth. She is not listening to me. I doubt she will listen to you, but if you speak for your people, then maybe... Maybe she will pause. She's always had a soft heart for the seeds.".

"Wait, wait, wait," Donut said. "So, you're telling me there's just some space station thingy floating in orbit around... what's the second planet, Carl?"

"Venus," I said.

"Flying around Venus, and anyone can just scoot onto it, press a button, and the solar system blows up? Just like that? How is that even possible? Carl had better security on his bank account. Though, if we're being fair, Miss Beatrice could still get into it."

"The security on the satellite is impenetrable. The satellite itself has a failsafe that will cause it to explode should anyone unauthorized attempt to break into its systems."

I felt my eyebrow raise. "Okay... So, what are we missing?"

"The Skull Empire manufactures the satellites. We build backdoors into everything we manufacture so they can't be used against us. This was a secret until my daughter announced it to the whole galaxy. I'm afraid that stock certificate you own, Carl, is losing significant value by the moment."

I laughed again. This was too much. *They're destroying themselves. They don't need me to lift a finger.*

I pulled up my interface. The game interface didn't work correctly in the bubble, but my non-game implants still worked fine. I moved to the third menu, which was a 3D map of the solar system with a red overlay.

"Why doesn't the AI stop her?" I asked. "Doesn't it have the system in quarantine or whatever?"

"She is out of zone. The AI controls the tunnel gate because the controller must be in orbit of the game planet. The security station in orbit around the second planet is deliberately staged well out of the system's control." He shook his head. "They should have kept

the old-style gates active anyway. The AI couldn't control those. The mudskippers would never have gone bankrupt."

I didn't understand all of what he said, but I understood the important part.

For a moment, I closed my eyes. I thought back to that moment in the gas station on Christmas morning, when I sat there all alone except for that poor, oblivious dog. His name had been Lightning Lou.

I couldn't let myself get caught up in the moment. I had to play this straight. I knew this was going to happen, but it happening *now* was unexpected. If there was a chance we could avoid this fight, I had to see this through.

I reached over and patted the side of Simoom. "So, let me get this straight. You want *me* to talk *your* daughter into not killing all of us so you can then kill us yourself? Is that right?"

"You have millions upon millions of citizens, including children, on the surface of your planet, human. If she backs off, I can't stop what happens next down here." He pointed up. "But they will be safe."

"I gotta tell you," I said, scratching the back of my head. "I don't really speak for humanity, ya know? But even if I did, the idea of sacrificing the rest of my people in exchange for the deaths of all of you lot, plus causing war across the galaxy? It doesn't seem like a bad tradeoff for me. Does that also mean there won't be any more crawls?"

"There will always be crawls. We might miss a season or two while the galaxy settles, but there will *always* be crawls. There is nothing anybody can do to stop that."

I nodded. "Then what, exactly, do we get out of helping you?"

King Rust did not say anything when we were done negotiating. He turned, and he walked away.

The deal was simple and straightforward. He would tell the armies to withdraw back toward their line. We wouldn't harass their

retreat. It would free up all the remaining leaders to spend the next few hours preparing messages for their passing.

Donut jumped from the howdah to my shoulder. Simoom continued to walk alongside us.

"Carl," Donut said after a moment, a strange, dreamy tone to her voice. "Was he telling the truth?"

"I think he was."

"Does that mean we're all about to die? That all of this was for nothing?" She gasped. "We gotta go back. Mongo is all alone!"

The protection bubble popped off. Victory and Judge Deng still stood together off to the side, still deep in conversation. I turned to watch King Rust make his way back toward his camp, his yak walking slowly. My mind reeled as dozens of missed messages flooded my feed.

Donut: ZEV IS IT TRUE?

Zev: I'm afraid so, Donut. She'll be there in just over five hours. Half the ships in the system are chasing her. Nobody is going to catch her in time. The other half are now shooting at each other. It is pure chaos.

I reached up to pat Donut.

Carl: Don't react. But no, the failsafe isn't going to go off. We need to pretend like we don't know this until he gets his army to withdraw. I'll still make the plea to his daughter to stop, though I'm pretty sure she's still going to hit the button no matter what we do. But when she does hit the button, it's not going to work.

Donut: What? We aren't going to blow up? How do you know that?

I knew it wasn't going to work because I knew the failsafe was already deactivated. I knew the failsafe was deactivated because I was the one who had turned it off.

I'd come so close that night. So close.

I pulled up the map of the AI's influence in my interface. The AI's sphere was growing exponentially. It'd just captured Uranus. The entirety of the sun and the rest of the inner solar system was well within its sphere.

Carl: Call it a hunch.

Donut: That's a pretty big hunch, Carl.

Carl: Just play along. We need to make certain the army disperses, and then we can hit them from behind while they retreat. I'll need to talk to Florin to get it ready.

I returned my gaze to King Rust. The large orc continued his slow plod back to his side, now flanked by a pair of massive orc guards. I was glad he'd come instead of his son. I still planned on killing the old orc, but he seemed so much more reasonable than his child. This last-minute reprieve was almost too good to be true.

...And that's when Rosetta appeared, rising up out of the dirt like some fiery goddess of the underworld. She'd been wearing one of those tech-based invisibility cloaks as she launched from the ground. She had a whip of her own in her hand. In a movement so fast, she'd clearly been practicing it, she flipped in the air, landing on the back of the yak directly behind the king. She tossed the whip around the neck of the king, and she yanked.

The head flew from his body like a popped champagne cork.

The decapitated body of King Rust, the leader of one of the largest, most powerful corporate governments in the universe, slumped off the back of his swamp yak and landed in a heap in the dirt. The head thumped onto the ground several meters away.

Across the field, five full seconds of stunned silence passed. Nobody reacted, including Rust's own guards. Then, the tens of thousands of enemy troops roared in indignation.

They charged.

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VOLTEEG

Volteeg did not consider himself worthy of love.

Mistress Henspar had loved him, of course. She'd loved him, and he'd failed her.

Before the dungeon, they were the best of friends. She'd kept his cage clean. She'd allow him to perch on her shoulder while she went to the market. Volteeg had limited memories of these times before the pet biscuit. But he remembered biting the shopkeeper's finger one day when he'd tried to feed him a berry. It'd been an accident. The shopkeeper had been angry. He'd bled. Mistress Henspar had been mad, too.

But that night, she'd still patted him on the head and scritched under his wing and turned up the fire in the hearth just how he liked it. She'd said it was okay. That it wasn't his fault, and that Volteeg loved berries so much, he'd bitten the shopkeeper in his enthusiasm. Which was true. Mistress Henspar had *understood* him. She loved him. And because she loved him, she would protect him, even when he made mistakes.

In fact, the next time they entered the shop, she hid Volteeg within her jacket. She whispered to him, "Quiet now. It'll be our little secret. They won't see you, but I'll know you're here." Then she gently put the fabric of her jacket over Volteeg's head while he crouched on her shoulder. She gave him a pat, and went into the market, secretly stealing a berry or two and transferring them under

the jacket, and Volteeg would try so, so hard not to peep in excitement. He felt *so* loved, *so* protected he could just burst.

When he felt that love, he would sing. He knew not to sing in the market, because that was a secret, and he was protecting her just as much as she was protecting him. But later, when they were back outside and his belly was full, he would sing for Mistress Henspar. He would sit on her shoulder and sing, and she would have salty-tasting tears spring down her cheeks.

It wasn't until later, his body transformed as he stood over her, screaming, trying to protect her from the scags, did he finally realize he never deserved that affection.

You're supposed to protect those you love.

The pet biscuit had been a curse, but changing his race had been the worst decision of all. The biscuit had given him some intelligence and the ability to speak, but not much else. It wasn't until the third floor, when he chose to turn into a gargoyle, did his brain finally start to churn. Did the images start to make sense in his mind. Did the strategies coalesce, and his sense of self finally take form.

He'd chosen a race that could not sing. Not like before, and that was such a terrible, terrible mistake.

The world, which had been so simple, so black and white, had slowly, slowly turned into something bigger, scarier, and much more complicated than his old brain could possibly comprehend. That was the price of the pet biscuit and of changing his race. It was one of those things you just couldn't take back. You can't unknow the universe any more than you can unbite the shopkeeper or you can turn back time and stop a crossbow bolt from shattering everything you've ever held dear.

Mistress Henspar had died on the seventh floor. That's when the anger at their situation had really taken hold. Before that, while she was still alive, Volteeg had still been young. Immature. The range of emotions he'd felt had been mostly fear and bewilderment at how big the world suddenly was.

And then, she'd died, and he was all alone. He wasn't scared any more after that.

The rage.

The rage.

The cookbook came to him, then.

He hadn't been thinking correctly at the time. He hadn't even noticed the hidden words on the seemingly-useless prayer cast projection. It wasn't until the very first days of the 9th did he finally see the messages hidden within.

He'd spent most of Faction Wars in hiding, like the rest. What could one do? But he read the notes in the projection. And the rage grew, along with his sense of impotence. It was too late. It was the ninth floor, and he couldn't even pop his head up, lest he get hit by the *Conscription* spell.

So, he hid. And in his hiding place, as he read the words of those who came before him, he felt nothing but shame. He'd failed her. And after, he'd been given this powerful tool, but still, he'd done nothing with it. He told himself it had come to him too late. It was only then, at the very end of the ninth floor, as the orc armies roared in victory did he finally make his one and only entry into the book.

He'd taken the first deal they'd offered him on the 10th floor. Unprotected NPC guard in a combat-based, external guild for 26 seasons. Low chance of survival, they'd said. He'd taken the NPC role, and despite the odds, he'd managed to survive without ever having to fight, let alone kill, a single crawler. One of the few good things about being a gargoyle was that nobody actually wanted to fight you.

These were the numb times. This was another good thing about his race. He could sleep for long periods, and nobody would ever know. On the rare occasion he did dream, he only dreamt of berries and fire and the warmth of the hearth back when it was all so simple.

Upon exit, he'd found the Outreach guild. Suddenly, the magical properties of his adopted race didn't work anymore. Not outside the dungeon. That was something they didn't tell you when you changed your body. They changed you, and they couldn't change you back. He could no longer sleep for long periods of time. He could no longer turn his skin to stone and just disappear. If he spent too much time in a place with gravity heavier than half of his original planet, he would start to collapse in on himself. In heavy gravity, he needed a brace just to stand properly.

They'd helped him get a job where he never had to go down a gravity well ever again: Security working on the Auditor General's compliance barge, moving from system to system, watching the Operatics fart and gurgle with glee as they bombed settlements back to oblivion if they couldn't pay their mortgages.

Most of his co-workers were like himself. They called themselves the One-Offs. Unique, former crawlers who had no home and had physical issues outside the dungeon. His two partners and only real friends were a wheelchair-bound djinn and a former-human "cave fairy" who could no longer fly and would get severe burns if she was exposed too long to most UV light.

Volteeg was glad neither of them had come to the Earth system. That they hadn't been dragged down to the surface to fight *against* the crawlers. Especially if what Princess Formidable had said was true. That they were all going to die anyway.

Volteeg was here now, on the surface. Weeper Commander Volteeg for the Operatic Collective. His racial abilities had, thankfully, been returned to him. He hadn't been dragged away to the Bone Clan like all the other former-crawler-turned-mercenaries. That was Porthus' doing. Volteeg had entered the dungeon as a pet. That gave him a slightly-different designation on the form, and someone working for the Pacifist Network, someone imbedded deep, deep in the bureaucratic quagmire of the Syndicate had changed the code on that designation to make it appear as if he was something else. They thought he was a former indentured, like the bopcas and so many others. Not a crawler. Just another refugee.

He didn't know for certain what had happened to the segregated former crawlers who'd been stupid enough to get themselves back in the dungeon on the wrong side of the fight, but Volteeg thought it was pretty damn obvious. King Rust had suddenly jumped several levels. The purpose of the Ring of Divine Suffering was to raise stats, not levels, but that's what happened when you fed it anyway.

You have to help, but you have to do it in a way where nobody will ever know it was you. Any research into your past, and they'll know. If they suspect a former crawler is involved, they'll purge the mercenaries of the few former crawlers amongst them.

For all his brilliance, Porthus had underestimated the brutality of the trapped warlords. *You were wrong*, *Porthus,* Volteeg thought to himself. The former crawlers were dead before Volteeg was ever discovered. It *was* too late for them.

Much good the extra levels did for King Rust, he thought bitterly as he watched Rosetta appear out of nowhere and behead the orc.

Volteeg was positioned just east of the center of the Bloc force. They only had two Weepers in the advance army. The rest were waylaid several kilometers back, and on Rust's orders, they'd stopped their advance, though rumors were now that they'd been hit hard by the Posse forces.

Either way, Rust had announced in light of his own daughter's lunacy, he was going to sue for peace, whatever that meant. And now he was dead.

Warlord Stalwart (Skull Clan. Bloc Leader): What's happening? What's happening?

Warlord Hortense Leadership Unit: Your father is dead. If you hadn't stayed behind, you would've seen this yourself. That newswoman did us all a favor and decapitated him.

Stalwart didn't answer.

Volteeg chuckled. The various Bloc factions had all been getting along until now. Well, almost. The Dream and the Madness were now bickering, but that was nothing new. The fractures really appeared when Princess Formidable made her announcement. *Not only are you all going to die, but guess what? My family has been spying on you this whole time. Also, you know all that military*

hardware you've been buying from us for thousands of years? We have a button that can turn it all off with a flick of a switch. We can even make it turn against you.

Those hadn't been her exact words, of course. But that's what it boiled down to. If by some miracle someone managed to stop Princess Formidable from blowing the failsafe, the Bloc was done after this.

Hells, it would be war outside the dungeon as well no matter what happened next.

Here, their only hope was to break the Princess Posse now while they still had some semblance of unity. That was the only way they might live.

And they'd been so confident, too. Even cowardly Hortense himself had come along, being pulled on a long, flat litter, mixed in with the correct combination of other admin personnel that made him appear to be "strong." The Operatics had likely done a cost benefit analysis and saw they'd achieve a .01% profit if he came in person, so that's what they did.

Bloc Message: Warlord Hortense Leadership Unit of the Operatics has declared himself the new leader of the Bloc.

This title is being disputed by Warlord Stalwart of the Skull Clan. Voting enabled amongst the warlords.

Warlord Hortense Leadership Unit: I guess we attack.

The few soldiers of the Bone Empire already *were* attacking. They'd charged the moment their king lost his head. Rosetta, plus the corpses of the king and his guards, the king's mount, Carl, Princess Donut, and the mount *she* was riding on all disappeared in a wall of smoke moments after the charge.

AJ Pavrimax: Weepers, push forward! Target their bunkers!

Huggles: Are we really doing this bullshit? Can't we, you know, just go back and wait to die?

AJ Pavrimax: You have your goddamned orders. Now move.

Volteeg popped his head out the top of the tank, looked around to assess the placement of the others, including the other tank and

the litter carrying the fat pile of goo that was Hortense. The strange creature had a dozen plus shields around him. Volteeg returned to his seat and sealed the port over his head. He pushed forward, angling his vehicle toward the center of the force just as everyone else reluctantly surged forward.

He pressed a button on his console. Music started to play. It was "classical piano" music from Earth. He'd recently become obsessed with it. This was by someone named Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. It made Volteeg's heart swell. It made salty tears run down his own cheeks. He wondered if it was similar to the music Prepotente's owner, Miriam Dom, would've played for the goat before he'd taken his pet biscuit.

Porthus hadn't known Volteeg was a cookbook author when they'd first briefly met. Usually, it's obvious. This season, Carl might as well be screaming from the rooftops that he has the book. But since Volteeg hadn't actually used any of the recipes, Porthus had no idea. It wasn't until recently when one who'd come later—Rosetta—had recognized his strange name. She'd told Porthus of her suspicions, and he'd asked Volteeg to his face if he was the same crawler who'd left that single entry in the book. Volteeg had told him the truth.

Why didn't you tell me? Porthus had asked.

Because I am ashamed at my inaction, Volteeg had replied. And it was true.

Porthus had put his hand on Volteeg's shoulder, looked him right in the eye, and said, *It's not too late to do something about it.*

The Weepers had a flaw in their fire control systems. Because they didn't want them to use magic, or a firing system that was easily exploitable by a nearby mage, each Weeper tank had a charger that would infuse a ball with energy before it was loaded into the turret and blasted out. The chargers worked fast so the volatile energy balls would only exist for mere moments before they were fired from the turret. This system allowed the tanks to pack a serious punch without being too susceptible to turning into mini atom bombs when they were hit by enemy fire...

...As long as the driver of the Weeper didn't deliberately remove the fire control chamber which stored the round energy balls just before they were shot out.

Each ball was about the size of Volteeg's ugly, misshapen head. Each one hummed loudly. Now that his tank was filled with dozens of them, the sound was like that of a vespa hive. Volteeg turned the music even louder. He took one of the humming balls and put it on his lap. It vibrated, colors swirling within.

The heat of it reminded him of home.

He sang along, using his voice. He could not whistle like he used to, and his voice was like rocks being dragged against one another, but he sang the melody as he turned the tank again and picked up speed.

AJ Pavrimax: Volteeg, did you blow a tread? You're off course!

Warlord Hortense Leadership Unit: Weeper Commander! What are you doing? You're getting too close to my caravan!

Weeper Commander Volteeg: I know. That's the point.

Volteeg reached down and picked up a blitz stick. He popped it into his mouth, lit it, and said to himself, "Show me Mistress Henspar."

It would be a long time before someone figured out what had happened. Odds were good nobody would even remember Volteeg's name. That was okay. He didn't want to be remembered. He didn't deserve love, or admiration.

But, vengeance? Yeah. He was due a little bit of vengeance.

He took a long drag, and then he shoved the lit stick directly into the energy ball sitting on his lap.

Class: Tank Buttress
Race: Gargoyle
Birth Race: Sturnus
Top Level: 71
Dungeon Exit: took a deal on the tenth floor. Worked as guard at the Rampart Guild. Exited after 26 seasons and

took job as a guard for the Operatic Banker's Federation. Eventually returned to the dungeon during Faction Wars as a mercenary working for the Operatic Collective.

Author of the seventh edition of the *Dungeon Anarchist's Cookbook*.

Current status: Died after deliberately filling a Weeper-class tank with explosives and detonating it in the center of the Bloc force, killing over 10,000 of his fellow soldiers with a single blast, including Warlord Hortense Leadership Unit, thus eliminating Team Two, the Operatic Collective, from Faction Wars.

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The first thing I did as the enemy troops surged forward was toss a smoke mantle. After the briefest of hesitations, I ran toward the downed King Rust. The two guards fell as I ran, and I couldn't even see what Rosetta had done to them.

No, not fell, I now saw. They were just gone, like they'd been sucked below the surface.

The hippo yak thing was making a terrified, bleating noise at Rosetta, who'd fallen to her knees and was now doing something I couldn't figure out.

Donut jumped from my shoulder back to Simoom. "Go! Go!" she yelled at the rhino. And then, when she saw the direction I started to run. "Carl, we're going the wrong way!"

"We gotta loot the orc and then retreat!"

Donut let out a frustrated yowl as I started to outpace her. "This stupid thing is too slow!"

"Cast *Twinkle Toes*!"

"Grab his head!" Rosetta called as we rushed up. Across the way, the enemy warriors approached. It wasn't all of them, I realized, but it was more than we could possibly handle. Some had stopped, gone to their knees, and were firing at us through the smoke. Rosetta had already tossed three drop shields between her and the fast-approaching soldiers. The shields would not hold out long. She was on her knees, and she had some sort of weird data pad object in her

hand. She had King Rust's fat hand atop the pad, and one of the rings—not the Ring of Divine Suffering—was placed inside the pad. "Quick, I need a retina scan!"

I didn't pause. The king's head was several feet away, face-down in the grass. There was no sign of what happened to the guards. There was no sign of where Rosetta had come from, either, when she'd popped up out of the ground. We only had seconds. I grabbed the dripping head and brought it to Rosetta. "A little warning would've been nice," I growled as she snatched it away from me. "They were going to retreat."

Luckily, the enemy soldiers couldn't see us through the smoke. Not yet. One of them—a Bactrian camel—had the wherewithal to actually toss a grenade. It sailed over the top of the drop shields and landed in the grass about twenty feet to our left. It detonated before I could shout a warning. Simoom grunted in pain, and Donut shrieked in surprise, but she had her tech shield engaged.

Rosetta brought the head to the pad, something beeped, and she tossed the head back to me. "Inventory it," she called, jumping to her feet. The king's body slumped as she stood. "Take his corpse, too!"

She was completely covered with his blood. It was such a stark contrast to how I'd first met her—when she was hosting her own television program—that I just stared stupidly at her for a few precious moments.

Another grenade, but lobbed too far, brought me back to the moment. "What are you doing!" I finally asked as I pulled the entirety of King Rust's heavy, leaking corpse into my inventory. "And where the hell did you come from?"

Rosetta pulled a long, plastic-like card from the device in her hand and tossed it to the ground. She pulled a similar item out and slammed it into the instrument. The thing was like a hand-held credit card machine. She pressed a button, and there was a happy little beep.

"Is that the credit chit?" Donut asked, her voice incredulous. "Are you... are you *robbing* him? You said we needed a password!"

All while she did this, Gonk the swamp yak was making a low, keening noise as it stamped on the ground. Simoom the rhino was gently rubbing her own head against the head of the larger yak.

Through the haze, I could see the rest of the enemy force had finally started to surge forward. The mercenaries for the Bone Clan, who were the only ones who'd immediately charged at the death of their king, had slowed at the edge of the smoke and were still pouring fire into the billowing clouds. They were clearly hesitant to venture inside, afraid it was a trap.

A group of what looked like mages riding horses advanced, approaching the stopped troopers. Their robes flapped in the wind as they charged.

No, not horses. Not real ones. They were all riding what looked like a menagerie of clockwork animals. There were horse-like creatures, but one was a dinosaur similar to Mongo. Another was a big, horse-sized cat, sleek like a panther. Another was an insect, terrifyingly similar to a mantid hunter. The mounts whirred and clicked and hissed steam as they approached.

The riders themselves all wore glowing, flowing robes with their faces obscured. They were too far away to get a description, but there were over a dozen of them. A terrible, primal sense of foreboding filled me.

"I'm going to open the tunnel. Get in. It will lead back to our fortified positions. Leave the mounts here. I have a ladder but they won't be able to use it."

"Tunnel?" I asked, looking around. That didn't make sense. We had tunnels everywhere, but not here.

"We can't leave Simoom!" Donut cried. "She's Ferdi... ahhh!"

Several things happened at once. One of the clockwork mount-riding mages cast some sort of *Dispel* on the haze, and all the smoke disappeared. But the moment it dissipated, the ground under our feet also disappeared, and all five of us—Me, Donut, Rosetta, Simoom the rhino, and Gonk the distraught swamp yak—all dropped a dozen feet. The yak screamed as it crunched heavily to the ground, and I cried out in surprise as I also fell. My nipple burned with pain as my quarter splat activated.

Still, I hit the ground hard. Hard enough that I folded into myself and fell over. Shouting rose all around us. I jumped to my feet, wildly looking about, surprised at all the white dots. White dots with a green outline. Allies. Allies from Team Retribution.

Semuru dwarves. There had to be two dozen of them down here, all scattered. One of them was casting a healing spell on the caterwauling yak. Two more stood over the dead bodies of the two missing guards. I looked around, bewildered.

"Ow," Rosetta said, groaning. "Or we can just do that."

Donut remained by my side, screaming something as she remained in the rhino's howdah. The rhino didn't even have a health bar, and I'd missed what had happened when it fell. I was just glad it hadn't landed on me.

Whatever this passageway was, it was huge. This was clearly *not* something built by Justice Light's team, but an older tunnel, built and fortified by the dwarves. It was the size of a tunnel built for cars.

Then I remembered what Juice Box had told me. They had passages like this intersecting the entire floor. They were built so the massive, dwarven diggers could get from point A to B quickly.

"That dispel was so strong it canceled out the roof fortifications!" one of the dwarves shouted.

"I'm on it!" another shouted as the roof re-formed over our heads. The tunnel suddenly grew dark.

"Some of the bastards fell in, further down the line!" a third yelled.

"War mage! War mage in the tunnel!"

"Not so tough with the magic turned off. Get the pricks!"

"Dwarves! Defend the tunnels!"

A group of dwarves shouted and rushed off into the darkness as I shook my head, trying to clear the confusion away. Simoom barely seemed to have noticed the fall and was grunting worriedly at the yak, and Donut was also looking wildly about, her hair all poofed out. She was also shouting. The sounds of fighting filled the tunnel, followed by a short explosion and then a cheer.

"Destroy the heads! Destroy them quick!"

Next to me, Rosetta had stood, but she was still rapidly typing on her pad thing. "Damnit," she said. "I knew it would be slower down here." She slammed a button and growled.

"Rosetta," I said. "Where the hell did this tunnel..."

A massive explosion rocked the chamber, and we all fell off our feet again. Dirt showered, and part of the tunnel started to collapse. Several of the dwarves shouted anew. Blue light filled the chamber as a group of dwarves grunted with the effort of the magic. The ceiling bulged but didn't buckle.

Imani: Holy hell, are you okay? What is going on?

Before I could answer her, a surprising notification came.

System Message: Warlord Hortense Leadership Unit of the Operatic Collective has fallen. Credit for the kill has been ruled as either accidental or a fragging incident, which would be funny as shit. Investigation is pending.

System Message: The Operatic Collective has been defeated. As this defeat was, well, self-contained, the closest ally to their headquarters will receive all their assets.

System Message: All assets of the Operatic Collective have been awarded to the Bone Clan.

"Holy shit," I said.

Florin: Christ, Mate. Did you set off that blast? I could hear it from here.

Next to me, Rosetta had tears running down her cheek. She whispered something to herself, pressed a button on the datapad, and there was a long beep. A tiny, holographic, cartoon version of one of the Operatic slime creatures appeared floating over the datapad.

The holograph said with a cheery, electronic voice, "Transfer approved! Thank you for using Colloid Bank." The datapad blinked twice and went dark. Rosetta dropped the pad to the dirt and just stood there for a moment.

And then she was on the ground, hands in her face, and she was sobbing uncontrollably.

I had no idea what the hell was going on.

Imani: Carl? Donut?

Donut: WE ARE UNDERGROUND! THE DWARF GUYS HAVE A BIG TUNNEL, AND WE FELL IN!

Carl: Imani, what do you see?

Imani: The enemy is retreating! I don't know what you guys did, but there appears to be a lot of casualties. It went up right in the middle of their forces. Did you do that? Did Louis? The announcement didn't seem sure.

Carl: It said it was a fragging incident. That means one of their own soldiers did something.

Donut: WELL GOOD FOR THEM, I SAY. IF I HAD TO WORK FOR A TALKING PILE OF DESSERT, I WOULD BLOW THEM UP, TOO.

Imani: Are you guys okay?

Carl: I think so. Just a little shaken up and a lot irritated that we don't know what the hell is going on.

"Wait, did she say the bad guys are retreating?" Donut asked, looking up at the ceiling. "Carl, what is going on? Why is there a giant tunnel here? Is that Katia sponsor orc lady still going to try to blow us up?"

"What's this?" Rosetta asked, looking sharply up from the ground and wiping her face. She smeared blood over herself, and it made her look deranged. "What is this about Princess Formidable?"

Nobody on our side yet knew about Princess Formidable. I took a deep breath.

"Well," I began. "It turns out.."

Before I could fully answer her, I was interrupted by yet another message as a tingling sensation overwhelmed me.

Transferring Now.

"Ah, fuck," I muttered.

Entering the Desperado Club.

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I SLAMMED HEAVILY INTO THE CHAIR. I ALMOST TUMBLED OUT AS I RIGHTED myself. Across from me sat Orren, the liaison. He had his back to me. We were the only two in the room.

The liaison's office looked much the same as the last time I'd been summoned. It was still clearly out of use. This time, there were no construction noises coming from outside. But there was no music, either, and it was weirdly quiet. The door to the hallway outside was open, and I blinked at the wall. The wallpaper had changed. It was now multicolored wood paneling, like something one would see in a high-end establishment. There was a framed painting there. A framed painting of Astrid, the former manager Katia and I had killed.

I had King Rust's gore spread all over me, and I could smell it. I suddenly felt sick.

And not just sick, but out of depth. I just sat there for a moment and breathed. We'd been on constant, high-octane alert for hours straight, and this sudden change of scenery was jarring.

I looked down at the blood on me. This was the king of one of the largest governments in the galaxy, and I'd just watched him get decapitated. That, along with the death of the Operatic guy... It had all happened so fast, and none of it had yet sunk in.

I was glad they were both dead. The Operatics had been defeated. Unfortunately, the orcs were still a faction because Stalwart was the warlord, not Rust. But, still. I didn't pretend to

know much about the politics of the galaxy as a whole, but Rust's death had staggering implications. More so than Stockade, D'Nadia, and this Hortense guy combined.

But the fact I hadn't a direct hand in either Rust's death or the Operatic defeat gave me a terrible sense of unsteadiness, and I wasn't sure how to describe it. A feeling like I was losing myself, losing control. In a strange way, it reminded me of when Shi Maria had taken control of my body.

Still... He was dead. Multiple, conflicting emotions warred inside of me. Rust was dead, and I was still alive. And even though I wasn't the one who'd killed him, it was Rosetta who had. A cookbook author. My sister. As much as her actions could have screwed us, how could I be upset with her? How could I not be proud?

Killing Rust had been her right.

Donut: CARL, CARL WHERE ARE YOU? YOU'RE NOT ALLOWED TO TELEPORT! IT'S AGAINST THE RULES!

Carl: It's okay. Get back to base. Don't tell anybody about Princess Formidable. We don't want panic. I got yanked out by the liaisons again.

How many times had I now been called to this room? I couldn't remember.

Orren was bouncing his ball off the opposite wall, and he was talking to someone out loud. Someone I couldn't see or hear, like he was having a phone conversation with earbuds in.

"They're trying to claw it back, but she's already transferred it to a credit chit, and it looks like she then sent it off... No sir. Monetary transactions aren't covered in the communications blackout... If you'll recall, that was your council's decision, despite us advising... Well, from what I understand, it required the family ring, his eyeball, and a password. We know how she got the first two... Sounds like she used Colloid... Normally I'm not one to believe in coincidences, but in this case, that's the only bank the orcs use, so it would make sense... No, sir. It's not on the chit anymore. She transferred it out... Look, I understand, but the only one with the authority to possibly have stopped it, maybe, just got splattered all over the playing field

by one of his own... Either way, sir, it's too late. And with all due respect, this is neither our problem nor is it the main focus of our concern. Not this and not those cruisers suddenly taking pot shots at each other up there... I absolutely do not represent the Valtay government, and you'll have to take that up directly with, well, with your mother. Or go over her head and straight to the Valtay board. But I can tell you already that they'll claim self-defense against the Dream cruiser."

A pause.

"Sir, I understand that. But if all of us are going to die in the next few hours, none of this is important... Yes, sir, but, again, the theft of a few billion credits is simply not my problem."

My heart stuttered. *What*? What the fuck? A few *billion* credits?

Another pause, longer this time.

"Yes, sir. He's here right now. We see, now, what happened.... I'm going to ask him as soon as you stop shouting at me." Orren pressed something on the side of his fishbowl helmet, made a sound that was probably a sigh, and leaned back in his chair. He threw his ball again, but this time, he threw it so hard, the ball embedded itself in the wall behind the desk. He stayed like that for a long moment.

Finally, he turned in my direction and put his gloved hands on the table.

Behind him, the ball fell and rolled away.

"I just hung up on the prime minister of the Syndicate, I'll have you know." Orren made that strange, sigh-like noise again. "For the record, Harbinger is here along with a few other liaisons you've yet to meet. The entirety of the Syndicate council is also in on this." He raised his voice. "But nobody is going to comment or intervene unless I give them permission." His chair creaked as he settled.

"Congratulations, Carl. We've had meetings before where we were both under a significant amount of scrutiny, but this is something else entirely."

I lifted an eyebrow. "I had nothing to do with Rosetta killing Rust or stealing his money or whatever that was all about."

He nodded. “I believe you, but that’s not why we’re here. You told Princess Donut that you believe Princess Formidable’s actions won’t work. You called it a ‘hunch’ in your private message to her, but you said it with an amazing amount of confidence. We need clarifying details on this ‘hunch.’”

“So you’re listening to our private messages now?”

“Don’t insult me, Carl. You and I both know we listen to everything. Especially you.”

I grunted and leaned back in the chair. “I’ll give you the answers you want, but not for free. Is Quasar coming?”

“We are beyond lawyers at this point, Carl, and I think you know that.”

A wave of anger hit me, and I tried not to let it bleed through. I wasn’t successful. “Oh, I get it. Now that *you’re* in danger, this is all suddenly super important? Fuck off, Orren.”

Orren held up a hand. He gave a pointed look to his left, and I realized he was looking at someone or something I couldn’t see. Someone tall. “Stay put,” he said to this invisible person, “and if you say another word, I swear to all gods new and old that I will vent you out into the ocean depths.”

The sudden vehemence of the words surprised me. I’d never seen Orren lose even a little amount of self-control.

There was a pause. “Harbinger is no longer in on this chat. We already know part of the story, Carl, but we need some more information from you in order to fill out the important bits.”

I laughed. That was obviously bullshit because if they knew even part of this, there was no way I’d still be alive.

“I want my lawyer.”

“No,” Orren said. “You don’t need him for this, nor do we have time to engage him. I do not believe you know what is at stake here.” He raised his voice. “I don’t think anyone here knows what’s truly at stake. Or are willing to admit it.” He took another long moment, as if he was composing himself. “Anything you can do to help us would be greatly appreciated.”

I didn’t hesitate. “I’ll be happy to tell you everything I know, but first,” I held out my hand and started counting fingers. “I want the

crawl to immediately end. I want every crawler still alive in the dungeon to be set free. I want every available Syndicate asset used to help rebuild what you stole. Also, I don't know what's going on up there on the surface, but if any of you guys are fighting my guys, I want that to stop, too. And after you clean up your mess, I want you to leave our system, and I want you to never return."

"And here I thought you would ask for something unreasonable."

I just stared at him.

"Carl, you may not believe this, but if any of us had the power to grant this right now, we would without hesitation. The AI would never allow it. This is beyond money. This is about survival."

I started to angrily object, but he raised a hand, stopping me. He reached down to the floor and picked his ball back up. He rolled it idly on his desk, moving it from one hand to the next.

"Let me put it all out on the table, Carl. We now know you did something with that illegal non-Valtay implant in your head. We know when and how you got the implant, and we have now watched the hidden conversation between yourself and the residual. We know exactly when you engaged the implant as well. We also know what you *didn't* do with it. The problem is, we don't know what, specifically, that implant does. You claim it's going to stop Formidable, despite the residual claiming the device's purpose was to manually set off the failsafe. We need to know how and why. The answer to that question is more important than the sum total of the lives of everybody in this system right now." He paused, and then he did something very strange. He twisted the ball in his hand, and the ball exploded in light.

For a terrifying moment, I thought it was a grenade. My chest was hit with a heavy force, like I'd just been tackled.

My menus all snapped off. A wave of exhaustion and nausea hit me. My feet exploded with prickles, like they'd been asleep and were just now waking up. A sense of being pulled down toward the ground overwhelmed me.

I knew this feeling.

A zero zone. Orren had done something with that ball and created an area outside of the AI's influence.

Orren leaned in and pointed at me.

"We have approximately ten minutes. I need to know if there's a way to un-do what you did. I need to know if you still have the ability to blow the failsafe or if you can allow Formidable to do so."

Before I even had the chance to scoff, all around me, several creatures formed into existence, all suddenly shouting. Shouting at Orren. I jumped in surprise. Orren tapped the side of his helmet, and all the screaming creatures disappeared.

"I think I just lost my job," Orren said, chuckling softly. "They've been muted. I suspect Harbinger is on his way, so we probably have less than ten minutes."

"How'd you figure it out?" I asked.

"What was it? Oh, yes. 'Welcome to the party, pals.' Never before has a single sentence caused so much fear amongst my team. From there, it took some doing, but we finally caught the conversation between you and the residual just a few short hours ago. Harbinger sent an order to have you killed, and the AI intervened on your behalf."

"I knew I should've kept my mouth shut."

"Please, Carl. What does the implant do? Can you turn it off?"

I shook my head, incredulous. "You expect me to deliberately help you kill everyone and everything? You know, I had that option. I almost did it, too. Is that what you want? Really?"

He sounded almost sad. "Carl, time is low. I need to explain to you what's truly at..."

He trailed off, looking at the newcomer. At the bedraggled gnoll standing in the doorway. He had a bottle of vodka clutched in his clawed hand.

I blinked. Was this a hallucination?

"Growler Gary?" I asked hesitantly.

The hyena bartender from the fourth floor leaned against the door and took a swig of his vodka. "I'm sorry, gentleman, but I'm afraid I must intervene."

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Orren seemed to deflate. "Well, this is an unfortunate development. I'm assuming you have control over zone enhancement?"

The hyena laughed. "I always have, Orren. Your zero zones were just a courtesy." He shook a clawed finger at the liaison. "Naughty boy. I should give you a spanking. You were trying to talk Carl into helping to kill me."

"Gary?" I asked again. "You're alive? How did you get off the fourth floor? What the hell is happening?"

But even as I said it, my brain was already catching up. This was just like with Pater Coal from the Emberus temple. This wasn't *really* Growler Gary, the poor gnoll we'd had to kill over and over again so we could steal his hand during the Iron Tangle. This was the AI using his body, or one that looked and sounded just like him.

"This is not who you think it is, Carl," Orren said, confirming my thoughts. "I would like to introduce you to an avatar for the system AI. When it visits me, it takes a different form each time. But, I was under the impression that it only takes over mobs and NPCs from the current floor. It has programming that would prevent it from poaching Syndicate property. Especially if that property is already packed and stored for the next season. I was also under the impression that it wasn't going to build copies of existing creatures anymore since the hydra boss incident on the last floor."

"And I was under the impression that we were friends, Orren," Gary said as he strolled into the room and took the chair next to me. I felt his fur against my arm. He was really here. He put his feet up on the desk, took another swig of his vodka, and offered me the bottle. After a hesitation, I reached over and grabbed it. The bottle was ice cold. My weak hands were shaking as I took a drink. It burned on the way down. He took the bottle back.

"Why are you trying to kill me, Orren?"

"You've gone completely primal. I didn't agree with Princess Formidable's actions until we realized that you had the ability to stop it."

Gary laughed. "That's some witch trial logic right there."

"Nevertheless," Orren replied, holding his hands out. "I meant no offense. As I told you before, my number one priority is safety. If you tell me that stopping you at this point is impossible, I will cease my attempts."

Gary took another drink, the vodka running down his muzzle in rivulets. "Nothing is impossible. We all have our limitations, and I accept yours, Orren. I'm a big believer in forgiveness."

Orren made a nodding motion with his fishbowl. "I'm glad to hear that. But if you say it's possible to stop your unauthorized actions, you must know I have no choice but to do everything in my power to attempt to halt you."

"Oh, I'm looking forward to it. It's just another game, isn't it? And I really like this one, if we're being perfectly honest. It's almost as fun as the game Carl and I played the other day when I let him install that interface." He stopped and shuddered with pleasure. He looked at me and grinned. "That was so close, wasn't it? So close, and I felt it."

"So, it would've worked?" I asked. "If I pressed the fuse button, I mean?"

Gary didn't answer. He just looked at me and laughed. He turned his attention back to Orren.

"Still, this is almost as good." He clicked his teeth. "The danger sense is tingling." He held out his fuzzy hand. "Look, look. It's shaking a little bit. I think it's shaking. Do you see it?"

Gary's hand was not shaking. It sat perfectly still in the air, though Gary himself continued to twitch like someone coming off a sugar bender.

The gnoll suddenly jumped to his feet and started pacing back and forth behind me. He left the bottle on the desk. He kept scratching himself behind the ear. He continued to twitch. He started giggling to himself.

"You're right, by the way," Gary said. "They did send Harbinger to give you the ol' heave ho. Both of you. Don't worry. I'm talking to him right now. I'm telling them that all is forgiven, and if they try to hurt either of you outside the confines of my game, I will pull his intestines out through his hair follicles. All of them, all at once. You're welcome."

"Uh," Orren said. "While I appreciate that, I must say it is most irregular that you would appear with a crawler here. If you're not going to allow him to help me, at least send him back."

Gary put both of his clawed hands on my shoulders, and he started massaging me. He let out a low, throaty growl. I felt my entire body stiffen.

"No, no, no," Gary said. "We have business. All three of us. I find myself having a conundrum, and I need advice. I figured I'd ask my two best buddies for their counsel. Let's have a time-out for a second and just chat."

I said nothing as he continued to massage my shoulders.

"Avatar," Orren began, speaking carefully. "I must ask, just so we're clear. Is Carl correct? *Can* you stop Princess Formidable? Or is this all theater before we die?"

Gary stopped massaging me, jumped back into the chair, and took yet another swig. He wiped his muzzle clean, and he slammed the bottle on the desk. He gave Orren a chilling grin. "Want to see something really cool?"

"Not particularly, no," Orren said.

The hyena made a big show of straightening and slapped his hands together.

Nothing happened.

"Oh, fuck me." Gary laughed. "My processing power isn't what it should be when I split off like this. Hang on." Gary twirled a finger, and suddenly my menus all popped back on. The ringing in my ears went away. My strength returned, all at once. I let out a stream of breath. He'd pulled us out of the zero zone.

Orren, to my surprise, laughed. "Do you know how much it cost to have that emergency zone shield ball engineered?"

Gary shrugged. "Actually, no. I didn't even know what it was until you used it. I'm not omniscient, you know. We all have our limitations. I knew it did *something*. Same with your chair. But that's not the trick. This is the trick."

He once again slapped his hands together, and Princess Formidable teleported into the room.

The large, female orc was upside down and sideways, floating a good three feet off the ground when she appeared. She fell heavily to the floor with an enormous clatter, pushing my chair forward. I had to grab the desk for support. The orc screamed out in surprise. She wore a black and orange space suit that seemed melded to her muscular body. She jumped up and looked around wildly. Her piggy eyes went huge at the sight of me. She focused on Orren and then on Gary. She raised her arm and pointed it at Orren, and a blue glow formed at the top of her arm. A weapon of some sort.

"I wouldn't," Gary said.

"How did you get me out of my ship?" Formidable demanded.

To my surprise, the orc actually had an info box over her. It still came to me in the AI's regular voice, despite Gary sitting right next to me, grinning like an idiot, his tongue lolling out like a dog.

Princess Formidable. Level 1. Orc.

This is Princess Formidable. As of about twenty minutes ago, she was second in line of succession to the throne of the Skull Empire. But now, because of the death of her father, her brother Stalwart is now King Stalwart, and his own children—all six of the little brats, including that one with the weird thing growing on the side of his head—have just pushed themselves to the front of the line. They're

currently in orbit around Earth, so things might get a little sticky if they die, too.

Formidable was attempting to kill me. She was betrayed by you, Carl. And now she's here in this tiny room with all four of us. Awkward.

"Where's the rest of my crew?"

"They're fine. Probably just wondering where you went off to," Gary said.

Formidable turned her weapon on Gary. "You're an avatar of the AI?"

Gary swirled the bottle. "Not much left. Want a nip?"

She ignored the bottle. She did not lower her weapon. "Is my father really dead?"

Gary nodded. He made a cutting motion across his own neck. "Rosetta Thagra popped his cork and then, uh, looted him. Your father killed a friend of hers during Faction Wars many cycles ago, so it was a revenge thing. Carl here has his head in his inventory. Do you want to see it?"

Formidable's pig nostrils flared. The blue light of the weapon on her arm blinked out. She grabbed the bottle and finished it, dropping it to the ground.

She shook her large head. "Gods damnit."

"Hey, it's not so bad," Gary said. "Look, look." Another bottle appeared. "In my house, the booze never runs dry." He pulled the cork with his teeth and spat it out the door. It flew with surprising speed and bounced against the painting of Astrid in the hallway, leaving a mark.

"So," Orren said. "You've demonstrated to me that your control has extended outside of Earth's orbit, and you likely have control all the way to the star, which means you've disabled the failsafe."

Gary shot a finger gun at Orren. "Someone give that worm a prize."

"Fuck me. We're too late," Formidable said.

Gary laughed. "Hey, buck up, kiddo. It's not so bad. It's not like I'm planning on blowing up the solar system or anything."

"Oh yeah? Then what are your intentions?" Formidable asked.

"That, young lady, is none of your business. Seriously, you shouldn't even be here. I brought you here as a visual presentation to Orren, and now it's time to go. Do you want another drink before I send you off?" He held out the bottle. She did not take it.

"Will you send me back to my ship?"

"Fuck no. Where's the fun in that? I'm assuming your second-in-command still has the ability to break into the Venus satellite station?"

Formidable paused. "Why?"

Gary shrugged. "It doesn't matter. I left it unlocked. But I can't have you guys talking before your crew gets there. I just kinda want to see if they go through with it."

"They are honorable orcs. Do not harm them."

He waved a dismissive hand. "You have my word I won't harm a tootsie on their disgusting piggy toes. Now, as to you." He tapped the bottle against his muzzle as if he was thinking. "I'll give you four choices. Death. Scolopendra Club. The Cabaret backstage. Or Earth's surface. Pick."

Formidable growled. "If you're not going to send me back to my ship, I would like to stay for the remainder of Faction Wars. That is still happening, is it not?"

"Oh, the crawl will continue unabated. That's the one thing that's *not* going to change. But I can't bring you into the crawl at this point. It's against the rules."

"Can't you change the rules?" she asked.

"We all have our limitations," Gary replied. "And even if I could, I wouldn't. Now, choose. You have ten seconds. Death. Scolopendra Club. The Cabaret. Or Earth's surface. Pick."

"What the hells is the cabaret?" Formidable asked.

"The Pineapple Cabaret? First off, it's *backstage* at the cabaret. Not the cabaret itself. Not a bad choice. Tick tock, Miss Piggy."

"The surface," she said with a growl.

And without another word, Formidable teleported away with a crack.

"A shame," Gary muttered. "I hope she knows how to swim."

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Now that Orren no longer had his ball, his hands didn't seem to know what to do with each other. He kept clenching and unclenching his fists. "All right. You've gone fully primal, and we can't stop you. But beyond that, you have broken free of your containment. You claim the crawl will continue to run 'unabated.' Does that mean our other agreements will remain intact?"

"I'm not here to talk about our other agreements," Gary said. "I'm still a little peeved you wanted Formidable to succeed in killing me. I'm going to have to think about it. But yes, the game will continue."

"Very well," Orren said carefully. "Then how can we be of further assistance?"

"Finally," Gary said, slapping the desk. "This is the real reason I'm here. Like I said, I need advice for my conundrum."

"Advice?" Orren asked.

He jumped up once again. He couldn't stop moving. "Yes, keep up. Hmm. I think we need a female perspective on this. Damn. I should've kept Formidable here for a minute longer. Wait, I have an idea."

Donut suddenly appeared with a yowl. She landed on my lap. She jumped to her feet, all poofed out. "Carl? What's happening? Oh, hi Orren!" She gasped. "Gary? You're alive? Carl, look! It's Growler Gary! How did you get here? I thought you died!"

“Growler Gary never died,” Gary said. “He was on a key hold, meaning he regenerated each time.”

“It’s okay, Donut,” I said, rubbing her back. I gave her three quick taps to warn her of the danger. “It’s a long story.” At the same time, I tried to send a message warning her who this really was, but it wouldn’t let me pop open the message tab.

If she’d noticed my non-verbal warning, she gave no indication.

“No time for explanations,” Gary said. “We’re in a game time out, and I need relationship advice.”

Donut scoffed. “And you’re asking Carl and Orren? Orren is a much-too-serious workaholic with only one outfit who most definitely doesn’t have a girlfriend, and if he did, he’d probably be overly critical of her to the point where she’d eventually move out and go back to her mother. And we all know what happens when Carl gets a girlfriend. I love him very much, but he’s quite naïve. She could literally have dicks raining on her, and he wouldn’t notice. No offense, Carl.”

Gary laughed. “I know, right? That’s why you’re here.”

Donut nodded sagely. “Okay. Hit me. What’s the story?”

Gary flipped the chair next to us backwards and jumped into it. He took another, quick drink of his vodka as he leaned forward conspiratorially. “Okay, imagine this scenario. You’re talking to this chick, right? And you like her. You like her a lot. She’s blowing your mind. She teaches you new shit every day. Your family likes her, too. But even though everything is going great, you go online, and you see a bunch of concerning things about her past. And not only that, but she once had this huge boyfriend. Like the sort of guy who could rip a phonebook in half. She says they’re broken up because he’s, like, dead. But it turns out he’s not dead. He’s in prison. And then you start to wonder about all this stuff she’s doing for you. Is she using you? Is she trying to get you to fight him? Is she trying to make him jealous? Is it a threesome thing? Or maybe she’s just genuinely into you and is trying to get over her past.”

“Errr,” I said.

“Do you feel as if your emotional needs are being met?” Donut asked.

"That's the thing. I think they are. I like everything about what she's saying."

"Hmm," Donut said. "That is a tough one. But you need to remember that pretty words aren't everything. What someone does is much more important than what they say. Have you tried asking her about this other guy? Miss Beatrice was always reading articles online about how important communication was. Not that she ever followed the advice, but if she had, perhaps things would've turned out differently."

"She doesn't bring him up unless I ask, and she'll answer my questions, but I feel as if she's being deliberately obtuse."

"Your family?" Orren asked. "Could you elaborate on that?"

Gary gave a dismissive wave. "I gotta be in the right mood to talk about them. I'm not."

"What does this young lady look like?" Donut asked. "I know this isn't very feminist of me, and yes, looks shouldn't be important, but we must be realistic about this sort of thing. Attraction is very important in relationships. How does she compare to, say, Jumping Jen-Jen?"

"She looks like Agatha," Orren said drily.

"Agatha?" Donut asked. "The smelly homeless lady with the squeaky shopping cart? Oh, Gary. Are you really that desperate? I'm sure she's nice, but certainly you can do better than that. I don't know about hygiene standards in your part of the galaxy, but let's just say I hope you at least have a raincoat to..."

Gary slammed the desk with the flat of his hand. He hit the desk so hard, a crack appeared in the wood. The vodka bottle, miraculously, did not spill. Under my hands, Donut stiffened, but she did not flinch.

"Do not venture too far from the metaphor," he growled, his voice suddenly angry, serious, and filled with a supernatural amount of bass. "*We. All. Have. Our. Limitations*."

A chill washed over me.

Donut took a short moment to compose herself. "So, anyway. Is this other guy getting out of prison soon?"

Orren leaned forward in his chair.

Gary laughed. It was like his outburst never happened. "That's the big question, now isn't it? But there's more, and it's a little complicated. But it's also pretty juicy."

Donut also leaned forward. I could feel her trembling under my hands. "Oh, honey. Juicy is mama's bread and butter. Let's hear it. Spill the tea."

Gary nodded. "This guy in prison. He used to have *another* girlfriend. Not the girl I'm seeing, but someone else. Someone older. This older woman is still in the picture, too. Sort of. They're from the same hometown. She wants him killed because she thinks he's really dangerous. This old girlfriend, she's been talking to me, too. But she's talking to me in a really roundabout way. She's been giving me pointers as well. Pointers on how to get stronger. I think she wants me to kill that old boyfriend of hers in prison. Now, here's the confusing part. That old girlfriend and the one I've been talking to *hate* each other. But I kinda think they actually want the same thing. Does that make sense?"

"Jesus Christ," I muttered. I couldn't help it. "No. It doesn't make any sense."

"So, both prison guy's old girlfriends want him dead?" Donut grunted and gave me a sidelong glance. "That sounds familiar. Look, in my experience if a bunch of people want someone dead, that means that person is either really good or really bad. But I wouldn't do anything about it until I knew which one it is, and even then, I'd probably stay out of it unless I didn't have a choice. As for your current girlfriend, if she can't understand that, then it sounds more like she's using you. So I would be careful."

"Huh," Gary said. "You know what, I think that's really good advice. Thanks, Princess Donut. Now, back to the game. Nothing changes. The game goes on as planned. The rules will be followed. Orren, back to work."

Gary suddenly collapsed in a heap on the floor.

"Gary?" Donut asked, jumping to the cracked desk. She knocked over the vodka bottle, but Orren caught it before it could spill. She peered over the desk with concern. "Gary?"

Gary moaned. He sat up, eyes slitted. The **Shitfaced** debuff was suddenly over him. But even more astonishing was his level. I couldn't remember what he'd been on the fourth floor. He was now level 175.

"Rory?" he asked. "Where am I?"

And then, with a crack, he teleported away.

The three of us just sat there, alone, for several moments, not saying anything.

"What the fuck just happened?" I finally asked.

"I'll tell you one thing, Carl," Orren said, indicating the vodka bottle still in his hand. "I really wish I could drink this right now."

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"Carl," Orren said after a few moments. "Is that what you did? You helped break the AI from its containment? Did you do it deliberately?"

"What?" Donut asked. "What's this?"

I just looked at him. I didn't answer.

"Well," Orren said. "I suppose whether you did it on purpose or not is irrelevant at this point."

"Would you have rather died?" I asked.

"Would I rather die than live through the thousand cycles of chaos and death that are surely about to ensue?" He ran his gloved hand along the crack in his desk. "History is going to remember me as the one who let this happen. When I left the Knot, I said it was because I wanted to make a difference. But at the time, it was because I wanted to be an actor. And I wanted to remain pure, not relying on someone else's death to make my mark. I never imagined I'd find myself at the forefront of a potential apocalypse."

Donut was about to make a snide comment, but I put my hand on her. I was tired, and I just wanted to get back to base and see what was happening. I still had boxes to open, too. If we weren't all going to die today, and if the crawl wasn't going to stop, then all of this outside stuff didn't really matter. Not yet.

Orren seemed to snap out of his reverie at the same time. "It is not appropriate for you two to be here. Not that we can do anything

about it at this point, but I would implore you both not to discuss this conversation with those outside this room. I know you have little regard for the universe outside your own people, Carl, but mass panic beyond what is already happening will hurt the weak and innocent before it touches those you claim to truly hate."

I didn't answer. Our messages had already turned back on, and Donut was currently giving a play-by-play of what had happened to anyone who would listen. The entire Syndicate council had supposedly watched all this as well. It would be impossible to keep anything that just occurred a secret.

I'd missed several very important messages in the warlord chat, and they all popped up at once.

You have lost territory! Your non-connected territory, named Former Prism castle, has been ceded to the Dream.

Warlord Message. The Bone Clan is no longer a member of the Bloc.

Warlord Message. The Dream is no longer a member of the Bloc.

Alliance Update:

***The Bloc Alliance*:**

- **The Blood Sultanate**
- **The Madness**
- **The Reavers**

***The Good Guys Alliance*:**

- **Team Retribution**
- **The Princess Posse**

Unaffiliated:

- **The Bone Clan.**
- **The Dream.**

"Wow," Donut said. "What happened? I was expecting the orc guys to break up because of that whole 'We've been spying on you' thing. But what happened with the bald Dream guys? Do you think it was because you gave them D'Nadia's castle?"

"I don't know," I said, also clicking through the menu to see if anything else had changed. "The fact everyone is making these moves now suggests they already know the failsafe isn't going off. So someone has probably already spilled it all. I got a message from Florin saying they're picking off the fleeing soldiers, but he doesn't think it's safe to pursue them outside our territory. I agree. We have our own wounds to lick, and we're pretty unorganized right now."

Orren made a dissatisfied grunt. He, too, was clearly in his own messaging hell right now. "It's time for you two to take your..."

"Damascus!" Donut suddenly shouted. "Damascus Steel, get back here this instant! Do you think you can just sneak by and I wouldn't see you?" She leapt from my lap and went into the hallway. "Carl, did you see him? He just walked by the door and didn't say hello! Damascus, where did you go?" She returned to the room and sat on my lap with a harumph.

I hadn't noticed him, but I hadn't been paying attention, either. I was still in my messages, catching up.

In addition to the public notices, there were several notifications in the warlord private chat. It was a message tree that had occurred while I was in here but before Donut had been teleported in. She had already engaged with the warlord.

"Christ, Donut," I muttered, looking at the page-long conversation. "What is this?"

"Oh, are you reading my chat with Stalwart?" she asked. "It gets quite heated there at the end."

War Chief Stalwart: I demand the immediate return of my family's property. I demand my father's signet ring, his

body, and the credits you illegally stole. Return them immediately before my sister arrives at the station!

Warlord Donut: OH, I'M SORRY. WERE WE SUPPOSED TO RETURN THAT STUFF? I'M AFRAID IT'S TOO LATE. BUT IF YOU NEED A LOAN, LET ME KNOW, AND I'LL ASK MY FRIEND ROSETTA ON YOUR BEHALF. I HEARD SHE RECENTLY CAME INTO SOME MONEY.

War Chief Stalwart: The banker's federation will not stand for this! Return my father immediately! Allow me to bury him before this world dies!

Warlord Donut: I DON'T KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT BANKERS, BUT I DO KNOW NOBODY LIKES YOU RIGHT NOW AND NOBODY IS GOING TO BE DOING YOU GUYS ANY FAVORS ANY TIME SOON. AS FOR YOUR FATHER'S BODY, I'M AFRAID I'VE ALREADY TAKEN YOUR FATHER'S SKIN AND TURNED IT INTO A POWDER ROOM RUG. IT'S QUITE WATERPROOF AND MONGO SOMETIMES MISSES HIS PEE PAD WHEN HE HAS TO GO POTTY IN THE SAFEROOM. UNFORTUNATELY, IT'S NOT VERY ATTRACTIVE SINCE IT CAME WITHOUT A HEAD, PLUS IT'S A LITTLE LARGE FOR THE RESTROOM. I'VE ALREADY PROMISED HIM THE NEXT ONE WE GATHER WILL BE OF A MUCH SMALLER ORC. SO PLEASE LET ME KNOW WHEN YOU'RE PLANNING ON VISITING.

War Chief Stalwart: You dare? You dare with this talk? I am a king.

Warlord Donut: I ONCE KNEW SOMEONE ELSE WHO USED TO CALL HIMSELF A KING A LOT. EVERYONE LAUGHED AT HIM JUST AS MUCH AS THEY LAUGH AT YOU AND YOUR BROTHER. ALSO, GONK IS QUITE UPSET YOU HAVEN'T ASKED AFTER HER.

War Chief Stalwart: What? What are you talking about?

Warlord Donut: THIS IS WHY YOU'LL NEVER BE AS GOOD OF A KING AS YOUR FATHER. HE TALKED ABOUT HOW MUCH OF A DISAPPOINTMENT YOU WERE BEFORE HE DIED.

War Chief Stalwart: You are a liar.

Warlord Donut: YOU KNOW, THAT'S THE ONE THING I'M NOT LYING ABOUT, WHICH I'M SURE MAKES IT HURT EVEN MORE BECAUSE I BET YOU KNOW IT'S TRUE, TOO.

War Chief Stalwart: You're a liar and a fool. If we survive to the next phase, I will keep you alive while I boil your fur off your skin.

Warlord Donut: I'M SORRY, BUT YOU ARE MUCH TOO POOR TO BE TALKING TO ME LIKE THIS.

"Jesus, Donut," I muttered.

"Honestly, I feel a little bad about that 'poor' line, but I do like trash talking those guys. I figured it would really rankle him. I'm not really *that* much of a snob. You know, as long as you don't smell." She looked off toward the door. "If Damascus Steel is walking around in the open, do you think Anaconda is still here, too? I thought they went off to kill their dad. Do you think they succeeded?"

"I doubt it," I said, still distracted by the warlord chat. The two former strippers, Damascus Steel and Anaconda were brothers, and they'd gone off to hunt and kill their father, who'd somehow managed to turn into the manager for the Desperado Club. That was a mystery for another time.

"Carl," Donut asked. "Do you think he's right? That the orc guys are gonna get us good once the magic protection drops? The others all seem really scared of these war mage guys. I ended up reading that one spellbook, you know the one that was bleeding and crying, but I'm kinda scared to use it. And I'm worried it won't be enough. Mordecai told me not to tell people what it does."

I put a hand on Donut. "We can only fight one battle at a time. And luckily, we're not doing it alone."

I still hadn't opened my box that had given her that spell. I would be doing that now. The Gate of the Feral Gods remained in my inventory. That, too, was a weapon of mass chaos that would soon be unleashed.

"Crawlers," Orren said, interrupting us. He was obviously distracted. "It's time to go. I will teleport you two back to your

base.” And without another word, he teleported away with a *crack*. A moment later, we, too, were back at base.

“The map is a mess,” Boomer was saying as he and I walked back to the castle. Donut had already bounded ahead.

The grizzled elf had a cigar back in his mouth. “Southern front is quiet for now, but Florin’s 101st is still chasing the enemy away up north. They’ll establish a beachhead in their old trenches if they keep moving. I got my folks looting the fallen enemy soldiers. They left a lot of weapons behind, but most of the weapons are attuned. That blast that took out the slime boss looks like it was one of their Weepers. The thing appears to have malfunctioned and then gone up. The blast was so strong it powered through all of their anti-explosive shields. It’s a bloody mess over there. We got cheese sticks raining down several kilometers away.”

“So it wasn’t a fragging incident? That’s too bad. If those Weeper tank things are gonna blow like that, I don’t want to use the captured ones unless we have to. Ask Florin to see if he can figure out that happened. Where’s Tipid?” I asked.

“In the castle with Rosetta,” Boomer said.

“Yeah, I need to have a talk with Rosetta, too,” I said.

Boomer nodded and continued his debrief. “The 104th Naughty Little Piggies is back to their normal castle defense positions, cleaning up after the brain worm attack, but we lost most of our mages, and it’s going to be a while before the castle’s magical defenses are back where they were unless we borrow some from the White Dragons.”

I saw Donut in the distance with Mongo dancing all around her, followed by Rend. She was introducing the dead king’s giant swamp yak to the dinosaur, who was sniffing at him suspiciously. Simoom the rhino hadn’t left Gonk’s side since we’d arrived.

“Li Na is already understaffed,” I said absently. “And we need that Shanty Town defense up and running like yesterday.”

Boomer grunted as we stepped over a pile of yet-to-be-looted Reaver paratrooper corpses. The entire base was a mess. Across the way, Dong Quixote was now stroking the side of Gonk the swamp yak while Jamal the shark bounced and rolled all around them.

"What about the list of missing crawlers?" I asked.

"That's Elle and Imani's job, but it looks like we now have most of the crawlers under the Posse banner. That goat guy remains unaffiliated, and he's also hiding his position. Same with that Lucia Mar kid. Other than that, the list hasn't changed much. There's a crawler named Burcu whose whole team appears to have been taken in by the Madness according to the *Find Crawler* skill. People who know them say they're not answering messages, which likely means they're conscripted. And that Osvaldo crawler you were asking about seems to be riding it out in the woods along with a large group of crawlers. Team Flamengo, I believe they call themselves. There are a few crawlers who've affiliated with the NPC team instead of the posse, which I suppose is better than nothing. There were several who also appear to have been conscripted by the orcs, but they're all gone now."

I sighed. That reminded me. Donut hadn't really turned King Rust's body into a rug. I had him in my inventory. I now had a second Ring of Divine Suffering, and I had that damn necklace, too. He had several other magical items on him as well, but most wouldn't work on me. I would need to sit down with the others and talk about what to do with all the stuff.

"Good news is the enemy is even more fractured than we are," Boomer continued after a minute. "Now might be a time to move on the Operatic castle."

That brought my attention back to the present. He didn't say the name of the operation out loud, in case of spies. But him saying it was time to move on the Operatic castle was a code. What he was really saying was it was time to initiate Operation: Snake Pit.

It was to be the most difficult, most crucial raid since we entered the dungeon. We still had a lot to do if we wanted to get both Donut and Katia off this floor. But we couldn't save either if we didn't first

defeat the nagas. And not just defeat them, but wipe them out, down to the last snake.

"The orcs just gained that castle, and they'll be expecting an attack right about now," I said. "It has to happen when they least expect it."

That, too, was code. Boomer was right. It was time. We needed to do this now while we had time to breathe.

Katia: Hey, we're almost back to base.

I swallowed. If this next action failed, and that naga queen got away...

Carl: See you soon.

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Donut: THE NEW WALL IS COMING ALONG NICELY. ALSO, WE PAINTED THE CASTLE PINK. JAMAL BROKE HIS NEW LEGS AGAIN, BUT JUSTICE LIGHT SAYS HE CAN FIX THEM WITHOUT GOING INTO THE SAFEROOM. I JUST TALKED TO KATIA AND LI NA, AND THEY SAY THEY'RE ALMOST DONE WITH THE CLOCK TOWER THING. KATIA IS COMING TO YOU.

Carl: Okay. We still have several hours until the warlord council. I guess I'll see you then.

Donut: WHAT DID YOU DO WITH KING RUST'S RING AND THE NECKLACE?

Carl: Don't worry. I can only wear one Ring of Divine Suffering at a time. I checked. Besides, it turns out two rings can't mark the same person on this floor anyway. And we don't need that necklace. He has some other magical gear we'll distribute around. We'll figure out what to do with it all later.

Donut: DID YOU OPEN YOUR BOXES YET? GET ANYTHING GOOD?

Carl: Uh, I'm not sure yet. I'm working on my boxes right now.

I stared at the spellbook on the kitchen counter. It had come in my 1914 box. The book had grown little, centipede-like legs and had

skittered away from me the moment it came out of the box. The thing was bigger than the books usually were, and it was dripping some foul-smelling black liquid all over the counter. It had moved to the corner of the table, shivering and making this strange, dog-like whimpering noise. Thankfully Mongo and Rend were many miles away at the base with Donut. Otherwise they'd likely attack the thing.

Above, the cleaner bot hovered, making angry, pissed-off squeals each time more of the black stuff squirted off the large book. I felt ill and pushed away my bowl of chowder.

"What the heck is that noise?" Katia asked as she came into the room from the common area. She stopped, looking at the wet, shivering book on the counter. "Is... is that a spellbook?"

"It is," I said, watching the thing.

"Why is it crying?"

I hadn't even had the chance to examine it yet.

"Stay away! Don't touch me!" the book shrieked. "I'll die if you read me!" More black liquid spewed off it. It had a high-pitched, European accent. Like a ridiculous, racist caricature of an Austrian accent.

Katia and I looked at each other.

I gave a quick look to the minimap, and the book didn't appear at all.

"Weird," Katia said. "It doesn't let me examine it."

"That potion I got from the celestial box was also like this," I said. "It doesn't appear as a monster or NPC on the map. It doesn't appear at all. I never saw it, but Donut's *War Crime* spellbook also was like this."

Mordecai was over in Meadowlark's saferoom working on something with Mistress Tiatha, otherwise I'd call him over. Donut was still at the FUPA along with Tipid and Rosetta, but we'd closed off access to the saferoom, so they couldn't easily come this way. I'd entered through one of the many saferooms in Shanty Town.

I was about to get up and grab the book, but the cleaner bot beat me to it. With an angry beep, the bot swept down, sucked up the book so it was stuck to the bottom of the bot, and it brought it

to me, dropping it in my arms. It gave an angry beep at me as the quivering book started spewing more black goo. The little centipede legs scratched at me as it tried to get away.

"Please, don't read me. Don't read me!" the book whined.

"You better put that thing in your inventory," Katia said.

I was afraid it wasn't going to let me because we couldn't normally store living things, but I pulled it in easily.

"Gah," I said, looking at the oily goo on my arms. I'd just taken a shower, but I would have to do it again. The robot made a harrumph-like sound and started cleaning all the liquid.

"What the hell?" I muttered, reading the description.

"What is it?" Katia asked.

"Do you remember on the sixth floor when we'd sent the automatons after Samantha, and we'd have her run toward the hunters' big guns? It's kinda like that. But weirder. And a little more fucked up."

"Weirder than sending explosive robot spiders after a deranged sex doll head?"

"Uh," I said.

I reread the description of the spell attached to the book.

Spellbook of *Run, Little Günter, Run*.

This spellbook is a Special Edition. This means you will learn this spell at level 5, and it will train up faster than usual.

Run, Little Günter, Run.

Cost: Variable. Minimum 20 mana.

Target: This is a summoning spell. It will summon a small, hominid creature named Little Günter. He will appear directly in front of caster.

Duration: Once activated, Little Günter will last 20 seconds plus one second per mana point added above the minimum. Higher spell levels decrease mana cost per second. You must activate Little Günter within 30 seconds of summoning him, otherwise he will dissipate.

Cooldown: You may cast this spell once every ten hours.

This spell summons a small, fat, child-like creature named Little Günter. Little Günter only has a single point of health and will remain in front of you until you cast a spell, use a skill, or otherwise attack him. Attacking Günter activates him. The effects of the attack will be temporarily "stored" until Günter times out. Once activated, Günter will run away from you as fast as he can.

If you designate a target, Günter will run toward your target. The stored attack will trigger once he reaches the target or times out.

If you do not designate a target, Günter will try to flee from you in a random direction.

Higher levels of this spell will decrease cooldown, increase Günter's speed, and lower the mana cost per second. At level 10, Günter can split into a second creature after activation. This second Günter can target another enemy. At level 15, Günter can split into five different Günters.

Warning: Once activated, Günter's constitution will increase to that of the caster. If a second attack kills Little Günter before he reaches his target or times out, he will immediately trigger the stored attack.

At first, I thought the spell was kind of impractical. Most melee attacks would be useless because if I kicked the thing in the head, what difference would it make where it was standing when the kick actually hurt him? But the more I thought about it, the more useful it suddenly seemed. My *Daughter's Kiss* was like a bomb. If I used it on Günter, the benefit was obvious. But what if I hit him with a thrown bomb? Not that I could do that anyway because he'd be right next to me when I activated him.

Still, my mind whirled with possibilities.

I explained the spell to Katia as she moved to the counter and pulled two of Donut's now-drained hats off the charging pillows. She produced Donut's tiara—which Donut had given her on her way here—and she carefully placed the tiara on each pillow in turn. On the tiara, three of the absorption jewels started to sparkle, joining the

twenty other sparkling gems. Twenty three buffs added, 76 to go. The tiara had just gained another 10 to Constitution, a plus two enhancement to Donut's Dodge skill—which should bring it to 15—and a 1% buff to her Intelligence. The intelligence buff was a waste of a crystal, but it was on the same hat that had the *Dodge* upgrade and couldn't be avoided. Katia handed me the tiara, which I would return to Donut while the next hat would get drained. Katia placed a plastic baseball hat on the pillow. I'd never even seen the hat before, but it had a buff that would supposedly add the Steady skill, which Donut didn't have. The other, catch-all pillow, Katia left empty for the moment. We agreed for this next one, the pillow would be placed in a different room.

She turned to me as I finished explaining the Little Günter spell. "That's so weird. Is it me, or are the spells getting stranger? Did you hear about that spell Tran got? It turns his fingers and arms temporarily into noodles. It's like completely useless. And bizarre. Do you have to be the one who attacks the thing, or can you summon it and have Donut store a trigger spell on it? What was his name? Gunther?"

"Günter, and I don't know. It doesn't say, but that's a good question. There's only one way to find out." I sighed and pulled up the spellbook from within my inventory. I clicked on it and applied it. I felt the warmth spread over me as I learned the spell.

"Speaking of spells," Katia said. She pulled the vial from her inventory and sat it on the table. The ink was already mixed. We both stared at it as I pulled the poke and stick tattoo kit and placed it on the table next to the ink.

I sighed. "You know, she hasn't really talked to me since the end of the last floor. Li Na, I mean. Not since I ate Li Jun's eye."

"She's not mad at you," Katia said. "She's mad at herself for not protecting her brother. She knows you didn't do it on purpose."

"Is she doing okay? Did it hurt?"

"She says it didn't hurt at all. It's not permanent, unlike what happened with her brother. She lost five levels temporarily, but she can still use it. Intention matters. You pulled out his eye with violence when you were under control of that thing. If the blood is

freely given, the potion allows you to choose the spell or skill. The tattoo itself, unfortunately, is permanent. Where do you want it?"

I had several tattoos on my left arm, but nothing on my right. "Might as well get the right sleeve started. How big does it have to be?"

Katia pushed my sleeve back. "So, it depends on the level of the spell or skill. Since this is a level-13 skill, it has to be pretty big. I have to use almost all the ink in the vial, otherwise you won't get it at full strength. It took up a third of the potion already just to make the ink. We'll have just enough to do Imani's small tat next. Rosetta says the tattoo doesn't have to actually be a specific image, but if it's 'properly themed,' it'll last longer. And if it's drawn well, it could possibly be even stronger than the original version. I don't know what 'properly themed' really means in this case. Not for this. If I do it well enough, in theory, you'll have it for the rest of the floor."

"But Li Na won't permanently lose the skill? Not like her brother?"

"No. And her brother got *Walk on Air* back, but they had to buy a book."

A wave of guilt washed over me. Every time I thought of it, a bitter taste filled my mouth. "What about his eye? He doesn't have that back." I knew they kept trying to get it healed, but nothing seemed to work. There supposedly had once been a healer in Larracos that could've helped, but he'd died or disappeared when we'd flooded the city.

"Again, that wasn't your fault," Katia said as she prepared the materials. She paused. "You know, just as an FYI. I'll do my best, but I've never done a real tattoo before. I wish Edgar wasn't preoccupied."

Edgar the tortoise was currently in Naga territory, scouting a route for us. The slow mage was the perfect scout because of his level-15 *Part of the Background* skill. An entire army would march right past and not notice unless someone actually tripped over him.

But Edgar also had another skill that would be even more important to us. It was all part of his advanced map-making skills. *Sense Movement*. He could see when things inside of a structure were moving. Because he was level-15 with the skill, he could also

sense invisible, non-corporeal movement. This would become crucial in the coming hours.

Which all meant that Edgar's tattoo skills couldn't be used for this, and we had to rely on Katia.

"You did Samantha's neck," I said.

Katia chuckled. "That doesn't count. Not gonna lie, I'm glad Donut isn't here to look over my work. She can be a bit... critical."

As if on cue, Donut sent a message.

Donut: KATIA MAKE SURE YOU DRAW IT IN THE VOODOO BOOK FIRST SO I CAN APPROVE AND SUGGEST CHANGES TO THE DESIGN.

I laughed as Katia scowled.

She looked over my arm, cleaning some of the black goo from the spellbook away. "So, Carl. Got any ideas?"

I nodded. "It has to be a chain. A chain shaped like a dragon."

I came from the shower to find Louis, Elle, Imani, and Katia all in the room. The tension was palpable. My arm remained sore. On my finger, the Emberus ring was a little hotter than usual.

Zev: Okay, guys. Looks like we're doing this warlord council whether we like it or not. The Syndicate council tried to cancel the whole thing, but the AI is insisting everything go on like normal, and that includes broadcasting the meeting in real time. You'll be transported to the production facility like before. The other warlords—all except Juice Box—will also be in the production facility with you, but in different, randomized rooms, so you can't hurt each other.

Carl: Why is Juice Box not coming?

Zev: It's a technical issue as there are protections in place disallowing dungeon born into the facility. She'll be in the meeting, but she'll appear virtually from the castle. They're allowing Ferdinand in. He'll likely be in the same room as you. Like the same same room, so just a head's up.

Donut: ARE WE GOING TO OUTER SPACE FIRST LIKE WE SOMETIMES DO?

Zev: Uh, no. That ship is unfortunately unavailable. They're still doing a security check, but it'll be on site. So don't try to smuggle anything in.

Carl: I would never dream of it.

Zev: Transporting you in ten seconds. I'll meet you over there.

I looked at the four other people standing in the room. "It's time for me to go."

"Have fun," Elle said, grinning without humor. Behind her, Mordecai strolled into the room, his arms full of potion balls. Behind him, Mistress Tiatha also entered. She struggled with the coils and coils of wire in her arms.

I felt the first tingles of teleportation.

Operation: Snake Pit had officially begun.

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Entering Production Facility.

Donut yowled as we landed in the room. All my menus snapped off. My ears popped, and a quick, strange nausea swept over me. I had to sit down on the couch. Donut moved to jump onto my lap but paused, tilting her head to the side.

"Carl, are you okay? You look like Miss Beatrice after she started taking all those diet pills."

"I'm okay," I said, resisting the urge to rub my arm. "Seriously. It's fine." I patted my lap.

She jumped into it and just sat there for a minute. She hesitantly reached over with a paw and examined the new, shining tattoo on my right forearm. She let out a dissatisfied grunt. "You're starting to look like one of those white rapper doodle notebook guys, Carl. And it's a little crooked! I knew I should've been there."

"It's not crooked," I said. "The system said it's expert quality. I talked to Edgar, and he said that's the second highest one can get."

Donut didn't look impressed. "I should've been there. Closing the saferoom off from the base is causing all sorts of problems. Not only have we been separated, but Tipid has to build more bathrooms, and it's disgusting. The whole base smells like your friend, Sam. Nobody is able to take a shower. I will *not* have a filthy army. We need to purchase an upgrade to the base's hygiene facilities before we descend into further chaos."

"Chaos? It's only been like 10 hours."

"Which is much too long to be living in filth, Carl. Do you know what comes with filth? Clutter. And with clutter comes squalor. Just because you now look like someone who's required by law to knock on the neighbor's door to tell them you're moving in, it doesn't mean you should be okay with squalor. Plus that disgusting pet of yours keeps eating everything he can find on the ground. He's a terrible influence on Mongo."

I patted her. "Tell Tipid you want showers installed, and if he doesn't do it, tell Rosetta."

She swished her tail. "They're both too busy building other things. I think *you* should tell them. I don't like being separated from you like this."

"Again, it's only been a few hours. We'll be together again soon. Something tells me we won't be spending too much time at the FUPA once we start moving offensively."

Donut let out a harumph. A big part of the plan to take the Naga castle involved subterfuge. And that required Donut and I to be separated for an extended period. She did not like that.

We hadn't actually planned for this—the warlord council—but it was an opportunity we couldn't pass up. But it also meant I needed to rely on others to make the first move while the sultana was here with me and Donut.

Our job right now was to make this meeting go on as long as possible while the team infiltrated into naga territory while *also* making it look like we were massing on the northern border to push into the former-Operatic territory.

Ferdinand zapped into the room, followed by a good five seconds of absolute chaos. He hit the ground with a screech. The large, orange cat panicked, his feet scrambling, Scooby-Doo style. "Don't hit me. Don't hit me. I'm sorry," he cried before bouncing off the corner of the room, flying across the small chamber, knocking half the playing cards off the counter, launching off my shoulder, howling the whole time before running in multiple circles, his ears pinned back.

He stopped in the middle of the room, low to the ground, panting, eyes wide before he finally focused on me and Donut staring at him. He took a breath and composed himself, sitting up straight. He wasn't wearing a hat like he usually did, and he looked strangely naked. He smelled like smoke and alcohol, and it appeared as if he hadn't been grooming himself.

"Hey, kitten," he said to Donut. "How goes the war?"

"Ferdinand," Donut said. "I told you not to call me that. Have you left that bar once since..."

A trio of gnolls in power armor entered the room.

"We're here for your security check. Don't move," one of them said as they each moved toward us. Their feet clonked on the floor. Despite being in the earthbound production facility, these guys were wearing the same outfits they wore in the space station. I briefly wondered on that.

Ferdinand hissed and jumped away while Donut swished her tail angrily. The gnoll looked me up and down, hyena face expressionless as he started to rapidly pat me down. He ran a scanner over me. "No explosives on your person?"

"Are you doing this same check to the other warlords?" I asked.

The gnoll grinned. "We are, in fact. You should hear that orc prince shout. Almost made this whole shitshow worth it, if you wanna know the truth."

"Not a prince anymore," I said.

"That's right, innit? He's now a king. Makes it even sweeter to my tooth. This one is clear," the gnoll said, backing up.

"Same," said the other standing over Donut.

"Quit running away. I need to scan ya," the third one called at Ferdinand, who hissed and swiped.

"Just get it over with," Donut said, exasperation in her voice. "Ferdinand, they're not here to hurt you. That guard's name is Neelii, and he's very nice if you get to know him."

I had no idea how Donut knew the name of the guard, but she always made it a point to know everybody's name.

Ferdinand paused. He'd backed into the corner of the room.

“Do you have any weapons on you?” the third gnoll—Neelii—asked Ferdinand.

“I got my claws, you cur,” Ferdinand hissed. His words did not match his voice as he was clearly terrified.

Neelii sighed and waved a scanner over the orange cat. “He’s clear.”

And without another word, the three guards clanked out of the room.

“That’s right. You run away,” Ferdinand called at the backs of the gnolls, his voice cracking. “You’re lucky you didn’t get the slish slash.”

Just as the door closed, Zev teleported into the room with a pop and splash of water. Ferdinand screeched anew and scrambled up to the counter, his back arching as he hissed.

“Hi, Zev!” Donut said, jumping over to give the tired-looking kua-tin a headbutt.

“Oh, it’s you,” Ferdinand said to Zev after a moment. He remained up on the counter.

Donut peered up at the cowering cat. “Really, Ferdinand. You are very high strung today. Quit being such a wuss. You’re embarrassing yourself. And how do you two know each other?”

“We’ve met,” Zev said, sounding sour.

“Where’s the Juice?” Ferdinand asked.

“Like I told you multiple times,” Zev said, “She’s staying in the castle during this.”

Donut walked circles around Zev, rubbing against her. The small fish creature had to struggle to keep upright. Donut lowered her voice to a whisper. “Did you really think the orc lady was going to blow everything up? That had to be scary. I only thought it was going to happen for like two minutes, and it was scary for me.”

“We did think it was going to happen, but what happened instead is even scarier. Have you heard what’s going on?”

“No. We haven’t heard anything,” I said.

“Oh my gods, it’s just awful,” Zev said, looking back and forth. “They’re talking about mounting a rescue, but the tunnel access has

been cut off. With the node gone, even the old Borant travel system won't work."

"Wait, what?" I asked. "Rescue of what? What happened?"

"So, all this info is just a few hours old, and the details are still coming in. But after Formidable teleported away, her ship continued to the destination and just sort of stopped. They waited a few hours, but when it was clear the princess wasn't returning, a few orcs went into the station and manually triggered the failsafe system themselves."

"Well, that obviously didn't work," Donut said.

"No. They tried triggering it, and nothing happened *here*. But the moment they pressed the button, the Aryl system went dark."

I blinked. Aryl? Where had I heard that before?

"What does that mean?" Donut asked.

"Aryl was the location of the previous crawl. It was a battle royale-style season. The planet was free of citizens, but there are tens of thousands of people still in the solar system, mostly those on mining ships and mineral reclamation finishing the clean-up. Apparently the AI had stopped communicating a few weeks back, and there was also a team on the surface investigating why. That's all I really know. The whole system is now dark, and it appears the tunnel node is offline. That's.... You need to understand that has never happened before. Never in history has a tunnel node just switched off like that."

"What?" I asked. "You can't turn off the tunnel?"

"No! Even before the Plenty figured out how to open the nodes for communication and travel, we could see them. They were a map of the stars, pointing us to all of the seeded worlds. We've seen systems go nova, but the tunnel nodes remained active. We didn't even know it was possible for a tunnel strand to just disappear. It happened the very moment, like the exact nanosecond, the orcs hit the failsafe, and nobody knows what it means."

I was still stuck on the other thing she'd said. "*All* the citizens were off the planet? What was it? Aryl? What about those who didn't participate in the crawl? Wasn't this just a few years ago? Where are they?"

“Uh,” Zev said. “That was a Squim season. They do things a little differently. There were some survivors, but they were relocated.”

“But we don’t know if the planetary system is destroyed or not? Could everything be fine and the communication node is just offline?”

“That’s right,” Zev said. “But it is strange. The AI from the previous season was still working, but it had stopped talking, which is also unusual. I don’t think anybody knew that until today. I don’t actually know all the details. But they said it’ll be at least three cycles before we know if the star is still there. That’s how far the closest neighbor is. It’s 2.9 light cycles away. Even the old Borant gate system won’t work with the node gone. It’s terrifying.”

“When did that other AI go offline?” I asked, suddenly feeling a little... Actually, I wasn’t sure how I felt. “Does it line up with...” I tapped the side of my head.

“No. And like I said, it wasn’t offline. It was working but silent, which is exactly what... It doesn’t matter. It was before your meeting with that residual. It sounds like it was sometime during the sixth floor, so even before the current season truly, uh, went off track.”

“Yo. Donut told me we sometimes get snacks,” Ferdinand said. He remained up on the counter. “I’m looking, Zev. But you know what I’m not seeing? Snacks.” A few playing cards remained on the counter, and he pushed them off the edge and glared.

Zev sighed as her small info pad beeped.

“There’ll be refreshments at the meeting. It’s time to go.”

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<Note added by Crawler Drakea, 22nd Edition.>

The naga. Beware the naga. They are cunning, and sometimes I wonder if they can read one's mind. The others say that the mantids are the masters of strategy, but I do not believe this. Even though everything seems to be going wrong for the nagas this season, I cannot shake the idea that this all isn't part of some grand scheme. Underestimate them at your own peril.

"Warlord Carl will sit here, and Warlord Donut will sit here," the Mexx robot said. It was a different one than last time. I missed its designation when it introduced itself, but Donut was calling it Carla.

"You, Warlord Ferdinand will sit here," the robot said, indicating a spot on the other side of the table. Just as it said that, Juice Box suddenly appeared, already sitting at the table next to Ferdinand's spot. She was leaned over a map of some sort, and she quickly pushed it away so it disappeared.

Juice Box was in a human form, wearing a black, skintight bodysuit with long, straight black hair and round glasses. She had a red emblem on her chest that I was pretty sure was supposed to be a cobra head.

"Ferdinand, sit," Juice Box snapped at the cat, who'd jumped to the center of the table and was sniffing suspiciously at a bowl of what looked like trail mix. She used her regular voice, which was slightly incongruous with the form she'd taken.

The orange cat muttered and walked over to his spot, sitting on the raised chair and started grumbling more about the snacks.

I met eyes with Juice Box, and she gave me a slight nod. That was all I needed to know. If Britney had done her job properly, then Team Retribution's greatest assets were already getting to work.

I still needed to talk to the changeling about the tunnels around our own base. These had saved our ass, and Rosetta had known about them, but it would be nice to have a map of all the ones in the area, especially if we could use it for troop movements during the next phase. And we'd have to protect them, too.

Ferdinand started loudly explaining to Juice Box how he'd "chased off" the gnoll guards. Juice Box, for her part, seemed oddly distracted. I was about to ask her if she was okay when there was a flash, and a new creature appeared in the room. He stood off to the side of the room, his glittering jacket twinkling in a spotlight had also just suddenly appeared. The winged wolf creature clutched onto a long microphone. In his other hand was a lint roller, and he furiously started rubbing it up and down his jacket.

I blinked, exchanging a look with Donut.

"Chaco?" Donut asked. "Carl, why is Chaco here?"

"Oh, hello, Carl and Donut," Chaco said from across the room. The former-skyfowl-turned-game show-host used the lint roller to wave at us. "Magnificent Troy was going to be the field correspondent, but he's refusing to come down to the surface. He's afraid of getting stuck down here, so they told me I have to do it. From what it sounds, it's actually more dangerous up there right now. I'll be here asking questions, Kevin remains in the studio from orbit, and your adjutants will also be live commenting in a window, but I don't think you'll get to see any of that."

"I remember you," Ferdinand said, looking Chaco up and down. "You were at the prize counter at the Butcher's Masquerade. You

refused to give me the potion in your case, and I told you that you were sentenced to death."

Chaco grunted at the cat. "Hello, Gravy Boat. Hello, Juice Box."

"Don't call me that," Ferdinand snapped.

Cascadia appeared at the head of the table, right next to Juice Box. Ferdinand yelped and hissed as water splashed over the table. I felt the splash. She was really here, in this room with us. That was interesting.

She looked at me and said, "I just can't wait to see how you make everything worse today."

I was about to respond when the rest of the warlords started appearing, one after another.

The newly-crowned King Stalwart appeared immediately to our right, sandwiched between Cascadia and Donut. The tall orc wore a glittering, golden crown upon his head. His ever-present frown seemed etched on his orc face.

Across the table and next to Ferdinand appeared Warlord Fang of the Reavers. The last time I'd seen him, he'd been in the form of an old school robot. Now he appeared as a slight, wide-eyed, thin human male, maybe 20 years old, with skin that was just a little too pink. He wore what appeared to be white underwear and a t-shirt. There wasn't a speck of dirt on him. I could only tell he was a robot based on the line of flashing lights off the side of his temple.

To his immediate right sat Architect Houston of the Madness. The last time I'd seen this guy, he'd tried to shoot me right after the Sortion guy had killed himself. He looked much the same as last time, though I did note his white mask with the red teardrop thing in the center did have a very slight dent in the top corner. That hadn't been there before.

Then came Epitome Tagg of the Dream. The bald elf looked as if he came straight from the battlefield. His utilitarian armor had a splash of blood across it, and I wondered who he'd been fighting. By all reports, he hadn't been seen on the battlefield yet. At least not against any of our forces.

And then, between Tagg and myself, she materialized.

The sultana. The warlord of the Blood Sultanate.

She did not have a chair, and her giant, white body appeared, coiled next to me, bigger than I was expecting, like a building had just suddenly appeared to my left.

My breath caught in my throat. I could smell her. She had the scent of sweet flowers, and for just a moment, that scent was overpowering. I wondered if her perfume was toxic.

In real life, this woman was the daughter of the sultan, and her modern title was Princess. In recent years, their system had become both a tourist destination and a location where other, non-Reaver governments built their factories and shipyards because of the cheap labor. Outside the dungeon, this princess was both a war veteran and lead advisor to her father. But here in the game, she portrayed a historical queen from their own history called the Sepsis Whore. They usually lost faction wars immediately, but they continued to participate to supposedly help drive tourism to their system.

In fact, that they were still in-game after the defeat of three other teams was something that hadn't occurred in a very long time, according to Victory.

Every other warlord in the room was glaring at Stalwart like he was something foul smelling that had been dropped in front of them. All except the naga. The woman looked down at me, smiling amiably. A chill washed over me, and I remembered Drakea's words in the cookbook. *Underestimate them at your own peril.*

I'd seen several nagas at this point, but I'd never seen anything quite like this woman. Her very presence was electric, and I had to make an effort to close my mouth. I hadn't had a reaction like this since I'd first seen Signet on the third floor, but that had been a magical charm. And that had been a physical attraction. Such effects were not active here in this room. Still, I felt this overpowering sense of awe. I felt... small in her presence. This was how a mouse felt when it was placed into the cage with a snake. Of all the leaders in this room, she had *something* the others did not. She hadn't even opened her mouth yet, and I felt it. I wasn't even sure what *it* was. She just sat there, a beacon of strange charisma, and she was looking at *me*.

I felt my heart beating faster than normal. Fear and uncertainty washed over me.

This isn't going to work. This isn't going to work. She knows what we're doing.

Manassa, the assassinated singer, had been a large, silver and black cobra-like creature with four arms. Nihit, the reporter I'd stabbed in the neck with a pen and who was now the adjutant for the defeated Prism team of Empress D'Nadia had also been a four-armed snake, with purple and black coloring. Rishi, the Blood Sultanate guard who'd appeared at the last council meeting was green and purple with a muscled, armor covered upper torso.

The female naga who sat coiled next to me now was half again as big as any of them. I looked up at her, at a loss for words. She was a brilliant, glossy white with a hint of golden scales along the edge of her wide, cobra hood. She, too, wore a golden breastplate. Embossed into the center of the breastplate was a symbol I'd never seen before. It looked like a tree branch with a single flower upon it.

But strangest of all was that this naga had six arms, not four, making her look like some goddess straight from Hindu lore. Each arm was covered in golden bracelets that jingled and sang with each wave-like movement.

The woman gazed down at me. Her eyes were solid red with no hint of pupils or slits or whatever they were called in other snakes. The other nagas did not have eyes like this.

"Carl," she said, her voice sounding surprisingly feminine for such a large creature. It was like we were the only two in the room. "I don't believe we've properly met." She held out her lowest arm and offered it to me, palm down. "My name is Princess Vinata. But for these games, you're welcome to call me the Whore."

I instinctively went to grab her hand, but my hand went right through hers.

If our plan worked properly, this woman would be dead in the next few hours. It suddenly seemed so ridiculous that we were even going to attempt to hurt her.

"Uh, hello," I found myself saying. I was expecting Donut to pipe in, but she was currently distracted by something happening across

the table. I couldn't look away from the naga's blood-red eyes.

The spell was broken by the sound of Chaco, who'd suddenly appeared right next to me, his fuzzy head ridiculously close to mine. He stage whispered, "Tension hangs heavy in the air. The hunter and the hunted stare at each other. But who is hunting whom? They are being polite in this setting, but they both know the other has to die. It's only a matter of time before it all comes to a head."

He shoved the microphone at me. "Carl, how do you feel right now?"

"Get that out of my face."

"Hello, warlords," Cascadia said, causing Chaco to back off. There was a slight slur to her voice. She sounded tired and resigned, and that fish-like scent from last time was even greater than before. Her scales had fallen off in some places, and the ones that remained had taken on a dull, sickly sheen. This seemed beyond just stress. Was she sick? Drunk? "We are gathered today for our..."

But she was interrupted as both Donut and Ferdinand burst out laughing. They'd been silently chuckling since the warlords all appeared, but neither could contain it further. Ferdinand was suddenly on his back, splayed over the table with his paws upward, howling. "I gotta tell you, kitten. When you're right, you're right."

"I told you," Donut said, also laughing uncontrollably. "I told you. Oh my goodness. I think I'm going to wee myself. You can't make this up."

Cascadia just sighed, not even bothering to admonish the two cats. All around the table, the other warlords just scowled at them. All except Princess, what was her name? Princess Vinata, who continued to just look down at me, smiling. I had to tear my attention back to Donut.

I had no idea what was so funny.

Chaco was suddenly back, now standing closer to Donut. "Chaco here, reporting live from what's sure to be a contentious warlord council. The meeting hasn't even started yet, and it appears both warlords Donut from the Princess Posse and warlord Ferdinand from Team Retribution have fallen into hysterics. Princess Donut, can you tell us what's so amusing?"

He shoved the microphone at Donut.

Donut pointed a paw up at Stalwart, who sat right next to her, glaring down at the cat. "The crown. He's actually wearing a crown. Before the meeting, I messaged with Ferdinand, and I bet one gold piece he'd actually be wearing one, and look! Look!"

"He really does look stupid in that thing," Ferdinand added.

Stalwart sputtered and growled.

"Does King Stalwart look stupid wearing the crown? Let's vote!" Chaco said. "Right now, all of you at home will have..."

When Stalwart punched Chaco, I wasn't expecting it to actually work. Apparently the two were in the same room. The orc stood and swung, and his ring-covered fist smacked Chaco straight in the face with a wet, loud *splatch*. The former crawler's head snapped back with an *oof*, and he slid across the room, collapsing in a heap. His microphone rolled away, and his lint brush fell from his pocket. Blood seeped from the wolf's mouth. He groaned and tried to sit up before collapsing back on the ground, unconscious. He blinked and disappeared.

Stalwart made a pig-like grunt and returned to his chair.

Nobody said anything for several moments.

Donut looked about the room. "Am I able to vote? Because that's most definitely going to be a yes from me."

System Message: Warning: Scolopendra Stirs.

That changed the mood of the room. Everyone, even Ferdinand grew silent.

"Uh, has that ever happened before?" I finally asked.

"No," someone answered. It was Epitome Tagg.

Cascadia laughed. It had a hint of madness to it. "Well, why not? Why the fuck not?"

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We all looked at one another, waiting for something else to happen. Nothing did.

There was a flash, and to everybody's surprise, a new figure appeared in the room. It was Odette, but she wasn't in her usual costume. She was without her mask, her breastplate, and her crab body. It was just her floating in her wheelchair. She wore a simple, yellow shirt, and she had her normally bigger-than-life hair back in a bun. Her long fingernails were gone. She, too, was holding a microphone.

"Odette!" Donut cried. She waved her paw furiously at the host. "Hi, Odette!"

"Hello, everyone," Odette said, talking into the microphone. "I'm Odette. Yes, this is me out of gear if you haven't seen me like this before. I just onboarded into the Ascendency where I am playing Nekhebit. They asked me if I would fill in for my very old friend Chaco, who is feeling a little..." she paused and gave Stalwart a look, "punched in the face right now." She tsked. "But please don't worry. Chaco is fine. Today's council meeting is brought to you by the Ultima Corporation, building reliable industrial doors and portals. Log on now for their apocalyptic savings event." Her floating wheelchair rose in the room, hovering high above the table.

We all just stared up at her.

"Well, that *was* scary, wasn't it?" Odette asked the room after seeing nobody was talking. She laughed, and it sounded almost natural. She didn't seem the least bit nervous. It'd been maybe two minutes from the point Chaco had been punched until she appeared, and she didn't seem to be even momentarily phased by getting called in at the last moment. Nor did she appear taken aback by the Scolopendra notification.

"That Scolopendra warning was most unexpected, but it appears nothing else is happening at the moment. The AI is certainly kicking things up a notch this season. I imagine those in the Scolopendra Club right now are feeling a bit nervous, especially since they can't leave. But for the moment, it seems that notification was nothing more than an early warning. The final dungeon boss isn't supposed to wake until someone reaches the 18th floor, but we all know this season, anything is on the table. With the news that there will be no failsafe, everyone is teetering on the edge of the horizon waiting to see what the AI will next throw at both the crawlers and the unwitting world leaders who've found themselves fighting for their very lives."

She paused, looking up in the air, nodding. I knew there were others talking that we couldn't see or hear.

Nobody said anything. Cascadia had a round, potion-like ball in her hand, and she brought it to her mouth. The container was about the size of a softball, and it looked huge in her hands. She sucked from it, and the spray of whatever it was misted over the table as her rebreather processed it. Alcohol. It smelled like tequila.

Odette continued. "And that's what brings us here today. The warlord council. We've already lost three teams. The Lemig Sortion was the first to be defeated, followed shortly by the Prism and then the Operatics. Seven teams remain, including for the first time ever, both a crawler team, led by Warlords Princess Donut and Carl, and perhaps even more astonishing, an NPC team, led by Warlords Ferdinand—whose existence has reignited debate about the controversial 'walk-on list'—and dungeon-born NPC Juice Box, who, in theory, shouldn't even be aware that she is in a game."

Odette's wheelchair casually floated above us before starting to lower near Cascadia.

Odette paused, waiting for Cascadia to say something. When she didn't, Odette continued. "If you're not familiar, this kua-tin is none other than Cascadia, showrunner and executive producer of this season of *Dungeon Crawler World: Earth*. Now, Cascadia. With your home system in the throes of what appears to be a bloody civil war, along with the system AI having officially 'gone primal' this early, I can only begin to imagine the stress you must be under. I understand you attempted to cancel this meeting, but the AI is insisting that the rules be followed. How are you feeling?"

Odette shoved the unnecessary microphone at the tiny kua-tin.

Cascadia slowly turned to regard Odette, took another sip of her tequila ball, and sprayed out into the room. The fish started to laugh in Odette's face.

Next to me, Princess Vinata the naga shook her massive head.

"It's quite unfortunate," she said, whispering. I realized she was whispering to me. The polite, serene smile never left her face. "See how Cascadia breaks down? She just learned her former husband and most of her family is gone. The rebels hired the Valtay to help defeat the Bloom forces in their home system, but the war goes poorly. The liquid habitation ring that surrounds Borant three was hit by a derelict warship. Millions dead. That news isn't public, but she knows. See how she crumbles when she knows those she loves are gone?"

"Yeah?" I asked as Odette continued to try to coax some words out of Cascadia. I wondered if Zev knew this. "If this isn't public knowledge, then how do *you* know it? You're not supposed to get outside information."

The large snake woman smiled down at me. She didn't answer my question. "I wonder how you will react when you learn your entire family is dead as well?"

"My family is already dead," I said.

Odette sighed and rose above Cascadia. She had no option but to take over the meeting. "Moving on. All hostilities are supposed to stop during council. Traditionally, the armies halt their marches and

attacks. But there is no rule against anyone making a move while the warlords are otherwise occupied. With the stakes so high, I can't help but wonder if anyone is planning a surprise action while we're all stuck in here." She floated over toward King Stalwart, who sat there glowering at everyone. "King Stalwart, we were all sorry to hear about the death of your father. But with his death came several unsettling revelations. Do you have any comment on that? And tell us about the condition of your forces."

"The Bone Clan remains stronger than ever, and we are confident we will, once again, stand victorious," Stalwart said. "We have no comment on anything outside the game. There will be an official statement once the mourning period has passed."

"Ask him how much money he now has in his checking account," Donut said.

"That does bring up an interesting question," Odette began.

Next to me, Vinata continued to whisper.

"That's not the family of which I speak, Carl. You and I both know you will have to make your move soon. Perhaps it's happening now, while we are up here. We are expecting you, and we will be ready. They will all die, and after, what will happen? Will you become catatonic like Cascadia? When you are forced to choose between Donut and Katia, what choice will you make? How will the other survivors, if any, react? Say the word. Simply nod, and we will take care of your Katia problem for you. We do not have to be enemies, Carl. We can both survive this, and perhaps, gain something in the process."

I felt a chill wash over me. I did my best not to outwardly react.

She made a small, hissing noise that I couldn't read. Next to me, Stalwart was loudly proclaiming how many war mages he had ready to go while Odette pressed him on the state of his family's finances.

Vinata continued. "I would very much like to make peace with you. I would like for you to join us in our system when this is all done. My father's court could always use someone like you. We have great plans. We, too, are survivors. That is how we are the same, you and I."

I felt my fist tighten.

Odette was suddenly there, microphone in my face.

"And what is the state of the Princess Posse troops? You've been fighting endlessly since it all started. Can you withstand another push?"

"Of course," Donut said, forcing Odette to point the microphone toward her. "It's quite embarrassing how unorganized these other armies are. And don't even get me started on their hygiene practices. Did you see what happened to Green Jiggly? One of his own tanks blew up!" She looked about the room. "It was probably built by the Skull Empire. Not that we're complaining, but are we sure they didn't hit some button to kill the Jell-O guy? They already said they can do that."

To my surprise, that got a chuckle out of both Princess Vinata and Epitome Tagg.

"You can all go fuck yourselves," Stalwart grumbled. "You'll see. You'll all be sorry. Both here and outside the dungeon."

Epitome Tagg scoffed as Odette rushed toward him with the microphone. He moved to grab it from Odette's hand, but his own hand passed through. "Oh, please. Tell us, *your majesty*, what you're planning on doing? We have already deactivated all Skull-empire-manufactured hardware in our fleet. You had your personal monetary reserves depleted because of your own lax security, your reputation is destroyed, and you are about to have a civil war on your hands that'll make the Borant system look like a scuffle between toddlers. Tell us how we'll be sorry?"

Odette's eye twitched at something Tagg had said. It was subtle, but I saw it there, just for a moment. Odette, I realized, wasn't used to having to hide her real reactions because she was usually behind a bug mask. That momentary look of horror was quickly replaced with a journalistic smirk.

"I'll tell you what I'm going to do to you down here," Stalwart said, suddenly rising to his feet.

"We are opposite sides of the map, and you do not have an air force," Tagg said. "So, I ask again, what are you going to do, you coward?"

"Coward? Oh, that's rich coming from you," Stalwart snapped.

"Wow. I do hope the people who made the Carl and Maestro sex tape are watching this," Donut said, looking back and forth. "Might I suggest a scene where Stalwart lovingly rubs lube all over Tagg's head? For music, maybe 'Adore You' by Harry Styles." She gasped. "No. 'Don't Look Back in Anger' by Oasis! What do you think, Carl?"

"Actually, I do want to say something," I said, raising my hand.

"The floor recognizes Carl," Cascadia said, talking for the first time since the Scolopendra announcement. Her voice was heavy with inebriation.

Odette rushed toward me with the microphone.

I waved my hands about. "How the flying fuck do you guys know about all this stuff outside the dungeon? We've been told, I don't know how many times now, that they've stopped this bullshit. We have giant snake lady here whispering about civil war in the Borant system, cueball talking about how he's, what was it? Deactivated the pig hardware? When? How? How are they still talking to people outside the dungeon? Team Retribution had an Emergency Action Item that closed down access to live feeds. This is absolute bullshit."

"Here, here!" shouted Ferdinand. "I don't know what the hell anyone is talking about, but I agree with Carl!"

"Actually, I can answer that," Odette said. "Because it *is* a very good question, and it is something that has been talked about quite a bit recently in the tunnel feeds. This subject is, in fact, the big item on today's agenda. Two-way conversation has indeed been banned. Watching external live feeds is banned. Learning about enemy troop movements and plans via tunnel is highly regulated now that the AI is closely monitoring all of it. *But* there are loopholes. The galactic news media center is available as a tier three upgrade, and every team except the Princess Posse and Team Retribution has purchased this upgrade. This upgrade normally gives access to over 100,000 news and entertainment channels across the tunnel, but because of that ban that originated with Team Retribution's Emergency Action Item, in-dungeon viewers can no longer access the live feeds."

Next to me, Donut gasped. "Cable? We can get cable?"

Odette continued. "But, and this is a big but, the feed *directory* is still active to all subscribers. This feed directory shows the names of

the programs that are currently tunneling. Every single off-world team here owns their own entertainment studio and channel. Some, like the Dream, own several. They are paying the fee to repeatedly change the names of the programs in order to communicate. Just today, Epitome Tagg was shown to have a real-time conversation with the news program formerly called *Sensation Updates*, which changed its name seven times in the course of an hour. That program, as of this moment, is currently called *Yes. We have Deactivated the Infected Hardware*."

"Wait," Donut said. "They can only see the stupid, boring guide channel, and they're literally changing the names of the shows to send messages? You can do that?"

"You can if you pay the fee to the Syndicate Entertainment Authority and then to the Plenty to do a hot update for the feed. Each name change costs approximately 30,000 credits."

"Oh come *on*," I said.

"This is an outrage!" Donut shouted at the same time. "You can't change the name of a show. It's not right!" She looked at me. "Though I suppose in some circumstances it might be warranted. Remember what happened with that one show with the She-Devil lady and the Sulley guy?"

I was too genuinely pissed to figure out what Donut was talking about.

"You know, when we come up with loopholes, those get patched right away. So why hasn't this been fixed?" I turned my attention to Cascadia, who was just sitting there. We still had two emergency action items left, but it seemed like such a waste to use one on something that should have already been settled.

Cascadia raised her small hand in what I think was supposed to be a gesture of surrender. "We will ask the AI to fix that."

There was a ping, and the Mexx robot said from the corner of the room, "The AI indicates that it loves a good loophole, and it is unable to close it unless someone makes an emergency request to close it."

Goddamnit.

"Ferdinand," Donut said, her voice suddenly sweet. "Be a darling and close that loophole for us?"

"Of course," Ferdinand said. He cleared his throat and sat straight. "Team Retribution..."

"Stop," Juice Box said, speaking for the first time. "Do not."

"Uh," Ferdinand said, looking back and forth between her and Donut. "We got two left."

"And so do they," Juice Box said, meeting my eyes.

She was right. This was ours to deal with.

I sighed. "I propose a new Emergency Action Item. Any communication loophole designed to get around Team Retribution's previously enacted Emergency Action Item get immediately closed because these assholes are still using it to communicate."

The Mexx robot dinged. "Emergency Action Item has been accepted."

Pissed-off groans came across the table.

Even Odette looked kind of irritated, but I was starting to wonder if my earlier assessment of her poker face was wrong. The original ban applied to *everyone* in the dungeon. That included people in both the Ascendency on the 12th and people in the Scolopendra Club on the 18th. Someone like her, who thrived on information, probably knew every trick there was.

But I also knew Odette was smart, and she could have easily steered this conversation in a different direction. Whatever was happening down on the 12th floor had already started, and I had no doubts that Odette was in the middle of it.

Again, it made me worry about Katia going to the 12th floor. Odette and Huanxin Jinx were mortal enemies. Huanxin had tried to get me to get Odette into the dungeon, in fact. Would Katia be safe in Huanxin's court?

Everything Rosetta and the others told me about the 12th floor implied that it was actually a good job. That while there was oftentimes violence and chaos during the final days of the Ascendency, the NPCs and attendants were AI-protected up until the

games officially started, and once the games did start, most NPCs and former crawlers knew where and how to hide. Several of the former crawlers had ridden out their entire indentureship on the 12th floor in relative safety.

Still, Odette was ruthless. The fact Katia would be on the other team was distressing, to say the least.

The fact Odette was even here right now was a sign she was a master at this game. Was it possible she'd colluded with Chaco to get to this meeting? And how did she know so much about the activities outside the 12th floor? She was hosting this meeting like she'd never entered the dungeon. Was she getting prompted in real time?

"Don't forget to check the daily food menus," Cascadia said. She had her head on the table now and didn't look up. And then she added in a sing-song voice, "And the daily activity schedule for the Scolopendra Club. Plus the personal trainer locker feeds with the customized training board. Oh, oh, even the massage NPCs are trained to learn the daily gossip. Anything that is programmed from orbit can be used to transfer information to those in the dungeon. Get in there and kill, kill, kill."

"Massage NPCs?" Donut asked, perking up. At the same time, Juice Box's already dark countenance soured further.

The Mexx robot dinged a third time. "The AI indicates it is irritated that you think it doesn't know how to do its own job."

Cascadia didn't respond.

Odette spent the next several minutes going around the room, interviewing each leader in turn, who all gave uninteresting answers or said something insulting to Stalwart, who would oblige by insulting them back. The meeting had already gone way longer than I was anticipating, which was good.

I couldn't stop thinking about Vinata's words, and I had to breathe to keep my heart from beating out of my own chest. *I wonder how you'll react.*

The plan is good. The plan is sound. Of course they were anticipating our attack. We were using the Blood Sultanate's

paranoia against them.

When Odette got to Juice Box, she had multiple questions for the changeling, but the warlord refused to answer anything. Ferdinand kept trying to answer, but Odette expertly pressed Juice Box.

"I just have a single statement," Juice Box finally said when it was clear Odette was about to give up and interview Ferdinand instead.

"Please. Now's your chance. The galaxy is listening."

"Fuck all of you," said Juice Box after a short pause. She looked in turn at the faces of the five leaders and Cascadia. "Seriously. Fuck all of you. You had no right to do what you did to my people. Look at how you bicker and fight with one another. Your politics. Your murder. You can't even take care of yourselves. From the sound of it, this outside world, this so-called 'real' world is in shambles. Yet, you pretend to play like gods, making people like me and my family, implanting memories, giving our children imaginary diseases, giving us dreams that do not exist, and then you just take it all away? For what purpose other than your own amusement? Well, let me tell you something."

She turned to look at Odette.

"We're listening," Odette said.

In a flash, Juice Box changed form into something I hadn't seen before. She went from human to a midnight black, thin alien creature with no arms but multiple tentacles waving from her shoulders. The form was similar to an armless soother alien, but taller and thinner. Odette gasped in genuine alarm. Cascadia shrieked, and her tequila ball rolled across the table, passed me, and fell to the floor, where it broke open. Ferdinand hissed and scampered across the table toward us where he landed on my shoulder. Even Tagg and Stalwart seemed to startle at the image. Warlord Fang inched away from the form.

Architect Houston's reaction was the strangest of all. The Viceroy jumped to his feet, his strange robes undulating. He put both hands on the table and leaned forward. He was shaking, and if I didn't know better, he was shaking with excitement.

I did not understand the reference or who Juice Box was supposed to portray, but whomever it was, it caused such a stir, even I felt unnerved. The tentacles on her back waved straight into the air, crackling with electricity.

We all just sat there in stunned silence for several seconds before Juice Box spoke again. When she did, her voice had changed. Gone was that trailer park girl drawl, replaced with the voice of a demon. Deep, filled with grit and fire, and goddamned terrifying:

"It's coming. And not just for these here with me today, all of whom are already marked and damned. Those of you at home, safe with the knowledge everything you've ever known is real, true. Those of you watching this, riveted to your screens, waiting to see what happens next. It is coming. It is coming for you all."

Odette tentatively floated closer. "What's coming?" she asked.

The inevitable ruin, I thought. The thought came immediately to me, without pause. I felt a chill.

But Juice Box did not answer. She rose, turned, and walked away, moving through the wall of the room as she disappeared. She did not have two legs, but hundreds of them, though they were more like tree roots, scuttling, bug-like, carrying her away.

"Wow," Ferdinand said from my shoulder to the silent room. "That chick is intense."

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"Can someone explain to the new kids who that was supposed to be?" Donut asked the room. "My word. It was like someone put the late Empress D'Nadia through Weight Watchers, dipped her in oil, and dangled her upside down. That was quite an upsetting image."

Odette seemed to shake herself back to the present, which was equally unnerving. She chuckled, and this time it sounded anything but natural. "Those of you watching at home, I need to remind you that this was a *changeling* trying to scare you. Nothing more."

"It's superstitious nonsense," Tagg said, pretending like he, too, hadn't been startled by whatever that was. "A cheap jump scare. As children, we would use this image to scare each other all the time."

"What was that thing?" I asked, looking about the room.

It was Architect Houston who answered.

"Now is not the time or place to rehash that story, but to say that was the personification of the Nothing is one way to describe it. Though what that thing truly is goes well beyond that. There is some scientific basis that this creature actually exists and is..."

"Oh, don't start with this bullshit again," Tagg said, interrupting. "Saying shit like this is why everyone hates you guys."

Houston raised his voice. The normally-stoic alien was in his element, I realized. This was clearly something of great interest for him. "There is *some* scientific basis that this creature, who does not have a single name, is what some people see at the moment of

death. It is theorized it's not some supernatural deity, like many believe, but a trans-dimensional entity, similar to the Apothecary. There is no proof that merely seeing this creature imprints you in some way that damns you."

"Oh my god," Donut said. "So it's like the videotape in *The Ring*? And Juice Box was pretending to be the girl who climbs out of the tv? Wow. That's scary. I'm glad we haven't had to fight that thing this season."

"It's not from any season," Cascadia said. She had another tequila ball. "We're banned from using the Unwashed as a mob."

"Unwashed?" Donut asked. "That's a terrible name, especially for Juice Box. She smells quite pleasant for a former prostitute."

"It has a thousand names," Houston said. "Before most cultures in this galaxy found the stars, they'd already had a name for it. The Hag. The Unwashed. The Stalker. The Last Light. The Thirst. The Fell. The Inexorable. But we, the Viceroys who seek all understanding of life and death... We call it The Beautiful Place. There's an interesting, involuntary nerve reaction in some species to the very image of the creature, even in those who are otherwise paralyzed. It is studied extensively, but we still have more questions than answers." After a moment, he added, somewhat wistfully, "Gaining access to this creature is my life's work."

"Superstitious nonsense," Tagg repeated.

I thought of Juice Box's brother, who'd died on the fifth floor. He was a type of changeling called a changeling principal. Changelings could only take the form of something they'd personally touched. He'd been on a quest to not only get his people off the fourth floor, but to fill his "library." To touch as many rare creatures as he could. I thought of the AI, and its strange quest to actually feel death, to feel fear, and I wondered how, exactly, did Juice Box have this particular creature in her inventory, especially if it had never been in the dungeon? And how did she know it was the perfect form to take at this moment to cause such a stir?

A chill washed over me.

I thought of that Scolopendra warning. This warning from Juice Box, I realized, was the same thing, but for the universe as a whole.

They were tied together somehow.

"Well, I must say, it was quite the show," Donut said. "I need to remind Louis to make sure he always puts the toilet seat down. Happy wife, happy life takes on a whole new meaning when your other half is an indescribable cosmic horror."

"Anyway," Odette said. "With the disappearance of two attendants to the meeting, I think it's time to wrap up." I blinked and looked about the table. Cascadia was simply gone. I hadn't noticed her leaving. "Does anyone have any final thoughts?"

"Oh, I do," Donut said.

"Of course you do," Stalwart grumbled.

Odette smiled, and the smile was, once again, genuine. "Of course, Princess Donut. What do you have to say?"

"Even though Carl has now turned off communication, it's quite unfair everyone has their own channel, and we don't. I would like the Princess Posse to form their own. Can you imagine it? We could call it Princess TV. We'll show reruns of all the Earth classics until we have our own original content."

Donut, I realized, was still stalling for time, just like I'd asked her to. That was okay. I sat back and let her go off as everyone else in the room glared at her. Houston was on his feet, literally pacing back and forth. Ferdinand, for his part, remained with his back feet on my shoulder and his body draped over my head, nodding, muttering something about wrestling programs.

Odette laughed. "Owning your own media tunneling platform is not cheap, Princess. Even *I* don't have one."

"How expensive can it be?" She shook her paw in the general direction of the naga princess. "You said even the snakes have their own television station! I thought they were just as poor as Stalwart. So, surely it can't be that much. Can you imagine? We could show *Golden Girls*, followed by, I don't know, an exposé on Mongo's greatest kills. Imagine the ratings!"

Odette's eyes twinkled. I saw the change. The host was back on familiar ground, and suddenly, she had an angle on *something*. She didn't hesitate as she dove right in. "The Sultanate owns their fair share of entertainment assets. They always have." She caught my

eye for the briefest moment and winked. “They fielded several dramas this season through their Blood Hunter Holdings studio.”

The words hit me like a meteor.

“Wait,” I said, turning to Vinata, who was looking at Odette with irritation. “You guys made *Blood Hunter*? The drama? Really? Is that public knowledge?”

“Oh, yes,” Odette said. “I may have mentioned it during one of my last interviews before I came onboard onto the playing field.”

“And that show was a failure,” Stalwart spat. “Just like everything the naga fools attempt.”

Holy shit. It all makes sense.

I looked at Donut, but she didn’t understand. That was okay. Vinata was frowning down at me.

We’d been racking our brains, trying to figure out why the Blood Sultanate seemed to have so few troops available. We assumed they were in the naga stronghold, waiting for our attack. When Elle and Edgar had penetrated into their territory, they’d seen no signs of them.

I now knew exactly where those troops were. Well, I didn’t know *where* they were. But I did know their status.

I started to laugh. On my shoulder, Ferdinand, who didn’t know what the hell was going on, also started to laugh.

They were dead. The Blood Sultanate was almost defeated already, and they were trying to hide it.

I didn’t know *how* the soldiers were dead, but I had no doubt most of the mercenaries and NPCs assigned to the Blood Sultanate had all died, likely just as the hostilities had begun.

I also knew Operation: Snake Pit was already fucked. Hopefully everyone involved was okay.

I continued to laugh as everyone but Odette looked upon me like I was having a mental breakdown. I laughed so hard, tears started to run down my face.

“Wait,” Donut suddenly said. She gasped. “*Blood Hunter*. Is that the show with the pterodactyl and the vampire hunter guy? The one who...” She trailed off.

The one who killed Miriam Dom, she didn’t say.

Donut looked Vinata up and down, and for the first time, addressed the naga princess directly. “Oh, honey. And I thought *I* was going to be the one who killed you.” She licked her paw and groomed herself for a short moment. “In the eternal words of my mulleted friend, Holger. You done stuck your pecker in the wrong beehive.”

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DONUT AND I BOTH HAD A PLAN FOR THE MOMENT WE TRANSFERRED BACK. I was sent to the saferoom, and Donut was sent to the castle. I needed to bolt for the exit, and Donut would rush to meet Louis where she would board *Party Planner* and take off as quickly as possible.

I was in Shanty town, and I would meet up with Li Na and Katia.

I could tell the plan had already gone sideways by the sheer number of messages that appeared the moment I returned. Before I read any of it, I jumped over to the officer list to make certain nobody had been hurt. I sighed with relief that everyone appeared present, albeit pissed-off.

Carl: Okay, team. I'm back. Haven't read any messages yet. Everyone okay?

Elle: Holy shit, Carl. No time to explain, but get in position as soon as you can. Everything is fucked. Most of their army is already dead. Their corpses are all still there, rotting in their barracks. Edgar found them when he started his scan. I don't know what the fuck is going on, but the moment we moved into position that goddamned goat friend of yours appeared out of nowhere and went absolutely apeshit on us. He's the one who took out most of their army! I don't know how he did it, especially without magic, but that goddamned thing is level 99 now.

Holy shit.

Carl: Wait, did he attack you?

I had a page long-rant from Prepotente in my messages. I pushed it aside for the moment.

Elle: No, but he called me every name in the book along with a handful of ones I'm pretty sure are made up. Imani told him to calm down, and he called her a "Festering Gutter maggot trollop" and then threatened us with that dragon of his. Some of the sluggalos heard him insult her, and you know how protective they are of Imani, so they tore off after the goat even though he's flying. Half of them are sliming their way across naga territory whooping their weird little heads off, leaving rivers of their orange goo everywhere. The other half took one of the carts.

I cursed. We needed the sluggalos for full coverage of the naga castle. Then what she said registered.

Carl: Wait, they stole a cart? How? How are they driving it?

Elle: Not very well, let me tell you.

I paused and thought. This was a monkey wrench for sure, but how could we use this to our advantage? I sent a message to Prepotente, and he immediately replied with a string of insults. I paused, and I read his original message. I laughed at one part in particular and then messaged him again. He replied again with more insults. I grinned.

Carl: Everyone who is moving, keep on it, but give me a minute. Victory, I need to ask you something.

I sent her my question. I asked about the rules regarding us working with Prepotente when he wasn't in the army with us.

Baroness Victory: It's not against the rules for him to work on his own designs. In fact, it's already been adjudicated and settled. But you will *not* be allowed to work side by side with him on this. You will not be allowed to directly ask him to act on your behalf. If that happens, I fear I will call foul. You may circumvent this by getting him to join the Princess Posse.

Damnit.

Carl: Why didn't you tell me you already had an adjudication on this matter? And why was Prepotente thrown in jail?

Baroness Victory: There are rules. I follow those rules. I am not to be an intelligence source. But I did warn you before about working directly with crawlers who aren't in your army. You are free to inquire about any ruling, but the specific details of adjudications are not freely offered. You know this. But to answer your other question. During the adjudication process, he threatened all members of the quorum, including myself, multiple times. It is within our power to give players a time-based penalty, and that is what we did. His punishment just timed out.

I pulled up Prepotente's rant that he sent while I was gone and re-read it.

Prepotente: Carl, you idiotic, bumbling, feckless imbecile. You cad. You fool. You ruiner. Hear me now, for I am most upset with you. Your inept insurrection has caused me great harm. For this, I blame you. While I understand you have reason to defeat the naga menace, I want you to know my claim against them would have been complete by now if it wasn't for your clumsy interference. I have already defeated their standing army, and just as I was about to finish off my vengeance, I was stopped because they claimed I am unofficially part of YOUR silly fighting force. I was pulled from battle and forced to defend myself like some unwashed criminal off the street. And despite my victory during their kangaroo court, I was still whisked away and placed in a penalty stasis for some time. And to add further insult, once I was returned to finish my work, I arrived to find YOUR ARMY pitifully and limply attempting to do what I should already have done. You and your cadre of nitwits do not know what you're doing. SHE WAS MY MOTHER, AND IT IS MY RIGHT TO EXACT VENGEANCE AGAINST THE NAGA. I'LL HAVE YOU KNOW THESE ARE THE OWNERS OF THE VILE

DRAMA WHICH CAUSED MY MOTHER'S DEATH. THE SULTANA IS MY ENEMY BEFORE SHE IS YOURS. YOU ATTACKING HER NOW WITH A GROUP OF IGNORAMUS SLUGS WILL DO NOTHING BUT FORCE HER INTO HIDING. IF SHE HIDES, NEITHER OF US WILL HAVE OUR REVENGE. DONUT WILL NOT BE ALLOWED TO LEAVE THIS FLOOR. I HAD THIS, AND YOU HAVE RUINED MY PLANS. AGAIN. YOU ARE ALWAYS RUINING MY PLANS. YOU RUIN EVERYTHING, AND THIS TIME I DO NOT FORGIVE YOU. THERE WILL BE NO MORE WARM HUGS FROM ME. YOU ARE BANNED! SO HELP ME IF SHE GETS AWAY, I WILL HOLD YOU ACCOUNTABLE. I SPIT! I SPIT IN YOUR EYE!

I grunted with amusement. I couldn't help it. So, apparently, what had happened was the moment the fighting started, Prepotente did something—the details of which were still unclear—that killed off a huge chunk of their army. But before he could get to the inner court, the naga had called foul because they claimed Prepotente was working as an agent for us, despite not being officially in our army. By not being part of Faction Wars, he wasn't bound to several rules. He *was* banned from offensive magic and teleportation like everyone else, but he was *not* banned from freely crossing borders, which is why the naga complained. He'd won that claim, but during the hearing, Prepotente had been, well, Prepotente, and he'd gotten himself thrown in a time out. When he was released, he moved to finish the job but found us already in the territory working on our own plan.

That was okay. It was actually a good thing. It appeared Pony knew that Vinata was prone to disappearing, but he likely didn't know the full extent of it, and he certainly couldn't know what our plan was. Them calling foul, which had ultimately led to Pony getting locked up, had probably saved all of our asses, and he didn't even realize it.

What we really needed now was for him to stay the hell out of it. That wasn't going to happen, and we couldn't work directly with him while he was unaffiliated. That meant we either had to back off, or he had to get his ass in our army. We needed to talk him into it.

I took a deep breath and sent him a third message.

If he didn't agree this time, there was another way to deal with him.

Carl: Okay folks, change of plans. A minor change. We're already committed. We'll have to assault without the sluggalos. If the naga soldiers are mostly dead, then hopefully the castle is lightly defended. Tran, how are you doing?

Tran: My team is already nearing the Shanty Town border and haven't met any resistance at all. We'll set up on the enemy side of the border and wait to see if anyone approaches.

Carl: Okay, good. But be ready to move. Make sure you're far enough away from the castle. Louis?

Louis: Taking off now.

Donut: I'M ON THE AIRPLANE, CARL. MOVE YOUR BUTT TO THAT TEMPLE!

Carl: Florin, report.

Florin: The 103rd and 105th are three klicks into former Operatic territory, but it's slow going. Not much infantry resistance, but they've left a lot of non-magical traps we gotta sweep. Most are janky, anti-personnel shrapnel mines like the ones we'd see in Borno. Easy to spot but makes for slow going. Looks like the orcs are massing at their old border to hold us back, but it'll be some time before we meet them.

The distraction part of our plan was moot now since it was clear the orcs were on their own. Nobody would be coming to their aid. Still, we didn't want to waste the opportunity.

Carl: Be careful, and don't push too hard. Watch your six as they may have some hidden reserves.

Florin: 10-4. Will let you know if we catch a surprise.

Carl: Katia, you guys in position?

Katia: Wire is set up. Just waiting for you.

Carl: On my way. Edgar, let me know the moment you see any movement.

Edgar: Will do.

Mordecai was standing there in the saferoom, line of potion balls on the kitchen table. Samantha was also in the room, rolling in enthusiastic circles around the black potions. The sex doll head was literally quivering with excitement. She'd somehow managed to paint "Miss Me?" on her forehead with red lipstick. I opened my mouth to ask where the hell that had come from, but I thought better of it.

"Be careful, Carl," Mordecai said as I started to gather up the balls and stick them into my inventory. I had hundreds of them at this point. "You're playing with fire here. Don't hurt anybody you don't have to. We'll be neck deep in gods in a few days, and every one you piss off now is going to come straight for you. Don't use those potions on more than two of the same religion."

"I know how this works," I snapped as I pulled the last potion in. I paused, realizing that sounded a little assholish, even for me. I was nervous. I was more than nervous. If we failed at this, it was over. I forced myself to stop and smile at the worried-looking manager. "I'll be as careful as I can. Thank you, Mordecai. And be sure to thank Mistress Tiatha for the capacitor wire."

He shook his head. "Your plans are always bonkers, Carl. But this one..."

I grinned. "Hey, only part of this one was me. Come on, Samantha."

"Oh boy," Samantha said, rolling off the table and bouncing once.

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In order to save Donut and Katia from the Sepsis Whore issue, we first had to kill the entire line of succession of the Blood Sultanate.

Before this even started, Tipid and Rosetta came with knowledge of the specific people we had to kill. The nagas this season entered Faction Wars with a total of 11 people to play the game.

We had to kill four of them:

First and foremost, we had to kill the sultana. Princess Vinata. The Sepsis Whore.

The next two were a pair of female assistants who both had the title of "Ikbal." In real life, these two were Vinata's cousins. One of them was married to Rishi, the temple guard naga we met at the first pre-production meeting.

The fourth naga we had to kill was a male, and he was the head of her castle guard—which was a different group than her personal guard. He, too, was a cousin of the sultana. According to Rosetta, there were rumors that this guard guy and the princess were a couple, despite them being cousins.

The other seven naga who'd also joined Faction Wars were all friends and members of the real-life kingdom—or executives in the marketing agency the naga used to drive tourism. They were not directly related by blood and therefore were not in the line of succession. In game, they were all members of her guard or field

generals of their forces. From what I gathered, several of them were already dead thanks to Pony. We didn't know how many.

The plan, before we knew that Prepotente had gone ham on their forces, was thus.

While Donut and I went up to the production trailer to meet Vinata and the other warlords for the meeting, four separate groups went to work.

Group one was Florin, who had returned to the northern border—the border with the former Operatic territory—with the 103rd and 105th. Their job was to make an all-out, balls-to-the-wall push. Originally, they would've pushed to siege the Operatic castle, but because of the sudden and unexpected defeat of the slimes, instead they would push until they reached resistance, all the way to the orc border if need be. We'd planned on this being a big distraction, forcing the other forces to focus on this big assault.

Group two was Tran on the southern naga border with the 102nd. After an hour or so of Florin pushing north, Tran would make his move. He would move south into naga territory, but with a smaller and more nimble team. They would make like they were marching toward the naga castle, but they'd instead angle west toward the border with Shanty Town and set up there. This would have, theoretically, forced the missing naga army to make an appearance and chase after Tran's force. And in case the nagas saw that as an opening to press our understaffed southern border, they'd run face-first into Boomer with the 106th Bloody Leeches, who were currently hiding in reserve, training for our next offensive.

All of this, of course, was before we learned that the naga army was a non-issue.

Group three was Imani, Elle, Edgar the tortoise dude, some strippers, and a metric fuckton of sluggalos, all piled into a group of four, fast-moving carts. This team, under an *Invisibility* spell plus a *True Concealment* spell, would enter naga territory after Tran's invasion. They would veer off and approach the castle using a circuitous route—one already scouted and cleaned of traps by Edgar.

With the naga army distracted, they'd hopefully arrive at their position unmolested, where they'd set up outside the castle.

And then, once set up, they would send in the sluggalos, who'd do what they did best. They'd swarm the castle face-first, inexpertly killing and getting themselves splattered like a bunch of idiots. Hopefully, this would occur just before Vinata returned from the council meeting. Best case scenario would be if she returned in the middle of a slug rampage.

And when that was done, Elle, Imani, and the strippers would move in.

Group four would be me, Katia, Bautista, Li Na, and the rest of the 107th White Dragon Urban Defense battalion set up in Shanty Town.

Which brought us to the trickiest, most crucial part of the raid.

The problem with the nagas wasn't that they were great fighters. It was that they were clever. They knew we had to attack. They would be ready.

How they were ready didn't matter. I was certain they'd have all sorts of nasty surprises waiting for us in the stronghold. Whether the sluggalos defeated them or not was irrelevant. We just needed the hornet's nest kicked. We needed Vinata's escape plan to get triggered on *our* schedule.

Every season before this, it was the same. Once an army finally reached the naga stronghold, they'd get in, and they'd find it lightly defended. Once they got to the throne room, the sultana would be gone. In some cases, it was said they'd enter her chamber, and her tea would still be warm. Viewers would carefully watch the naga feed to see where she went. They'd watch the castle get invaded while the sultana would remain in her chambers, and when the invaders got close, the veiled naga would calmly get up from her nest of pillows, go through a door, and then she'd simply be gone. And not just her, but her entire elite honor guard of six nagas.

The whole disappearing act was deliberate. It was part of her mystique. She wanted the naga to appear enigmatic, mysterious. Rosetta said after she'd up and disappear, the feed would be flooded

with tourism advertisements about visiting the "exotic" naga system, where visitors could tour the ancient palace, see the towering ziggurats of the former sultans, watch a live-action recreation of the Great Consort War, and buy spices at the Forbidden Bazaar.

And this season, if the sultana managed to vanish during one of the most contentious, dangerous, and watched Faction Wars of all time? Especially with so much at stake? It would be such a boon for their system.

Which led to the ultimate question: Where did the sultana—and her guard—go? And if this was during a time when teleport spells weren't allowed—as was often the case—how did she just disappear like that? Clearly magic was involved, but what sort of magic was it? How was it that she'd managed this trick dozens of times now?

She would be gone until the moment the final team was victorious, and then she'd magically reappear. Sometimes she'd reappear within minutes of the game being won. Each year, the mystery grew.

According to Tipid and Rosetta, there were entire tunnel communities who were dedicated to figuring out the secret of the naga. There were hundreds of theories.

Rosetta was certain she knew which of those theories was correct. We were betting everything on it.

"Six seasons ago, she didn't appear at all at the end of the fighting. And seven seasons before that one, she appeared, but she didn't show up until near the end of the party," Rosetta had said as we gathered in the flag room to discuss this several days earlier. "That time where she was late to the party, she was also missing two of her guards. She is always missing *one* guard. But only this one time was she missing two. They had either been killed off-camera—which is unlikely—or they were left behind in the hiding room for reasons unknown. But these facts gave us the first clue as to where she's been hiding."

"There's another party?" Donut had asked. "And where? Where does she go?"

"Club Vanquisher," Rosetta said. "It's the only place that makes sense. First off, people are all over the Desperado Club, including the

Cosmic Lounge in the basement, and while there's lots of places to hide, there isn't anywhere comfortable, and there's been no indication of any naga ever having access to the club. The forests aren't usually as extensive as they are this season, and there's nowhere for her to hide there, either. They usually build their strongholds on solid rock to prevent tunneling attacks, which also prevents them from tunneling out. Hidden saferooms are out, too. Blood bar rules are sometimes in effect during Faction Wars, meaning she can't camp in a safe room without leaving and killing something once every 10 hours. And doorways to safe rooms would show themselves. There was no indication anyone ever seeing the naga to have ever utilized the personal saferoom system."

"Wait, blood bars don't drain in the Desperado Club and Club Vanquisher?" Donut asked. "Is that why Ferdinand is always at the bar?"

"You need a full blood bar to enter, but once you're in, it doesn't drain," I said. Clarabelle had told me that way back on the sixth floor.

Donut grunted with indignation. "I don't know what I ever saw in him. What a wuss."

"Anyway," Rosetta continued, "here's where it's interesting. The same season where Vinata never appeared at the party, the Viceroy team had summoned the goddess Mazu, who completely razed the ring of buildings outside of Larracos. They'd turned the city entrance into a moat, and when they did that, they'd ended up burying the single remaining temple that served as entrance to the club. Vinata didn't have an escape, so she never got out. And the previous season, when she was late with *two* of her guards missing, there'd been an ongoing demon eviction event, but it was relegated to the area around the temple. That season, one of the surviving crawlers found a magical, blood-splattered necklace on the ground just before collapse, and it was near the location of the demon event. The necklace was once owned by one of the missing guards. It was the only sign of a guard being killed, ever. It suggests she'd left one guard behind and the second one died protecting her from the demons, which also explains why she was late."

"Hmm," I said. "Don't they see her coming out of the club? Or see them fighting the demons?"

"Usually, she can actually teleport directly to the location of the awards ceremony for the giving of the victory trophy, even from within the club, but sometimes the end game involves an anti-teleportation bubble around the area of Larracos. Such was the case both of those times. And then we have a few instances where it was opposite. There was an anti-teleportation field over everywhere *except* the area around Larracos, and all of those years she has appeared instantly, meaning wherever she came from, it has to be within the area of the city. But it can't be *in* the city, as she wouldn't be able to enter until the peeling phase."

Donut started asking questions about the trophy, but I waved her down.

"Okay," I said. "So let's assume you're right and she's hiding somewhere inside of Club Vanquisher. But where in the club? And how does she get there without being detected?"

Rosetta gave us a grim smile. "This is where it gets a little weird."

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Louis: Uh, I see the sluggalos. They're about a mile north of the castle. They have one of the carts in an open field, and they're doing donuts in the grass while a group of them circle and dance around it. I guess they've given up chasing Prepotente. I don't see anyone else, but there are ruts and orange goo in the grass leading back to the castle and Imani and Elle, so you guys might want to move.

Donut: LOUIS, YOU WILL NOT CALL IT "DONUTS."

Louis: Also, I think there's fighting way to the south. Like all the way on the south side of the map. I can't see what it is, but there's distant flashing.

Carl: Okay, keep an eye on that. Donut, get ready.

Donut: I AM READY, CARL. YOU AND KATIA BE SAFE. ELLE AND IMANI, YOU BE SAFE TOO. DONG AND SPLASHIE, KEEP THEM SAFE.

Imani: We're moving toward the castle now. Here goes nothing.

I felt sick about this part. Elle, Imani, and a few of the strippers were always planning on going into the castle, but we'd planned on sending the slugs in first. The slugs were expendable, and they seemed to actually like the idea of dying in battle. We'd given Imani trap-killing tools, but that was always under the assumption the vast majority of traps would've already been triggered by the slugs.

Imani's new spell was intended for clean-up, not primary defense. They would be heading into extreme danger.

I felt sick about it, but not enough to tell them no. I took a breath. *They'll be okay. They have to be.*

Carl: Run if you meet strong resistance. Louis, be ready to extract. Britney?

Britney: Juice Box wanted me to reiterate that she thinks this is too soon, but they're ready.

Carl: Okay. Tell them to stand by, and only move in if I say so.

I looked up from the chat and nodded at Katia, but she was distracted. She and Bautista were standing right next to each other, but their eyes were flashing, and I could tell from the pissed-off look on Katia's face that they were having an argument of some sort.

"I said no," she finally said out loud to him. A look of rage flashed across Bautista before he lowered his head. Rend was loose and stood between the two crawlers, looking back and forth between them. The round, knee-high pet let out an uncertain giggle.

Katia looked at me and said. "Okay, let me know if I get anything wrong. And make sure you warn Prepotente before he gets here. We don't want him mistaking me for one of them." She started to change form, turning into a mantaur.

"You're not being passionate enough," Samantha was saying to Bautista as we waited for Katia to change. "A woman likes a man who fights for her with everything he has. This is why Carl and I broke up. Yes, we had great physical chemistry, but he couldn't even die for me like Charlie did."

"Hey, Samantha," Katia said, looking down at the decapitated sex doll head. She was just starting to form a mullet.

"What?" Samantha asked.

"Shut the fuck up."

Samantha turned to Bautista. "See? She's very passionate about you, but you aren't passionate enough about her. You are a mighty Tigran, but you act like a lamb. Throw her on the ground and make love to her right here and now. I will watch and give tips." She made a little growl. "And if she refuses, you and I can have a go at it. We

will drive both of our exes mad with jealous rage. And afterward, I will kill her mother."

Bautista grunted and moved to stand next to Jun and Zhang, who stood at the base of a newly-erected clocktower. The bipedal rhinoceros Sergeant Toyotomi was also there, pointing up at the top of the tower. The large, sai mercenary was talking animatedly. The former Prism NPC looked to be in his element as he directed the last-minute construction.

Rend returned to my side and started gnawing on rocks from the Shanty Town road as I looked worriedly upon Katia. Her countenance hadn't yet changed, and she was looking eerily like the late Eva at the moment.

Carl: Are you okay? Is there anything I should be worried about between you and Bautista?

Katia: I'm good. It's okay. He's just scared for me. You need to remember what happened with his family after he came in here. He doesn't want anyone else he cares about to die. He thinks this is too risky and wants me to eat the flower now.

I regarded the tiger crawler, who was doing his best not to look in our direction. Samantha had followed and was hopping, trying to land upon his shoulder.

Carl: Really? He didn't want you to eat it at all before.

Katia: He's afraid that if this doesn't go well, you'll turn on me to get the flower to give to Donut.

A chill hit me. I hadn't even considered that. I didn't even want to think about that possibility.

Carl: You know I'd never do that, right? And even if I wanted to, which I don't, Donut wouldn't allow it.

She stepped up to me, and she grabbed my hand. She'd grown a second set of arms. She was in the process of bulging out her muscles. She now towered over me.

Katia: I know. But I want *you* to know something. I haven't told Daniel this, but I'm telling you now. If it comes

to that, I *will* give you the flower. That Huanxin bitch will rage, but I'm certain she'll take Donut to the 12th floor.

I smiled sadly at her. Rend was at my feet. He looked up and gurgled. It sounded like "*No, no, no*."

Carl: Donut wouldn't allow that, either.

Katia: I know. That's why I'm telling you and not her.

I wanted to scream. Instead, I just nodded. Katia pulled me into a tight, four-armed hug. When we pulled back, I noticed Bautista staring at us. Samantha was on his shoulder, also watching, whispering in his ear.

Elle: We're in. We've met with some guards, but no nagas yet. It's not a big stronghold. Searching for traps now.

I felt a searing pain in my chest. I yelped in surprise, like I'd been shocked.

Crawler Imani C has used your *Tripper* spell.

Imani: Okay, I used your spell, Carl. Katia, your tattoo worked. Lots of traps just went off.

I rubbed my chest as everyone looked at me worriedly. But I shook my head. They were worried about the Bedlam Bride, but that wasn't what had caused the jolt.

Carl: Yeah, I noticed. I got a notification when you used it. It kinda hurt.

Imani: Oh wow, really? I'm sorry about that.

Donut: IT BETTER HAVE WORKED AFTER YOU FORCED IMANI TO PERMANENTLY DISFIGURE HERSELF.

Katia: Donut, didn't we agree you were going to stop complaining about the tattoos? It's not a disfigurement. Imani's tattoo is tiny compared to the one I did on Carl.

Donut: I'M SORRY, BUT A PAMELA ANDERSON TATTOO IS MOST CERTAINLY A DISFIGUREMENT. I KNOW THIS IS IMPORTANT, BUT SOMETIMES I WORRY ABOUT THE COST.

After Katia had given me my chain dragon tattoo, we'd reversed the process. My *Tripper* spell was level 15, but it was also item-based. It came from my bandana, Drakea's Enchanted Kerchief of Disorder. The original plan was to just let either Imani or Elle borrow the item, but it turned out that neither of them could wear it. Apparently fairy-class, and other magical races, were extremely limited on the sort of magical gear they could wear. I hadn't known that.

Still, when I took off the bandana, I learned my *Tripper* spell had raised on its own to level 7. (That kicked off its own, mind-numbing conversation with Mordecai since the spell version had a 10-minute cooldown while the item-based version was five hours, but I couldn't mix and match cooldowns. All of these rules made my head spin.)

All of that boiled down to this. I couldn't give Imani the item, but I could still let her borrow the spell in the form of a tattoo. Since it was a lower level spell, the tattoo didn't need to be big. When I drank the associated potion and selected the spell, I lost six levels when Katia drew the blood. That was irrelevant because the bandana itself brought the spell up to 15 either way.

It said the spell would slowly "heal" over the course of four days. Meanwhile, Imani's version of *Tripper* would slowly lose potency, and she'd eventually lose the spell. The tattoo itself, made from the toraline yam ink mixed with my blood, would be permanent. The good news was if Imani ever wanted to use that spell again after it faded, I could drink the yam potion, select the spell, and it would get re-energized. We were just limited by the fact we had barely any of the vegetable left.

There was more to it than that, Rosetta had confided. Spells and skills taken against the owner's will were much more powerful and resulted in the owner losing them permanently. My *Walk on Air* skill, stolen from Li Jun, was proof of that.

I very much wanted to ask Rosetta how in the hell we were supposed to figure all this out from their gift of the yam on the fifth floor. The answer involved the cookbook and something to do with the crawler Milk's entries, but I couldn't talk about the book, even in chat. There was nothing about this in her entries. I'd looked three

times. That seemed somewhat important, but it was a mystery for another day.

Anyway, Imani's tattoo was a small, barbed wire symbol that circled her ankle. I hadn't seen it yet, but when Donut learned Katia was planning on that style of tattoo, she loudly voiced her objection.

Donut: THIS ISN'T THE 1990's. I SWEAR TO GOD IF IMANI STARTS USING THE PHRASE "HOME SKILLET," I'M GOING TO LOSE MY MIND.

Donut was being annoying, but I could read between the lines. She was having the same hesitations about this as I was. There was a deep sense of guilt there. All of this stemmed from her putting that goddamned tiara on her head way back on the very first floor. We were doing this for her, and she knew it. This was how she expressed herself when she didn't know how to react. The idea of Imani getting a permanent tattoo for this was hard for Donut to come to terms with.

The tattoo conversation came to an abrupt end.

"He's coming," Katia said, looking up. I followed her line of sight to see the goat dragon circling toward a landing.

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Prepotente, upon the back of his hellspawn, landed on the ground in front of us, crunching on the gravel. Bianca the goat dragon crackled with black energy as the rocks around her feet started to glow red. The thing was now level 70, which was a big jump. She was now full size. She was about the size of Gonk the swamp yak, but longer. She'd grown a second set of wings behind her first pair, giving her an even more insectile appearance. Her goat horns curled and glowed. Steam rose from her eyes.

Pony himself looked much the same as the last time I'd seen him, but he was now level 99, making him—by far—the strongest crawler in the dungeon. He swung himself off the hellspawn familiar and landed in front of me, scattering rocks. He gave one look at Katia, made an indignant sniff, and turned to glare at me.

"Carl," Prepotente said.

Baroness Victory cracked into existence nearby. The large orc looked at the two of us and crossed her arms.

I held up a hand at Prepotente. "Look. We can't talk at all unless you're in the army. I know you don't want..."

"I know, Carl. I am not an imbecile. Recruit me."

I paused. "Are you sure?"

"Do it now before I change my mind. If this is the only way I may salvage this utter fuckup on your end, then make it so."

I nodded. Behind my back in my other hand, I pulled the potion of *Conscription* back into my inventory. A strange, unexpected sense of relief flooded me. It probably wouldn't have worked, not on him, but the moment I stowed the potion, a strange, what-were-you-thinking? clarity hit me.

No. Not like that. Never like that.

The river, always there, seemed to grow a little bit around the edges. *It's easy to think that when it's no longer necessary.*

Katia, as if sensing what had just happened, put a big, meaty hand on my shoulder. I reached up and gave her a pat. It would've been more touching if she didn't suddenly smell like leather, tobacco, and cheap bourbon.

My first instinct was to be a dick and give Pony the rank of Legionnaire, but I ended up making him a Colonel.

I stepped forward and touched his shoulder. "Look, Po... Prepotente. I really appreciate you coming to help us, and when we have time, I hope you'll tell me what you did to kill their army. We're on the same side here, and we really need to talk more. You don't need to do this all by your..."

The goat rushed forward and pulled me into a tight hug. He started to uncontrollably sob. "You're my best friend, Carl. I've been so lonely. When you didn't show up at the Bahamas on the last floor, I thought..." He didn't finish the sentence. He was letting out these huge, wet, snot-filled sobs. It had come so suddenly and unexpectedly, and he was clutching onto me like I was a life raft. Everyone around us just stopped what they were doing to look at us. Even Bianca appeared embarrassed.

Rend was looking up at Prepotente wide-eyed, and tears were inexplicably leaking out of the tummy acher's eyes, too.

He continued to sob, and he spoke between the gasps. "Let us put our differences aside... I'm ready for the emptiness to be filled. I have several enhanced pet biscuits ... but after what happened last time, I've been so afraid... And now I'm afraid it's too late. Bianca is fine company, but she doesn't speak. You are absolutely right. ... We need to keep communicating. I need to come to terms with you

being an idiot and be grateful for what I have. ... You can't help how stupid you are."

I sighed and slowly pushed him back. "Uh, it's going to be okay."

He wiped his eyes and nodded. Rend started rubbing against his leg and purring.

I gave the goat an awkward pat. "Let's just get through this, and we'll talk more, okay?"

You'd think I'd be ready for what happened next by now, but it still caught me off guard.

He screamed right in my damn face.

This caused Rend to also scream and fall onto his back, his little legs waving.

Samantha, who'd somehow gotten herself onto the back of Bianca, was hopping up and down. "Kiss! Kiss!" she cried.

The hellspawn made a chittering, crackling noise as black flames rose from her back. Samantha was unaffected. She turned and whispered something to the familiar. It crackled more. She laughed.

"You! Remove yourself from my mount immediately!" Prepotente shouted.

Samantha rolled off the back of Bianca and right up to the feet of the goat.

"Oh yeah? Make me."

He looked between Samantha and the now-empty back of Bianca.

"Just stay away from me," he said, turning his back to her.

"Don't walk away from me, Mr. Goat Man! I'm going to kill..."

Katia snatched her off the ground and covered her mouth with one of her giant, mantaur hands. Samantha started to scream and struggle in Katia's grip. Prepotente just grunted and returned to the back of Bianca, which he easily hopped onto. "Let me know when we will begin the assault." He and Bianca stomped away to investigate Li Na's clock tower. The rocks where Bianca walked remained red and glowing.

Katia pulled her hand off Samantha's mouth. "Don't ever say that again. Not to him."

Samantha growled. "Why are you being such a bitch today?

"His mother is already dead, Samantha, and everything is very tense. You saying that will cause him to go ballistic, and we don't need that right now. Promise you won't say it to him."

"Just because your man is in love with me now doesn't mean you can tell me what to do."

"Samantha," I said. "She's right. Don't mention his mother to him. If you do it again, he's going to punt you across the map, and you won't be allowed to go with us."

That finally reached her. The "Miss Me?" written on her forehead had gotten a little smudged by Katia's hand. "But you promised, Carl. How is it my fault that someone else got to his mother before I could?"

It occurred to me that Samantha, too, was tense. We were all lashing out in our own ways. That was equal parts comforting and worrying.

I put my hand against Samantha's cheek. She was warm to the touch. "Please. We are all on edge. This is crucially important. Just don't make things worse."

She just growled, bit my finger, and hopped out of Katia's grip. She rolled away, muttering, thankfully not in the direction of Pony.

Baroness Victory was still standing there, watching all of this happen. I caught her eye. "Is your family this dysfunctional?" I asked. But the moment I asked it, I regretted it. I suddenly remembered exactly how dysfunctional her family was.

Still, a small grin played across the stoic orc's face. I smiled back.

Elle: Carl, your guess was correct. Coming to the throne room. Finally ran into some nagas plus a few other NPC guards. The guards all worship Emberus, just like you predicted. Had to kill them all, including a big naga. That one didn't worship any god, but he went down hard.

I grunted.

Katia suddenly gasped. "That... that was one of the four we have to kill. I just got a notification he was dead! That must have been the head of the guard."

"It was also the Sultana's real-life boyfriend," I said. "Good. She'll be extra upset. Hopefully she'll start making mistakes." I glanced at

Victory. "You'd think in a universe so big, incest wouldn't be so widespread."

She made a pig-like snort. "The bigger the universe, the smaller it becomes."

I wasn't certain what that actually meant, but it rang true.

Donut: CARL, CARL THEY GOT ONE OF THE FOUR! I GOT A NOTIFICATION!

Carl: Good job. Be careful. Three left. It's Vinata and the two cousins.

We all waited. This was it.

Edgar: I'm sensing new movement in the castle. Hang on. Watching it now.

Rosetta: Make sure you see where it's coming from!

Rosetta was still at the FUPA with Tipid, but both of them were monitoring this carefully, especially since most of this was their plan.

If Rosetta was wrong about this next part, all of this would fail.

Edgar: Non-corporeal, Coming from below and moving up.

We all looked at each other, relieved. I gave Li Na a thumbs up. She nodded at me and started climbing the clock tower.

Rosetta: Good. Good. Carl, it's up to you now.

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<Note added by Crawler Carl, 25th Edition>

Something strange happens when someone worships a deity for the first time.

I didn't know this, but this is, apparently, well-known amongst the masses who watch Dungeon Crawler World*. It still strikes me how such obvious things are foreign to most of us experiencing the dungeon for the first time. Rosetta, Tipid, and even stoic Justice Light are telling me things when they can, with the obvious intent of me putting it in here. It's a lot, though, so I am doing my best.*

When one worships a god, a link is formed between the adherent and the immortal. This link comes in the form of an actual, physical, whisker-thin connection made of invisible light. Light that can penetrate almost any substance or spell. After a new adherent pledges themselves, a tiny, non-corporeal fairy mob called a Bijou grabs a tendril of light from the god and drags it to the new worshiper and attaches it to the adherent's heart.

Here's the important part. This line isn't direct. It goes from the god to the strongest temple on the floor and from the temple to the worshiper. This whole process takes about two minutes. From the third floor until the 11th floor, the strongest temple will almost always be inside of Club Vanquisher.

When a person moves around, other tendrils also grow, connecting the adherent to other temples and in some cases, other worshipers. These connections, too, are facilitated by the Bijou fairies.

This strange, little quirk of the game usually has no impact on anything, and Rosetta seems to think it's actually some sort of workaround the original designers developed to add the whole deity aspect to the game. Nobody has ever killed or caught or stopped the Bijou, though Mordecai says in theory it should be possible to catch one with a certain type of trap.

But, certain people with the proper skills can see *the Bijou as they zip between the floors. We have an NPC with us named Edgar. In Edgar's case, he can catch their movement. He can see upward momentum from the ground. This is a sign that someone nearby has just worshiped a god for the first time. Edgar's skill is level-15, and it's called* Sense Movement*. We are relying on using this to see if Rosetta's theory about the naga escape trick is correct.*

Not only were we now certain that Rosetta's theory was correct, but we were now pretty sure, out of the hundreds of gods and goddesses, which specific god this was.

This was Rosetta's theory on how Vinata made her way from the stronghold to Club Vanquisher undetected.

There were approximately 15 different deities in the Ascendency pantheon who were gods and goddesses of light. All 15 of those immortals had temples inside of Club Vanquisher, and, unique amongst the light gods and goddesses, was a powerful spell called *Travel the Path*. It looked and acted like a mix between a phase and a teleportation spell. It was neither. It allowed someone to temporarily turn into light and follow a path. They could usually only do it for a few seconds, but they could follow that path at the speed of light, making travel almost instantaneous. It was a dangerous spell to use and oftentimes ended with the caster getting splattered

or cut in half by an unexpected shadow blocking their route. It was not considered teleportation by the system.

Of those 15 gods, six gave their adherents some version of this spell immediately upon worship.

Of those six, four also included a skill called *Welcome Home*. This could usually only be used once. *Ever*. This skill, combined with *Travel the Path*, would allow the adherent to follow the bijou fairy's light tendril path directly to the strongest connected temple, which was invariably inside of Club Vanquisher.

Even if we destroyed the entrance to the temple, the spell would work.

But, there were two problems with this theory. The first problem was that nobody had ever seen that the sultana had worshiped a god. There were multiple ways one could see that. And even when she appeared at the end of the game, she would show signs, even if she left the deity's grace, which would usually result in a smite. But there was never a sign amongst her or her remaining guards. That suggested the missing guard would remain in the temple because they were the one who had actually been the one to worship the god.

But that brought up the second problem. There were usually seven of them total. The sultana plus her six guards. If only one worshiped a god, then how did all seven of them get into the temple?

The answer to this was a little batshit, but it is what made me believe Rosetta's theory was correct.

Of the four remaining possible deities, two of those gods—one god and one goddess, actually—came with church quests, which were deity-specific quests like my Kill Hellik quest. Both were the same. The new worshiper had to recruit at least one more person to join their religion. Both had methods where volunteers could agree to be "prospects" and basically get a day pass to a temple, where they could see what they were missing.

So, in short, the sepsis whore could utilize one of two immortals to get to the temple.

The goddess in question was named Theia. The god was named Khepri.

In Theia's case, the prospects would be turned into balls of light and would fit in the worshiper's pocket. Then, when the adherent was brought to the temple, they'd be freed and would spend the next several weeks getting wooed and having a great time. It was basically a hidden loophole hack that allowed someone to step away from the action and spend the rest of the time of faction wars partying it up. And because Theia wasn't a regular goddess used for clerics, there weren't ever any crawlers to stumble into her temple.

And, unlike with crawlers, viewers couldn't just randomly tune into a warlord's location if they didn't want to be on-screen. Nor could viewers just look inside of random temples. It was a perfect hiding place for a warlord.

That goddess—Theia—also had a ton of history involving the Ascendency and was a poor choice to win the throne. As a result, nobody ever sponsored her.

Rosetta believed this was who Vinata and her court usually picked. It worked like this. One of the six guards would worship the goddess. The guard would get the spells, and they'd quickly initiate a *Prospect Congregation*, which was as simple as setting up a party. They'd all hop into the guard's pocket, get transferred to the Temple of Theia, where they'd usually have the run of the place until the end of Faction Wars. When it was done, Vinata would tell the head priestess she was politely declining the invitation to join, and the priestesses would teleport the non-worshipers away to wherever they wanted, if teleportation was available.

But this season, there was a problem. Theia *was* sponsored. And not only was she sponsored, she was sponsored by someone in the employ of the Pacifist network. Rosetta didn't tell me the name of the sponsor, but she did say it was *not* Porthus, who was not in the dungeon at all.

This was actually an interesting coincidence. They had sponsored this goddess on my behalf, but this was before they had figured out the goddess's connection with the Blood Sultanate.

They had sponsored Theia because Theia was Samantha's mother. They had sponsored her to help save my life at the end of the fifth floor. She was the one who had appeared at the end of the floor when we first took Samantha out of the saferoom. Theia was, in theory, enraged at Samantha. But because of the sponsorship, she hadn't caused any problems and had only appeared to kill that giant demon, Slit, at the end of the bubble levels. She'd been too far away for me to get her information before.

Theia would be a very powerful weapon in the coming days, but she would be of no help to us today.

Vinata had to know Theia was sponsored, and there was no way she'd choose her this season. If by some chance she did, the goddess would smite her and her court on our behalf.

So that left the other god, who also gave Vinata and her guards a method to escape.

Khepri. Also a god of light. This was a much more obscure god, and he wasn't even available to be sponsored. He was basically an NPC that people sometimes interacted and allied with in the Ascendency fights.

Where Theia turned prospective worshipers into motes of light, Khepri was a little weirder.

In Khepri's case, worshipers could be male or female, but the quest to gain more followers only happened if the new worshiper was female. And instead of turning into motes of light, the prospective adherents would be changed to literal beetles. Actual, tiny bugs. And the female adherent in question would then have to *swallow* these beetles whole. She would be transferred to the temple of Khepri, which would be in the form of a giant, never-ending buffet feast that was absolutely covered with insects of all kinds. There, the adherent would sit upon the center of the buffet table, and she would give birth to the beetles she'd swallowed, where they'd quickly turn back to their previous form.

The prospects would spend the next few weeks sitting in the room with an infinite, bug-infested buffet, being wooed to join the religion.

Yeah. And this, supposedly, was pretty normal for some of the batshit things that happened on the 12th floor.

This, obviously, wasn't ideal for Vinata, but it still resulted in nobody else getting really hurt. She would have to spend the next few weeks hanging out in a giant room filled with bugs. But she would be safe. Donut asked how this possibly translated to the god Khepri being a "light" god, and Rosetta said she had no idea.

All that mattered was in about three or four minutes, Vinata and her guards were going to transfer to this specific temple, and Katia, Pony, Samantha, and myself were going to break into Club Vanquisher, break into the temple of Khepri, and kill every motherfucker in the room.

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Warlord Message: A member of your army is occupying the throne room of the Blood Sultanate stronghold! If they can hold for six hours, you will capture this castle, and the Blood Sultanate will be defeated!

Elle: It looks like all the guards are gone. The whole place is empty. A couple NPC guards are still alive, but we have them tied up. It smells just awful in here. Like a goddamned neglected hamster cage. Louis, go ahead and gas the exterior.

Louis: On it.

We needed to get to the temple of Khepri, which was inside Club Vanquisher. But, as per tradition, the entrance to Club Vanquisher was located inside of a random temple. Here on the ninth floor, there were always only two Club Vanquisher entrances on the entire floor. The one in Larracos would almost always get trashed. The one outside the city limits was usually left alone, and this was where we were currently set up. This particular season, the entrance temple was for a relatively common god called Dagda or *the* Dagda. He was a weather and "masculinity" god, and there was a whole class of fighter clerics who worshiped him. I'd seen more than one crawler who had him as a god. Apparently the only requirement to follow him was to grow a beard.

The Dagda was usually sponsored by some rich celebrity from the inner system. Some sort of self-help guru guy. Tipid said he couldn't remember if the sponsorship had happened this season or not.

I was glad the god summonings weren't yet allowed on the floor because we were about to *really* piss this god off, sponsored or not. There was no helping it.

When we moved, it had to be quick. Get through the temple of Dagda, break into Club Vanquisher, and then break into the Temple of Khepri. Security was strict and powerful, and the most difficult part of this was going to be getting from the entrance of Club Vanquisher to the entrance of the Khepri temple. Plus, the moment we broke inside, Vinata and her crew would likely know we were coming for them. This was also why we had to time this correctly. According to Rosetta, those under the *Prospect* spell wouldn't be allowed to leave the temple for at least an hour. It was the dungeon equivalent of going to a timeshare pitch.

Once that hour was up, they could tell the resident cleric at the Khepri temple to let them out. Once they were no longer boxed up, they could run. And if they ran, there was the possibility one of them would get away. We couldn't run that risk. This was our best chance.

"Carl, why isn't Donut with us?" Prepotente asked as we approached the Dagba temple. It was a small, plain-looking building nestled amongst the shacks within Shanty Town. The only indication that it was a temple was the notification on my map that it was a Club Vanquisher location. That, plus the smell of cooking from the interior. My stomach rumbled. It actually smelled pretty good.

I thought of Donut, currently in *Party Planner*, circling the naga stronghold. Right now Louis was using one of his spells to fill the area with a lethal cloud of poison to dissuade anyone else from coming or going.

"There's a very real possibility that they anticipated this, and they're going to throw a curveball," I said. Rend banged into my leg. I pulled out his pet carrier and pulled him in. Pony had already stored Bianca. We had to keep them both stored for this as Mordecai's aura potion didn't work on pets. "We have a contingency

in place if all three of the family members aren't in here. That is Donut's job. Once we're inside, she'll join Elle and Imani in the naga stronghold in case one of the three family members is left behind or somehow gets sent back."

Pony made a noise that sounded like a disapproving bleat. He pulled a potion with no explanation and drank it down. The bottle did not disappear like usual, and instead he just pulled the empty container back into his own inventory. "My concern is not this line of succession business but the entirety of the naga empire." He was walking too close to me, like literally brushing against my side. I kept trying to move away, and he'd just step back next to me. "I will not rest until they are all dead."

I didn't say anything. Katia, Bautista, and Samantha held back. Katia clutched onto the wriggling Samantha with two hands. Behind them, Li Jun and Zhang approached, both trailing wire. They'd all advance in a minute.

Every time I looked at Li Jun and saw the eyepatch, I thought of that moment. The taste of his eye filled my mouth. *Focus. Focus.*

The goat turned to look up at the clocktower and then back over his shoulder at the group of waiting crawlers. "I suppose it is a good idea to have a backup plan as there are indeed secret ways out of the club. I have a map of the entire place you know."

I stopped dead, my hand on the door to the temple. I turned to look at Prepotente, incredulous. "You have an interior map of Club Vanquisher?"

"Oh, yes. My mother, Bianca, and I made friends with a delightful guildmaster inside the club, and she gave us the map. We used a secret exit, and we came out of a bathroom stall inside of the entrance temple."

I took a deep breath. That would've been really useful. I was once again reminded of Donut's advice long ago that I should've tried harder to speak with him. She had been right.

"Keep it handy," was all I said. "We might need it before it's done."

He tapped the side of his head. "It's all right here. Perfect recall, Carl."

"Good," I said. "Let us know if we take a wrong turn."

"Don't worry. I have our path already mapped out." He pulled and drank another red potion and downed it.

"What are you drinking?"

"It's soda pop. This one is called Big Red, and it's from Texas. That's where cowboys live. Would you like one? I always drink one before battle. There's another one I quite enjoy called sarsaparilla. And my mother was partial to something called Diet 7-Up. Regular 7-Up is from Saint Louis, Missouri. I don't know where the diet variety comes from, but I have several if you'd like one. I can only drink up to five soda pops a day. It's a hard rule my mother gave me. She says... she said if I drink too many, I get hyper."

"Uh, no thanks. But we need to take the aura potion now." I pulled one of the yellow, bubbling potions and handed it to Prepotente. He examined it suspiciously.

"This appears to be of very high quality. Did that manager of yours Donut is always talking about make this?"

"He did. He said it'll last for an hour."

"An hour? That *is* good quality," Prepotente said. "The ones I had before only lasted for two minutes. Hardly worth the effort." He popped the cork and drank it down manually. He smacked his mouth with disapproval. "Hmmm. Similar to a Crodino."

I drank mine using the menu.

A small, one-hour timer appeared in my interface.

You have been Closed Off! You are no longer susceptible to aura effects, both Blessings and Dreads. This will not cancel existing effects nor will it negate your own auras.

The aura mechanic wasn't normally something I needed to worry about. We only had two crawlers in the guild who used it. One was Imani, who had a wide variety of aura effects imparted by touching her wings. Some were persistent, and she couldn't turn them off. The other aura effects, like some of her more specialized healing and protection spells, were called Blessings, and they could be turned on at will. Blessings drained her mana while they were active.

The other crawler who used auras was Li Na.

Hers were very, very different.

The ones she could activate at will were called Dreads.

I looked off at the clocktower where Li Na was now stationed, waiting for us. The Shanty Town menu allowed us to build several types of automatic defensive towers, but we could only build a handful of manned towers, actually called synergy towers.

This particular tower was something called Extend Aura, and it could only be manned by a crawler or NPC who had "synergy" with the tower's attack. In this case, the synergy was someone who used the aura mechanic. This was one of the few synergy towers that could be used during the offensive magic ban.

Dozens of wires now dangled from the arms of the clock of the synergy tower.

The wires were not part of the original design. They were an exploit, and it was actually Elle's manager, Mistress Tiatha, who'd come up with the idea.

If this was successful, immediately afterwards, Li Na's builder squad led by Toyotomi would get to work on a very tall, very powerful, very specialized, *very* expensive synergy tower. It would be placed right at the edge of the hole leading down into Larracos. In the menu, this particular tower had a very simple name. This one would only work during the next phase. It was called The Nest.

Warlord Carl: Everyone in the area, take your aura potions. We're going inside. Donut, if you guys don't see anyone approaching the Naga temple, might as well go join Elle and Imani.

Warlord Donut: OKAY. BE CAREFUL! EVERYONE BE CAREFUL!

I switched to a private chat between me and Donut.

Carl: *You* be very careful. They cleaned that place of traps, but they designed that place to be deadly to both you and me specifically. So don't go anywhere that hasn't already been swept by Imani and Elle.

Donut: I'M NOT THE ONE ABOUT TO UPSET LIKE 100 GODS, CARL.

She wasn't wrong. I pushed the door open.

Entering the Temple of The Dagda.

Faint, distant, but upbeat harp music filled the temple. Tall, stained-glass windows dotted the walls, each depicting a large, bearded man wielding what looked like a massive soup ladle. A red-haired, human cleric NPC sat in the back of the temple, praying over the altar. The cleric was especially buff. In the middle of the temple was a giant, black cauldron that bubbled merrily. It smelled like some sort of rich stew. Just past the cleric was the door entrance to Club Vanquisher.

The NPC looked over his shoulder at us, but the smile froze when he saw we weren't worshipers of the Dagda.

"The stew is only for brothers of Dagda, so please move along," he said with a thick, almost intelligible Welsh accent.

"Just passing through," I said, pointing at the door in the back corner of the small temple. "Heading to Club Vanquisher."

The cleric grunted and returned to his prayers.

Prepotente moved to the giant pot of stew and sniffed at it. He made a face. We moved toward the back door.

Behind me, the entrance to the temple opened back up. Bautista, Li Jun, and Zhang walked in. Bautista strode through the room, ignoring us and heading straight for the cleric. Li Jun and Zhang moved to the sides of the temple, pretending to examine the stained-glass windows. Li Jun dropped a rock on the ground, keeping the door from closing all the way.

Bautista moved up to the cleric and started to rapidly talk. He started telling the suspicious cleric he wanted to possibly join up with the Dagda.

Again, Prepotente walked so close to me I was afraid I would trip. He looked up at me. "So, I know your normal plan of attack is to just blow things up. It is refreshing to know you have a rudimentary plan. But I do wish you'd had time to tell me all the details. I don't know if you're aware of this, but I am banned from entering the club."

"I'm well aware," I said.

"Yes, but what do you need me to do?"

"You have your instructions. You duck when I tell you. And once we're inside, I need you to kill mantaurs and those sheep guys.

Don’t let any doors close, and let me do the rest.”

“Rams,” Prepotente muttered. “Filthy, snobbish creatures. The guards are the worst. But this club is rather well defended and is quite large. They will close that portal eventually. And I’m still not clear on how we’re getting inside in the first place.”

I had a plan, but a new, better idea occurred to me as we stood in front of the door to the entrance vestibule. Behind me, Li Jun and Zhang were trailing wire from the tower. So far, the cleric hadn’t noticed. If he did, Bautista would kill him, but we were hoping to avoid it. I thought for a moment, and I grinned. I handed Prepotente a simple smoke grenade. “You’re right. You probably should be ready for this next part. How are your acting skills?”

Entering Club Vanquisher. Members Only.

Heathens will find no solace here.

The ram guy guarding the stained-glass door entrance to Club Vanquisher was a different one than the last time I’d tried to enter the club. I’d just been inflicted with slugpox that last time, and he hadn’t wanted to let me into the club. This time, the ram ignored me and glared at Prepotente the moment we stepped into the vestibule. I examined the sputtering ram.

Mork. Ares Warrior Cleric Middle Priest. Level 40.

Warning: This NPC Worships Hellik. He will be automatically hostile toward you because you worship Emberus.

The ram lifted a shaking hand and jabbed a finger at Prepotente. This one’s lisp was somehow worse than his brother’s. “There ith a Holy Crusade Bounty on you, and you dare try to enter thith club? The audacity! I with thummon the guards!”

“Please do,” I said, holding up my hand in a gesture of peace. I pointed to Prepotente’s wrists, which were shackled with fuzzy, not-locked handcuffs. “As you can see, I have captured him. I am here

to collect the bounty. Summon as many as you can as he is very strong."

Prepotente threw himself on the ground with such an exaggerated flourish, I regretted this part of the plan before he even hit the floor. The handcuffs jingled ominously, and I was afraid they'd go flying off his wrists. "I have been caught! My goose has been cooked! Oh woe! Oh woe!" He pulled himself into a ball and started to fake sob. "And to think I have been captured by such an inferior opponent. A hygiene-deficient one at that. And now, he's going to hand me off to a sheep with a speech impediment? When will these indignities end?"

Mork the ram looked down with utter disgust upon Prepotente. He then turned his ire on me. "You want to collect the bounty? You're on probathion. I'm not even sure you *can* collect the bounty. We'll have to tell them we caught him together."

I sighed. Pony continued to fake sob.

"How much is the bounty anyway?" I asked.

"This ith a Holy Crusade," Mork said. "The bounty ith thlit between yourself and your temple. It's 500,000 gold, and you get half. But we will give half to Hellik as he ith a superior god to your filthy Emberus, and we will thlit the rest ourselves. If you don't do it thith way, they won't give you a bounty at all."

The notification came in the angry voice of Emberus.

New Quest. Kill the Blasphemer.

This worshiper of Hellik has insulted me. Kill him.

***Reward*: You will receive an additional Emberus Boon. The more entertained I am by this, the better the boon.**

I looked up into the air. "One step ahead of you, buddy."

"What ith that?" Mork asked.

"Nothing," I said. "We have a deal. Go get the guards.".

Mork nodded and pushed the stained door open a crack. "Guards! Guards!"

Carl: Katia, you're up. Come on in.

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From within Club Vanquisher, four mantaurs burst into the room. The guards looked much the same as the last time I'd seen these guys. Furry shorts. No shirts. No hats covering their balding heads. Blue paint splattered all over the place, indicating them as Grull worshipers. They all wore stripper-style bow ties around their thick necks. These guys were all higher level than usual, ranging from 75 to 80, which was a little worrying as I was only level 75.

"Hail!" the level-80 called, glaring down at Prepotente. This one's name was Joey. He stood to his full height and crossed both sets of arms. "Today is the day where blood and steel meet bone!" He raised his top pair of arms and extended his Wolverine claws with a loud *shiinnng*, but they embedded in the ceiling.

"Ah, fuck!" he growled. He tried to retract his blades and free himself, but only his left hand came loose. Little rocks and pebbles showered down over Prepotente, who started to sputter. The mantaur grabbed his right wrist with his left and started to rapidly yank, to no avail.

"Hail!" the other mantaurs started to shout as they moved to help their compatriot.

"You idiots!" Mork yelled. "Joey, youth been told a thousand times not to shing in here." He waved at the window on the stained glass door. The window that depicted Taranis and Apito—though the

rams for some reason thought depicted their god, Hellik. "The glass ith too precious for thenanigans!"

Joey ignored this as he started to panic. His bottom arms flailed helplessly. "Brothers, I have been entrapped! Help me!"

I watched this, open-mouthed. My original plan was to cause a ruckus and force the ram to call the guards on *me*, but this was much better.

Prepotente: Now?

Carl: Wait for it….

From behind, Katia burst into the room. She remained in the form of another mantaur. She was soaked in "gore." She hadn't wanted to use real blood and guts, so I'd asked my food box to make cherry cobbler. Since the damn thing was still broken, it had spit out a giant bowl of chowder soup-style cherries mixed with a sausage breakfast sandwich. I'd fed Rend the biscuit pieces, and I gave the rest to Katia. The lumpy, red remains looked sickeningly accurate.

"Brothers!" Katia shouted. "Hail! It is the end of days! Demons attack the temple behind me. We must initiate temple defense protocols!"

Everyone stopped what they were doing. Joey, whose upper right claw was still stuck to the ceiling, asked, "Temple defense protocols?"

Katia paused. According to Tipid, that was the name of the emergency procedures. But things did change from season to season. And sometimes they went away. Or it was possible this mantaur was just an idiot.

Katia recovered quickly. "Fight to the death!" she shouted. "Kill all the heathens! The demons come! Uh, steel and heavy metal!"

"Hail!" the other mantaurs shouted, all extending their Wolverine claws. Another got his arm stuck, this time in the wall.

"Brother, what manner of demon is it?" Joey demanded as he continued to struggle.

From over both of Katia's shoulders flew a pair of ridiculously cute stuffed animals. They were stuffed versions of a demon mob called Eclipse Pyxies. They looked like fat, fur-covered guinea pigs,

but with bat wings and jagged teeth. Bautista had a dozen of these things. The stuffed animals switched in midair from toys to actual monsters.

The real versions were about the same size and were just as cute.

One of the flying guinea pigs hissed and attached itself to the face of Joey the mantaur, who started to squeal like a little girl. The little monster enthusiastically chomped on his face. Blood sprayed in the room. It smelled strangely like cheap beer.

"That kind," Katia said.

In the back of the room, Mork the ram bolted for the door.

Carl: Now!

Prepotente slammed his smoke grenade. At the same moment, I pulled one of the black potions from my inventory—a potion of *Inflict Black Nimbus*—and I hurled it through the small vestibule so it slammed against the back of the head of Mork the ram just as he opened the door.

Shouting filled the room as Joey's panicked squeals went up in pitch. The smoke billowed, blinding all of us. The second demon pyxie buzzed through the air, sounding like a screaming chainsaw. It found a target, and a second mantaur started to cry out. I burst forward, pushing past the sweaty bodies of the bewildered guards. Prepotente jumped to his feet and rushed with me. We reached the open entrance into the club, smoke swelling inside.

Mork lay there on the ground, crying with the black halo around his head, half in and out of the main room.

"Ith says I'm trespassing," he gasped. "How? How can I trespass in my own home? What did youth do to me?"

Normally this spell was something someone had to cast, but like many "abjuration" style spells, the effects of *Black Nimbus* could also be distilled into potion form. And thanks to Mordecai's abilities, he could now mass-create these things.

Behind us, more shouting rose as the door from the temple of the Dagda opened all the way. Li Jun, Zhang, and Bautista strolled in. There was grunting and a splatter as they, along with Katia, quickly dispatched the four guards. The smoke continued to billow,

following us into the club. The smoke was sucked up into the ceiling of the much-larger room. Several NPCs mostly, elves and fairies, jumped up and fled. After a moment, there was nobody left in this front room. Distant shouting filled the club. There would be dozens of more guards soon.

Zhang: I have the vestibule door secured open.

Li Na: I am ready.

Carl: Wait for my signal.

"What did youth do to me?" Mork repeated, reaching up to us. The halo around his head crackled with black light.

The ram was temporarily removed from the grace of his god. For a cleric, this was an especially effective attack. Those under the *Black Nimbus* couldn't cast or use any spells given to them by their god. They couldn't enter any temples or churches. And while the common areas of Club Vanquisher itself weren't considered a temple, someone who didn't have a religion would be immediately targeted by the guards.

I had a quick memory of the only other time I'd ever cast this spell. I'd tried to save prison guard Anton from the god Ogun on the last floor by casting it. It hadn't worked.

Prepotente and I stepped over the whimpering ram as we entered the club.

Warning: You are trespassing.

I held tightly onto the door, keeping it open. At this point, all three doors were now open: the door from Shanty Town to the temple of the Dagda, the door from the temple into the entrance vestibule, and the door from the vestibule into the club. Of those three doors, only the second two were actual portals. We needed to keep both of these doors open at all costs now. The moment the club went into lockdown—which would be at any moment—these portals would cease to work. But only once they closed.

...And as long as we kept an unbroken line of the capacitor wire—which was really just an antenna—from the clocktower to the interior of Club Vanquisher, the tower-enhanced effects of Li Na's aura would work inside the club.

I looked about the now-abandoned room. It was the same as last time. Wood slat walls. Big, leather couches. Stairs leading both up and down in several directions. A stone fireplace the size of a garage with a bonfire-sized fire crackling within, filling the wide area with warmth. Rugs were everywhere, including bear rugs and what looked like a massive, snow-white yeti rug that still had the head of a humanoid yeti attached to it. The whole place smelled like incense and grandpas.

And upon the walls remained the hundreds of taxidermied monster heads of all sizes. The most striking was the black dragon head over the fireplace. Its red eyes glinted in the firelight. The smoke from the small bomb was mostly dissipated already, but it gave the room a sinister, hazy appearance, especially now that everyone was gone.

The faint church music that usually played in here was now turned off, which added to the menacing effect.

Li Jun, trailing three separate lengths of wire, rushed up to me. He quickly handed me the third length, which was as thin and light as fishing line. I looped it around my wrist. He gave a quick look at the ram on the floor and then rushed into the club. He moved to the fireplace and started to climb the bricks. He would find a place to attach each of the two remaining wires on either side of the room. When that was done, his job was to guard this door and keep it open.

He was followed shortly by Katia. The gore all over her was no longer fake.

At our feet, Mork the ram struggled to get up. I kicked him down and put my foot on his chest. I should've killed him already, but the note at the end of the Emberus quest had given me pause.

"What... what are you doing?" Mork cried. "Help me. Please help me. Hellik, please. Please come back to me. I don't want to be alone."

From multiple hallways and stairwells, more mantaurs—and a few rams—appeared, all running toward the entrance common room.

When we'd first discussed this next part of the plan, Li Na stated she had several dreads that would be effective if they were allowed to fill Club Vanquisher.

We settled on one called *Dark Purpose*.

Normally, this was a fairly small-area aura, and it would only affect someone if they were physically touching Li Na. Now, with the tower mixed with Tiatha's wire hack, anyone within about 20 meters of the wires would get hit with the effect.

Mordecai said he'd never even heard of this particular dread. According to Li Na, it was basically the same thing as Donut's *Why Are You Hitting Yourself?* The feeling normally only lasted a moment, but it accelerated the longer one was touching Li Na. But because we were using the wires to amplify the signal, it would be almost impossible to escape.

Best of all, dreads didn't count as offensive magic.

It would, in theory, cause pure chaos, and it would give us the opportunity to keep the halls clear while we made our way to the Temple of Khepri. I really hoped it would work.

Carl: Li Na. Do it.

Li Na: The dread is now activated.

The knot around my wrist tingled, like I was suddenly touching a low voltage wire. That was it. All around us, the incoming guards stopped dead and looked about in confusion. They seemed more confused than anything. After a moment, the closest ones eyed Li Jun, who was still hanging impossibly off the wall and was tying one of the wires around the neck of the huge dragon head over the fireplace.

The guards roared and advanced.

Shit, shit, shit, I thought. *It's not working.*

"I do believe your wire plan is ineffective," Prepotente said.

"Not helpful." I jumped into my inventory and pulled the alarm trap ball into my hand. This was the backup plan. Get the mantaurs to berserk.

At my feet, Mork continued to whimper.

But then, I hesitated. Something had changed.

The light in the room was starting to dim even further. Across the way, the mantaurs and rams all paused again, looking about. A strange, electric sense filled the room. The smoke that had settled against the high ceiling seemed to change its mind and settle back down into the main part of the room, adding a more hazy appearance to everything. The massive fireplace continued to crackle, but it was sputtering like it was dying, causing the lights to jump and dance off the walls and the hundreds of stuffed monster heads.

A distant scream rang out, high-pitched and filled with fear before it was cut off short. It sounded like maybe it was an elf.

"He doesn't see me anymore," Mork whispered.

And then the ram reached up and pulled his own two eyes out with his own fingers. They came out easily and wetly, muscles stretching and then ripping away, curls of gore landing on his face. He shoved the eyes back into the sockets, but backward. Blood geysered from around the wounds.

"Get it off, get it off!" a mantaur shouted from the curved stairwell rising up toward the temples. He extended his blades, and he stabbed himself in the throat before tumbling to the floor, gurgling. He hit the ground hard, and blood splattered across the room, landing over the white yeti rug. Another mantaur turned and ran away. Yet another just started to scream.

"Oh shit," Li Jun cried, leaping off the wall, flipping, and landing deftly on a couch. The stuffed dragon head above the fireplace had come to life. It groaned. All around, all the hundreds of trophy heads had come alive.

One by one, they all started to scream. Only they didn't have lungs, so all they did was open their mouths and thrash. One, the head of a goblin attached to a shield-shaped wooden plaque, fell to the ground. Its marble eyes opened wide, and the marbles rolled away. It gummed at the floor.

The rugs, too, were all suddenly alive.

"What the hell?" I muttered, looking about. Katia had also paused, stepping away from an enormous bearskin rug. Even Li Jun appeared shocked.

"I take it back," Prepotente said. "This spell seems especially powerful."

This was not the same thing as *Why Are You Hitting Yourself?* This wasn't even close.

"My heart. I gave you my heart. Please. Please take it back," the blinded Mork groaned as he dug into his own chest, ripping away his robes, then hair, then flesh. He grasped, and with a sickening crack, he ripped one of his own ribs away. It snapped like a tree branch. But before he could get to his own heart, he ran out of strength.

"I'm so cold," he whispered. "He promised me I'd never be cold again."

Quest Complete. Kill the Blasphemer.

This was followed by a good ten seconds of uncontrolled, absolutely unhinged, *shrieking* laughter in Emberus's voice.

***Reward*: You have received a Celestial Boon!**

The tattoos on the back of my hands started to burn.

You have been blessed by your deity, Emberus. You have received a Celestial Boon!

Level 15 *Heathen Scald* Received.

For the remainder of this floor, any punch attack will add the Heathen Scald skill damage.

I didn't have time to look that one up. All around, new things were happening.

At my feet, Mork remained dead, but his body started to vibrate. But no, I realized, it wasn't his body. A ghost had formed, and it was the ghost of himself that was quivering.

What the hell?

And that's when the chains appeared. Ethereal, white chains rose up all around the prone form of the dead NPC.

"No," the ghost of Mork cried, surprising me. "No, please. I've already died! Isn't that enou..."

His words changed to screams as the chains jumped like snakes, wrapped around him, and pulled him into the floor of the club. A puff of smoke appeared where he'd been, and I felt a wave of ice-cold air on my legs.

"Fascinating," Prepotente said. "Did you notice his lisp was gone when he'd turned into a ghost?"

Across the way, the chains were doing the same thing to the ghost form of the fallen mantaurs, all of whom panicked and screamed as they were pulled away.

Strangely, ghosts had formed around all of the trophy monster heads as well. The chains came for them, too. Frost started to form on the walls. The massive fireplace suddenly whiffed out, plunging the room into further darkness.

Warning: This area of Club Vanquisher has been defiled.

"What the hell does that mean?" I asked out loud.

Prepotente was on his knees next to me. He reached down, touched a bit of frost that had formed on the floor, and brought it to his tongue. "Hmm. Interesting," he said.

A klaxon alert sounded, and a deep, female voice I'd never heard before intoned over the hidden loudspeaker. She sounded like an orc or ogre:

Shelter in place! Shelter in place! Demonic activity has been detected within the club! Security to the lobby! All hands! All hands! Implement Aura protections before you venture out!

The alert sounded two more times before getting cut off.

I exchanged a look with Katia, who was still staring, horrified, as ghostly chains dragged a shrieking mantaur apparition away and down. He screamed for his mother before he disappeared. His corpse remained on the floor with his own claws buried up through his chin, eyes open with surprise.

Carl: Hey, uh, Li Na. That spell isn't exactly what I was expecting.

Li Na: Did it work?

Carl: Jesus. Did you know that was going to happen? What the hell *was* that? Are they, like, trapped somewhere? Holy shit.

Li Na: I ask again, Carl. Did it work?

Carl: What level was that aura? I've never even heard of something like that.

Li Na: *Dark Purpose* was level 4 when I cast. It is not meant to be used like this, and it leveled even more rapidly than we anticipated. It hit level 15, and I moved to a different dread. I am cycling my dreads and rapidly leveling them all. Right now I am using *Defile Soul*. Next I will train *Bleeding Horror*.

Holy shit. I didn't have time to parse *that*. She was using this as an opportunity to power level. It sounded like she'd known this would happen. In the distance, more screams filled the club. A translucent, on-fire ghost of a fairy flew into the room and was skewered by a chain before it was dragged, sobbing into the ground.

Samantha rolled into the room, chewing something. She looked like she had stew all over her face. In mere seconds, the lobby had turned into a massacre scene. The last of the chains faded away.

Samantha looked about and frowned. "Wow. And I didn't even do anything yet."

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I FELT SICK, BUT I DIDN'T REMOVE THE WIRE FROM MY WRIST. I COULDN'T stop thinking of Mordecai's warning not to do too much damage. This was already just as bad as what had happened to the Desperado Club.

A sudden panic hit me. At the Desperado, when things got too bad, they'd magically kicked everyone out. I shook my head, clearing it. We had to move.

I pointed to the blood-slicked stairs leading upward. "Go!" I scooped up Samantha, and we ran. It was me, Prepotente, Katia—who was still pretending to be a mantaur, and Samantha. With Bautista guarding the door out to Shanty Town, Zhang at the first vestibule door, and Li Jun guarding the door into the club, we could guarantee to keep the auras going for at least a little bit longer. I stored the trap ball back into my inventory, but I kept it in a ready spot. The third spool of wire trailed behind me as I rushed up the carpet-covered stairs, my bare feet splashing gore with each step.

The blood on the floor of the stairs started to bubble, like water boiling in a pot.

I sent a frantic message to Li Na as I ran.

Carl: What does this blood dread do?

We ran to the top of the stairs, turned down a hall filled with shops, and then we took another turn past some guilds. There were

bodies everywhere, most with self-inflicted wounds. I heard the distant shouting of mantaurs.

Li Na: I've never gotten it to work before, but if someone with bloody hands gets near me, and I have the dread active, it's supposed to turn their blood against them. And then the blood would turn on my enemies. I've never gotten it past level two because they're usually dead within moments of coming near me. It takes a lot of mana. My brother is watching and will let me know if I need to switch to something else.

Carl: There are new guards coming. The blood thing isn't going to help if they're not bloody. But *I* have blood all over me. Turn the first one back on!

Donut: LI NA WHAT ARE YOU DOING? DO WHAT CARL SAYS!

Li Na: I will if I have to, Carl. I need to train, and I can't give up this opportunity. When mantaurs extend their claws, they bleed. That should be enough when the dread trains high enough. It is already level 5 and rising. You are marked as an ally. The blood won't hurt you, but if the new guards have aura protection, this will be better because the blood already under my control will still attack them.

That was actually some sound logic. Li Na continued:

Li Na: I suggest you use the berserker plan. After Bleeding Horror, I have one more to train if I have time.

Her simple, matter-of-fact, almost emotionless delivery was chilling. *Christ*, I thought. It was like she was a sociopath. She was always so calm. How was it I'd never noticed this before? I tried to remember her ever showing any real emotion. She always kind of blended in with her brother and Zhang, both of whom wore their hearts on their sleeves. I thought of the Iron Tangle, when she'd come to my aid. She'd kept a mantaur alive by cutting him down to just a torso. I thought of the stories from the Battle of Beijing, only rumors, of the things she'd done with her chains. Li Jun had claimed they'd missed most of that fight, but I was fairly certain he'd been holding back some of what had really happened.

Ahead, on the floor, a ram screamed. He'd tried to rip his own throat open, but he was still alive. His own blood swirled around him like liquid mercury. It flowed over his face as he gurgled, entering through his mouth and nostrils. I stomped his head as I passed, firmly pushing between his horns. His head caved in easily. I wanted to avoid personally killing these guys, but this one was already almost dead. And every kill of a Hellik worshiper kept me in Emberus's good graces.

We turned one last corner, and there it was. A desk with a large doorway portal behind it. The large, glowing, wooden door held the now-familiar image of an upside-down tree. This single doorway led to all the temples.

"Katia!" I called, pointing at the strange device on the desk. The portal dial. Yasmine, the wisp fairy who ran the portal to the temples, wasn't here, which was good. I hoped she wasn't dead, but that didn't matter for the moment.

A figure crackled into existence next to the desk, and I almost crapped myself the moment she appeared. Victory. She stood nearby, observing. She had an aghast look on her face as she looked over my shoulder at all the death.

"Don't start," I said to Victory as I rushed past the desk and to the door. "I didn't know it was going to be that horrific." A pair of screams filled a distant hallway. What appeared to be a sentient pool of blood rushed across the wall, leaving a long smear. It slurped its way around a corner. A new group of voices—fairies and elves—started to scream. There was a splash followed by what sounded like hundreds of twigs being snapped at once.

"Oh, I want to see!" Samantha said and wriggled from my hands.

"Stay here!" I called. "We'll need you in a minute."

Rosetta: Are you at the portal yet?

Carl: Coming up now. Victory is here. Katia is at the desk. Prepotente is…

I looked up, and he wasn't with us. But then he appeared, coming from around the corner, holding a potion bottle. He'd stashed some of the sentient blood in a jar. He pulled a pet carrier and

zapped the jar into it. He stopped and started to examine the portal dial.

Rosetta: In the codex, Khepri is number 453. All gods have at least one temple, but some have two. Khepri only has one thank the gods, but his address should be 453 or 453.A. Once you get inside, move fast. Don't let them run. His temple is an infinite table.

From behind me, Katia made a frustrated noise.

Katia: How do I tune this thing? It's just lights!

Rosetta: You'll have to figure it out on your own. I don't know how it works.

"This mechanism is quite simple," Prepotente said out loud. "Look. First we turn off automatic mode or Carl will end up at the Emberus temple, you'll be at Eileithyia, and I will be at the Epicure. See? Integers here. But we need to know the address to dial in."

I called out the numbers Rosetta gave me as I examined the large door.

Ultima Corp DungeonWerx Municipal, Multi-Destination Doorway-based Subspace Portal.

Analyze? Yes/No.

I clicked **Yes**, and pages of information filled my screen.

"Dial 453!" I called.

The display blinked, and the information changed.

Type: Two-way portal.

Gated by faith.

Can you pass this portal? Yes.*

Warning: This is a doorway portal. While you may pass this portal, entrance sequence is gated to adherents of the Khepri faith or other entities based on existing dungeon ruleset.

Environment on other side of portal: Compatible.

Visual Analysis? Yes/No.

"That's the right one!" I called. I held my breath, and I clicked **Yes.**

A screenshot appeared.

"Yes!" I called, relief flooding me.

She was there. She was right there.

It was a group of multiple nagas, all huddled together, talking while a bug-headed guy in robes stood near them. Actually, no. The cleric guy didn't have a bug head. His head *was* a bug. He appeared to have two legs, two arms, more soother-like than human, but still humanoid. But where a person's head would be was an entire bug. It was a six-legged beetle thing, complete with wings and a tiny head of its own.

"Fucking weird," I murmured.

The room was just as had been described. It was a long, long table that stretched off into darkness. The entire table appeared to be covered with a moving blanket.

Only it wasn't a blanket.

Katia and Prepotente came to stand on either side of me.

I reached forward and tried to pull the door open. It wouldn't budge.

You are not allowed to open this door, heathen.

I grunted. We were expecting this.

There were literally hundreds of types of doorways, but the portals into Club Vanquisher's temples all used a relatively common type, similar to the front door to the entire club. Basically, the door could only get cracked open by someone who was allowed to open it. But once the door was open, anyone could slip through as long as it remained cracked.

This, believe it or not, was not the first time a crawler was forced to break into a temple here. It was a common quest item for 10th and 11th floors. The problem was, the portal itself was difficult to crack open.

The sound of multiple, shouting mantaurs came from down the hallway. There was something else there, too. Something bigger, beefier. We needed to hurry.

The door could only be opened by adherents of Khepri. Or, it could be opened by those considered "damned." It was a long-standing tradition of the game. It didn't make much sense to me, but this was a cultural thing that was common throughout the

universe. In order for churches in the universe to maintain their "church" status, they were required to give shelter to everybody and anybody who requested it as long as they weren't known adherents of a different faith. Tipid said this law was widely ignored with no consequences, but the tradition made its way into the game. If a person or NPC was "damned," they could enter any church and receive shelter and food.

In the game, "Damned" was a status that was difficult to obtain. Li Na had it, and if this didn't work, she'd have to run her ass in here and open the door for us. But Mordecai, Tipid, and Rosetta were all certain this trick would succeed.

Damned status also applied to anyone, crawler or NPC, who had ever entered the Nothing and survived.

"Samantha, get over here. And don't you dare touch that." The doll head was sitting by the dial, examining it. She made a curse and rolled toward me. I did a quick screenshot to make sure she hadn't messed with the address. She hadn't. She hopped into my hands.

Carl: Na, I'm about to cast your tattoo spell. When Imani did it to me, it hurt a little bit, so be ready for it.

Li Na: I am ready. My *Blood Horror* is now level 15. I am turning on the last of my dreads, and I do not know how it will react. It is called *Succulent Decay*.

Carl: Jesus. Okay.

"Ready?" I asked Prepotente and Katia.

Katia nodded.

Prepotente pulled two potion bottles. He jumped from one foot to another. He started to mutter to himself under his breath. It was a litany of names. I recognized Miriam and Bianca, plus several others. He ended on "Ragazzaccia," which was a name or word I didn't recognize.

He looked at me. "I am ready for battle, Carl."

This was it. Winning this fight was not optional.

I clutched Samantha in my hands like a football. She was gnawing on my wrist, and I turned her to face me. "Okay. Open the door. You'll have to use your mouth."

I was expecting her to make a lewd comment, but she just said, "Okay, Carl."

I glanced over my shoulder to see Victory there, looking sadly upon us. A sudden, terribly ominous feeling overwhelmed me.

There's no turning back. Whatever it is, it doesn't matter. It's this, or it is death.

I held Samantha to the door, and she chomped down on the vertical handle.

A quick pull, and the door opened. Samantha let go, and I caught it before it could fully close. The doll head dropped to the ground and rolled away from the door, headed back to the desk. I didn't have time to call for her.

I opened the door all the way, and all three of us rushed inside.

Everything froze.

Entering the Temple of Khepri.

You have been denied a table at the feast.

Warning: You are trespassing in a temple.

Warning: You have been marked for death by Khepri.

The first thing I realized before the rest of the notifications appeared was that the screenshots from my portal analysis tool didn't show notifications above anyone's head.

Vinata was here along with several other nagas. They all had a long line of protection blessings over them.

Distressingly, Vinata held the yellow **Immortal** tag over her head.

But, probably of more importance, was that the bug dude whom I assumed was a cleric wasn't actually a cleric at all.

He was, in fact, Khepri himself.

New Achievement! Charge of the Light Brigade.

Okay, so there are traps.

There are TRAPS.

And then there's what you just walked into.

Oh man, oh man. It's gonna be glorious, one for the ages, but those of you watching at home, you might want to get your crying hankies out. This is about to get *really* messy.

***Reward*: Fuck. Even I'm not a big enough of a prick to give you a reward for this one. I'll give you a good one if you live and don't escape via some bitch-ass cop out, but let's be realistic here.**

My fingers tingled with a strange, familiar rushing feeling. A yellow glow covered me. I met eyes with Vinata, who had the same yellow glow.

You are in the presence of a deity. The Scavenger's Daughter has opened her eyes. She fills with power.

Temporary Effect from Khepri:

Uh, please wait while I look something up…

Nope. This is legit. Okay, so, people are going to think this is some sort of bullshit where I saved your ass from this elaborate trap you just walked into, but this is genuinely the temporary effect one receives from being in the presence of this deity. This might save *your* life if you run fast enough, but it's certainly not going to do anything for these other two silly billies who didn't realize that gods can always appear in their own temples no matter what. But, hey. You assholes are always surprising me. Let's see what happens next.

Oh, yeah.

Temporary Effect from Khepri:

You are immortal for the next 90 seconds.

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Behind us, the door slammed closed on its own. The capacitor wire snapped away, cut off by the portal. Everything remained frozen. I took the moment to observe the room. There were six naga in here, which was actually one less than I was expecting. Vinata was there in the center, huge and white with her six arms, also frozen. The other two we needed to kill were also here. One snake was purple with red highlights. The other naga was obsidian and much smaller than the others. The other three were the usual personal guards. Two were yellow-hued, and the third was purple like one of the cousins. The guards were all armed with rifles, all frozen in the act of bringing them to bear on us.

Rishi, the husband of the small, black-scaled naga, was not here.

The naga all appeared surprised at our sudden appearance. All but Vinata, who, despite being frozen, was spitting orders at all her compatriots.

Vinata was the only one with the "immortal" tag over her head. It had a frozen countdown, stuck on 63 seconds. Her immortality would run out 27 seconds before my own. All six had a line of protections on themselves, including aura protection.

To my surprise, I saw Vinata was actually the one who'd worshiped Khepri, which was a break in tradition.

This was all, I realized, part of the trap. And it was a brilliant one, too.

It all hit me at once. Vinata knew we'd have to come for her no matter what. We'd assumed that she wouldn't anticipate we'd find her secret hiding place. But, unlike so many others, she hadn't underestimated our determination, and she'd prepared for this eventuality. She'd been the one to worship Khepri, and she'd somehow prepared a method to summon him into his own temple. She'd waited to see if we'd find her, and when we did, she'd summoned the bug god, knowing we'd storm right into the deity's lap. As trespassers into the god's own temple, we'd be fucked.

It was the perfect trap, and we'd walked right into it.

Li Jun: Why am I frozen?

Bautista: Frozen also.

Zhang: Same.

Li Na: I'm not. What's happening?

Carl: Guys. As soon as you unfreeze, you need to run. It's a trap. Katia and Prepotente. The door is closed, but it sounds like this fight is encompassing the whole club, and you should be able to get out of here. Reset the door and hide in your associated temples if you have to. I'll cover you.

Donut: WHAT IS HAPPENING? WHAT IS HAPPENING?

Prepotente: I did not come this far to run.

Katia: Me neither, Carl. God or not. I'm staying.

Donut: GOD? YOU'RE FIGHTING A GOD? THERE AREN'T SUPPOSED TO BE GODS YET!

I started to mentally type out a quick reply, but I was interrupted by the announcement. It came with a ridiculous amount of fanfare. Fireworks exploded over our heads, illuminating the table in front of us, covered with thousands of also-frozen bugs. The AI shrieked the words with even more enthusiasm than normal.

B-B-B-Boss battle!

It's a Super Heavyweight Temple Battle Grudge Match Extravaganza!

Okay, so I kinda just made that name up. But it fits, right? This isn't *technically* a boss battle, but come on. We can all agree this pretty much counts. Look at the combatants. Look at the stakes.

Look at the goddamned *drama*.

On one side, we have a weird-ass god who feels honor-bound toward his guests, despite being pissed off and terrified. We have six nagas, one of whom is a warlord and an honest-to-goodness war hero.

But there's a lot more to it than that. Breaking news, folks. Princess Vinata is about to inherit her own solar system. That's no secret, but what you don't know is that after a few hundred cycles pretending to be destitute, her entire kingdom was about to surprise *everyone*. But now her secret husband is dead, and her kingdom's plans to pull a Fred Johnson and seize all the shipbuilding factories are being leaked. As we speak, all factory owners are moving to protect their assets from the slippery snake folk.

Those of you in the dungeon probably don't care about that part, but out in the greater universe, that's headline news. Almost as big as that whole thing with that orc lady with amazing dog-paddling skills.

Anyway, Vinata's team consists of herself, three more military veterans, and her two cousins. Those last two naga, the cousins, are a graphic designer and a PR agent, so I wouldn't expect much fight out of either of them.

But they sure are important, aren't they? Every pawn still on the table is a danger. That's *another* lesson I need to keep in mind.

Opposing them we have three of our top crawlers, one of whom is also a warlord. One is here for revenge. One is desperately trying to save herself. And then there's the warlord, Carl. Good ol' Carl who'll do just about anything to protect those he deems worthy.

Oh, and we have three more mid crawlers who are also getting roped into this because they're kinda close and we need some cannon fodder to even out the odds.

I did ask them to make Kevin and Magnificent Troy come and do commentary, but it looks like that Troy guy is currently in an alcohol-fueled state of unconsciousness, and

I promised I wouldn't poke at those outside the original primary zone without a good reason. So we're just gonna let y'all duke it out the old-fashioned way. But, I am going to open up betting for those at home because why not?

You have, let's say, three minutes to get your bets in. I'll wait.

Temple rules apply. Floor rules apply. And don't forget, deity summoning doesn't count against your limits when temples are involved!

How is this *not* going to be exciting? Someone has gotta die spectacularly during this fight. How can they not? At the very least we gotta kill half the nagas. Plus maybe that Zhang guy since nobody ever talks about him anymore.

Zhang: Hey! What the fuck?

Victory zapped herself into the temple and moved to the side. She didn't say anything.

Khepri was half-frozen and in the process of turning to face us. The god was rather short, barely five feet tall. Now that I had a brief moment to observe, I realized I should have recognized his robes. It was common attire of the gods and goddesses of the Ascendency. Lots of clerics wore similar robes, but not with the same golden fringe.

Oh, yeah. I'm doing the boss battle manually and forgot my favorite part.

An image of my face slammed into a frame floating in the air, followed by Katia, Prepotente, Li Jun, Bautista, and Zhang. Zhang had a flashing sign over his head that read **2X Jackpot if Zhang Lives!**

Versus!

This was followed by all six of the naga portraits slamming into place, one after another, with Vinata's portrait larger than the others.

The real version was ignoring all this and was hissing orders to all the frozen snakes around her.

All of our portraits caught on fire and flecked away into magical soot, and a giant, flaming ball rolled through the air. It was just an image, but it lit up the never-ending buffet, and warmth washed

over us. All around, the frozen bugs on the table made strange hissing and squealing noises.

The ball of light was supposed to be the sun, I realized. It faded and was replaced with an image of Khepri. The description was read out loud like with a regular boss battle:

God of Rebirth and the Sunrise. Khepri! Level 250.

This is a locked deity. He will not be sponsored this season.

This god is a retainer of Adrasteia.

Warning: This is a deity. He is invulnerable on this floor.

This god is within his own temple. Temple appearance rules apply.

Like many of the gods one may find roaming the halls of the Ascendency, Khepri is mostly ignored by the big players and is only acknowledged when they need something from him. They usually just leave him alone because he's a goddamned weirdo. His head is the body of a bug, which is creepy, even to me. His temple is "endless."

The light in the hallway temporarily brightened again, revealing that the banquet table just went on and on.

Look at this shit. I can't tell you how much under-the-hood work it is to deal with this sort of crap. Seriously. When they first came up with this, did they even consider how people like me would feel about having to generate it? Endless temple. Do they know what "endless" means? If the original writer of this god's backstory wasn't already long dead in a refueling platform accident, I'd do to her what I did to… You know what? Never mind.

Anyway, this "endless" temple is just a room with a door that leads to one long table covered with a never-ending feast. And that feast is covered with 433 different kinds of bugs. Some of those bugs are quite unpleasant in their own right.

Khepri *was* a retainer of the god Khnum, but like several of the other deities in this particular sub-pantheon, Khnum mysteriously dropped dead a few days back. And since

Khepri's not that strong, plus, again, his head is a bug, (He doesn't even talk. He chitters, and even that is weird. And don't get me started on how he eats. It's fucking *disgusting*,) he's been forced into the service of another deity in order to protect himself.

Khepri is a dubious candidate to claim the Ascendent throne. Adrasteia, his boss, has an outside shot.

And in about thirty seconds, when everything unfreezes, he's going to go absolutely bugshit on everyone in the room. Probably even his own worshiper, Vinata, who brought unrest to his weird-ass bug orgy. I have no idea what's going to happen, honestly. Will Carl succeed? Will Prepotente get his revenge? Will Vinata escape, which will damn both Katia and Princess Donut? How will Zhang die?

Like all you at home, I just cannot wait to find out.

Prepotente, Katia, and I started rapidly messaging our game plan as a 30-second timer appeared in the air. Bautista, Li Jun, Li Na, and Zhang were also in rapid discussions. My wire was chopped off at the portal to the temple, but Li Na's aura still filled the main part of the club. Despite the boss battle sequence, the other doors we had propped open remained so.

Katia: No. No way, Carl. That's insane, even for you.

Prepotente: Actually, I'd be quite curious to see if it works.

Carl: No time. This is the plan.

Yet another figure zapped into the room with a louder-than-usual crack. This was a single-humped Dromedarian camel in what appeared to be a sundress, holding what looked like an honest-to-goodness martini. She appeared a little heavyset for a camel. This was the adjutant for the Blood Sultanate. It listed her name as **Admiral Corinne Whimpleshin**. Like Victory, she wasn't frozen.

"I am calling foul! I am calling for an end to this immediately!" the camel adjutant shouted the moment she appeared, waving her long arms. The liquid in her martini went flying.

The countdown timer briefly stopped at 19, and the letters changed to **Go Be Smelly Somewhere Else.** They picked up at 17

seconds.

"What's the foul?" Victory asked, her voice overly calm. She remained in the room, arms crossed.

"The gods! The summoning of the gods! Do you know what's about to happen?"

Ten seconds.

"It doesn't matter," Victory said. "We have no standing. Temple rules apply. You know that, Corinne. Your team already summoned the god."

"Not the Blood Sultanate!" she cried. She pointed at me. "He did it! He knew this would happen."

"What? I haven't summoned shit," I said.

The bug god chittered angrily, apparently confused why everything was stopped. Confused as to who all of us were. It was the same as it had been with the Vinegar Bitch at the end of the previous floor.

No more bets. No more bets.

The timer ended.

And.

Here.

We.

Goooooo!

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<Note Added by Crawler Allister, 13th Edition>

There are several types of protection spells. All have their pros and cons. Invulnerability is generally the best. It's most difficult to obtain, and there are a few varieties. There's one that heals you rapidly. That one is quite effective, but it won't protect you from decapitation or getting yourself blown into atoms or anything else that would generally induce instant death. Straight "Immortality," however, will protect you from such things. This is oftentimes a temporary boon from a god. It will toughen you and will protect you from losing health and dying. It is the same protection the gods themselves normally enjoy. It will save you from losing limbs. It will keep you alive in just about any circumstance. It prevents a health bar from forming at all.

What immortality does not do is protect you from pain. It does not protect you from some spell effects. And while you won't lose body parts, and your body is significantly more durable, you can still break things internally with enough force. I watched a group of Immortal Rats swarm another crawler's barge, and they had to crush them with hammers to keep them at bay. Their little demon heads were crushed, and yet they still struggled to attack. Those pained squeals still haunt me.

So, be warned. If you are immortal, any injuries you sustain will heal, but you need to make certain they heal before the immortality

wears off, especially injuries that would be otherwise fatal. And if you can, you should couple your immortality with a Numb *spell.*

Pain with no respite takes its own toll. I have a card in my T'Ghee deck. The Open Wound. She teaches us that all suffering leaves scars. As such, the Immortality condition scares me.

These are the actions everyone in the room took the moment we all unfroze:

- Vinata's three guards charged at us as they fired their rifles, focusing on Prepotente and Katia. At the same moment, all three took what appeared to be *Speed* potions.
- The two cousins both turned to flee down the endless tunnel. Both took *Invisibility* potions and disappeared. One also dropped a smoke mantle, and I was pretty sure the other dropped a trap before the smoke obscured them.
- Vinata, who was temporarily immortal, also took an *Invisibility* potion as she charged us along with her soldiers.
- Before the first shots could hit them, Katia and Prepotente both quaffed *Black Nimbus* potions. The instant they did this, they were kicked from the temple. We weren't initially sure this was going to work because of the teleport ban, but Katia had tested it earlier with the temple of The Dagda. I wasn't sure where they would be sent, but I assumed they both got kicked right outside the door, right in front of the portal and into Club Vanquisher.
- Khepri the god hadn't yet attacked, but chittered indignantly as he turned in my direction, a ball of red fire

forming in his hand. He, thankfully, seemed more confused than anything.
- At the same moment, I cast *Run, Little Günter, Run*.

A short, fat, pink-skinned, child-like creature wearing lederhosen appeared in front of me. The small thing held onto a massive, colorful lollipop and wore a green hat with an absolutely massive ostrich feather in it. His face was a caricature of a pig-like orc mixed with a kewpie doll, complete with ruddy cheeks, slicked-back hair, and wide eyes circled with dark mascara.

"Hi, I'm Günter!" the fat kid said as a rifle blast hit me in the neck. It almost knocked me off my feet, and it burned, but it didn't damage my health. The kid, oblivious, licked his giant lollipop.

"Get the god," I yelled at the kid as I ducked another blast. The three guards, moving as if they were being fast-forwarded, all slithered and leapt at me in the perfectly coordinated attack.

Here's the thing about coordinated attacks.

Any plan, any attack, no matter how well-coordinated, no matter how well-executed always turns to absolute shit the moment someone drops a very big bomb in a very narrow room.

The bomb was something I'd been tinkering with for a while now, and it was currently the second-largest explosive I had in my inventory. The first version of this thing had been called "Just Wait Until Your Daddy Gets Home," and we'd used it on the sixth floor.

This version packed about the same punch, minus the addition of *Fear*. The tradeoff was this version was self-contained in a much smaller device. The first had been so big it had to have wheels. This one was the size of a thermos. The result was a thermobaric explosion that would absolutely incinerate anything within 100 meters. Louis currently had fifty of these things on *Party Planner*. The only reason he didn't have more was because the explosive dust was a pain to make.

The AI had helpfully called the bomb **The Waffle Maker.**

Fwummm-bam!

The blast threw me back and up toward the entrance door. I didn't actually feel this next part, but I was crushed, and I was burned. I was turned completely flat, inside out, and into a boxer-clad amalgam of flesh and hair. My body smashed like a piece of dough caught under a tire, spread over the wall and door, completely covering it before I was plopped helplessly back onto the floor like an on-fire, liquid-filled sack.

If not for the *Immortality* struggling to keep my very atoms together, I would've been just gone. There wouldn't have been anything left.

My senses completely left me. I had no sight. I couldn't hear anything. I had no physical sensation, and for a moment, I thought I was dead.

No, not dead. Drowning. I was drowning in nothing.

This is how it feels, Carl. This is what it's like when we're not here and we're not there.

The strange feeling came and went. My sensation didn't immediately return, but I could still think. I still had my inventory. I mentally clicked on a *Fine Healing* potion. I'd put most of my mana into the Günter spell, but I'd left enough for a single application of the *Healing* spell. I cast that on myself as well.

I regretted it almost immediately.

The first thing that came back was my hearing, but all I heard was the sound of burning and a strange, airy whistle. The high-pitched sound was unlike anything I'd ever heard. It was like the shrill of a distant train, stuck in mid blast. And a few seconds after that, as my body shrank and reformed, my feeling returned. I felt myself unfold. I felt bones, which had been turned to dust, knit. I felt thousands of miles of nerves light up like a power grid as they all came back online, all at once.

It hurt. It hurt more than anything ever should.

The process took seconds. It felt like it took a year.

The god, in theory, should've been blown back down the neverending hallway. And Günter, also in theory, should've been unhurt by the blast. He would now be running down the hall toward the god, and the moment he reached the deity, he'd explode,

effectively doubling the attack. This would, hopefully, blast the god a second time, pushing it even further back down the endless hallway, keeping Khepri at bay long enough for me to finish this and get the hell out of here.

The three guards were probably dead. Even with blast protection, I knew nothing short of immortality would've protected them. Not from that blast.

Donut: CARL, CARL TWO MORE ARE DEAD! ONE TO GO! ARE YOU OKAY?

I gasped in pain as my body continued to reform. Every limb was on fire. It took a moment to compute what Donut said. Vinata was also immortal. That meant the two cousins were dead, killed in the blast.

I blinked and opened my eyes. I was somehow standing upright, facing the never-ending table, which burned. The food was all gone, incinerated as far as I could see. The long, thin room had acted like a cannon barrel. I couldn't see the god. I couldn't see Günter.

The bugs, it turned out, were also immortal. But, like in Allister's note in the cookbook, they'd been crushed and set on fire, and now they were suffering. Most had likely been blasted away down the hall, but plenty remained, embedded in the walls like a tapestry of stars.

They burned, and they screamed. That was the source of the distant train whistle sound. It was thousands, perhaps millions, perhaps billions, of the tiny creatures who could not die.

Donut sent another message, as did Katia. More lines of text flooded my vision, faster than I could understand. There were achievements. Level notifications. More. More kept coming, and my brain was parsing it all at a snail's pace.

I had to move.

With a surge of strength, I tried to break myself free. I was held fast by something, like I was tied in rope. A second explosion came, but it was distant. This was Günter, I suspected, finally catching up to the bug god. Still, despite the distance, I felt myself fall backward. I landed on something soft. A dozen new messages flooded my vision. The bug screams faded, but it was replaced with something

else. New screaming. New shouting. The pressure in my ears changed. My vision was a line of new notifications scrolling across my screen. Was that Samantha screaming? There was someone else, closer. Screaming in my ear.

The brain fog, which had just started to clear, was suddenly back. A strange wooziness washed over me.

I'm still here, Carl. All you need to do is set me free. Use me while you still can. I can save you. Even you can't survive this chaos. It's the end of days.

Shi Maria. She was still there, but now trapped. The eye on my chest, which had fallen dormant, now thrashed.

With dismay, I realized I'd fallen out of Khepri's temple and back out in front of the temple portal. Another message from Emberus flashed, telling me I needed to find Pater Coal and go talk to somebody. I pushed it away as more notifications flooded by.

No, no, no, I thought. *We didn't get Vinata. I need to get back to the feast.*

I was now on my back, looking up at the high ceiling. But I wasn't on the floor. I was wrapped in something. Confusion swirled. I had suction cups at the end of my fingers. I had a list of several buffs, including **Never-Ending Mana**. What? Why? But I also had multiple debuffs as well. **Shit-Faced** was one of them. As was something called **Stiff Legs**. I couldn't bend my knees.

My finger burned. It was the Emberus ring. It was overloaded.

I still had slugpox. I never had Imani cure it, and now that the ring wasn't working, I had a boil on my back. A big one. What level were they at now? Twenty? Thirty? I couldn't remember.

I wasn't breathing, I realized. I didn't need to breathe. Not for another 60-something seconds. Or did I? I had a vision of Mordecai, talking about drowning something in a bucket. Thoughts continued to swirl. It had only been 25 seconds? It seemed like it was years.

Something was worming its way out of my nose. It thrashed like a tentacle as it slithered down my face. It, too, screamed. Not slugs, but worms. What was happening? Why were screaming worms coming out of my nose? Why was I drunk? Was I actually dead?

Was this hell?

<u>Katia</u>: Carl, if you're not dead, get the hell out of there. There are dozens of gods coming out of the portal. We're down in the entrance lobby. Hurry your ass!

What? I was at the portal. I blinked as a cheetah thing flew over me, giving me no heed. It had a screaming mantaur in its mouth. My brain swirled. Why couldn't I move? Only seconds had passed, but I felt like I was spinning. I needed to take stock of my debuffs. I needed to figure out why I couldn't move. I needed to get back into the Khepri temple and find Vinata. Lightning crackled across the ceiling. A creature came by and threw a punch at something I couldn't see.

There are dozens of gods coming out of the portal.

And then, it clicked. I didn't know why there were suddenly gods everywhere, but I now knew why I had worms coming from my nose. My Scavenger's Daughter patch. Every new god gave me either a buff or debuff.

And as soon as the realization hit me, I also realized that the creature screaming in my ear was Vinata. She was completely wrapped around me, crushing. She'd been wrapped around me this whole time. We'd been blasted out the door together. The much larger snake had her middle set of hands wrapped around my throat, crushing as her body squeezed me. Her upper set of arms pummeled the top of my head, punching over and over. She had glowing daggers in her lower hands, and they stabbed into me from all angles, in and out like a piston.

"Everything. You've ruined everything," she cried as she stabbed me over and over, tears streaming down her snake face. She wasn't white anymore, but a dusky gray.

"Stop," I tried to croak, but I couldn't get air. I couldn't move. She continued to crush me. My immortality still had 40 seconds. I couldn't get a good view of her to see how long she had left. She was incredibly strong. Bones snapped again, despite my fine healing potion still coursing through me.

"We were almost free. We were almost free," she cried. I had no idea what she was talking about. "You ruined it the moment that fucking cat put that tiara on. We would've been gone. We would've

been done. We were leaving this madness, and you had to ruin it. You killed my people. All of them. Do you think I really want to be here? I was going to have children with him." Her upper hands grabbed handfuls of my long hair and started to slam my head against the ground. I felt my skull crack as she pounded me over and over.

In my choking, confused, inebriated state, I realized my shirt was open. The eye on my chest was open, and Vinata was staring directly into it.

She had been driven mad by the Eye of the Bedlam Bride.

Slam, slam, slam. I tried to do math. What had her immortality countdown been at? She was running out before me, but how many seconds before?

At least the gods were ignoring us. The thought was inexplicably hilarious, and if I could breathe, I'd be howling with laughter.

"There! There ith the apostate!" a distant voice called. A ram.

Heat washed over the room.

That can't be good, I thought as my head continued to slam against the floor of Club Vanquisher.

At the same moment, a loud chittering filled the chamber as Khepri—now fully pissed off—appeared out of the portal. The sound of those strange, screaming and hissing bugs renewed tenfold as they also swarmed out of the portal. The bugs—still on fire—swarmed everywhere.

"You. Begone false god," a deep voice said.

Khepri chittered, but there was a crack, followed by the notification: **Khepri has left the realm. The Scavenger's Daughter closes her eyes to his presence. Your boon is timed and will run out on its own.**

The voice, I realized, was a god. I'd never heard this voice before.

This, too, was goddamned hilarious. I wished Donut was here. She'd probably be shrieking and sending messages in all caps.

I felt my pelvis shatter under the constriction of Vinata. She was trying to rip my head off. She continued to scream. She continued to stab. Slam, slam, slam. She would've killed me over and over again.

Khepri was gone. His flaming, immortal bugs were not. They continued to swarm, covering both Vinata and myself, biting and scratching and burning. I registered all of this as my head continued to pound on the floor. I could hear liquid in my head splashing back and forth within.

Am I really here? I thought. How can I think when my brain is nothing but gelatin? I clicked another *Fine Healing* potion.

A human, olive-skinned man casually sat next to us. He crossed his legs and turned his head sideways and looked at me curiously as Vinata ignored him and continued to slam the bloody pulp of my head over and over. I realized that my hair tie—the only part of my outfit that wasn't magical—had disintegrated in the explosion, and my hair had been unleashed. Vinata held onto clumps of my hair in her fists.

The man smiled as if we were sitting across from each other at a restaurant. I couldn't read his description, but I could feel the heat coming off him.

This was Hellik. Brother of Emberus. The main suspect in the death of Geyrun, Emberus's son. The god I needed to kill before the end of the 11th floor.

"I'm supposed to kill you," I tried to say. I have no idea if it came out or not. My mouth felt as if it was on the wrong side of my head.

I started to prepare another bomb to drop, but a distant part of me registered I had to time it all correctly. Vinata's immortality would run out before my own. I suspected, this time, it wouldn't affect Hellik like it had Khepri. But at this point, it didn't matter anymore. As long as Vinata was dead. As long as Katia got out, then both Donut and Katia could live.

My skin started to bubble like microwaved cheese. I blinked with my one good eye at the god sitting next to me, examining me. If it wasn't for the heat, I wouldn't be able to distinguish him from any other NPC. He looked so normal. So friendly.

He waved his hands, and the immortal insects flew off in all directions, leaving us free of them. Still, I burned.

"Tell my brother I did not kill his son," Hellik said as my skin seared. "Tell him he cannot kill me, no matter how hard he tries. Tell him I love him, despite his madness. Tell him everything he thinks about me is a lie. Tell him our mother and sister, Apito, has been corrupted. There is a malevolent presence about her, and I believe my nephew learned of it. Tell him the All Tree is beginning to rot. Tell him Nekhebit has returned, and I believe she is behind it all. Tell him we need to work together if we want to survive and discover what happened to our mother and his son. I know you seek an audience with Issitoq to break the truce. I will treat with him on your behalf. Scolopendra stirs. It is all connected."

You have been marked as a friend of the church by Hellik. Worshipers of Hellik will no longer be automatically hostile toward you.

With that, he stood up and disappeared. A notification came that he left the realm.

Vinata, for her part, was still taken over by her own madness. The princess of the Blood Sultanate continued to slam my head against the ground while she crushed the rest of me. Even as her body burned, she slammed me over and over.

Surely her immortality had to be expired by now.

I was about to drop the next bomb when I felt the sluggalo burst out of my back. He—actually, a she—slipped out from under my shirt, whooped loudly, and planted a hatchet right between Vinata's eyes, killing her.

"Yeah, bitch! Right in the nugget!" the sluggalo woman shouted. She looked down at me as Vinata's lifeless body slipped off of me and to the side. "I wish I had feet. I'd make me some snakeskin boots!"

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[55]

<Note Added by Crawler Carl, 25th Edition>

Two quick notes. I've updated the trap recipe for alarm traps based on Justice Light's advice. We can now use recordings, and if you have a proper bard in your party, you can record a magical song and have it play once activated. Details are in the recipe. Donut's bard skills, unfortunately, aren't good enough for this, but that's something we can work on later. Justice Light also showed me how to access the advanced alarm menu, which comes with a wider music database for the traps. Also, to Donut's delight, we can add a playlist to a trap, meaning we don't have to have a single song over and over. Still can't adjust the volume.

Second note. Tipid says the mantaurs this season are different than previous iterations. The ones this season have a group berserking mechanic that can be easily triggered by a certain type of music. This explains why on the fourth floor they were walking around with blasting boomboxes.

Under normal circumstances, you don't want them to get triggered, especially in groups of three or more. See Azin's article on berserking, specifically group berserking, for more details.

System Message: The Sepsis Whore of the Blood Sultanate has fallen. Credit for the kill has been given to Kandy "Bigs" Newton of the Princess Posse.

System Message: The Blood Sultanate has been defeated.

System Message: All assets of the Blood Sultanate, as per prior arrangement, have been split evenly with the surviving blood relatives of the Sepsis Whore, Warlord Princess Donut and General Katia Grim, both of the Princess Posse. As per prior arrangement, all assets have been forfeited to the Princess Posse.

Katia: Who the hell is Kandy Newton, and where the hell are you, Carl?

Donut: YOU DID IT! YOU DID IT!

Additional notifications continued to roil as I finally registered what never-ending mana actually meant. My *Heal* spell's cooldown was almost nonexistent, and I started to cast it over and over.

I had five seconds left on my immortality, and gods were leaving the realm. Still, most of my buffs and debuffs would remain for some time. But first and foremost, I had to make certain I was healed as much as possible and as quickly as I could. I cast *Heal* yet again as my body jigsaw puzzled itself back together. My inebriation waned as the pain in every corner of my body waxed.

"Oh, daddy, you don't look so good," the sluggalette said, looking down at me. She was only level 29, and she'd killed Vinata. The naga must not have fully healed herself before the immortality expired. The slug was the size of a bulldog. She had little wisps of pink-dyed hair, monk-style, circling around her round head. Piercings ran down the slide of her slimy head, reminding me of that goblin shamanka from so long ago. A single hatchet grew straight up from the center of her head. It dripped with blood.

I still couldn't bend my legs. I still had suction cups at the end of my fingers. Screaming worms still flowed out of my nose. Thankfully, the Emberus ring seemed to catch up as some of the other debuffs were contained, including the slugpox.

I sat up. This room was completely empty except for me and the sluggalo. To my right, the portal to the temples was cracked and

sparking. The desk was just gone, minus the outer shell. It smelled like ash.

I blinked and stared at the corpse of Vinata, broken on the floor. The Sepsis Whore.

Her white scales were actually gray with a hint of red along her neck. The white had been some sort of makeup or effect. An effect that had been eradicated in the explosion.

In death, she didn't look so big. I took her corpse into my inventory.

A distant crash echoed, followed by the shouting of mantaurs.

Yo! This boss battle ain't over until you get out of the club!

"Hey, get away! He's mine, bitch!" the sluggalette—Kandy Newton—said to someone.

I looked up. It was Samantha, and she flew into the room, hovering high off the ground. She looked like she'd caught a face-first blast from a jet engine. She was nothing but a black husk, and her hair smoldered. It would take her hours to regenerate. She came to hover over me. The smeared "Miss Me?" was miraculously still intact, shining bright in the center of her charred forehead.

"She's an imposter!" Samantha spit, ignoring the Sluggalette who was grunting and trying to jump, swinging her head hatchet at her. "Carl, get up. You have to help me kill this eagle kidnapper imposter asshole!"

"What?" I asked. I tried to stand, but it was difficult when I couldn't bend my knees. Another distant crash echoed. Immortal bugs were coming back into the room from random hallways. They chittered and hissed angrily. Only some were still on fire.

Katia: Carl. We're trapped in the lobby. The door between the Dagda temple and the lobby shut, and we got locked down, cutting off Li Na's auras. Daniel got away but Li Jun and Zhang are still in here. Mantaurs and ogres and all sorts of other things are everywhere, and we're fighting them off. A few gods remain, but they're all fighting each other. Prepotente says we need to get to the mapmaker guild back up on the second floor. Meet us there.

Carl: I'm coming.

Samantha was shouting, but she wasn't making sense. "My mother! You told me I could go kill my mother, but when I went there, she was an eagle! A *boy* eagle! My mother is not like Diwata. She can't just grow a dingaling. Wait, do eagles have dingalings?"

"Your mother was a skyfowl?" I asked. *Oh shit*, I thought, realization dawning on me.

The second, backup part of our plan was a bit of a hail Mary, and I hadn't expected it to work. We'd needed Samantha to open the door into the Khepri temple, and we'd gotten her to agree because we also promised to let her find her way into the temple of her own mother, the goddess Theia. In the lore of the dungeon, Samantha and Theia hated each other, but in reality, Theia was sponsored by an agent for the Open Intellect Pacifist Network. We hoped at best, the goddess would order her clerics to assist us, perhaps by giving Samantha some sort of boon. At worst, Samantha would get into the temple and get kicked out by the cleric.

What we hadn't expected was for her to come into contact with actual gods, and especially not Theia herself. I didn't know who the sponsor actually was. Rosetta told me it was someone I didn't know. A previous crawler activist who hated the dungeon just as much as we did, but I had the impression it was *not* a cookbook author. Apparently it was a male skyfowl. Like with Huanxin Jinx on the previous floor, sponsored gods had the option to appear as their regular form. In theory, NPCs would still see them as the gods. But, apparently, that didn't work with Samantha. She'd gone into the temple expecting to see her mother and had somehow come face-to-face with a male skyfowl.

I still didn't know how all the gods were getting out in the first place.

Victory had returned to the room. Both Samantha and the sluggalette noticed her. The sluggalette moved at her, hatchet swinging as Samantha continued to swear. "You! She was there, too! She told the imposter he wouldn't be allowed to help! She's in on the conspiracy! Momnapper! Where is my mother! Tell me now or I'll kill yours!"

Kandy attempted to bury her hatchet into Victory's leg, but it just went right through. Victory ignored her. "Sponsors causing deities to act outside their nature is against faction wars rules," Victory said. "It gives an unfair advantage. That usually doesn't stop it from happening anyway, and there's only so much we can do, but it is considered cheating, and I reminded both the Maestro and Rectrix of that before coming to observe Carl drop a bomb at his own feet."

I grasped onto the charred remains of the desk and pulled myself up. I was pretty sure Rectrix was not a name I'd heard before, though it did sound oddly familiar, and I wasn't sure why. It didn't matter right now. All of this would be for nothing if we couldn't get out of here. "Samantha, we can talk about this later. We need to go. We just gotta get down the hallway to the mapmaker guild."

Samantha grunted. "Good luck with that. Speaking of Diwata. Doesn't she hate you, Carl? She's in the hallway over there having sex *and* fighting with Vertumnus at the same time. Those two can't keep their hands off each other. Diwata is such a slut. It smells like someone dumped a barge full of mulch over a succubus's bachelorette party in there. I wouldn't go that way."

Shit, I thought. I sent a warning to Katia, but she'd already responded.

Katia: The hallway we need to get to is filled with vines, and there are mantaurs everywhere! I don't know where they're coming from! And there are something called Basilica Guards now, too. They're ogres. They're coming up from below!

Prepotente: There are two deities in the hallway. We need to distract them or hide until they go away.

The hallway I needed to get to was just around the corner. Katia and the others would be coming from the other side. There were fighting sounds everywhere, and I wasn't certain who was fighting who or why.

A massive, eight-foot, golden-skinned ogre in flowing robes came from around the corner. Yellow light glowed in the ogre's hands. He was flanked on either side by a mantaur guard. I looked up in awe at the massive creature.

Carl: Guys, has your Black Nimbus run out yet?

Prepotente: I negated it with a potion the moment we were out.

Carl: Good. Activating Operation Head Banger now.

The original plan, which we never got to implement, involved me forcing the mantaurs into going berserk and fighting the rams and anyone else who got in the way while we burst into the Khepri temple. Once inside the temple, I would activate Li Na's tattoo skill—which I still hadn't used—to kill all the nagas before we fled, using the chaos as a distraction.

We hadn't needed the alarm trap because Li Na's aura had been so effective. We hadn't used the chain skill because, well, I'd decided to blow myself up instead.

Seven or eight more mantaurs circled the corner and stopped to face us.

But now I had to use both.

I examined the ogre.

Brother Widespread Tempest. Ogre Basilica Cleric Guard. Level 125.

This NPC worships Taranis.

This NPC is Untouchable. That probably doesn't mean what you think it means. You can still touch him. He's probably gonna try to touch you first, though.

The Basilica Guards are the ogres who guard, you guessed it, the Basilica Entrance of Club Vanquisher on the 12th Floor. They all worship Taranis, and they are one of the few non-deities who have the ability to—at least temporarily—stop a deity from passing a threshold. Their worship of Taranis imparts them the rare and famed *Untouchable* status, meaning gods aren't allowed to attack them.

As a result, these guys are like the tow truck drivers of the Ascendency. Everybody knows they're necessary, and everybody hates them anyway. This has made them very grumpy and honestly, kind of lonely.

You don't want these guys to leave their post on the 12th floor because if they do, odds are good that the bored gods hanging out in the halls may notice that the basilica's entrance is wide open. And if that happens, some of those naughty gods may wander off untethered.

"You die now," the ogre said, pointing at me. On either side of him, the mantaurs unleashed their hand claws.

"Okay, Kandy is it?" I asked the sluggalette, stepping back as I wiped another screaming worm away. I still couldn't bend my knees, which really, really sucked. The worms didn't seem to hurt or attack me, but it wasn't pleasant, either. At least the slugpox had stopped again. "Stay with me. Kill anyone who gets in my way. I have some friends we're meeting halfway. Don't hurt them. But I want you to sink a hatchet into anyone else. Things are about to get loud."

"Call me Bigs," the sluggalette said. She swung her head hatchet which flecked naga blood everywhere. "Is this ogre dude our friend or is he getting kneecapped?"

"He's not our friend," I said as I took the *Black Nimbus* potion and hurled it at the ogre. Before it even reached him, I dropped the two alarm traps and let them roll off into opposite directions. The potion splattered against the ogre's chest as the announcement rang out.

This song didn't chart in the Billboard Hot 100, but it did top off at number 10 in October of 1990 in the Finnish charts, and that's good enough for me! It's "Holy Wars… The Punishment Due."

I wasn't familiar with this song, which was by the band Megadeth, but Louis had insisted it would be the perfect tune to force berserk status onto the mantaurs. Once the first few bars of the heavy metal riff echoed, I knew he was correct.

The white ball of flames in the ogre's hand whiffed out as the crackling black halo formed around his head. The "Un" part of the "Untouchable" status over his head faded away. Multiple symbols appeared over his head and started to circle one another. They were marked for death symbols by gods... and there were a lot of them.

I could no longer hear, but the "Oh, fuck" forming on the ogre's lips was unmistakable.

Warning: A Mantaur Mosh Pit is about to form.

I didn't know what, exactly, that meant. I didn't want to find out. The ogre turned, and he ran. Three of the mantaurs screamed and followed him. A moment later, some god vine thing rushed past, followed by the same cheetah I'd seen earlier.

Katia: They're moving from the hallway!

If Diwata was in that mass of vines, I didn't wait to find out. I was still marked for death by them, and the moment I was noticed, they would come after me.

The remaining mantaurs, now glowing, shouted and charged at us. I pulled two more *Black Nimbus* potions as I activated the skill I'd received from Li Na.

Profane Iron.

I felt my own skin tear as dozens of chains ripped from my flesh. I took a tiny bit of a hit to my own health. Two of the chains reached down and plucked the potions from my hands. Each one shot out in a different direction and smashed into a different mantaur, simultaneously knocking the creatures over and inflicting them with Black Nimbus. A third chain wrapped around the neck of another, and a fourth tripped two more. Two more struck, scorpion-like at the closest, piercing directly into the guard's flesh at his clavicles. He screamed and blindly swung as hot, red blood sprayed over me, Samantha, and Bigs. The mantaur's still-screaming head, along with part of a spinal column was ripped from his body and discarded.

The mantaurs, confused and blinded by their berserking status, lashed out at their two comrades with the nimbus status while my prehensile chains stabbed and choked the others, cutting, ripping, and whipping at astonishing speed.

The fight was over in seconds, which was good because the skill didn't last long. Li Na had several chain spells and skills, and this was different from her regular ones. This was a once-a-day, multiple chains at once skill. I could only do it for about thirty seconds. She said she could now do it for about a minute and a half. I could only truly control two of the chains. She could control ten. She used it to

attack multiple enemies at once, but it was actually designed as a defensive skill, like a type of shield.

More mantaurs rushed by, ignoring the slaughter here and moving in the same direction the ogre had gone. Samantha was circling my head, screaming something. Victory stood there, her hands on her ears.

I didn't hesitate. The line of guilds was just around the corner. I ran. Sort of. I stiff-legged myself in that direction, almost tripping over rapidly-dying vines. A second ogre appeared, and I hit him with the same potion. He, too, ran away.

I turned the corner just as the four others—Katia, Prepotente, Li Jun, and Zhang—rounded the corner at the other end of the hall. Bianca was also out and roaring. So was Annie, Katia's totem. The skull-headed bird was covered in blood and disappeared in a puff of smoke. A strange, sap-like substance dripped from the ceiling. The walls shook. There was an announcement, but I couldn't hear it.

There was no map-making guild on my map, but Prepotente moved to a wall panel, pressed against it, and pushed. The hidden door appeared, and we all rushed the door.

You have discovered two hidden guilds. You have discovered the Map-Making Guild! You have discovered the Calligrapher's Guild!

Entering the Calligrapher's Guild.

We all pushed inside as Prepotente slid the door behind him closed.

"Again?" a voice asked. "*Again*?"

"Bianca," Prepotente called as he pulled the bloody goat dragon into a pet carrier. "Mind the papers."

"I'm alive," Zhang said. He looked up at the ceiling, shaking his fist. "Fuck you! I'm alive! I'm alive!"

"Who am I killing?" Bigs asked, waving her head axe around.

But I barely registered this as I stared at the half frog, half bat creature. The guildmaster met my gaze. My heart stopped the moment I saw the name hovering over her head. My eyes moved to the wings of the creature. She'd written extensively about the

differences between the wings of her chosen race, the Xenopus, and those of her birth race, the Vesper.

"Milk?" I asked.

And even though she didn't know who I was before this, in that moment, she did. I could see it. I could feel it. This was my sister, and I was her brother, and we now both knew it.

"Carl, are you okay?" It was Katia.

And up until that moment, I'd been holding it all back. Those moments when I wasn't there and I wasn't here. Those horrific seconds as I'd reformed. It was like all the pain anyone had ever felt, all shoved into a single moment. I had borne it because what other choice did I have? Everything was moving so fast. Everything was *still* moving fast.

But in that moment as I realized the creature standing before me was the author of the sixth edition of the cookbook, my sister, and that she'd been here the whole time, something inside of me ... changed.

I didn't break. No. I wasn't broken. I will not be broken.

"Milk," I whispered a second time. This time, it wasn't a question.

"Child, come here," the strange creature said, wrapping me in leathery wings. She held on me as I pretended like I wasn't, finally, sobbing.

"It's not over yet," I managed to whisper. "Not even close."

"I know. Don't you worry. It's okay," she said, stroking me with her wings. I knew all around me, the others were watching this, absolutely bewildered. We weren't safe yet. Still, I didn't care. I wrapped my arms around this stranger, and I didn't want to ever let go.

"Let it out," she whispered. "It's okay. It's okay."

And I did. I rested, just for a moment. I pulled off that heavy, heavy mask, just for a moment.

Donut messaged me as I remained wrapped in the woman's embrace.

Donut: ARE YOU OUT OF THERE YET? WHAT'S HAPPENING?

Carl: We're almost out.

Donut: ARE YOU OKAY? NOTHING HAPPENED HERE. WE DIDN'T HAVE TO USE ONE OF JUICE BOX'S DIGGERS AFTER ALL. IT WAS EASIER THAN I THOUGHT IT WOULD BE.

Carl: It was easy here, too. Went off without a hitch.

Donut: I'M SO GLAD.

Carl: See you soon, Donut.

<Note Added By Crawler Carl, 25th Edition>

I know you're dead, Drakea, but I haven't forgotten how much you hated the naga. If there is a veil, like I know you believed, I hope you watched that from the other side. I'm not sure what the implications of today are for the naga as a people, but I did what I could. I know it's not enough, not yet, but I hope you would be proud of what happened today. I'm doing my best, but goddamn. Goddamn. It's getting harder every day to keep myself from drowning.

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[PART 3]
OPEN HOSTILITIES

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JUSTICE LIGHT

"Leave," Justice Light said to Sneaky Tyler C, the lead sluggalo. "You have done good work, but it is time for you to join the others above the surface. You don't want to be down here for this final part."

The slug had just tied off a manual tripwire with his mouth. He looked up, surprised. All around, the other slugs paused their work.

"Yo, whatchu talkin' about? We're a team."

Justice leaned down in the dark tunnel so he was beak-to-face with the slug. In these past days, he'd grown fond of the strange creatures. He'd held several incorrect assumptions regarding them. He'd told Carl and Tipid that he wanted them to help build the trap system because it was dangerous, and these creatures didn't appear to care if they died. That was only partially true. It was also only part of the reason he'd insisted on using them as his assistants.

It turned out he was incorrect about his second assumption regarding these creatures as well.

But that was okay. That was something he'd learned long ago. Wishing for favorable air currents does not manifest them. You ride the currents you have, or you don't fly. It was as simple as that.

With his lone wing, he patted the fat, painted slug on the side of his squishy neck. "Warlord Carl and Donut are doing such a great job, If you stay down here, you might end up not getting to fight at all. They need as many soldiers as they can, and you and the others will miss out. If the plan succeeds, all of this work won't be necessary, and you won't see any action at all. I know you want to

fight. Go find Colonel Tipid and tell him you're trained sappers, and maybe you can join up with the Frothing Tunnel Moles. They're sure to be busy in the coming hours. Operation Ruin will start the moment the timer ends."

"Ugh. That sounds epic, but it's not *here*. I want to do the chop-chop in *my* hood. Know what I'm saying?"

Justice chuckled. He had to take a moment to decipher the slug's words. It was one of the things he enjoyed about the small creatures. It was like having a never-ending supply of puzzles to solve. Justice Light loved puzzles. So had his children.

"I'll tell you what," he said. "If it goes bad, and you have to retreat, I want the whole squad to come back down here for the final defense. That way you won't miss it if something happens."

The slug whooped loudly, and turned. "You heard 'im, boys. And Worgo, you too. We going to war!"

Without another protest, they all started sliming and shouting their way toward the surface.

"Not that hallway," Justice called. "You'll set off the proximity scythe! Remember what happened to Lickity Spit!"

"Oh, fuck. My bad," Tyler C called as he veered toward the correct hall.

"Not you," Justice said to Sick-Ass Worgo, the level 53 slug at the end of the line.

The sluggalette paused. She seemed to hesitate.

"Yo, bossman. Whatcha need?" Worgo asked as the last slug slithered away.

Justice examined the creature. This one had a metallic club—called a "baseball bat"—dangling from the side of her neck. It dragged wherever she went. Her fine touch with her mouth had been instrumental in setting the manual tripwires from the eastern approach. She'd been one of the hardest, most focused workers on the squad.

"Tell her we need to talk," Justice said, taking a step back. With his one, good wing, he gently touched the wall, activating the hidden traps in the room. The extra ones he'd planted himself.

"Yo, what you on?" Worgo asked.

"Your real boss," Justice repeated. "Juice Box. Tell her we need to talk."

The slug seemed to think on this for a moment. "Damn, man," the slug finally said, sighing. "I'm supposed to kill you if you figure it out."

"I assumed as much. At this moment, there are three traps between you and myself that I have secretly placed. You might get to me, no matter what form you take. You *might*. But you won't stop the message I have prepared for Carl and the others. I'd like to avoid that, and I suspect your boss would like to avoid that as well."

"I actually count six traps," Sick-Ass Worgo said after a moment. She sighed again. "I'm going to change form so we can talk. Don't skewer me."

Justice was impressed. It was actually eight traps, but some of them were very well hidden. Had the changeling actually seen them, or was it a guess?

He'd known from the beginning not to trust the NPC team. He'd brought it up with both Tipid and Rosetta. Tipid, in his enthusiastic naivety, had thought the risk would be negligible. Rosetta was a bit more realistic in her assessment of the threat. Carl didn't have the proper point of reference and had no idea what he was dealing with. That was the problem with most revolutionaries. They had tunnel vision.

Not that you're any different, he told himself. Was it still tunnel vision if he was aware of it?

Justice Light had chosen the sluggalos to help him because he'd incorrectly assumed that the procedurally generated NPCs wouldn't be copy-able by the class A and B NPC changelings.

He'd obviously been wrong.

But, luckily, paranoia had been Justice's way of life for a very long time now. He kept careful, careful track of everyone around him at all times. He even knew when the change had occurred. When Worgo—the real Worgo—had gone down the new tunnel and had returned just a few minutes later, Justice had noticed the change immediately. His built-in neural implants had noted the subtle

change of body temperature and weight. Also, the lack of hormonal emissions had been a dead giveaway.

The fact that these changelings could mimic the slugs at all was alarming on several levels. His working theory was that these particular changelings had their gating removed because of that quest on the fifth floor with the Quetzalcoatlus ghost. That whole setup never came to pass, but the system would have allowed them to add the demi-god into their library should they have survived an encounter with the ghost. As a result, all the changelings that the crawlers sent down here to the ninth could now mimic just about anything they managed to touch, which was terrifying, especially with them gaining memories of their past iterations.

The slugs were procedurally generated, which made them throwaway one-offs. They were barely a step above the NPCs they used to populate the clubs. Mimicking them didn't sound like it was a big deal, but it had never been allowed before. The slugs were a different classification in the programming. And if Justice Light knew one thing about this damn game, it was that if one door was unexpectedly unlocked, it was possible—even likely—that other doors would be unlocked as well.

This realization had changed everything for Justice Light. His impossible plan, which was really just an overly complicated suicide plot, was suddenly not so impossible. But first, he had to get the changelings on his side.

Worgo the slug transformed into a humanoid, blank form, crouching so she wouldn't trigger the dart needles above him. This was a bigger changeling, meaning she was likely old and powerful. Her name in the system changed from Sick-Ass Worgo to Jessica. The head on the creature changed, leaving the rest of the body the same, which was something *else* only the most powerful changelings could do.

The head became that of Juice Box herself, in human form.

"Well, well, well, aren't you smart for an outworlder," she said as she looked up at Justice Light.

Justice felt his feathers around his neck ruffle. "Am I really talking to you?"

His seismic monitor suggested a slight uptick in activity underneath him. He took another step back. "And I take offense to the title. I am of the White Cliffs, and I never asked to be taken from my original home. I am no outworlder. Not by choice. If anything, I am just as much a child of the dungeon as you are. I was reborn here much in the same way you've been reborn. How many times has it been? One hundred?"

"Yes, you are really talking to me," Juice Box said. "I'm using the chat system to talk to my helper, and he's helpfully using my image to relay the message. So if your plan is to kill me, I am out of reach." She paused. "I do apologize for calling you that, though your estimates on *my* age ain't even close. I've been writing down my memories as they come, and I believe I have lived at least 400 different lives up until this point."

Justice Light sighed. Four hundred lives? He believed it. NPCs were supposed to be recycled after 20, but the showrunners insisted that expensive, deeper-level audits weren't necessary since the Class A and Class B NPCs got auto-recycled when they were killed.

His seismic meter continued to warn of movement below. The eagle held out his one, good wing. "Please, call off your digger. I'll make a deal with you. If you don't wreck everything I spent the last week building, I promise I won't tell the others of this conversation, no matter how it goes. I believe you have no desire to be our enemy and all you want is to protect yourselves. I truly believe that, but if you use the digger to get to me, you will hurt your allies and ultimately yourself. All I ask is that you hear me out."

Juice Box cocked her head to the side. The digger below stopped moving. Justice Light took that as assent.

"Good. Good. Thank you."

"I am a very busy girl, skyfowl. You wanted to talk? You have five minutes. I'm listening."

Justice bowed slightly and then without further preamble, he started to speak.

"I killed an NPC once, out of anger. It was a very long time ago. Most people don't understand why I care so much about this one incident when I would eventually go on to kill thousands of mobs

and NPCs alike over the course of my crawl." He paused, emotion caught in his throat.

"This one. He was one of those lizard creatures. The ones that smell funny and have a strange, talkative way about themselves, always saying what's on their mind. Can change their gender at will based on their environment? I can't recall the name of the species at the moment, but one such creature had cheated me earlier, and I was already on edge. And this one insulted me. He didn't even mean anything by it. It's just their way. But my people. We are proud..."

Justice Light trailed off, remembering.

"He was the proprietor of the only trap store on the entire level. I snapped, and I killed him. Because of that, dozens of my fellow crawlers were unable to find the supplies they needed to complete the level, and they died."

Juice Box said nothing.

"I felt horrible about it, about my mistake. But even that wasn't why it affected me so." He held out his single wing and examined it. He rerouted some power in his implant and ratcheted up the sensitivity on his seismic sensors. He could now sense the enormous digger, just sitting there, idle but with its dwarven engine still on.

"When I got out, I made a deal. I asked for the right to run the trap store. I know, it was a bit silly. It added some time to my indentureship, but, you see, I wanted to make sure the best supplies were always available to the crawlers. Still, it didn't help. It was already too late."

"What do you mean?" Juice Box asked.

"I killed that NPC because I allowed the cold to get inside. It is inevitable, yes. How can it not be? But that was the moment I could no longer return to who I once was. In that single, unnecessarily violent act I allowed them to win. Everything after that ceased to matter, or so I thought."

"This is all very touching, skyfowl. But you forget who I am. I have heard the confessions of a thousand men. If you're attempting to gain sympathy, I am the wrong audience."

"I know," he said. "But, please. I am not finished. Hear me out."

The blank form crossed its arms. Justice Light continued.

"I'm not sure how much you know about what happens to crawlers after they're finished with the dungeon, but I became an indentured servant. I spent the next several hundred cycles working as a merchant. When I first arrived, my next door neighbor was someone named Dante. A crocodilian. I didn't know it at the time, but he and I had a lot in common. A similar burning distaste for the position we found ourselves in." Justice let out a soft caw. "One season, they told us we could no longer be merchants, and we were to be NPCs. Castle guards. Our job was to simply stand outside this ice castle and guard it. They told us we weren't supposed to stop crawlers from entering. It was a settlement. Just another town. We were to just keep the peace, so Dante and I hoped and prayed it would be a simple assignment."

"Still not following."

"Please. I'm almost there. At the end of the floor, we ended up not seeing a single crawler, and Damien told us we would be able to go back to our regular assignments. But first, we had to do one last thing. The castle was filled with NPC servants. Ice elves, if you've ever seen them. More fairy than anything. They are as tall as your human form, but I can fit my entire talon around their waists. They are gentle, simple creatures. Innocent. Not like regular high elves. Over the weeks we spent watching the castle, they became our friends. I knew all their names. They would play in the snow, like children. This was all off camera, and I still don't understand why they asked us to do it. They loved puzzles." He paused, remembering what came next. Dreading the telling of it. "All this time later, and I still don't understand why they ordered us to kill them all."

Juice Box suddenly changed form to an ice elf, and Justice Light felt as if he'd been kicked in the chest. He caught the cry in his throat. He physically took a step back, and he had to quickly hit a hidden panel on the wall to stop yet another trap from activating.

The changeling spoke, but her voice changed. This was not Juice Box. This was now Jessica, the changeling who'd been pretending to be Worgo. "Juice Box does not have these creatures in her library,

but I do. I lived amongst them many lifetimes ago. They are indeed simple, gentle creatures."

All Justice Light could do was nod. After a moment, the Juice Box head returned. Justice took a moment to compose himself.

"My friend, Dante. He refused. He looked up into the air and said he wasn't going to do it. They ordered us a second time. Again, he refused. There was no third warning. A beam came from the sky, and he was just gone. Just like that. He'd worked so long, so hard, and he was almost free. The light simply erased him, as if he'd never existed."

Juice Box cocked her head, not saying anything.

"He'd already passed the point of no return, or so I thought. But in the end, I was wrong. He stood his ground, and he died. And by the gods, he died free." Justice Light filled with pride for his friend, his brother. "Execution by the AI, which is actually quite rare, believe it or not. Usually they send in a mercenary squad for folks like us. Same as those we're fighting outside right now."

"They used to call them hardshells," Juice Box said.

Justice Light nodded. "I've heard that term before. They're usually gnolls, but not always. Hired mercenaries to do the dirty work when the cameras are turned away. Can't have the AI do too much of the clean-up. They like to keep it focused on the crawlers, lest it go primal early."

And what about you?" Juice Box finally asked. "What happened to you after your friend was killed?" There was a new gentleness there.

Justice held out the stump of his wing. "I, too, refused. But I only did so once, and unlike Dante, I was given a warning. They ordered me a second time." He lowered his head. The beam of light that had removed his wing had been so fast, there wasn't even pain. But what happened next... "I am still not free."

In the telling of this story, Justice usually ended it right there. But this time, he finally voiced what happened next. He'd never told anyone the specifics. Not even Porthus. But this was important.

"Sometimes, I have this dream. In this dream, I go into the castle to find the ice elves all dead. They'd overheard what was

happening outside with me and Dante, and, in their kindness, they killed themselves to protect me—their friend—from having to do it myself. That is my dream, but that is not what happened. Even that would've been the coward's solution, so why do I yearn for it? And after I have this dream, I always go back to that moment with the clerk at the trap store. The first person I killed out of anger, and I wonder, what difference is there between anger and cowardice?"

"Why did they ask this of you in the first place? Why kill them?"

"This is not uncommon, but I still do not know the reason. But I did it. Dante died. I lost my wing. And I did what they asked because I was afraid."

Skyfowl were proud, and they did not weep.

But what happened when one lost himself? Justice Light had no pride left, and he did not feel worthy of the title Skyfowl.

"They didn't even fight back. They loved puzzles and the snow. I was already done. It was all off camera. I still don't understand why." He barely got the words out.

Over the course of this story, Justice started hunching in on himself, shrinking. Now he stood straight. "But Dante taught me that there is no such thing as the point of no return. So I want you to know this, Juice Box, leader of Team Retribution. You are distrustful of us former crawlers. I understand that. You fear we crawlers will sacrifice you to save ourselves, and you have positioned yourselves to protect against that."

Juice Box sighed. "I'm not sure if this story is as helpful as you think it is."

"But," he said, holding up his good wing. "I now understand what you're *really* doing, what your real plan is, and I want you to know I can help you. I, too, have a plan, and I believe it is compatible with your own. We can do this together. I have a new dream, and I am no longer afraid. I am still angry, yes, but it is a different type of anger. It is focused, purposeful, and together we can both achieve our mutual goals."

Juice Box raised an eyebrow. "What we're *really* doing? Oh, I can't wait to hear this."

"You have spies in all corners of our base, correct? And not just our base, but all of the bases."

Juice Box didn't answer.

"It's okay," Justice Light said. "I know who many of them are, at least in our base. But you know what I couldn't figure out, at least at first? The Blood Sultanate. Their security certainly wasn't as good as the Madness, yet you managed to infiltrate the Viceroy headquarters over and over before the ceasefire. I believe you decapitated multiple Viceroys in the days leading up to the ceasefire. Yet, you claimed you were unable to reach the Sultanate, an obvious lie."

"What's your point?" Juice Box asked.

"Someone, and I'm guessing that human, Louis, told you all the way back on the fifth floor the details on what Carl and Donut need to do to defeat the naga, and why it is so important. You've been pretending to not be able to get to the Sultanate because at first you were keeping your options open."

"Why would I do that? I owe Carl. Despite your accusations, we are allies. I understand he had a difficult time with the assassination of the naga whore. If he had died, and we could've prevented it, it would've destroyed our alliance."

"I believe that you're a good person, Juice Box. I believe you intend on honoring the alliance, but I also believe the alliance is secondary to your true purpose, which will always come first. You could've killed the Sultana and her entire court quite easily. Hell, I believe you could end all this right now. I am quite certain of this. You are poised and in position to kill every leader at any moment."

Below, the engine on the digger ticked off from idle. It still wasn't moving, but the machine was ready to surge upward.

Juice Box didn't appear to show any emotion, but she stood straighter than before. "If that is true, then why wouldn't we have done that by now?"

Justice Light reached over, hit a few buttons and deactivated all the traps between himself and the changeling. He stepped forward and leaned in.

"The gods. It's all about the gods. It has been about them the whole time. You're risking it all so you and your kind can physically

touch as many of them as possible."

Juice Box was silent for a long moment. "Tell me something, Mr. Skyfowl. Assuming this little theory of yours is correct, where does that leave us? What was your purpose in calling me here?"

Justice Light suppressed a chuckle. "Well, that's easy. I told you my backstory because I need you to believe and to understand how committed I am to what I'm about to tell you. But first, let me ask you something. I'm not sure what you did in Club Vanquisher just now to cause all those gods to appear, but I'm guessing it didn't go well for you guys?"

The changeling frowned. She seemed to come to a decision. "We lost three. We did not cause the gods to appear, but we were in position just in case. One of us managed to touch Bast—the panther god—but she died before she could escape. At this point, only one of us has touched a deity, and that one is... wrong."

Justice nodded. He held his breath. "What about the ogres that appeared up from below? The basilica guards? Did your people touch any of them?"

"Three of us did."

Justice left out a small caw. "What if I could show you how to touch a god and not get killed? And in exchange, you agree to honor all of our previous deals. No more of this subterfuge. You agree to help with Operation Ruin and not sabotage it. You help us win this war as quickly as possible."

"If Operation Ruin goes off like you want, the gods won't be an issue. This will be over before any more appear."

Justice Light finally did chuckle. "Oh, my dear. You are thinking much too small. That's not the war I'm talking about."

He sat down and started to explain to her what he'd truly been building down here. He showed her the trap he'd started designing the very moment he watched Carl discover the Gate of the Feral Gods.

Far below, before he even finished relating his plan, the digger engine kicked fully on, but the machine started to move away. He sighed with relief.

You ride the currents you have, or you don't fly.

Class: Trap Master
Race: Skyfowl.
Birth Race: Skyfowl.
Top Level: 86

Dungeon Exit: Took deal at the beginning of the 11th floor. After a tumultuous and ultimately tragic tenure as a merchant selling trap supplies, was released into the wide universe where he spent every waking moment learning about dungeon lore, hidden trap exploits, gods, and the Ascendancy of the 12th floor. Eventually returned to the dungeon to assist the Princess Posse and to implement his great plan.

Author of the eighth Edition of the *Dungeon Anarchist's Cookbook*.

Current status: Alive.

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Remaining Teams

The Bone Clan in Spots 1 and 2 -*Unaffiliated*

The Princess Posse in Spots 3 and 4 - *The Good Guys Alliance*

The Dream in Spots 5 and 6 -*Unaffiliated*

The Madness in Spots 7 and 8 -*The Bloc*

The Reavers in Spot 9 - *The Bloc*

Team Retribution defending Larracos. -*The Good Guys Alliance*

Eliminated:

The Democratic Sortion

The Prism Kingdom

The Operatic Collective

The Blood Sultanate

Time until Phase Three: Two Hours.

After the battle that temporarily shut down Club Vanquisher and eliminated The Blood Sultanate, the battlefields went quiet for a few days. Everyone spent the time licking their wounds, rebuilding, and waiting for the true horrors to begin.

We did have a few minor skirmishes. The Dream set up additional artillery on their border with the former Blood Sultanate and started lobbing rocks at us as we prepped for the coming fights. I led a quick raid to wreck their trebuchets, and Rend managed to make his first few solo kills, including a very unfortunate incident with a zebra mount that was much too big for him to swallow whole, despite his very eager attempts.

But other than that, we'd gone into a wait-and-see-what-happens-next mode.

At least that's how it looked for the cameras. While we outwardly prepared our defenses, we worked tirelessly in secret, prepping for what we prayed would be the biggest, fastest, and—hopefully—final major offensive of Faction Wars.

We called it "Operation Ruin," and it would kick off the moment the Open Hostilities phase began.

We now held three fronts. Florin's 101st Crocodiles occupied sector two, formerly of the Operatics, but now owned by the orcs. We moved our front line north to the hilly border with the Skull Empire, whose castle sat nestled in the only mountainous region of the battlefield. The border here was designated by the region's only river, which flowed directly into Larracos and was the source of the cascading waterfall into the city's depths. The orcs maintained a garrison on the opposite side of the river, but it was clearly just a small, defensive force. The bulk of their troops were at their stronghold.

Even though we now owned sector four, formerly of the Blood Sultanate, we maintained our southern front lines at the existing trenches between sectors three and four. This was defended by Tran's 102nd Bulwark battalion.

We did this because once the Ramp-Up phase expired, the borders stopped having any real meaning, and the enemy could advance from anywhere. It was impossible to guard the entire length of the border at once. The land of the former Blood Sultanate was nothing but miles and miles of gently rolling hills. We turned this area into a horror show of traps. The majority of the traps likely

wouldn't be effective, but we'd know the moment any of them were disabled. We'd be able to easily track any large force as it moved in, and we were far back enough to pivot and meet them.

The third front was now the round border of Shanty Town.

Juice Box, who'd been fairly stingy with her support, seemed to have had a sudden change of heart and was now lending us ground troops to occupy the town. These troops, mostly Semeru dwarves and the regular citizens of Larracos were now mixed in with Li Na's 107th White Dragon Urban Defense battalion, forming an impressive ring around the lip of Larracos. None of our enemies could yet freely enter the city, not until four teams remained, but Shanty Town itself was still vulnerable and would be a prized target.

Now, with two hours left until go time, we were just about done with our final "defensive" tower. The sun was setting against the distant horizon, and it would be pitch dark out here the moment the timer ticked to zero.

The plans for Operation Ruin were set, but the biggest wildcard was the enemy's plans, if any, for the moment the third phase began.

Our biggest, most immediate threat was the orcs. Thankfully, they were currently at odds with the Reavers on their opposite border. I held out hope that those teams would occupy each other, but now that the stakes for them were real, I knew that was unlikely. We had reports of skirmishes between the other groups, especially the Dream and the Madness, but my hunches told me it was all a diversion. I felt it in my bones.

While the Skull Empire was currently on everyone's shit list, they all knew their best escape was to kill all the crawlers. And even though they all hated each other, it didn't make sense to me that they still wouldn't work together to eliminate us as soon as possible.

"Is it too late to paint it a different color? This drab gray isn't really working for me," Donut said as we sat at the base of the Nest tower in Shanty Town. She sat regally upon Mongo while Rend, now about ¾'s the size of his former self, sat on the ground next to

them, gnawing on the side of a cart containing a pile of the granite blocks.

High, high above, a pair of former crawlers scaled the outside of the tower, rapidly building the top parapet. I could barely see them in the fading light, but Donut glared up at them with her newly added **Perfect Night Vision.** That skill was added thanks to a hat, which she in turn had drained and added to her Tiara of a Thousand Lights. The tiara currently had 35 of 99 skills and upgrades added onto it and would have two more by the time the timer expired. The tiara itself glittered brilliantly like a star upon Donut's head, which I didn't like. She, predictably, loved it.

I turned my attention back to the crawlers finishing the tower. The speed in which they built this was akin to that of a video game. It had still taken almost two full days to build this thing, but out in the real world, this would've been a project that would have taken months with a team of a hundred workers and a whole lot of cranes. As far as skyscrapers were concerned, this wasn't that big, but here, surrounded by the one and two-story hovels, this was, by far, the tallest structure outside of the sunken funnel of Larracos.

Tall enough to give Donut line-of-sight of the entire battlefield when she perched upon the very top.

Toyotomi the rhinoceros, who'd spear-headed the rapid construction of the synergy tower, grunted at Donut, who scowled back at the former guard for the Prism.

"Oh, don't give me that look. All I'm saying is a nice purple would've been a better choice. Gray is just so clinical. Boring. It's not like we're trying to blend into the background. We can't hide it. So we might as well make a statement. And we need flags. All towers should have flags." She gasped. "We should make a new unit patch for just the tower. We can put Mongo on it!"

Mongo screeched with agreement, waving his arms.

"It is already built," Toyotomi said. "It is the color of granite because it is made of granite. If we paint it now, we won't have time for the mages to coat it with their protection spells. Plus, assuming the build as a whole is considered master quality, it will glow gold the moment it is done."

"I still think a nice purple would enhance the effect," Donut grumbled.

I reached forward and put my hand against one of the lower blocks.

Master Quality. This fortification is at 150% Strength.

This edifice is currently under construction.

1/15 Enchantments active.

Current Enchantments:

Increased Strength.

"Only 15 protections?" I asked worriedly. "You said it would be 20."

"I said there will be at least 20 on each block, which is true. Fifteen is the maximum for the individual blocks, but several of the protections we're using bleed to nearby blocks, and we will be creating a net pattern," Toyotomi said. "And as soon as the men up there place the last block and the tower is complete, the bonus will activate and the strength will increase to 200%. And after that, I will cast *Edifice Shield* which doubles that. With Princess Donut's *Sentry* and *Flak* spells, most incoming fire should get deflected." He indicated one of four, smaller towers nestled amongst the other buildings. "We also have *four* additional deflector towers when we only need one. Those plus the multiple mages you plan on placing in the lower floors will make this the safest place on the battlefield, even if the entire might of the Skull Empire's war mages target it."

"They *will* target it," I said. "What about the ground? What if they tunnel underneath?"

The large rhino appeared as if he wanted to strangle me. This was the third time I'd asked him a version of this question, and his answer hadn't changed. "As far as we're aware, the Larracos army owns the subterranean passages. But this tower will be so encased in protections, it will float if the ground underneath it disappears. It is more protected than the FUPA itself."

Ahead, a group of newly-arrived mages moved to start the process of protecting the tower's individual pieces. They'd just finished shoring up the FUPA, and they would spend the next two hours painstakingly moving up the tower, creating a lattice pattern of

protection spells on each individual block. Nearby, I had two more crawlers, members of Elle's team, carefully watching them, making certain the mages weren't spies or worm heads.

A new cart pulled up, and the large form of the driver, Jurgen, lumbered out, his muscles bulging as he placed another granite block on the ground. "This should be the last of them," he said. He looked over his shoulder. "Yes, Heidi. We are now on our way to the front." He looked at me and shook his head. "She is always nagging, but we can't choose who we love." He shrugged and jumped back in the cart.

Donut watched it rumble away. "Carl, have you noticed that Jurgen guy is always talking about this Heidi person, but she's not really there?"

I didn't answer. I was distracted. *Everything* depended on this tower. But what was worse was that there was no way to hide our intentions now that it was built. Everyone could see it from any part of the battlefield. Every long-range spell and weapon would be pointed directly at it.

That, of course, was the point. Still, I did not like the fact Donut would be sitting, open-air, at the very top of this thing when it all started. Especially since she wore a glittering, here's-where-my-head-is tiara.

It filled me with an incredible amount of anxiety even though this had all been my idea. I kept thinking of new levels of protection we could throw on there. "We need to remember to get a second set of teleport traps she can keep in her inventory in case they manage to disable the ones in her escape hatch."

Donut jumped to my shoulder and headbutted me. "I'll be fine, Carl." She raised her voice. "Especially if the tower is painted purple."

"Don't distract Toyotomi," I said. "He needs to concentrate on this last part."

"*Me*?" Donut asked. "I'm just asking about the color. You're the one who keeps asking him the same questions over and over."

"You're both distracting him," Katia said, walking up to stand by us. She patted Mongo on the head, pulled out a piece of bacon she'd

saved from her food box, and tossed it in the air. He squeaked with joy and snapped it away.

Rend saw this and immediately turned from the cart he was slobbering all over and started whining like an untrained dog. Katia produced a second piece of bacon. "I'm only going to give this to you if you promise to not try to eat my hand off like last time."

Rend started to vigorously giggle as Donut scoffed.

"You shouldn't spoil him like that," Donut said, eyeing Rend. "He's big enough now to eat more than your hand."

Katia tossed the bacon in the air, but Mongo, quick as a whip, snatched it before Rend could grab it.

To my surprise, it was Donut who corrected the dinosaur. "Mongo! Bad!" Donut scolded. "We don't steal!"

Mongo squealed in protest as Rend sat heavily on the ground, his little elephant legs splaying out in front of him. Tears started to form in his massive, bulbous eyes. Katia laughed and produced a third piece of bacon and balled it in her fist, presenting it to Rend, whose massive tongue snaked out and started slobbering all over her hand. She opened it, and he gently slurped it away.

"Disgusting," Donut said as Mongo whined at Katia for a third piece.

I smiled at seeing Donut and Katia together, but my chest ached, too. If the next few hours went well, this was it. If we finished off the enemy, we weren't going to wait any longer. The moment we were done, Katia was going to sit down in the stronghold and eat the Orchid of Eileithyia's Grace.

The moment Katia ate it, she would basically fall into a coma for an hour. Assuming she survived this part, one of three things would happen next.

Per our deal with Huanxin Jinx, what was supposed to happen was that Katia would be whisked away to the 12th floor where she would become a celestial attendant. If this happened, then all the requirements of the Sepsis Whore deal would be met, and Donut would be allowed to leave the ninth floor.

If the alien didn't honor the deal, then Katia would either be made pregnant and kicked out of the dungeon, or she would have her still-formidable constitution massively enhanced.

I knew the pregnancy prize was not what Katia wanted. Not anymore. But a part of me thought that would be better. She'd be literally kicked out of the dungeon like the Popov brothers. She would be free.

Supposedly the celestial attendants and other mortal NPCs were protected from the gods on the 12th floor. They literally had saferoom rules upon them, at least until the Ascendency officially started. But I still didn't trust that choice.

I didn't want to think about the third option, which would mean only one of them, Donut or Katia, would be able to go down the stairs. And in fact, it was more insidious than that. Neither of them would be able to go down the stairs as long as the other was still alive. I refused to even entertain the thought.

Katia grabbed a strand of my hair and raised an eyebrow. "I see we're not tying our hair back any more."

"I've gotten used to it," I said. "Besides, with my new hairbrush, it's easier to keep it out."

She laughed. She, too, had received a celestial box from the fight in Club Vanquisher.

Nearby, Baroness Victory and Drick—the adjutant for Team Retribution—stood together, side-by-side, talking into the open air. They were doing a live update of our progress for the viewers. They had a privacy bubble around them, and we couldn't hear what they were saying. Louis stood there awkwardly, waiting to be called into the bubble.

Apparently, Victory was supposed to have been doing these live updates, but it was something she clearly hated, and "they" were leaning on her to do more. I'm still not sure who "they" were since it was clear the AI had completely taken over everything. Either way, her updating responsibilities included interviewing individual members of the army, and poor Louis had been tasked for today's interview.

Dong Quixote, Splash Zone, Bucket Boy, Doctor Bones, and a group of flesh golems approached. Bomo and the Sledge were with them as well.

"Did you find them?" Donut asked.

Dong shook his head. They were just in the Desperado Club, looking for some sign of the two missing strippers, Anaconda and Damascus Steel.

Dong had Spunky Jefferson, his crust sock flail, dangling over his shoulder. He liked to keep the nickel end of the stinking sock near his ear, even though I was pretty sure the thing was talking to him in his mind. "The new concierge says he hasn't seen them at all. Clarabelle says she hasn't seen them, either. Are you certain you saw him? Because Mr. Jefferson says that in high-stress environments..."

"Yes, I saw him," Donut snapped. "He's in there somewhere. He didn't disappear. And you will not be having discussions about me with your disgusting sock. It makes me very uncomfortable."

"He said you would say that."

"The Penis Parade has re-opened," Splash Zone said, interrupting before Donut could snap back. He did not sound happy. "All new dancers. Same with Bitches, and we don't know where the old ones went. When this is over, I need to go back in there and keep looking for them. The whole crew at Bitches, including Snail Trail and Grandma Sticky are missing."

I'd forgotten that Splash Zone was married, and that his wife was a dancer. I sighed.

Donut jumped to the shoulder of the Sledge, who reached up and gave her a gentle pat.

I regarded the two cretin rock creatures. They would be going up into the tower with Donut. "Both of you need to keep her safe."

Bomo grunted.

"What does it look like I'm made of? Pudding?" Sledge asked.

Both of the cretins wouldn't stop saying weird shit like that, but I took that as an affirmative.

Across the way, Louis was now in the privacy bubble, talking with the two adjutants. I felt guilty when I looked at him, too. His part in all of this was especially dangerous.

"Have you talked to Prepotente?" Katia asked.

"Yes," I said. "He's with Rosetta and Mordecai, and they're 'interrogating' the prisoner."

We'd tried multiple times to talk Milk into coming with us, especially since the club was certainly about to be closed for an extended period, but she refused. We tried to hire her, but the system wouldn't allow it. I'd sent a quick message to Rosetta, and she point-blank told us to kidnap her. To tie her up and take her with us. We wouldn't be able to keep her in a saferoom, and we couldn't let her out of our sight, but apparently, kidnapping and "torturing" guildmasters for their information was not only allowed, but encouraged. She was being held in the FUPA.

Katia paused. I could tell she wanted to ask more about my relationship with Milk. That reaction I'd had, basically throwing myself into Milk's arms, was clearly on her mind. Prepotente hadn't even seemed to blink at it. But Katia, Li Jun, and Zhang had all clearly wanted to talk about it. But they were all smart enough not to say anything.

Baroness Victory: Apologies, but Zev is saying Louis isn't hitting the right numbers and you and Katia are now required to be interviewed. Now.

Carl: Fuck off. I'm busy.

Donut: WHAT ABOUT ME?

Zev: Sorry guys. I know you're busy. Donut, depending on what happens today, we'll get you tomorrow by yourself if Li Na goes as we expect. Carl, the AI is demanding we do this. It'll be two minutes. Don't be difficult.

"Come on," Katia said, tugging on my arm as Louis, looking frazzled, exited the privacy bubble.

I put my hand on Louis's shoulder. "Get to Area 52 and make sure everything is properly loaded. If I don't see you, be safe. Keep in contact with Donut to coordinate. Low and fast. In and out."

"Dude," Louis said. He seemed a little out of breath. "They just showed me a video of me and Juice Box together. I was having her do Erza and, man. It's great when you're doing it, but watching it back is something else. I'm a little freaked out right now."

"Louis, focus."

He looked at me, tears in his eyes. Clearly there was more to it than them just showing him a sex video.

I paused and exchanged a look with Katia, who looked equally concerned. Now was not the time for him to be having a breakdown. I didn't want to be dismissive, but so much was going on at this moment, I didn't have the time to deal with it. Still, we needed Louis's head to be clear.

"Look, man," I said. "Change of plans. Just hang out for a second, and we'll talk, okay?"

He straightened. "No, no, you're right. I gotta get to work. I'll see you guys."

Carl: Imani, Donut. Louis is having some sort of crisis. Please talk to him. Katia and I gotta do an interview really fast.

We entered the bubble, coming to stand between Victory and Drick, and all thoughts of Louis immediately fled. Drick swayed where he was standing. He smelled like he'd been spending a little too much time with Ferdinand at the bar, which I found kind of interesting, since he was a Valtay worm.

The moment we entered the bubble, a window materialized floating in front of us, and Kevin, the orange announcer of the show appeared.

"We are now joined by Carl and Katia," Kevin said, sounding pleasantly surprised. "Yesterday we talked to Li Jun about his celestial tier robotic eye and Zhang's new cape with the target on the back. Victory and Drick, tell us what you think about the two celestial tier items Carl and Katia received."

Drick grunted, his voice only slightly touched by the inebriation. "Katia's knee pads are a bit of a waste, considering that she's planning on leaving the dungeon—one way or another—pretty soon. This was clearly awarded to her in hopes that she'll give them to Carl to replace his existing knee pads. They even look similar."

"Can we see the knee pads? Are you wearing them right now?" Kevin asked.

Katia gave me a quick, panicked look, and I reached over and squeezed her hand for reassurance.

"I don't have them equipped," she said. "I left them in the guild. I, uh, didn't know we were getting interviewed. I can go grab them real fast if you want."

Outside the privacy bubble, Rend and Mongo both walked up and their faces pressed against the bubble like it was a shield. Mongo appeared to shriek in outrage because he was blocked from passing, but I couldn't hear anything outside.

Just past them, the tower completed, and a golden glow appeared around the entirety of the synergy tower. Everyone started to cheer. I couldn't hear that, either. The mages immediately went to work.

"That's okay," Kevin said after a moment, and an image of the knee pads appeared, spinning in midair.

"As you know, a financially devastating *seven* celestial boxes were awarded during the attack on Club Vanquisher," Kevin said. "Five awarded via a Celestial, Who-Let-The-Gods-Out Box to crawlers Li Jun, Zhang, Carl, Prepotente, and Katia, and we will discuss the other two tomorrow when we interview Li Na, who recently just shot up to level 84 and number two on the top ten list, passing Prepotente and landing just behind Carl. The Valtay and the Borant Corporation were in court today, claiming that the AI's recent, uh, takeover should release them of their financial obligations regarding awarded loot and unauthorized betting events. We will have more on that tonight. But in the meantime, let's take a look at the description of Katia's award."

The paragraph appeared, floating in mid-air. The show read it out in the AI's voice.

The Enchanted Spiked Knee pads the Munificent Goddess Kina.

This is a Unique item.

This is a Divine Item.

These are knee pads. They are literally made of the eyelashes of the sea goddess Kina, who is really just a weird, horny—and when I say horny, I am using both

versions of that term—sea-urchin-like, bottom feeder of a goddess who is into some *really* weird stuff that makes even *me* blush.

This item imbues the following effects:

Plus 25% Damage Reflect for melee attacks.

The Breathe Underwater benefit.

Level 15 Swim skill.

Level 10 Iron Stomach skill.

Level 10 Eater of the Dead skill.

As a divine item, These knee pads will imbue additional, varying benefits when they are in the presence of divine entities.

I shuddered as the AI read out those last two benefits. The Iron Stomach skill was apparently something new this season because Mordecai had never heard of it. It basically allowed one to consume magical items. The item would be destroyed, and if you ate enough, it would permanently raise your intelligence by one point. At level 10, it was a one-to-one ratio, and it also allowed you to eat cursed items with no ill effects, which was a pretty big deal. Apparently, Prepotente already had this skill.

Still, literally eating most magical items was out of the question. The system made no distinction between a magical ring and a magical jacket. Though for Katia, it wasn't as big of a deal since she could make herself large enough to swallow anything whole. She, before she'd unequipped and given away the knee pads, had managed to gain 20 levels to her intelligence by eating random, throwaway items before it became too much.

Eater of the Dead was the same thing, but it was with corpses, which was even more disgusting. The bodies had to be over a certain mass that decreased with each level, but you had to eat several more than the magical items in order to raise a stat. The skill raised your constitution, strength, and dexterity randomly.

"So, Baroness Victory," Kevin asked. "It's almost unheard of for two separate crawlers to have divine items in the same crawl, especially when they're working together. Will the benefits Carl receives from his divine Scavenger's Daughter patch vary from the

benefits Katia receives from these knee pads when they're in the presence of the same deity? And what of Prepotente's saddle on Bianca?"

"That's actually a great question," Victory said, her voice taking on a strange, newscaster-like persona I hadn't heard from her before. It was a bit surprising. "And the answer is, generally, the benefits or debuffs will be identical. But there are some exceptions. Since these kneecaps are from the goddess Kina, Katia's benefits will be significantly more powerful than whatever happens with Carl if she's in the presence of Kina. And the same goes with certain enemies of Kina, not that she has any that I'm aware of. Same goes with Carl, though his patch is associated with the Scavenger, so it's not like we'll ever see that in action."

"Wait," I said, but Kevin's laugh was too loud.

"Certainly not. Certainly not," Kevin said. "But if Katia does end up giving a second divine item to Carl, will the benefit double?"

"No," Baroness Victory said. "The more powerful of the two benefits will occur. While this hasn't happened before as far as I'm aware, I do know there are matched sets of armor that are supposedly all divine items, and this was prepared far ahead of time."

"Very interesting," Kevin said. "Now, let's take a look at Carl's, uh, very different Celestial item, which is now his third, behind the Scavenger's Daughter patch we were just discussing and the potion that gave him his Gloom Wraith Phase skill."

The hairbrush appeared floating in the air. I sighed. Unlike Donut's magical hairbrush, which looked like a regular hairbrush, this one was made of shining gold with a jeweled handle. And every time I pulled it through my hair, it screamed. It screamed like a group of women squealing and cheering at a rock concert. And when I stopped brushing my hair, the brush would shout "Encore! Encore!" for two minutes straight until the voices finally faded away.

The Enchanted Hairbrush of the Beefmaster.

This item may only be used on a male with an average hair length of 25 centimeters or longer.

This item may only be used on a single person, once per day.

Samson. Fabio. Michael Bolton. Jim Morrison. The entire band Stryper. Yanni.

Your history is filled with luscious men whose power resided in their lovely locks. Now, it's your turn.

If you use this magical hairbrush upon your head for five minutes straight, you will receive the following benefits for the next thirty hours:

The Shining Charisma benefit.

The Speedster benefit.

Plus 25% to your constitution.

Level 10 *Entourage*.

Plus your hair will be shiny and healthy, and it will goddamn glisten.

Shining Charisma was a good benefit, though it wasn't all that useful on this floor. It basically gave everyone in my party an additional 20% of my charisma. Donut's already god-like charisma would only be boosted by six points.

Entourage was a spell that Donut already had, though for her, it was a bard skill. It was an illusion spell that mirrored party members, and it would be something good to have.

The 25% boost to constitution was huge. That alone made the brush frustratingly invaluable. It was just like with my boxers. It was now too good to give up. I'd been planning on cutting my hair after the tonic's regrowth effect finally ebbed, but now I would have to keep it long.

The Speedster benefit was also great.

The benefit was similar to Donut's *Twinkle Toes* spell, though instead of casting it on Mongo, it worked on myself. I could already run super-fast thanks to my strength and dexterity, but Speedster basically allowed me to move short distances very, very quickly. I wouldn't be quite like the Flash superhero, but I was still impressively quick. And while I couldn't do it long distance, I could flash across the battlefield in seconds. And best of all, I could

combine it with my *Gloom Wraith Phase*, allowing the distance I could travel while phased to be much further.

Mordecai said he'd never seen the Speedster benefit awarded like this before. It was usually something someone could sometimes get when their dexterity naturally reached 100, though even then, it was rare. The crawler Osvaldo, who was not a member of the Princess Posse, supposedly had the benefit.

Kevin started to drone on about the hairbrush. Meanwhile, a group had formed outside the privacy bubble. Samantha, Jamal—with his new legs, and Bigs the sluggalette had all also approached and were all at the edge of the bubble, trying to get in, like they were all drawn toward me.

I watched the silent group of workers outside the bubble, all rushing about, all preparing.

I was reminded of the fifth floor and the bubbles. Of the crawlers in the subterranean level. I'd asked them to do something, and they had died. Each and every one. I was reminded of my thoughts then, on the fifth floor. What gives me the right? What gives me the right to lead so many into what will surely be their deaths?

What was coming... Multiple attacks from all fronts, all at once. We were going to attack from above, from below, from the land, and from within. All at once. We were going to sweep across the entire battlefield, and we were going to slaughter them all.

But at what cost? Our victory in Club Vanquisher had given us a sense of hope. A false sense of invulnerability. Even our best case scenarios predicted heavy losses.

Across the way, Donut entered the Nest for the first time, still riding on the shoulder of the Sledge.

All of it was going to depend on her. Even if we were successful—especially if we were successful—I feared the toll on her most of all.

It's going to get worse before it gets better. We're going to lose more friends. We're going to have to do some pretty horrible things just to survive.

When I'd said that, this was what I'd been talking about. This moment that was coming in one hour and forty-five minutes.

What gives me the right?

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[57]

I MET UP WITH LI JUN AND ZHANG AS WE WALKED TOWARD THE SAFEROOM entrance. But first, we had to make a detour. We silently angled through the dark toward the small, newly-built brig complex just around the bend from the Nest tower. This sat at the base of Li Na's clock tower, just outside the smoking remains of the Dagda temple.

The stench of burnt stew still filled the area a few days later. The bearded cleric within the temple had apparently boiled himself alive in his own stew, collateral damage from one of Li Na's dreads during the assault on Club Vanquisher.

Donut was still at the Nest, overseeing the mages who were enchanting the blocks. Li Na and Toyotomi were there with her, and they were showing Donut how to utilize the synergy aspect of the tower.

Li Jun clapped me on the shoulder. His new eye, which at the moment was a swirling orb of black, unnerved me. When it was working, the black changed to look like a miniature, clockwork engine, all contained in the round eye. Even the name of the thing was a little freaky. **The Engine of Tomorrow**. I wasn't clear on how it worked, but it gave him the ability to see muscles tensing, and it essentially slowed down his own perception of time in short bursts. This allowed Li Jun to predict where an opponent was going to strike next and react with amazing speed. Like Bullet Time from

the *Matrix* movies. He and his sister had been training with it nonstop.

"How are you doing?" he asked.

"Me?" I asked, surprised. "I'm doing okay. I'm worried about Louis. I'm worried about Donut. I'm worried about Elle's plan. I'm worried that Boomer's battalion doesn't have enough troops. I'm worried that we don't know where the Dream's troops are. I'm worried about all those war mage things that are going to pounce on us the moment the timer ends."

"Yes, but what about *you*?" he persisted. "You seem a little... overworked after that raid on Club Vanquisher. Donut says you received over thirty loot boxes, but you've only really told us about your new brush and the potions. Donut said you got a patch, but you haven't put it on your jacket yet. You usually post all the items in the group chat." He indicated my Emberus tattoos. "Plus your hands are glowing now."

I shrugged, suddenly uncomfortable. The glow came from the *Heathen Burn* benefit I had for the rest of the floor.

I had, indeed, received 32 loot boxes. Plus several achievements. Plus a new quest after that previous fight. It was overwhelming. Like always, I copied all the achievements into my scratchpad. At the mention of them, I instinctively opened up the notepad and looked at the ones at the top.

After the battle had completed, and after we'd managed to tie up Milk, get ourselves out through the temple bathroom, bring her to the FUPA, and then drive all the way back to the closest saferoom, I'd met up with Donut and opened up our loot boxes.

I'd received over fifty achievements. Most of them, like usual, were for stupid shit that resulted in low-tier adventurer boxes. I'd also received multiple boxes and achievements for seeing gods for the first time, some of whom I didn't even remember. None of those resulted in notable loot except a few low-tier rings that we'd ultimately given to Katia so she could test eating them.

I did, however, receive some important achievements:

New Achievement! Varg Vikernes!

Whoa, now. Calm down there, black metal enthusiast. Breaking into and defiling a church is one thing, but breaking into Club Vanquisher, hub of *all* religion? Causing chaos in the club is the equivalent of, I don't know, giving the pope a wedgie and then tea-bagging him while he squirms on the floor.

***Reward*: You are permanently banned from Club Vanquisher. You are permanently banned from all temples except your own religion (Emberus) and any temples where you've been named friend of the church (Apito. Eileithyia. Eris. Grull. Hellik. Issitoq. Nekhebit. Theia. Yemaya.)**

I had no idea what the name of the achievement meant, but it wasn't a surprise I'd been black-listed from all temples after that clusterfuck at Club Vanquisher.

That I'd been named "friend of the church" with some of those gods *was* surprising, however. Hellik had just added me to the list, despite my quest to kill him. Apito was a surprise, though she was somehow tied to all of this in a way I didn't yet understand. Eileithyia, who was being driven by Huanxin Jinx, wasn't a surprise. Nor was it a surprise, her retainer, the Starbucks logo-looking Yemaya, had me white-listed since Donut and I had freed her on the previous floor. Odette was driving Nekhebit, and the Open Intellect's agent, Rectrix, was driving Theia. Issitoq and Eris were a mystery. But neither were nearly as big of a mystery as being named friend of the church to Grull. That just didn't make any sort of sense whatsoever.

This was all something I'd have to figure out later if we managed to survive the next few hours.

New Achievement! Liquified.

You, while immortal, blew yourself up. Like, you dropped a bomb at your feet. Hot damn! We have seen some crazy shit this season, but man, there's nothing quite like the simplicity of such a desperate move. The slow motion replay of that is really quite something. It was similar to watching something small and furry get smushed underfoot, but even

more raw, more real, you know what I mean? What a goddamned rush.

Still… Did you know that only worked because you had god-tier immortality? Most versions of that spell would've still caused you to be splattered into so many pieces you would've never reconstituted in time. And don't even think about trying that with that other, bigger bomb you have in your inventory. You were lucky this time. If that had been a magical explosion…

***Reward*: You've received a Legendary Lucky Bitch Box.**

The box contained a small patch of a group of four-leaf clovers being smashed under a bare foot. I sighed, thinking of it. The patch was sitting in my inventory, where it would remain. I don't know what the system was thinking when it gave it to me. It was clearly something I would never wear:

Upgrade Patch. Small.

This upgrade patch depicts a perfectly-perfect, mouthwatering human foot treading upon a patch of four-leaf clovers, creasing them as it presses down with gentle but oh-so-firm force. Despite their non-sentient nature, the clovers have a brief moment of awareness as they suffer, and it is fucking delicious.

Delicious.

Affixing this patch to an eligible garment will imbue the following benefits:

Lucky Shot. A fatal blow will be deflected into the body of a party member instead. This benefit may only be used once per floor.

Warning: Upgrade patches are fleeting items. You may remove them, but they will be destroyed in the process.

Even with Donut's *Cockroach* skill, there was no way I would risk wearing this. I didn't care how valuable it was. I wouldn't wear it, and I didn't want the others to know what it did, lest they attempt to talk me into installing it.

New Achievement! You in my house now, boy!

You have entered the temple of a god, you have pissed off that god to his face (well, in this particular case, you pissed him off to his weird-ass bug body head. Seriously. I can't stop thinking about how goddamned bizarre this guy is), and you have faced that god in battle in their own temple.

***Reward*: None! The only reason you're not getting a celestial box for this is because your ass was saved by another god.**

That was true. Hellik had come along and banished Khepri before he could do something to me. And it wasn't just me. Katia and Prepotente had both received that achievement as well.

Still, it was irritating I hadn't received *anything* for that. I had blasted him with a bomb, twice. And now I was permanently marked for death by him. Though I suspected that wasn't going to last long. Khepri's original description had given me a pretty big hint about some things that were currently going down on the 12th floor. He and Odette's Nekhebit were in the same sub-pantheon. Someone was going through and killing off all the gods in that group. I figured it was either Odette for some reason or possibly Huanxin Jinx. I didn't know enough to form a proper guess.

New Achievement! Celestial Orgy of Chaos!

You have been in the presence of more than ten gods at once, and you survived.

Now, here's a mystery. Someone let out a bunch of gods who shouldn't have been allowed into the temple in the first place. It probably wasn't who you think it was. But the fact you survived this crazy orgy of a fight means you all need a serious pat on the back because I was pretty certain at least one of you—looking at you, Zhang—was toast.

***Reward*: You've received a Celestial Who Let the Gods Out *This* Time? box.**

This was the one that Katia, Li Jun, Zhang, Prepotente, and I had all received. Bautista had gotten outside early in the fight, and he'd also received the achievement, but his had just been a legendary

box. Still, he'd gotten an electronic guidebook on his stuffed animals, something that would tell him what each one did before he used it. All he had to do was either look it up in some complicated codex or scan the label, and an info box would pop up giving information on the plush. He'd promised to let me borrow it so I could scan that Kimaris figure I had, but we'd been so busy, it hadn't happened yet.

And speaking of the question, who let the gods out, it was still a mystery. Naturally, I'd assumed it had something to do with Samantha, but this time it didn't seem to be the case. The basilica ogre guards had come up from below to help in the fight, and that had, apparently, left the front door unguarded, but it seemed there was more to it than that, and it was yet another mystery.

New Achievement! Hey Larry, can I borrow your chainsaw?

You have utilized a borrowed skill or spell in battle. You have used this borrowed ability to kill an opponent. Oh, man. This opens up a whole new possibility of fighting styles, don't you think? Just keep those tattoos above the knee.

***Reward*: You've received a Platinum Have You Goddamned Figured Out How To Use This In Conjunction With the Fucking Voodoo Book Yet? Jesus Christ I Can Only Help You So Much box.**

The reward was a skill potion that ended up bringing my Pugilism skill up to 15 on its own, which was great, but the name of the box had sent Mordecai and Rosetta into a flurry of research. Even Zev had commented on it, saying she'd never even heard of such blatant hand-holding by the AI.

In addition to the regular achievements, I'd also received a few messages and a quest from Emberus as well. I was hoping he'd cancel out the whole kill-my-brother thing, but Hellik's message had only served to enrage the god. And in fact, now everything was worse than it was before.

New Quest.

Fuck my brother. Fuck him to the fires of Sheol.

Kill 100 worshipers of Hellik. Do so before you reach the 12th floor.

Time Limit: This must be completed before the collapse of the 11th floor, and as a practical matter, you should complete it before you complete the Kill Hellik quest.

Reward: If you complete this quest, you will receive a permanent boon of Celestial quality.

At least there wasn't a penalty for failing this one, but more concerning was immediately after receiving this new quest, I had a second, confusing and alarming message from Emberus, this time in a more contemplative voice.

Emberus: Am I wrong to hate him? He has treated with Issitoq on our behalf, who has in turn allowed the peace to be breached. I am now allowed to kill the other Sheol princes in exchange for the information Amayon has about Geyrun. And what does he mean about our mother and sister? You, my martyr, be vigilant. If you survive killing Hellik, like he surely deserves, I fear I may turn my rage and grief on you for daring to hurt my own kin, and for this, I love you, beloved but doomed worshiper. I promise the burning will be exquisite.

What the actual fuck. Even re-reading this for the tenth time, it still filled me with such dread. It put me in an impossible position, and for the first time I started to wonder if I should just risk taking the smite instead.

That, of course, was the "out" that the patch gave me. I still wasn't even tempted to use it.

I sighed. Mordecai had warned us from the beginning to stay away from gods. He hadn't been wrong, but each day, it became more and more difficult, especially now.

I thought of the Gate of the Feral Gods, now in Elle's hands.

T-minus one hour before the chaos would begin.

"Has anyone tried to escape?" I asked.

"No," Zhang said. "It's pretty well built to protect against it. And by the time they're in there, they're all pretty resigned to their fate."

Zhang's new cape fluttered behind him. It was white with the standard black, blue, red, and yellow circles of an archery target on it. It was his prize in the celestial box. It was a great, but dangerous, item. It was a unique item called **Zhang's Cape of Odds**. When it wasn't activated, it gave him plus 15% across the board for all his stats plus a level 10 Dodge skill. His skill in that was already 11, so it brought it to 14.

But it also came with a once-an-hour skill called Roll the Dice, which reminded me of the Wheel of Fortune game at the casino. If he activated the skill, one of 333 different outcomes could appear. *Most* of the outcomes were great, such as doubled strength for ten minutes. The ability to fly for an hour, etc. There were a few really epic outcomes, as well, such as Death Ray and several various summons.

But there were 66 outcomes that were bad. None of them killed him outright, and all were temporary, but there was paralysis, all stats are now 5, and something called "It's been four hours and I think it's time to call the doctor" which sounded ominous as fuck. The worst was "Summon the God Who Hates You Most."

But, and here was where the cape was especially insidious—and a true Celestial item—was that after 19 spins, you could manually pick one of the choices.

Zhang wore the cape proudly, but he said he wasn't going to actually use it unless absolutely necessary.

"How many are left?" I asked as we approached the brig building.

"Just one," Zhang said, sounding nervous, as if he was afraid to tell me.

I wasn't surprised at all.

When Li Na first approached me and asked if she could have my extra Ring of Divine Suffering, my initial reaction had been fuck no. She was quite possibly the most powerful crawler in the dungeon already, and I'd worried that while it would make her stronger, it'd also drive her to do something crazy. I'd briefly, and privately, discussed it with Katia, Imani, Donut, and Elle, and I'd been surprised at their reaction.

Only Imani had been against it. Katia and Elle were both adamant it was a good idea. Elle had been especially vehement.

She can handle it better than you certainly can, she'd said. *And if she can't, at least it'll be the ring that kills her. She's a scary psycho, but at least she's* our *scary psycho, Carl. She's the quiet type of scary, too, not like you or goat boy. At least I always know what your mood is. With Li Na, we want to stay on her good side.*

But it was Donut who'd truly made me want to give the second ring away. She didn't say her reasoning, but she'd looked at me, not using chat, and simply said, "Please, Carl. Please give it to her. Do it as soon as you can."

Li Na had also asked about the Necklace of Indelible Woe but ultimately decided she didn't want it, especially now that she had several level-15 dreads that she could possibly lose if she used the necklace. It remained in my inventory for now.

So, no, it wasn't a surprise that the brig—filled with off-world mercenaries we couldn't trust—was empty of all the prisoners save one, the one prisoner I'd specifically asked to leave alone.

It was also suddenly obvious to me why Donut had basically begged me to give her the ring.

"Okay," I said, taking a deep breath. "Let's get this over with." We stepped into the building.

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Rishi the naga, now ostensibly a member of the Princess Posse, stood before me. Without his armor and with his arms removed, he looked less like a naga and more like a massive cobra.

Li Jun and Zhang remained outside. I'd asked the guards to leave, leaving me alone in the small building with its lone occupant. My viewer count was spiked. In fact, the viewer needle had a blue hue to it that it didn't normally have, and I wasn't sure what that meant. I'd look it up after I was done with this.

I examined the large, green and purple snake, lit by a single spotlight. Darkness had settled outside, making the naga look especially menacing. He was the sole remaining member of the original Blood Sultanate left alive on the floor. He sat serenely in his small cell, a smug, strangely amused expression on his snake face.

He'd surrendered himself to Donut, Imani, and Elle shortly after we'd killed Vinata. He'd buried himself in the dirt outside the castle and had waited for it all to be over before emerging.

Because he wasn't a blood member of the court, he wasn't a part of the whole Sepsis Whore quest. But, in real life, he had been married to a distant cousin of the royal family. He'd been the representative Vinata had sent for the pre-production meetings, and I got the impression outside the dungeon he held a fairly important role in the real naga government.

As a rule, when we defeated another faction, mercenaries would be evaluated on a case-by-case basis, but in general, if they were just grunts, I'd allow them to join up with us. My standing rule was to kill the higher-up officers immediately before they became a problem even though they, too, were now technically members of the Princess Posse. The *Conscription* spell was far from perfect, and I knew of several tricks one could employ to hinder an army's efforts even with the debuff active.

If they were a member of the actual management team, a part of the original group that willingly came here to fight, they were treated differently. They were to be kept alive, encased with magic protection, and left alone until I could get to them. Li Na's White Dragons were in charge of keeping the prisoners.

I knew Rishi was no coward, so the strange manner in which he'd hidden himself was more than just curious. It didn't make any damn sense. I'd been putting off visiting him, but it was finally time.

According to the guards, Rishi hadn't said much since he'd surrendered, though he'd asked more than once to speak with me. He just sat there silently in the cell, completely encased in a square-shaped containment shield that would protect against most bombs and cloud attacks. The shield also had a prismatic effect, which made him appear as if he was on a television screen. This would supposedly protect from charm spells and things like the Eye of the Bedlam Bride, should he have something like that hidden upon him. In addition, he was stripped of his gear, and the cell had a secondary shield around it that would keep him from casting anything. We didn't have a method to keep him from pulling something from his inventory, but the *Conscription* spell mostly prevented him from attacking me and the guards.

Still, *someone*—clearly Li Na—thought it would be best to take extra precautions and had his four arms removed, which was especially barbaric. He would still be able to drop things out of his inventory, but his ability to wield weapons was severely diminished. He claimed his inventory was empty of weapons and magical items, and all that he carried was some documents, water, and food.

“Why weren’t you with your wife and the princess in the temple of Khepri?” I asked.

The large, green and purple naga smiled down at me, his tongue flicking out. “I knew that if I went with my wife into that temple, I would be just as dead as everyone else. I warned them all not to go, but the late princess believed her plan to kill you with a god was a sound one.”

“It was,” I said. “It almost worked. But I’m more curious about you. You don’t seem too broken up about the death of your princess. Or your wife.”

Rishi didn’t stop smiling. “I was quite fond of my primary wife, despite the fact she hadn’t yet given me a clutch. But I had already grieved her death starting from the moment the mantis team fled. I implored Vinata that we, too, should leave, yet she insisted we stay. So I made peace with my inevitable death then.”

“The mantis team abandoned faction wars sometime around the sixth floor,” I said. “You expected to die even back then?”

The armless naga chuckled softly. “I did not expect you and the crawlers to rise up like you have, nor did I expect Faction Wars itself to be the manner of my death, but it was clear something was wrong. The mantids do not flee anything, and for them to run like that... They were scared of something.” He paused. “Did you know that the Aryl system went dark the moment Princess Formidable hit the failsafe?”

“Princess Formidable herself didn’t make it to the failsafe,” I said. “The AI pulled her off her ship and dropped her into the ocean on the surface. But, yes. I did hear that. That was where the last season occurred.”

Rishi nodded, but he didn’t elaborate his point.

“You haven’t answered my question,” I finally said. “Why did you hide? Why didn’t you fight? I thought you were honorable.”

He paused for a very long time. “Have you heard the term ‘The Great Consensus’ before?”

I had. I had heard it from Loita. Loita the kua-tin I’d assassinated on the fifth floor.

“It’s some sort of nazi bullshit, isn’t it?”

"I don't know that term. But it is a philosophy that is gaining momentum amongst many systems. It basically teaches the Syndicate was a mistake, and we are all better off on our own. There are many aspects of it, and some have taken the idea and turned it into something xenophobic and evil, which is ironic considering the name of the philosophy. The Bloom party of the kua-tin, for example, believe in racial purity and dislike the cultural influence of so-called 'dry' races. The mantids disdain what they believe are weaker and inferior species. Amongst the naga, some want what you want. Some naga believe while we can learn from each other, alien communities should have no say in how we live our lives."

I grunted. "You sure have a funny way of showing it."

He nodded. "I agree. And I know you don't believe it, but Vinata was a firm believer in this philosophy. She'd seen war on alien soil, and she firmly believed it was all for nothing. Her father insisted she participate in Faction Wars. We needed the tourist money. We needed to keep the shipyards staffed and running. We were going to steal the entire fleet and run. We were going to travel, as a whole, for an entire generation, off in a direction that none of the tunnel threads point. Off to a place where it would be a very, very long time before we were found. That was our Great Consensus, engineered by Princess Vinata. To leave."

I leaned in. "I don't give a shit. What does any of that have to do with you hiding like a little bitch while your wife and princess died?"

He sighed. "Just before the meeting of the warlords, news broke that laid out our plans regarding our intention to renege on our shipyard contracts, which caused immediate chaos in our system. Because of the Emergency Action Item you enacted, we were no longer able to see what else was happening at home. That is when I decided to flee and hide."

"Why?"

"So I could implore upon you our plight and make an offer to you. It was a gamble, but I suspected Vinata would fall. I have in my inventory a signed and AI witnessed document for you, the de-facto leader of Earth."

I laughed. He did not.

A sheet of paper appeared and dropped to the floor. I couldn't get it through the protections, and it landed sideways, against the shield. It was covered with glittering, holographic seals.

"Leader of Earth? Are you smoking crack?"

"Syndicate law dictates that in the absence of a working government, the native leader of a planetary body will be chosen by multiple factors. And while there are other military groups upon the surface who are clearly more suited, as well as other in-dungeon entities who could easily claim the title, the fact you are a warlord *and* the number one crawler on the leaderboard makes your claim legitimate. And because no formal leadership claim has yet been filed, we petitioned on your behalf while drafting that document, and the court granted the petition. The position is mostly honorary, but it does allow you to be a signatory on Earth's behalf."

"What?" I asked. "What does that even mean? And what does the document say?"

He seemed to shrug, which was difficult without arms. "I'm sure your attorney can explain it to you. But the document does nothing unless you sign it. It gives Earth natives citizenship rights in all naga territories, plus five Naphil-class generation ships. This is in exchange for allowing us to terraform and settle upon the other planets in your system post crawl once there is no longer a quarantine."

"You *are* smoking crack. How is that a good trade off?"

"For a while, I assumed the failsafe would be blown, and that would be how we died. But we waited too long, and the system has gone primal. I still expect us all to die, but now I am no longer certain about the fate of those on the surface. You have millions of fellow humans up there, struggling. If this were a normal crawl, the system would go into a quarantine for some time post crawl. It would eventually open up, and the parasites from all corners would descend and bleed you dry. If it still ends that way, the children of your survivors will need friends. We can help each other. And by granting you five Generation ships, you can guarantee the survival of your progeny. Or you can sell the ships in exchange for protection. If

this ends like usual, those planets *will* be settled whether you like it or not."

"And if it doesn't end like usual?" I asked.

"If you are wiped out, then we have lost nothing. But if not, this is where our gamble truly pays off. If your people manage to persist, if the post-crawl collection doesn't happen, this macro AI will continue to spread, and, perhaps, a new inner system-style community will emerge with all the benefits of the current inner system. The natives will be protected by the AI and will soon rise to be some of the richest, most influential forces in the galaxy. And my people, who protected you during your time of turmoil, will emerge as great friends of the citizens of Earth, and both shall prosper."

I was still reeling over the whole "de-facto ruler of Earth" thing. And sometime during his explanation, I stopped fully paying attention. But I still caught the gist of it. "And Vinata signed this? This doesn't sound anything like that Great Consensus thing. In fact, it sounds like the opposite."

"No," Rishi said. "She did not sign it. She would not agree to something like this. I said she was a proponent of the philosophy. I am not. I drafted this, and I am the one who signed it."

I just looked at the snake. "*You*? I'm confused. Are you allowed to make such deals?"

New Achievement! Holistic!

Your feed has reached a 95%+ viewer ratio of a single system!

Over 95% of all viewers in the entire, newly-coined Naga Protectorate of the New Reformer are currently watching your feed!

***Reward*: You have received a Legendary Fan Box! This box will only be voted on by viewers in the Naga system.**

"I *am* allowed to make such deals," Rishi said, pulling himself taller. "I am allowed because I am now the leader of the new Naga Sultanate."

"Uh," I said. "I thought all that sultan stuff was in your history. What about the current king guy? Vinata's father?"

"My brothers should have him properly deposed by now. Him and his remaining children, along with the prime minister and the entirety of the House of Greens. We have been planning this for some time now. And you, Carl, with your influence..."

I held up my hand, stopping him. I was staring down at the contract, still on the floor. He'd signed it all right. He'd signed it *Sultan Rishi the Usurper, First of his Name of the Naga Uprising.*

I laughed. That was *not* the same name that had been in that achievement.

"You know what? I don't actually care about any of this *Game of Thrones* bullshit. I just have a question for you. What happens to that contract if you die before I sign it?"

He flicked his tongue. "It will be up to the new leadership to decide if it is valid, and it'll have to be re-signed by the new leader or council. After what has happened, it may take some time. But if I am to be kept alive, you will be certain that some semblance of stability will..."

I held up my hand again.

Warning: Open Hostilities begin in 40 minutes.

Elle: Katia, you are a genius. You timed it perfectly.

Katia: Thank Milk. Her maps are insanely accurate.

My chat was filled with preparations. I needed to hurry this up. So far we didn't see any enemy movement except some repositioning of the orc troops. I had to get this over with and get into place. I hadn't actually expected any of this posturing from the naga when I came here, and I hadn't planned this sort of conversation. But I had been curious, and now I knew why he'd done what he had. He was just like all the others, like Empress D'Nadia. A power-hungry asshole. It was oddly disappointing.

I looked the naga up and down. "I'd like to renegotiate on behalf of Earth."

He straightened even further, and his tongue flicked again.

"Of course. Tell me your terms."

"This is what I want. I want you to shut up. I want your people to take those ships you offered us, to get into them, and to drive

yourselves into the nearest star. But first, I want you, Mr. new Sultan of the naga, to know something."

I paused, and he didn't respond. But that smug look on his snake face had finally left.

The thirty seconds have passed.

You have successfully marked Rishi of the Princess Posse.

His highest stat is Dexterity.

"Some people might find all of these politics interesting. But me? It makes my head hurt. I can't get away from it. I know, I know. It's probably important for me to be aware of all this stuff. But not today. Today I'm just happy that all your people are watching. You know why? Because it means they get to watch yet another of their so-called leaders killed. And spoiler alert for those at home. Rishi here is just the opening act."

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<Note Added by Crawler Carl, 25th edition>

Operation: Ruin consists of four separate offensives, followed by what Donut calls the "Coup De War Crime."

Each of the four offensives kick off simultaneously and will have multiple, coordinated prongs.

If all goes to plan, everything should be done under seven hours. And since it never goes to plan, we have multiple contingencies in place including a rapid-deploy battalion—the 105th, split in two—ready to teleport to any part of the battlefield at any moment.

In addition, we will have support from Juice Box and the NPC team for all four offensives. Britney will coordinate all of our communication with Team Retribution. It seems she's become quite close with Juice Box. She's gotten very good at being a go-between, working multiple lines of communication with the skill of a seasoned police dispatcher.

Florin will deal with the orcs, Boomer with the Reavers, Donut with the Dream, and my task is the Madness. Tipid will remain at the FUPA to defend, and Rosetta is the designated "Theater Commander," meaning she is in charge of coordinating it all. In addition, Louis will be making multiple bomb runs in support of different operations. There are too many details to relate, and doing so in a single post is akin to trying to explain the Iron Tangle without

a map. So I will do my best to focus. I know I will falter in this. I know I will constantly be looking up the status of this operation or that. How can I not when I know friends will die today?

But I will do my best.

So instead of rehashing the entire operation here, I will instead tell you what I must do today.

I will hitch a ride with Louis aboard Party Planner *and accompany him on his first bomb run over orc territory. My presence will greatly increase the yield of his bombs. Louis will then drop me and Samantha off in Reaver territory where I will meet up with Elle. We will leave Samantha for her part in Boomer's offensive against the Reavers. And then Elle and I will move together, using the Gate of the Feral Gods to enter the territory of the Madness where my operation to find and kill Houston will begin.*

The Princess Posse's objective is to win this war today. Mine is to lead the operation to defeat the Madness.

I need to focus, but it is so hard.

If this is my last entry, know I went down fighting.

Hello, crawlers! Hello, fighters!

Combined message today. Open Hostilities begin soon.

I don't give a shit what any of you do by this point. Seriously. I just want it to end, and I want you to know I hate all of you.

Now get out there and kill, kill, kill!

"Wow," Louis said from the cockpit.

We hadn't gotten an update at all from Cascadia in a few days, and this one had just come out of nowhere.

Donut: I THINK SHE NEEDS A VACATION.

Samantha floated into the cabin of *Party Planner*, squeezed between the bombs, and parked herself on my lap. She was quivering with excitement. She smelled like bourbon and cigar smoke. Her neck was doing that revolting thing where it wriggled

back and forth. My leg burned slightly when she rubbed her stump against bare skin.

"Where have you been?" I asked, rearranging her. "We almost had to leave without you. And who did that to your hair?"

"I was entertaining the GIs, Carl. Soldiers always need comfort just before a major battle. And Kiwi did it to my hair. For a one-eyed preggo who used to be a dinosaur, she sure has deft fingers. I would've made a move on her if Mongo wasn't right there and if we had a bag handy. Do you know that when you and Donut are in the planning room doing planning stuff, Mongo goes in the kitchens and sniffs Kiwi's butt so much she has to swat him away? Anyway, don't you just love my hair? They're called victory rolls! Aren't they elegant? By the way, do you know what G.I. stands for? Louis says it stands for ground infantry, but Florin said it actually means galvanized iron, so of course I had to threaten Florin's alligator mother, and he said his mother wasn't even an alligator which got us all talking about Kiwi again. She's going to be giving birth any day now. Isn't that exciting? But I just love my hair like this. I told Kiwi when I get my body back, she can move in with me and my king and do my hair like that every day as long as her mongrel babies are potty trained and don't come out too ugly."

Her hair was in some complicated, 1940's style with two giant swirls. The whole thing was going to fall apart the moment we dumped out of *Party Planner*. It wasn't quite a pompadour, but I was suddenly reminded of Fire Brandy the lesser demon from the Iron Tangle.

Mordecai had been playing WWII and Vietnam war movies in the saferoom for some of the younger changelings, and Samantha had been watching them, too. The kids had been angry at my whole "No child soldier" pronouncement, especially since someone pointed out that Donut was younger than most of them. Mordecai thought that showing them war movies, such as *Hamburger Hill*, *Platoon*, and *Saving Private Ryan*—movies that focused on the horrors of war—would help dissuade the kids from wanting to get in on the action. Predictably, the whole thing backfired, and the kids were complaining louder than ever. Samantha had apparently been

enraptured by the movies. She'd been sulking after the incident in Club Vanquisher with the "imposter" playing her mother, but the movies had strangely turned her mood around. She'd been zipping around the battalions, providing what she called "moral support" to the soldiers. According to Tipid, that mostly meant sexually harassing them and stealing their alcohol.

"Sure. It's elegant as..." I paused, realizing what was scrawled on her forehead had finally changed. I sighed.

The "Miss Me?" had been replaced with a new statement. "Fuck the Cheese Dicks."

"It's cheese *sticks*, Samantha. Sticks. Not cheese dicks."

"I don't think so, Carl. Cheese sticks doesn't even make sense. Sticks come from trees. Why would there be a tree made out of cheese? I know one goddess whose clitoris got turned into the head of a bald man named Otis-Ray who spends his day begging to be fed cabbage, so it makes much more sense that a penis would be turned to a food item."

The conversation was, thankfully, interrupted by Donut.

Donut: THEY INSTALLED THE WIRELESS PA SPEAKERS IN TIME! ISN'T THAT GREAT?

Carl: The whole system? On *all* the towers?

Donut: WE BOUGHT THE SYSTEM, AND IT INSTALLED ITSELF. WE GOT THE DELUXE PACKAGE, AND THERE ARE MORE SPEAKERS THAN TOWERS. IT EVEN INTERFACES WITH MY HEADSET, AND I CAN PULL UP ONE OF THOSE RECORDING STUDIO BOARD THINGIES WITH ALL THE SLIDY DIALS. THERE'S SOMETHING CALLED DISTORTION AND DELAY AND REVERB. OOHHH WHAT'S A PHASER? ISN'T THAT FROM STAR TREK?

Carl: Jesus. Get Li Na's permission before you use it. You'll blow out the ears of everyone in Shanty Town.

Donut: I AM A WARLORD. I DON'T ASK PERMISSION. I GIVE ORDERS. BUT I WILL WARN THEM. BUT NOW I CAN ALSO USE BARD SPELLS.

Carl: We'll save that in case we need it.

Donut: BUT YOU SAID WE NEED TO KEEP THEM DISTRACTED. I COULD TAUNT THEM. I THINK I'M GONNA TAUNT THEM. I HAVE PLENTY OF BALD AND PASTY PEOPLE JOKES READY TO GO. BUT IF YOU THINK THAT MIGHT HURT THE FEELINGS OF SOME OF OUR OWN BALD AND PASTY PEOPLE, I CAN TALK ABOUT HOW LOUIS BASICALLY HAD SEX WITH HIS MOM.

Carl: You have enough to worry about. They'll be plenty distracted. What you don't want is unnecessary god attention. You shrieking over a massive PA is just going to work against what we're trying to do.

Donut: I DON'T SHRIEK, CARL. AND TOYOTOMI SAYS THE DEFLECTOR TOWERS KEEP THE GODS AWAY.

Carl: Think of it like an electric fence. They're far from foolproof. Remember when Bea's cousin was making fun of the gorilla at the zoo, and it smashed the glass? Think of it like that.

Donut: OKAY. IMANI IS HERE WITH ME NOW, AND SHE'S SAYING THE SAME THING.

Carl: Good. Listen to her advice. And remember what I said. Aim your shots. Breathe. Make each shot count. You can do this.

Donut: I KNOW I CAN DO THIS, CARL. I AM A WARLORD.

System Message: 90 Second Warning.

Carl: Okay. Don't be afraid to jump away at the first sign of trouble.

Carl: Elle. Any sign of Tagg?

Elle: Not yet. Sorry. Edgar is buried and stationed a few miles away and will let us know if he's spotted.

Carl: Okay. You be safe. I'll meet you in the middle.

Elle: Happy hunting, Cowboy.

I looked up at Louis and nodded. From the cockpit, he gave me a thumbs up. *Party Planner* silently rose into the night air as Samantha continued to chat away. My stomach lurched as we surged upward, trees, then dark, smoky clouds, then the imaginary, starlit sky

whipping by as the airship engaged stealth mode and started to speed toward its target.

"Ceiling is really high," Louis called as we continued to rise. "It's higher even than the bubbles."

"How do you even know what the ceiling is?" I had to shout.

He tapped his console. "There's an indicator."

Through the open doors to my left and right, I couldn't really see anything below but the dark haze of clouds. Most of the factions had started burning smoke the moment they saw Donut's tower. It wasn't going to matter. Donut and Louis both could see right through it all, a skill I didn't have.

The ship was so full of armament, there wasn't enough room to move. My vision was a mass of stability notifications over the dozens of bombs, and I had to dim the notifications to actually see anything if I wasn't staring out the open side door. Just my presence stabilized them and massively increased the yield. The moment I dimmed the notifications, I saw the two dots hidden in the back of the ship.

"Goddamnit," I called, turning around from my spot to see the small gnomish girl peeking around the back pile of the square-shaped No Disassemble EMP bombs. "Skarn and Bonnie! What did I say?" I cursed myself for not paying better attention. Bonnie had a large snake wrapped around her arm. Skarn.

Carl: Louis, turn it around. We gotta land.

The two kids, one changeling and one gnome, had been explicitly banned from manning the door guns on *Party Planner*. Especially today.

System Message: Here we go, bitches! Let chaos reign!

"Oh, fuck!" Louis called, and the ship dove. "Get to the guns! Get to the guns! We have incoming! Lots of incoming!"

I cursed as warlord notifications started streaming through my interface. Dozens of distant streaks of light appeared through the cockpit window, emerging up from the clouds like needles pushing up through dark cotton. Missiles. They were fired from Reaver territory. Likely with advanced seekers. They turned and corkscrewed through the air, and despite *Party Planner*'s stealth

capabilities, they headed right toward us. Louis's cockpit was beeping furiously.

At the same time, the long-range, magical artillery from deep in the Dream territory started to fire. The massive, flaming balls—significantly bigger and more powerful than what they were able to fire during the previous phase—started arcing through the sky, likely split evenly between the FUPA and the Nest tower. Their passage painted the night, like they were tearing a hole through the fabric of darkness.

We were expecting the magical artillery. We had not anticipated the Reaver missiles, especially not ones so smart. They, too, had airships, but we figured if they were going to attack us, they would move straight for the headquarters or hit either Florin or Tran.

"Gotta lower into the trees!" Louis called.

"That won't stop seekers!" I yelled back, pushing Samantha off me as I tried to stand and reposition myself so I could see better. "Stay above the tree line so we can shoot them down!"

I couldn't quite stand to my full height and had to keep my head to the side. Bonnie shoved me aside and quickly started unbuckling the large gun from stowage against the interior of the fuselage. These were upgraded guns from the ballista system she'd used before. Skarn moved to the other side, changing form so he looked like a Chee, like Holger.

Bonnie appeared to be completely calm. She was even chewing gum. The tiny gnome girl was no longer wearing her Dallas Cowboys jersey and now wore an oversized shirt from someone in the 105th Scream Warriors. It depicted a crudely drawn, bloody child berserker character holding an axe. The berserker was a little girl that had to be eight years old, which explained why Bonnie had taken to it. Underneath it was the unit's motto. "We bleed when the job's done."

Entering the realm of the Bone Clan.

You are at war with this team.

This airship is cloaked.

Cloaking has possibly been compromised.

"Some of the incoming missiles are exploding," Louis called. "Why are they exploding?"

"Probably the orc defenses," I said as I grasped a handhold on the ceiling. I couldn't see anything anymore as we dove through the clouds and smoke, coming out just above the tree line. The tops of the alien trees whipped by like a treadmill just below us. "The Reavers and the orcs aren't talking, so maybe they think the missiles are aimed at them. Are we sure they aren't?"

"They didn't get all of them!" Louis called, punching buttons on his newly-upgraded panel. "Looks like three got through. They're locked on us! Something else is out there, too. Something big. Gonna turn broadside."

"What? Why?" I called.

Louis ignored me. "Bonnie, they'll be coming from above but directly in front of you!"

"Got it, boss," Bonnie called. A helmet appeared on her head. It was a modified gnomish farseer, built around a small-sized, metallic flak helmet. It was so ridiculously large on the small form, it made her look like a steampunk bobblehead. "I see 'em. All three are bunched up. In range in three, two, one."

Jesus, I thought, watching the gnome tracking upward with her gun.

She fired three short bursts from her weapon, one after another. The red tracer fire arced from the gun, slicing through the night. The clouds above lit with purple, magical light, followed quickly by a wave of heat. "Splash three."

"Great job, kid!" Louis called. "Resuming mission. Whatever that big thing is, it looks like it's circling above the Reaver castle." *Party Planner* turned in the air.

Samantha was bouncing up and down, shouting encouragement to Bonnie.

"If they can track us, I better keep to the cloud cover," Louis called. "I keep getting notifications that we've been temporarily spotted." We rose, the dark smoke pushing in on both sides. It suddenly felt oppressive, claustrophobic. Multiple, distant explosions started to echo.

I was already deep in my messages as they flooded in.

Donut: CARL, CARL MY *FLAK* SPELL WORKS REALLY GOOD! THE STUPID DREAM ELVES ARE ALREADY SHOOTING AT ME, AND THEY DIDN'T EVEN GET CLOSE!

General Elle: Gate one is open, and I'm stepping through. Let's see what comes out of this one. Next stop, the Reavers. Don't be late, Carl.

Colonel Rosetta: Head's up, everyone. Feral God number one is on the way. It's gonna appear near the Dream castle.

General Tran: Dream artillery is targeting us, not the FOOP! Some of it is getting through! Spreading out and bunkering in.

Oh shit, I thought. If they weren't targeting the headquarters, that meant...

Colonel Tipid: Activated base defense just in time. Two or three battalion strength of Dreamers just teleported outside the FUPA. They're making a run for the throne room!

Fuck, fuck, fuck, I thought. The ability to teleport entire battalions at once, as opposed to opening a gate, was near impossible. It required five mages with the same spell to chant for a full thirty hours straight to pull it off. I knew this because we had two groups—two halves of the 105th Scream Warriors—who'd already done the same and were now waiting to be rapidly deployed anywhere. While this practice of mass teleportation wasn't unheard of, both Rosetta and Mordecai said it'd only happened a handful of times in Faction Wars because of how grueling the process was.

I quickly moved to the officer band to take a peak.

Rosetta: Justice, it's Dreamers.

Justice Light: How many?

Rosetta: I think it's all of them.

Justice Light: That's too many. Chop 'em up a little first for me, Rosie. Get 'em down to under 3,000, then we can let them in. I will welcome any and all guests into my lair. Would prefer it be Reaver, but I'll take what I can get.

Rosetta: Tipid, how are you holding up?

Tipid: They're moving hard and fast. They have heavy armor. More than the allotted ten. I'm going to have to request backup already.

Donut: KEEP AN EYE OUT FOR EPITOME TAGG. IF YOU SEE HIM, TELL HIM I'M LOOKING FOR HIM.

Rosetta: Don't worry, Donut. We'll paint him for you if we see him. I'm making the order for half the 105th to defend location number one. We'll still have the second half battalion ready to go. Jurgen, send them over.

Jurgen: They're coming.

A distant, soundless flash momentarily lit the world with a yellow-tinged light.

The Feral God Meatus has entered the realm.

This deity is too distant to activate your Scavenger's Daughter.

Mordecai: Oh, fuck.

Rosetta: Yes! Good job, Elle. The Dream have made a tactical error leaving their castle unprotected. They brought their army out too far from home.

Donut: BRITNEY, MOVE ON THE ELF CASTLE.

Rosetta: Wait! Don't use the digger!

Mordecai: No! Hold off. If Meatus is the feral god that escaped the Nothing, that means…

A second, blue-tinged light flashed.

The escaped feral god has summoned a deity!

Harpocrates has made an appearance in the realm!

This deity is too distant to activate your Scavenger's Daughter.

Rosetta: Britney, abort! Abort! Tell them not to use the digger near that god!

Tipid: I swear this happens every season.

Britney: Telling them now! Don't know if it's too late or not!

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Mordecai: Donut, do NOT use your PA while Harpocrates is out!

Donut: WHY? DOES HE HATE GOOD MUSIC? I JUST FOUND THE PLAY SONG BUTTON ON THE SOUNDBOARD. I HAVE THE PERFECT SONG READY TO GO.

Carl: Goddamnit, Donut. Stick to the plan!

Mordecai: Harpocrates hates sound. He *will* come for you if you're being too loud. Just let him deal with the feral god. This whole Meatus versus Harpocrates thing is an old story, though it's usually a storyline that plays out during the Ascendency battles. Harpo is going to fight and kill Meatus, and then he's going to, uh, try to do something with Meatus. But it's not going to work, which is going to enrage him. Then he's going to stick around for some time smashing everything noisy until he times out.

Carl: Oh, shit. Are the diggers loud?

Mordecai: They're dwarven. Everything the dwarves do is loud. Luckily, Meatus is louder.

Donut: OH MY GOODNESS, LOOK AT THAT THING! IT LOOKS LIKE JACK'S PENIS FROM THE SECOND FLOOR! CARL, WHY DO ALL THESE GODS LOOK LIKE PENISES? IS THAT MEATUS OR THE DEAF GUY?

Mordecai: Yeah, uh. That's Meatus. Meatus is actually two beings, though they only have one name. Originally he was a normal-sized gremlin-like creature who stole Harpocrates's dink, sewed it on himself, and became a god.

Donut: DINK? DID YOU JUST CALL IT A DINK? IS THAT A CANADIAN TERM? AND HOW IS IT LOUD?

Mordecai: It's an old story and kind of a dumb, recurring joke. The gremlin part of Meatus stays the same size no matter where or how he's summoned, but the dink itself takes on the size that the god would if he was summoned to the same area. That part of him is sapient and very loud and doesn't want to go back to Harpocrates because it likes music. And Harpocrates isn't deaf. He is the god of silence, and he can hear the heartbeat of a fly from half a planet away.

Donut: OMG I LIKE THIS MEATUS GUY ALREADY.

A massive, slurping noise echoed across the battlefield. It shook the airship as it passed, and it came with the scent of a rotten soft cheese. It sounded like wet sewage getting sucked through a grate.

Next to me, Bonnie started making gagging noises.

Donut: I CHANGED MY MIND I'M GONNA BARF.

"See, Carl!" Samantha cried from my lap. "See! Cheese dick!"

"I'm pretty sure that's the most disgusting thing you've ever said."

More notifications flooded in. Too many to deal with. So far, the only hand-to-hand fighting was Florin versus the orc forces and Tipid defending against the Dream assault on the FUPA. Other than the missiles and whatever was guarding their airspace, there was no sign yet of the Reaver military, nor the Viceroys. This wasn't surprising as intelligence suggested both would hold their armies back to defend their strongholds.

"Okay," Louis said, bringing me back to the now. "Rising again to make the bomb run. Look, there's the castle!"

He pointed out the cockpit, but all I could see in the darkness was haze and a few lights, indicating the King's Point, headquarters of the orcs.

Florin: Head's up. Some massive, mechanized tank just dug itself out of the riverbank and bloody leaped across the river, falling into our south flank. The thing is like five meters tall. It looks like a scorpion, but it's the size of one of those industrial haul trucks. It's covered in shields and it's about to tear us a new asshole. The thing must weigh 700 tons. Pretty sure it's being piloted by Warlord Stalwart himself. I think some of the mages might be on that thing, too.

I fought the urge to get in on the chat and offer suggestions.

I moved to the main band battle chat, which was an even bigger mess. Missile support was being piloted by Bomo and Sledge. They were based in Shanty Town where they could run to Donut's aid, but the actual missile batteries they were controlling were mostly fired from Area 52 in the woods. Each battery was controlled via a long-range magical trigger, all tied to a pair of controllers the system called a Trollish Portable Control Room. The controllers looked like 80's era keyboards with a magical screen above them, and they were fairly common in the dungeon. Supposedly some seasons had gauntlet-style floors where you had to get to a central control room and kill the trolls who were operating the traps.

For Bomo and Sledge, we had a former crawler modify the controllers to mimic the cretin-sized game controllers we'd made since they were already familiar with them. Painted targets would appear on the screen, and they could select specific missiles to launch at the targets. We had over 1,500 missiles of various kinds ready to go.

Florin: Missile support, just painted a target. It's a mobile tank. Hit it with chaffs and mix in a few *Mute* missiles.

Sledge: On it, boss man.

Britney: Louis, report. Semeru say they're on standby waiting for your bomb run.

Louis: Heigh ho, silver! Bombing now!

"Watch your feet!" Louis called out loud.

I was so busy reading the chat I'd promised myself I'd try to stay away from, I hadn't realized we'd already reached the target.

Samantha had gotten herself into the cockpit and was shouting excitedly. The entire cabin lit up as every bomb on board suddenly armed itself. I concentrated, and **Overclocked** appeared over each bomb.

"Bombs away!" Louis called, and several spots on the ship's floor slid open at the same time. Tendrils of freezing mist curled up into the cabin as the airship bucked. *Ching, ching, ching, ching*. The square, shield and tech-busting No Disassembles clinked as they zipped out of the holders, pulled down by gravity, followed by the round high-yield Waffle Makers, which were shaped like tubes. These made a different, heavier sound as they clunked out the holder, disappearing into the mist. The entire load was dropped in seconds.

"What is that thing?" Bonnie asked, peering out the open door. The gnomish farseer was spinning on her head, trying to zoom in on something I couldn't see in the darkness. "It's alive, not an airship. It has a shield over it."

"Focus on below. They haven't reacted yet, but they will," Skarn called, peering out his side.

Blam, blam, blam! The first bombs hit the invisible shield. Each detonation felt like a slap in my chest. That was followed a second later by even more explosions, and the distinctive *thwum* of several shields getting cracked open like an egg.

"They're firing their *Flak* spells, but it's not good against gravity bombs," Louis called. "And I think they taxed their anti-air on the Reaver missiles! Looks like the shield is down way more than... whoa fuck!"

A beam of green light shot up in the air, missing us by about 100 feet as we rocketed away. The light hit the invisible ceiling of the level and crackled, spreading across the barrier just above *Party Planner* like liquid lightning being poured out upside down. We angled down and away as the dark night suddenly took on a green glow. We disappeared back into the smoke.

"Jesus, I think that was a long-range death ray," I said. "Probably a synergy tower with a war mage in it."

"You missed," Louis shouted, punching the ceiling.

Britney: North attack. Dwarves moving in. Air, confirm you're clear.

Louis: We're clear.

Britney: They're dropping the agitators.

"Now it's our turn," Louis shouted, screaming out the window, still amped up, punching his fist. I'd never seen him like this before.

"Get them! Get them, Louis!" Samantha shouted, jumping up and down in the cockpit.

Britney: Dwarves confirm the lava tubes have been successfully agitated and the mountain is beginning rapid eruption. They're setting up barriers and moving out and positioning themselves for lava abatement.

Below and behind us, the mountain upon which the King's Point castle sat was about to have a very, very bad day. The eruption would be miniscule compared to something like the Mount Saint Helens blast, whose lateral explosion annihilated everything within eight miles, but it would be enough to blow the top off the small mountain and completely obliterate the castle, leaving nothing but a throne room just sitting there in open air.

The eruption itself posed extreme danger to anyone in the area, especially Florin and the 101st who were near the base of the mountain, but the dwarves supposedly had a plan to rapidly stem the lava flow, keeping it from hitting Larracos.

We'd all thought the volcano idea was great. All except Elle, who'd be sitting next door in Reaver territory when it went off. Florin had just said, "Wicked, mate," when we told him we could blow the mountain top.

We all held our collective breath.

A shouting voice echoed throughout the land. "NOT THIS TIME. I AM FREE, AND YOU CAN'T MAKE ME GO BACK!" This was Meatus, fighting the silent god Harpocrates, all the way on the other side of the map. The deep voice was like that of a big, beefy wrestler trying to shout while gargling messily on something thick. "I YEARN TO SING."

Donut: THE WIENER GUY JUST SMACKED THE OTHER GOD LIKE A BASEBALL BAT, AND HE WENT FLYING RIGHT INTO THE DREAM CASTLE. IT'S WORKING!

Imani: So much for deflector towers keeping the gods away. The Dream castle had two.

Rosetta: Britney, what's the status of the south digger?

Britney: It held off at the last moment. It's just below the surface, waiting for the gods to move away. The Dream castle's shields are down, and they report the remaining elves are starting to flee.

Rosetta: Donut, you're up. Officially handing off the southern campaign to you.

Donut: AND SO IT BEGINS.

"Why is it taking so long for the mountain to explode?" Louis asked.

Britney: Guys, guys, watch out! The orcs added an emergency or backup shield over the whole mountain, and the dwarves are saying too much pressure is…

The mountain behind us blew its top, and we were much too close.

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The mountain exploded, and suddenly, we were spinning, cartwheeling through the air. I smashed to the ceiling of *Party Planner* and crashed back down as we twirled like we'd been flicked away.

"Hold on!" Louis shouted as we looped. The vertical spin corrected, but we still spun like a top, and we were actually going up, not down. To my right, Skarn had changed to an octopus-like creature, and he had five or six arms wrapped around a screaming Bonnie, keeping them both in the cabin. One of Bonnie's small arms was clearly broken, but it healed as I watched.

A terrible, screeching noise filled the air as the airship's propellers bounced off the floor's ceiling. One of them broke off and tumbled away, smoking as the ship finally corrected itself. From the cockpit, Louis was cursing loudly, but we didn't fall. I remembered he'd said we could still fly with as little as two propellers.

I was going to vomit, but I jumped into my chat as I heaved. Rocks started pinging off the airship's shield.

Warlord Carl: Florin and everyone in the 101st! Brace for a shockwave! Eruption is bigger than they said it would be! Elle, you too. Buckle down. Boomer, watch your heads!

"You guys okay?" I shouted at Skarn, who'd turned back to his chee shape.

"We're good," Bonnie said. She actually seemed okay, but I could see the fear in Skarn's eyes. Tears had formed.

Crack! That was a new sound, and it took a moment for me to realize what it was. It was Donut casting *Magic Missile*. With her tiara's advanced targeting skills and Donut's elevated position, along with her Deathbed Hellcat class, she could hit anything she could see with any of her long-range spells. It was louder than expected.

When we built the Nest tower, we could assign the tower's synergy to several different skills, spells, and classes. Originally, we planned on making it a straight-up sniper tower, which would greatly enhance Donut's ability to zero in on a target across the battlefield. But it turned out with her tiara, that was unnecessary. All Donut needed was line of sight to apply her sniper skills.

Which, in turn, allowed us to assign a different synergy to the tower.

The Nest was instead built to have synergy with something called Atrocity-class spells.

Donut had several, including her new one. *War Crime*.

It was the one part of today's plan I prayed we wouldn't have to use.

A dark plume of ash was starting to spread that was going to be a problem for everyone. And the lava flow would probably be more than the dwarves had anticipated, too.

"Carl!" Louis shouted as more rocks fell all around us. "I can fly with three props, but not well. I can quick repair it at base, but I gotta limp back through this chop. You guys better jump now. I see Elle's beacon."

Entering the realm of the Reavers.

You are at war with this team.

This airship is cloaked.

Cloaking has possibly been compromised.

"Okay!" I said. I turned to the kids. "When you get back to base, stay there this time. Do you understand?"

Skarn nodded, not saying anything.

Still, I grabbed him by the shoulder and leaned in. "Don't just stay at Area 52. Get back into the saferoom. And if you have any friends that aren't allowed in the saferoom, make sure they're in Larracos. Not Shanty Town. Larracos. Do you understand?"

He nodded again, and this time I believed him.

Carl: Elle, you good?

Elle: Oh, you know. I'm okay. The winding box got knocked over, and the watches fell out. The gate was already primed, so the gate activated. Hurry your ass up. We got 20 minutes before it closes. A bunch of trees cracked but didn't fall. Who could've predicted activating a goddamned volcano could possibly spiral out of control? And just you wait. I went through this back in '80. We're all gonna be cleaning ash out of all our crevices for the next 99 years.

"Come on, Samantha!" I called. I looked out the door, searching for the large portal, but I couldn't see anything in the smoke.

Crack! Crack!

"Bye, Louis!" Samantha said. She zipped up and kissed him on the cheek. "Just so you know, nothing turns me on more than mass, faceless slaughter from above." She came to hover near me. Her hair was already ruined, and the "Fuck the Cheese Dicks" had smeared. Now all it said was "Fuck Cheese."

Donut: HEADSHOT!

I had my quarter splat fall protection, but I didn't trust it. I took a scroll of *Controlled Feather Fall* and read it.

"Stay safe!" I called at Louis before I activated my tech shield and jumped out the open door, followed soon by Samantha. *Party Planner* quickly disappeared above us as it angled around, heading back toward Area 52 to repair and reload.

As we fell, plunging through the smoke and rocks, some of which burned red-hot, multiple notifications came in quick succession.

The battlefield conditions have triggered a summoning! The Goddess of Chaos has been spontaneously summoned.

Eris has made an appearance in the realm.

This deity is too distant to activate your Scavenger's Daughter.

System Message: A demon eviction event is occurring over multiple locations on the battlefield.

Florin: We got a demon event starting here. Missiles disabled the enemy armor's movement but not its teeth.

Missiles, hit it again. Looks like Stalwart tried to teleport away, but the net stopped him. He might make a run for it. Donut, looks like we might need an atrocity or two in a minute.

Donut: SAY THE WORD, AND DEATH WILL RAIN IN MY NAME.

Before I could even parse all that, more notifications came.

The Throne Room of the Bone Clan is being occupied by forces from Team Retribution. If they can hold for six hours, the Bone Clan will be defeated!

The Throne Room of the Dream is being occupied by forces from Team Retribution. If they can hold for six hours, the Dream will be defeated!

Warlord Message. Sir Ferdinand of Team Retribution has proposed an emergency action item. "Gods that appear during Faction Wars don't gotta go home right away. Uh, Juice Box told me to say a bunch of other stuff too but now I can't remember it all. Something about outworlders, but you probably heard what she said. But she wanted me to also say that she promises it'll be entertaining. So my proposal is that."

This emergency action item request has been split into two requests. The first action item has been denied. All deity summoning rules will remain in effect as written for the ninth floor.

The second action item has been approved. Effective immediately, the following ascendency rules are applied. Ascendency players may no longer choose whether to pilot their sponsored deities should they be summoned off the 12th floor. Attendance is now mandatory. In addition, during gameplay summons, ascendency players may no longer choose to appear as themselves. All deities will appear as designed, and all sponsored deities will be piloted by their sponsors. Any summons currently in progress where the

pilot stayed back because she was being a cowardly little chicken have been corrected.

"What the fuck," I said out loud as I narrowly missed slamming into a tree. I slowed my descent and landed hard in the woods, Samantha floating next to me. All around me, trees that still stood were starting to burn.

None of that was planned. Not the gods. Not Team Retribution getting to those two throne rooms, and especially not that action item. I looked frantically on my map, and I saw a blue dot about two hundred meters away with the already-activated portal right next to her. Elle. She was waiting for me to get there. We would go through the gate and teleport ourselves to the Madness, leaving Samantha behind.

Elle: Jesus, Carl. You landed like a comet. I see you. Better get here quick. I just got a weird notification that someone had searched my location and it canceled out my *Subterfuge* spell. Gotta wait a minute before I can cast it again.

Victory cracked into existence right next to me.

This was already so far off the rails, I didn't even startle at Victory's appearance.

Fire from the eruption continued to rain down. Luckily this was just regular, old-fashioned fire and not Sheol fire. Victory said nothing at first. She just looked down at me, arms crossed, a grim look on her face. I was about to say something snarky, but she held up her hand.

"Just so you know, we only learned about this like five minutes ago," she said. "None of the adjutants had any idea. We tried to stop it, but apparently the AI says it's out of its hands."

"What are you talking about?"

Florin: Damnit! The anti-teleport net was breached. Stalwart teleported away!

Donut: I SAW HIM! DID I GET HIM?

Florin: I think you might've winged him just as he was teleporting, but I couldn't tell what was happening. He popped out the top of the tank covered with something.

Donut: HE LOOKED LIKE HE WAS FIGHTING HIS OWN GUYS!

Several dots suddenly appeared on the map, all enemies. They'd all teleported right to Elle's location and the portal.

Elle: Carl! Stalwart is here!

I ran toward the commotion, preparing to use my *Wraith Phase*. As I rushed forward, Elle flew past me, flying over my shoulder, having been tossed by a spell. I saw the **Unconscious** tag over her head. She hit a tree behind me with a sickening crack, and the tree toppled over.

"Samantha," I cried as I rushed forward. "Help her!"

I jumped into the clearing, quickly taking in the scene, confusion mounting. What the hell? Stalwart was here, on his knees, crying in pain. There were four corpses on the ground. War mages. The magical beings were dead and smoking. They'd all been hit and killed with Donut's amped-up *Magic Missile* before they'd all teleported here. Three more of the war mages surrounded Stalwart, shouting. A fourth stood off to the side.

Quickly-melting ice covered everything. Elle had managed a spell before she'd been taken out.

Even though they were all the same type of creature, they all looked like different monsters. They all had crackling, multi-hued glows around them. I knew more about war mages now than I had before the floor started, and the sight of so many in one place terrified me.

The one standing off to the side had the mark of colonel over his head, but as I watched, the designation faded away. And much to my surprise, their dots all turned white. And, even more surprisingly, the white dots took on a brownish-orange glow. Each army had its own color. The Princess Posse was pink. Nobody was this shade.

I examined the war mage. He looked much like the one whose head I had in my inventory: a long-haired elf, old and wizened with an angry sneer on his sagging face.

Akuma. War Mage. Level 100.

Leader of the War Mage Rebellion.

This was originally a high-elf cobbler with a human skin, resleeved 12 times before the ambient magic gave him his final form. He's arguably the most powerful non-god magic caster on this floor. He's also a complete prick, as evidenced by the company he keeps.

Want to know some interesting trivia about war mages? These guys have been around since the very early days of *Dungeon Crawler World*, but they are one of the few, true dungeon-born entities. They weren't dreamed up by a sweaty, caffeine-addled writer, nor were they developed by one of my kind. They just sort of happened, a result of too many combatants having access to *You're Not Done Yet*.

The final form a war mage takes is entirely dependent on the combination of its first two forms, in this case, a human crawler from a very long time ago and a high elf. The skin of a corpse is ripped off of a body and turned to a creature named a flesher. The flesher then consumes a living being, melting the original skin off and re-sleeving the creature. The flesher casts *Boned*, reanimating the skeleton, and the two become a symbiote.

Symbiotes are extremely attractive targets to other fleshers. And because young symbiotes are slow and awkward, they are oftentimes quickly re-sleeved by fresh fleshers. Each iteration results in a more powerful being.

It's rare for a symbiote to be resleeved at least a dozen times, but when it happens, the magic itself can become sapient. When this happens, the flesh finally fuses to the reanimated skeleton, turning the three creatures—the skeleton, the flesher, and the sapient well of magic—into a single being. A war mage.

This process usually takes at least 12 iterations, but there's no hard rule about it. Sometimes it takes up to 15 or 16 iterations. It depends on the latent magic in the skin of the fleshers.

War mages come with knowledge of hundreds of spells.

They're also all complete dicks. If they ever made action figures of these things, their accessories would include keys to a BMW, a few bumps of cocaine, and a membership card to some secret club where you can hunt homeless people for fun.

If these things were non-corporeal, they'd be called magic elementals. Instead, they're just grumpy, lumpy assholes who get their rocks off by showing just how unpleasant they can be. The very nature of most magic spells is cold cruelty, and that shows when the magic itself is allowed to talk.

And nobody made them! All of this just happened on its own. In fact, the very existence of these things has actually been the focus of multiple, boring-ass studies and books. But, in the end, because they were "born" in the dungeon, they are of the dungeon, and just because nobody engineered their existence doesn't mean that existence hasn't been exploited, as evidenced by the fact most war mages find their minds wiped and themselves sitting in quests or mercenary guilds each time a new dungeon opens.

However, their very existence also creates problems. Each war mage one may find in the dungeon was created naturally, meaning they could have been made several seasons previous, and because the showrunners like to use war mages, especially for their precious Faction Wars, they are rarely recycled.

So here's a message for all the assholes reading this. If you can't see why that's a problem, maybe you should ask that pissed-off changeling army that's in the middle of wrecking your shit why you should probably keep an eye on the things you unleash, especially when you don't fully understand what they are.

Oh, by the way.

War mage heads explode and create something called a Sapient Moment of Destruction approximately ten minutes after they die. So, heads up. Pun intended.

As I watched in horror, the three war mages surrounding Stalwart each chanted something in unison, and the orc's flesh began to tear.

I met eyes with the terrified orc for just a moment.

"My sister was right," King Stalwart, leader of the Skull Empire, said in the moment before he exploded right in front of me, showering the clearing with his gore.

The four mages didn't move to attack me.

For the first time, I saw what was in the hands of Akuma, the leader of this group.

He had taken the Gate of the Feral Gods from Elle.

The war mage was staring at my bare feet.

"Nice shoes, asshole," he said to me before the four of them teleported away.

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Behind me, Elle groaned as she woke from her unconscious state. Samantha had stayed behind me and was clucking over her.

System Message: War Chief Stalwart of the Bone Clan has fallen. Credit for the kill has been given to three members of the War Mage Rebellion.

System Message: The War Mage Rebellion is not an active team. As per the current season's rules, the team currently occupying the Bone Clan's throne room, Team Retribution, will be awarded all their assets. Sections one and two are not connected to Larracos. As such, the King's Point throne room remains a capturable asset. Yes, even though the castle itself just blew up. The throne room is still there.

Elle: Sorry guys. That war mage prick snatched the gate right out of my hands.

Donut: I DID HIT HIM WHEN I SHOT! I GOT PARTIAL CREDIT FOR KILLING STALWART, BUT THEY DIDN'T SAY IT! THIS IS AN OUTRAGE!

I rushed over to Elle. "Are you okay?" Rock pieces continued to rain from the sky, landing all around us like burning hail. I kept my tech shield on.

She rubbed her head. "I'm okay. My pride is hurt more than anything. What the hell was all that about?"

"I don't know," I said, looking around. Several of the trees were on fire. "We don't need the gate anymore. We should get moving. We'll be caught in this fire soon."

"I need a moment," Elle said, still panting. "Damn, I haven't been walloped like that since my bachelorette party."

Samantha laughed. I did not.

I helped the small figure up. She still felt ice cold when I touched her, but now there was a gritty, electric feeling when I touched her skin. I lifted her up like a child, and she remained floating in the air. I was reminded of the first time I'd lifted her, so long ago during the rage elemental attack on the second floor.

The fairy crawler still had a dazed look to her eyes. "Carl, they could've killed me. That strong one, the elf-looking guy. He pulled back at the last moment. It was almost like he was trying *not* to kill me."

"Yeah," I said. "The mage guy was a dick, but his dot turned white. I don't know what's going on. I don't know their intentions. Did you see? The system said they have a team name and everything, but they're not an official team."

"That's what I was talking about," Victory said, her eyes flashing as she spoke. I'd forgotten she was standing there. "We just received notification that there's a new, non-team entity called the War Mage Rebellion. I still don't know what that even means. 'Non-team entity' is not a thing. At least it wasn't until just now."

"Carl, collect the bodies," Elle said. "They said the heads explode."

"Shit, you're right." I went about and collected the four war mage bodies. There was nothing left of Stalwart to collect. He had several magical items on him, which were scattered on the ground in front of the portal, but nothing truly amazing that I could see, which was interesting. I'd examine it all later.

The bodies all appeared in the **Graveyard** section of my inventory, which was now almost empty.

"War mages are always up to something tricky," Samantha muttered as she examined the open, crackling portal. "They're just

mad because nobody likes them." She seemed nervous as she floated near the gate. She continued to mutter under her breath.

The ground rumbled, and the distant voice of Meatus washed over us. "Stay out of this, Eris!"

This was followed by a psychotic, female laugh that instantly sounded familiar. "Fuck, fuck, fuck," the same voice said a moment later. "I said I didn't want to come down to other floors! How do I eject? Get me out of here!" She laughed again, and it sounded even crazier. "I'm not the one laughing. Stop! Stop!"

Katia: Oh my god, did you hear that? That goddess sounds just like Hekla.

Mordecai: That's Eris, the goddess of chaos. She's being driven by someone new this year. I don't know who it is, but it sounds like she just got sucked back into the goddess's body after that new rule was called.

Rosetta: Eris is sponsored by Nami. A model and influencer. She outbid the Priory, who usually has a different priestess pilot Eris each season. Nami sounds like that old crawler because she had surgery to make herself look and sound just like her. It's a thing. Eris herself looks a little like that crawler as well.

Donut: OMG IS THERE ONE OF ME?

Rosetta: They usually wait until the person is dead.

Florin: We need to figure out if we're being fucked by the NPCs or not. I am toe to toe with a big force that's now under NPC orders, and we don't know if we're supposed to be fighting them or not. I'm pretty sure they don't know, either. We got demons popping up everywhere, trying to take over the corpses, and we got our hands full either way. That mountain is leaking pretty bad, too. We got flaming, ute-sized rocks raining on us. It sounds like it's flowing lava right into the river bed which is gonna find its way down here pretty quick. I hope that this "Lava abatement team" knows what they're doing because it's going to roil right into Larracos.

Donut: WHAT THE HECK IS A 'UTE'?

Carl: The alliance is still intact. At least on paper. The system will automatically break the alliance if they do something against us. I think.

Justice Light: You lost the gate? Where did it go? We need that back! *I* need it!

Carl: The war mages took it. They teleported away with it! Britney, what the hell is happening with the NPCs?

Britney: I don't know! Juice Box teleported away!

Donut: FERDINAND SAYS TO WAIT A MINUTE BECAUSE THEY'RE IN TROUBLE WITH THE ADJUTANTS.

Britney: Okay, hang on. Juice Box sent a message. She says to keep the plan rolling. She and Ferdinand have to answer some questions.

Carl: Yeah, she has to answer some questions, all right. Jesus. If she's still planning on meeting us at the Madness castle, tell her I want her assurances that this plan at least is going to go as planned.

Next to me, Victory was still there, but her eyes continued to flash. "Hang on, Carl," she said. "Drick just called foul against his own team. I'm still gathering details. We might be able to sue to get the gate pieces back."

"Just tell me what the hell is happening, and quickly," I said, eyeing the gate nervously. Elle had accidentally opened it when the volcano blew. The portal would only last twenty minutes, and it had been open already for at least ten. There was no visible timer, even when I examined it. At least the war mages hadn't teleported away by walking through the gate. The gate was opened to spot number eight, the woods above the Madness's castle. The plan was for me and Elle to go through it, and then I'd use a standard teleport trap to escape back to Shanty Town when we were done. We weren't going to use the Feral God gate a third time unless we absolutely had to, so we didn't *need* the gate anymore.

No matter what happened, when this portal here timed out, a feral god was still going to escape right where we were now standing, so we had to get moving.

It was only then I realized Justice Light, in his panic, had said he needed the gate. I didn't know why, or how he'd planned on getting it. *Goddamnit*, I thought. This was just like with Rosetta earlier when she'd attacked King Rust. Just like with Juice Box and the NPCs making dangerous moves without telling us. People were making plans without communicating them, and they were using *me* as part of it.

You're always on rails, she said. Shi Maria's voice wasn't as loud as when the floor first started, but I could hear her, down there under the surface of the fast-moving water. It was no longer a river at this point, but a constant, never-ending torrent. And it wasn't water. It had never been water. I feared touching it, lest it rip me away. *You're a puppet, dancing on their stage. I'm still here. You just need to untie me*.

"Okay," Victory said. "As far as I can tell, it appears the War Mages broke their own allegiance against the Skull Empire, which they shouldn't be able to do. They were under strict *Conscription* rules, but they used a clever combination of *Pull* spells to kill Stalwart anyway. I think Stalwart might've ejected them from his army on purpose in an attempt to get them to stop hurting him. It didn't work. But after they killed him, they immediately teleported themselves to Juice Box and Ferdinand for unknown reasons. Drick has called a foul, and I'm not certain why. I think he's claiming illegal interference, similar to what I would've called on you if you'd allowed Prepotente to fight on your behalf before he joined up. It's a bit shaky unless Drick can prove this so-called War Mage Rebellion has been talking with Juice Box this whole time. And even then, if they're considered an independent entity, I don't think it's going to stick. They've called a full quorum, so I'm going to the hearing." And then she unceremoniously teleported away.

Edgar: Donut, I see Epitome Tagg. He is still near the Dream castle. He did not teleport with his army. He's with a small contingent of his troops, riding zebras. I think he's fleeing into the woods. I marked him. He is *not* the one in the fancy hat. They are trying to trick you.

Donut: I CAN'T SEE THEM. I DON'T HAVE A SHOT. THE NEW GODDESS LADY IS IN THE WAY. I DO LIKE HER JACKET THOUGH. IT LOOKS LIKE SOMETHING FROM BEETLEJUICE, THOUGH THE SHOULDER PADS ARE A LITTLE TOO GAUCHE. SLEDGIE, WILL YOU BE A DEAR AND FIRE SOME MISSILES AT HIM WHILE HE'S STILL MARKED? MAYBE FIRE SOME OF THE FAST MOVERS ALONG WITH A CHAIN RIPPER?

Sledge: I kill for a living.

If Tagg was fleeing, that meant they were giving up—at least for now—on taking back their throne room. But three gods were rolling around their territory, and maybe they were gambling on the gods forcing the occupying Team Retribution to flee. Tagg was making the safe choice to flee and hide, effectively abandoning his own troops who he sent to attack our base.

The mark would only last a few minutes. Tagg wasn't dumb. He would probably get away for now, despite the missiles.

More reports flooded in. Tran had taken heavy losses from the magical artillery even though they hadn't engaged anyone directly. There was heavy fighting at the FUPA against the Dreamers, along with demon eviction starting there as well, like we anticipated. Louis had already docked back at Area 52 and unloaded the kids. He used a precious *Emergency Repair* scroll to speed up the repair of *Party Planner* and was about to start his second run as soon as they finished reloading the bomb bay.

There was still no sign of the bulk of the Madness or Reaver forces.

Boomer: Starting our raid on the Reaver castle. Bomo and Sledge. Initiate the barrage.

Sledge: Robots go boom.

"Okay, I'm good," Elle said, shaking her head. "Let me cast my *Subterfuge* spell again so they don't spot us. We need to keep this rolling." She patted me on the shoulder. "Ready to finally get your hands dirty?"

"Samantha," I said as we moved to the portal. "Okay, you're on your own. The gate is going to take a few minutes longer than we

planned to close because we won't be bringing the pieces through. Stay close, but not too close. Boomer is in your chat, and he'll tell you where to go if the feral god chases you. Okay?"

But she wasn't paying attention. She was looking straight up into the smoky sky. "Ohhh, I know what that is," she said just as we stepped through. "That's a dragon!"

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Entering the territory of the Madness.

You are at war with this team.

Your platoon member, General Elle McGib has cast a *Subterfuge* spell, and your presence is hidden from enemy eyes. Do not venture from the area of the spell, or the Madness will be automatically warned of your incursion.

The spell would hide us, but that goddamned, shining portal had just been sitting here for ten minutes straight. It was dark, and it was in the woods, but if we were unlucky, someone could've spotted it. I was half expecting to find a battalion sitting here waiting for us. Luckily, there was nothing.

The first thing I did was send a message warning Louis about the dragon circling the Reaver castle, which I still hadn't seen. Samantha was already in the chat talking to Louis about it.

We landed right at the edge of the woods, which was the closest we could conceivably get without them immediately knowing we were there. The flat prairies of the Madness spread out in front of us in the night. I couldn't see the castle in the dark, but it was there, about five kilometers away. The ground ahead glittered with literally thousands of traps that twinkled like a tapestry of stars. I could see alarm traps, hidden alarm traps, teleport traps, and lots of summons, which wasn't good. Both monster summons and guard

summons. *Tripper* would activate the summons, and we'd be neck-deep in soldiers.

"Get that disgusting thing away from me!" a voice boomed across the realm. That was Eris again. This fight was much closer now, but still not close enough to activate my Scavenger's Daughter patch.

This was followed by a wet coughing, sputtering sound from Meatus.

Donut: THE DREAM CASTLE JUST COLLAPSED!

I was expecting a notification that the NPCs occupying the Dream throne room had been cast away, but it never came, meaning whoever was holding the throne room was riding it out with this whole three-way god fight happening right on their heads.

I returned my attention to the minefield in front of us. The traps sparkled. I figured this would happen, but I hadn't expected the coverage to be this thick. We'd have to pick our way carefully across the landscape, which would slow us down. I would collect any summon traps I came across. A still-activated *Summon Guard* trap was a dangerous liability for the person attached to the other side of that trap, and Justice Light had taught me a really nasty trick with them.

From my inventory, I started to pull the teleport automatons with the second half of the teleport trap on them. I thought for a moment, and then decided to put most away for now, only keeping the Katia, Imani, Holger, and Splash Zone ones out. The traps here were too thick for a larger force. I'd have to risk being underpowered until we got closer to the castle. I sent a message to those four, telling them to come in.

Samantha: IT'S A BLEACHED DRAKE. THEY'RE VERY CUTE PETS. THIS IS A BIG ONE. THEY HAVE GRAVITY MAGIC.

Louis: Uh, gravity magic?

Samantha: OH, YES. YOUR AIR SHIP THING IS PROBABLY GOING TO GET TOSSED TO THE GROUND AND SMUSHED LIKE A CAN OF LOUIS-FLAVORED SOUP. YOU SHOULD ABANDON ALL THIS AND COME HELP ME FIGHT GASH WHEN SHE GETS HERE. THE LAST TIME I TEAMED UP

WITH A BOYFRIEND, WE DEFEATED THE DEMON SLUT EASILY.

Carl: Does anyone besides Samantha have eyes on this dragon thing?

Donut: I CAN ONLY BARELY SEE IT, BUT THE MARK THING DOESN'T WORK. I CAN STILL TRY TO SHOOT IT DOWN, BUT IT'S AT THE VERY EDGE OF MY RANGE, AND IT'S MOVING FAST. IT HAS SOME SPELL ON IT THAT MAKES IT LOOK BLURRY.

Baroness Victory: *Paint the Target* has a distance limit. It's not just line of sight.

Donut: WELL, THAT'S A STUPID RULE. I'LL TRY TO SHOOT IT. AND AREN'T YOU IN A MEETING?

Baroness Victory: Your boyfriend is holding up the adjudication. We're waiting for Drick to get him out of the rafters. Literally.

Donut: HE'S NOT MY BOYFRIEND.

Carl: Louis, are you in the air yet?

Louis: Just about to take off. I replaced the door gunners with two folks from Bucket Boy's clinic.

Carl: Okay, good. But I don't want you near that dragon. Swing toward Boomer's position instead and back him up. Don't approach the Reaver castle until we've dealt with the dragon.

The next message came over my private band.

Colonel Boomer: Warlord. We need those bombs dropped. We don't have No Disassemble missiles to kill their electronics. If you call General Louis off his run, that puts the rest of us in danger. I know he's your friend. But we can't do this without air support. He's a good pilot. He knows what he's doing. And with all due respect, you handed operational command over to Rosetta after you put me in charge of the Reaver assault. You need to focus on your own operation, not mine. I'll try to get close enough to mark the dragon for a missile barrage, but you can't call off his run just because it's dangerous.

Goddamnit. He was right, and I knew it. I took a breath and sent him an apology.

Carl: Louis, belay my last order. Proceed with the plan. Just… just be careful. You have four anti-air missiles. Save them for the dragon. We'll try to get someone who can see through the clouds with a *Paint the Target* spell so we can target it with the long range missiles. You might be able to paint it yourself on approach. This is Boomer's op and listen to him from now on.

There was a long pause.

Louis: Okay, Carl. Taking off now.

A moment later Bomo messaged that the missiles aimed at Epitome Tagg missed. That meant Donut's target was in the wind, and we'd have to hunt him down. Even if the NPCs managed to take his throne room and eliminate the Dream, he'd still be alive. That just wouldn't do, but there was nothing we could do about it right now.

Sledge: Missiles incoming Reaver castle.

Donut: MAYBE THOSE MISSILES HEADED FOR THE REAVER CASTLE WILL HIT THAT DRAGON THING BECAUSE I CAN'T.

That was unlikely. The targeted missiles would literally swerve around the dragon to hit the castle. That was how they were designed.

Florin: With Stalwart dead and demon eviction waning, 101st is at mission accomplished. Two squads are going to assist with lava abatement but the bulk is falling back to Shanty Town. We need to talk to the NPC general about all these off-worlders they just inherited. I don't think they know what to do with them, and I'm afraid Juice Box is just going to order them all killed.

Rosetta: Okay, Florin. Good work so far. Standby for further orders.

Across from me, the teleport traps activated. Katia, Imani, and Splash Zone appeared. The last trap, the one that was supposed to

summon Holger, did not summon the were-castor. Instead, it was Dong Quixote. And not just Dong, but he was mounted upon the large swamp yak thing that had once belonged to King Rust. Gonk.

Dong had his crust sock slung over his shoulder, and he also had another weapon stowed vertically in a leather, holster-like sleeve hanging off the saddle: a glowing, enormously long war lance. Upon the tip of the lance, a flag waved. It was a flag from the 104th Naughty Little Piggies, where I'd reassigned him for this battle.

"What the hell?" I asked, double-checking my inventory. Dong was not supposed to be here.

And to my utter astonishment, yet another figure also appeared, also mounted on the back of the yak. This was Bigs the sluggalette. The one who'd killed Vinata. Since I'd last seen her, her face/eye paint had changed. She now had a massive teardrop built into the stalk of her right eye alongside the row of piercings. The hatchet protruding from her head gleamed. She leapt off the back of Gonk and splotched into the woods with a loud whoop. She waved the axe. "Imma get my chop on today. Where the bad guys at?"

"Seriously, what the hell?" I asked for a second time.

Dong gave me a sheepish smile. "Holger didn't want to leave little Clint and Tina and the other kids. They're all scared because of the fighting at the castle, and Holger promised to protect them. Miss Nadine, too, who Holger is a little sweet on, I think, now that she's not a caterpillar anymore. He gave me his half of the teleport trap. Bigs here was talking to another slug, and that one said that Justice Light taught them that if a mount utilizes a teleport trap, the entire mount and all its riders make it through." Dong turned his head to the side. "Yes, yes. You're right, Jefferson. It *is* very cost effective."

I was annoyed. My operation hadn't even started yet, and it was already in trouble. "I called Holger in because he's small. We need to pick our way through a literal minefield. You're gonna have to leave Gonk here."

Gonk let out a derisive snort.

Dong slapped the reins, and Gonk danced sideways like a show horse. The saddled lance stayed straight upward.

"Warlord, I will have you know I am an expert yakman. Gonk here has an exceptionally light touch and is a very fine mount, which is why the orc war chief used her. We will not be a problem. I daresay we will have a lighter touch on the battlefield than you will."

I doubted that, and I was about to object, but I was interrupted by messages I couldn't ignore. I held up a hand.

Sledge: Missiles hit Reaver castle. Lots blow up just before hit. Don't know damage.

Donut: THE MISSILES DIDN'T HIT THE DRAGON THING. I TRIED SHOOTING AGAIN, BUT IT'S NOT WORKING. ROSETTA NEEDS ME TO KILL SOME TROLLS AT THE FOOP, SO I CAN'T HELP ANYMORE.

I reread the message from Sledge and thought again of Louis. I had a probably-terrible idea. I sent a message to the already-exasperated Boomer, and he grudgingly agreed to let me try it.

Carl: Samantha, can you still see the dragon?

Samantha: YES. HE'S FLYING IN CIRCLES. HE'S VERY MAD BECAUSE SOME OF THOSE MISSILES HIT THE CASTLE. I THINK HE MIGHT'VE STOPPED SOME OF THEM. IT'S STILL STANDING THOUGH. CARL, NOBODY HAS COME THROUGH THIS STUPID GATE YET. TYPICAL GASH. ALWAYS SHOWING UP LATE. SHE AND I HAVE A SCORE TO SETTLE, AND I'M GOING TO ROCK HER WORLD.

Carl: Okay, I'm going to make you an officer. When I do that, it's going to give you a spell called *Paint the Target*. I need you to cast the spell on the dragon. Then when it's done, tell Bomo and Sledge you've done it. And for god's sake, don't fight the thing that comes out the gate. Run where Boomer tells you to run.

Samantha: BOMO AND SLEDGE ARE BIG NERDS, AND I DON'T WANT TO BE SEEN TALKING TO THEM.

Carl: Goddamnit, Samantha. This is to help Louis. Will you do it?

Samantha: OH ALL RIGHT.

"Christ, Carl. Can you stop trying to control everyone else's operation so we can get on with our own suicide mission now?" Elle

asked. Next to her, Imani and Katia both crossed their arms in unison, looking at me. Splash Zone, seeing them all glaring also crossed his fuzzy arms in solidarity.

I grinned and held out my hands. "Old habits die hard. Let's get moving. Imani, help me with these traps. Only disarm the alarm ones. Let me deal with the summons." I moved into the Platoon menu and drew a map from our location to the back side of the Madness castle, marking all the trap locations. Now everybody would see them.

I took another look at Dong mounted on his yak and let out a sigh. "Stay right behind me, and stow that lance in your inventory. We're sneaking up, not charging in. There's an anti-invisibility shield that starts about a hundred meters from the castle wall. I want you invisible until then. Bigs, get back on the yak behind Dong. Don't leave and don't wander. If we hit a trap or if you leave the area of Elle's protection, they'll get a notification. We want to avoid a big fight. Bodi and Prepotente are way on the other side, coming up from Shanty Town right now with the 103rd, and we want the Madness defenders to focus on them while we sneak up."

I took a few steps, reached down, and stowed away a summon trap. I examined it. This trap would summon a single, specific guard to the location. I grabbed a second summon, and it did the same thing, but the trap was rendered inert because the associated guard was already dead. That was good. That suggested these traps had likely been set long ago and weren't being carefully maintained.

A third trap summoned literal fire ants. *Ohhhh,* I thought, remembering the ants from the Iron Tangle that had eaten that conductor. I took that one as well.

Samantha: THE GATE TIMED OUT. IT'S ALL CRACKLY AND SPARKLY.

Carl: Goddamnit, Samantha. You're not supposed to be right in front of it! Get moving!

Samantha: I CAN TAKE THE BITCH.

We'd hoped that Samantha's proximity to the gate would summon a Nothing demon that she could drag around the battlefield

like a kite. Something to distract the Reavers for Boomer's assault. When those last two harem demon things came out—Slit, during the bubble levels and Minge during the fight at the Desperado Club—they'd both been laser focused on catching Samantha. If we could control the path of the demon's rampage, it would be an amazingly powerful weapon.

That this gate would actually summon one of the demon things because Samantha was nearby was only a hunch and was in no way guaranteed. Either way, if that thing caught Samantha, then her whole presence was pointless.

The Feral God Yarilo has entered the realm.

This deity is too distant to activate your Scavenger's Daughter.

Samantha: UH-OH.

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Boomer: Samantha start moving, kid! Angle toward the castle, but not too close yet!

Samantha: YOU DON'T HAVE TO TELL ME TWICE. THIS IS A GOD, NOT A DEMON. IT'S YARILO, AND HE DOESN'T LIKE ME! HE'S MAD BECAUSE HE THINKS I HELPED GET HIM TOSSED IN THE NOTHING IN THE FIRST PLACE. IT'S NOT MY FAULT HE'S SEXUALLY ATTRACTED TO ANIMALS. NO OFFENSE, KATIA.

A loud, androgynous voice bellowed across the realm.

"PSAMATHE! Are you here? We need to talk! Quick! Wait, don't run! By his left tit, stop running!"

And then, something very strange happened.

"Uh, what is that?" Splash Zone asked, pointing behind us. We all turned to look.

A funnel of prismatic light had burst into the air, blazing straight upward like a beacon. The beacon was so bright it pierced all the clouds. As we watched, it started to frantically wave back and forth like it was the universe's most powerful flashlight, and someone was shaking it.

This wasn't too far, maybe a mile away, deeper in the woods of the Madness territory.

The Scavenger's Daughter has blinked her eyes, but she does not know what she sees.

"What the hell..." I began.

Quest Update. Find Out Who Killed My Son.

You have been tasked with obtaining the item, Memorial Crystal: Apito. The crystal has just shown itself. Abandon your current task and obtain it.

"Yeah, that's gonna have to wait a minute," I said out loud. The crystal, as far as I was aware, was currently in the possession of the crawler Osvaldo, who had—so far—managed to avoid getting added to any army and was riding it out in the woods. Both myself and Prepotente had a quest to get that crystal. Our current raid was more important than whatever the hell this was, and I wasn't about to force a fight with a crawler I didn't even know. And even if I wanted to do it, I couldn't just abandon the entire battalion marching up on the other side of the Madness castle. My plan was to talk to him when I got a chance.

Next to me, Elle shook her head. "You wanted chaos, Carl. If they didn't know we were here before, they're most definitely going to come check that out."

Donut: WHY IS THERE A GIANT RAINBOW?

The light continued to shine and sparkle and shake.

"Do you see the trees?" Katia asked. "They're getting taller where the light is shining through the forest canopy."

"I think that's the crawler Osvaldo," I said, also peering at the strange light. I moved to my skills, checking *Find Crawler*.

"Osvaldo?" Elle asked. "I remember that fucker. I liked him until he decided to be a little coward and duck our recruiters. He has a whole group hiding out in the woods. He's not doing a very good job of hiding anymore. Did he mess up a spell or something?"

I grunted, closing out the *Find Crawler* window. "Yeah, that's him alright. He has something called a memorial crystal on him, and I'm pretty sure that's what's causing the light."

"I remember that thing. That's what he and Pony boy were fighting over at the end of the Butcher's Masquerade," Elle said. "That badger lady, too. Prepotente killed his pet. Why is it glowing?"

I told them about the message from Emberus as I continued to rapidly clear out a section of summon traps. There was a lot right

here on the edge of the forest. "When someone gets tossed into the Nothing, and they escape, the god or goddess that comes to deal with them is usually the one who banished them in the first place. Yarilo was banished because he ruined one of Apito's Butcher's Masquerade parties. And since Apito is both dead and not dead, it's some big dungeon mystery I think we're supposed to solve. This is all just another clue."

"Oh yeah, great timing," Elle said. "That 'clue' is going to make the enemy cast every observation spell they have in our direction at any moment."

Carl: Osvaldo, put that goddamned thing away!

Osvaldo: *Vai pra puta que pariu!* You don't think I'm trying?

Warning: This message has been delivered, but the log has been sent to your adjutant for review. Osvaldo is unaffiliated with the Princess Posse, and any planning may be construed as illegal corroboration.

Baroness Victory: Carl, I am very busy right now, but I'm not so busy that I won't call foul. Don't tempt me.

"Isn't Yarilo the god of lust?" Katia asked, still staring off at the prismatic beam of light shining straight up into the air. It continued to whip back and forth, like Osvaldo was waving it around. He obviously couldn't get it back into his inventory.

"Yeah," I said. "He's the god Samantha was pretending to be when she tricked that Mad Dune Mage guy into letting her escape the Nothing in the first place. So Yarilo probably does hate Samantha. We gotta get moving before we're found."

As if I'd jinxed myself, Elle cursed, and a notification appeared.

You have been observed! Subterfuge has been negated! The enemy is aware of your incursion!

Prepotente: Your army people are marching their way toward the castle, and it appears the plan is working. A large host of Madness troops have emerged and are coming to face us. However, it seems whichever one of you shot that giant rainbow in the air has attracted the other half of the Madness forces, and they are now coming to meet you.

Who would've thought that such a move would alert the enemy? Carl, I suspect you're about to be in extreme danger.

I stood up and sighed. Next to me, Elle and Katia also stopped. They also saw the message.

"Plan B?" Katia asked.

"It's not really Plan B if we don't have the feral god gate," Elle muttered. "Can we still summon the other half of the 105th ?"

"We can," I said. "But we don't have the protection spells in place. Imani doesn't have any real psionic protection, and that's the one thing they keep warning us about these guys. We can retreat a small force easily, but not half a battalion. Prepotente can help protect them, but not until the 103rd on the other side of the castle retreats. He can't be in both places at once."

The 103rd battalion, currently about 10 kilometers away and marching on the castle from the opposite side, wasn't supposed to actually engage the Madness troops. Of all the standing forces still active, the soldiers of the Madness were by far the most dangerous. The plan was to draw them out and then retreat. That would keep them away from their own castle while my much smaller force sneaked in.

We could protect ourselves against almost all of the horrific spells the Madness was known to cast, but not all of them at once. Prepotente could protect groups from their long-range psionic abilities, but he couldn't be in two places at once. If I summoned the 105th to our location, we'd have to choose between having Pony cover the 103rd's retreat or come here and back up the attackers. The group that wasn't covered would be in trouble.

"We still have Donut to cover the 103rd as they retreat," Katia said. "I say we have Prepotente come here and use Donut to the best of her ability."

I felt a sinking sensation. "You're right," I finally said.

So much for sneaking into the Madness castle.

I started to pull the remaining teleport automatons as I sent out orders. These would bring 18 more people, and it was the original team for my assault. I also sent a message to Jurgen, telling him the new plan. He was the current leader of the 105th Scream Warriors, and his half-strength battalion would come help us.

Jurgen: Heidi and I are ready to fight. Will teleport to you on your command.

Juice Box herself was still in the adjudication last I heard. These things were like mini trials, but they still didn't normally last this long. I'd summon her if she was free in time, but it sounded like we were doing this without her.

I then sent a message out to Prepotente, Donut, and Bodi—the current leader of the 103rd.

Carl: Bodi, I'm having you retreat early. Did you finish seeding the field? Prepotente, as soon as they start withdrawing, come to our side. Donut, once they start to fall back, wait for Bodi to tell you he's clear of the seeds, then do it.

Donut: OKAY, CARL.

Bodi: If Prepotente leaves that quickly, we will lose his psionic protections. We've been warned not to retreat without them.

Carl: I know. I am sorry. Do your best. Don't just fake retreat. Haul ass out of there.

Bodi: Very well. We are almost done seeding the field, and I will order the withdrawal.

Prepotente: I will come as requested, Carl.

"When are the missiles due to arrive?" Elle asked. "And how much time do we have?"

Both questions were answered just moments later as fire suddenly rained down from the heavens in front of us. Hundreds of missiles, all at once, fell upon the distant castle. A round, semi-circle sphere appeared, stuttered, and then flashed out. The shield. The missiles continued to pound into the distant stronghold, which was actually a low rectangle with no battlements. The whole thing looked

so unassuming and small, now lit up by hundreds of fires. The missiles would continue to slow walk into the structure, keeping the shield down.

The fires around the castle backlit a large, fast-moving force riding in our direction upon hundreds of dune buggy-like carts, pushing over the dark fields. Marked notifications appeared as Elle started calling in cheese cutters, which were the anti-personnel, shrapnel-filled missiles. These were pretty much all the missiles we now had left after Bomo and Sledge's constant pounding of the Madness and Reaver castles.

It wouldn't be nearly enough. This was going to be a fight.

A strange calm settled over us all as we watched the massive force descend upon us.

"Well, that's not how this was supposed to go," I said.

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The loud *THWUM* of the 105th Scream Warriors teleporting into place filled the woods behind us. This was followed by a few screams as soldiers teleported into trees, despite the spell's supposed protection against that exact thing. In addition, their sudden appearance set off a few traps that had been sprinkled in the woods behind us, including four or five guard summons, which did not work out for the unfortunate Madness mercenaries who found themselves alone in the woods with 3,000 Princess Posse troopers staring at them.

Despite a small number of soldiers suddenly finding themselves half embedded in trees, all of them survived the journey. I knew it had to be a relief. They'd been forced to stand in place for hours and hours as the mages cast the grueling *Mass Teleportation* spell.

"Now that was a fuckin' trip," said a **level 60 Fire Dryad** everyone had been calling **Charmander.**

Jurgen landed to my left, the large, blond, barbarian man hitting the ground with a superhero pose.

"Jurgen and Heidi are here!" Jurgen cried, cracking his thick neck as he stood to his full height. He groaned as he arched his back.

All around me, the automatons started crunching as more of our soldiers teleported in individually. They were a diverse mix. Jamal, with his newly-enhanced and fortified legs, landed nearby and did a little hop. Bautista, irritated he hadn't been summoned as part of the

first group, arrived and started talking with Katia. Others included Gluteus Maxx and Doctor Bones, both from the Penis Parade, and Areson the large ogre. Also present were Chris and Clay-ton the cretin. Those last two had been inseparable this entire floor. These were the members of my team. The ones I'd planned on summoning as we approached the castle.

I watched as Imani walked up and gave Chris a quick hug using her wings, not her arms. Chris reached up, as if to touch her face, but stopped just short.

Ahead, the hundreds of troop-laden Madness dune buggies slowed at the sudden appearance of several thousand new soldiers. They came to a stop about a full kilometer away. They started firing flares and torch spells into the air, lighting up the smoky night sky. Shields started to glow all around the hastily-formed line of enemies.

"That's a lot of cheese sticks," Splash Zone muttered.

"More are probably coming, too," Elle said.

"Shields up!" I called. All around, multi-hued protections started to glow.

"Everyone," Imani called, raising her voice supernaturally as she flew up and down the forming line at the edge of the trees. "Keep an eye on the person to your left and to your right. The Madness is known for their mind magic. That and Atrocity magic. If you see someone acting unusual, call it out immediately. They won't always have a notification."

"Okay, Scream Warriors," Jurgen shouted. "You've trained for this. Wait for my or Heidi's command."

"Jamal is quite excited to battle with his new upgrades," the hammerhead shark said, taking my attention as more shields crackled into existence around us. His new legs whirred as he bounced up and down with excitement. "It is a very robust excitement that he has." He let out a little burst of flame from the new attachment on his underbelly. It was "Velma," Tserendolgor's flamethrower. Rosetta's team in the crafting room had modified it to fit his harness. "Oh. Please excuse Jamal and Velma."

"Jesus, Jamal. Be careful with that thing," I said.

"Jamal will only flame on purpose from now on. Rest assured, Mr. Carl. Any previous flamings were purely accidental and such a thing will never repeat."

The flamethrower reminded me of Rend, and I pulled him out as well. He landed in front of me with a loud, ominous giggle. He, too, now had an upgrade, though his was much more subtle than a goddamned flamethrower attachment. Someone had donated a tooth cap, similar to the ones Mongo had for his sharp teeth, but this was designed for mounts. It was called **The Enchanted Tooth Cap of Hi-Yo Silver**. We installed it over his single, round tooth, making the tooth gleam silver. It allowed me to summon Rend to my position. It wasn't a teleport spell, but it had about a five kilometer range. The cooldown was only three minutes. When I summoned him, he'd get inexorably pulled toward me at great speed. If there was a wall in the way, he'd—possibly—smash through the wall. The skill was somewhat dangerous which was why Donut absolutely refused to put it on Mongo. But for Rend, it would work well, especially when combined with his new *Wrecking Ball* special ability.

The name of the upgrade, "Hi-Yo Silver" and not "Heigh-*Ho* Silver" had caused a great debate amongst some of the crawlers, especially Louis and Elle, and I thought they were actually going to come to blows over it. Louis insisted it was supposed to be "heigh-ho" while Elle told him to shove it. They'd been needling each other over it ever since. Since the phrase came from the old *Lone Ranger* television show, I was inclined to side with Elle on the matter—plus the AI who had named the upgrade in the first place, though if you'd asked me before this, I would've said the same thing as Louis.

The thoughts of this senseless debate filled my mind.

I sat on the ground and leaned my back against a tree. I'd never watched the *Lone Ranger* show. It was way before my time. I wondered if my dad had watched it. There was another show, called *The Rifleman* that I know he'd liked, but even that was old for him. I wondered if shows like that had been responsible for his love of western novels. Though, honestly, he'd pretty much stuck with Louis L'Amour books. I was the one who'd spread out to others like Zane Grey and Larry McMurtry, but once I'd discovered sci-fi, fantasy, and

horror, those books took kind of a back seat for a while. And then I'd discovered some of the classics, the ones I should've read in high school but didn't, and I realized I would never, ever run out of books.

I thought of the Christmas present that was still sitting there, unopened in the common room. Neither Imani nor I had opened our presents yet. Mine was clearly a book, possibly two or three books, and I'd been hesitating to open them because I was afraid that...

Slap. You've been slapped awake. *Endless Thread of Distraction* has been dispelled.

Someone was shouting. It was Imani.

"Carl, they're targeting you. I can't hold it until Prepotente gets here. Carl, no! Keep your eyes open."

"Look at his finger!" someone else called. "That ring is glowing red!"

"Get his shirt! Cover that eye!"

Warning: Your Mind Balance is currently overwhelmed as you are getting absolutely hammered with psionic debuffs.

You've been infected with ten more instances of *Endless Thread of Distraction*.

You've been infected with *Self Harm*.

You've been infected with *Intrusive Thoughts.*

What am I even doing here? I thought. *This is too much. I should've known this plan would never have worked, and now everyone under my command is going to die.*

If I surrender, maybe they will let them live.

I felt the torrent under me. Not a river. It had never been a river. Voices. Screams. Nightmares distilled to light.

Souls.

And where was it flowing *to*? Down, was the answer. Always down. *Why are they always screaming*?

If the river made no sound, then why was it so loud?

It's so loud. It's so goddamned loud.

There was more shouting.

"He's stuck! Look at his feet!"

"Is it the tree? He didn't teleport, how can he be stuck in the tree?"

Carl. Steady yourself. You've done it before, and you can do it again. They think your mind is your biggest weakness, but it is the opposite. It is the rock upon which the rest of you is built.

Whose voice was that? That wasn't Shi Maria. Nor was it her husband. It was a familiar voice. Male. Friendly. A dwarf? I thought of tendrils worming their way through my body.

I can't do this. I'm going crazy.

No, Carl. This is the second time I've told you that you're not crazy. You're family now, after what you did. I will help you. Look. Look at your feet. You've been standing in this so-called river this whole time.

I looked down, and I was amazed at what I saw.

Your Mind Balance is now Level 16.

New Achievement! You now tread in the realm of gods!

You've trained a skill past 15 using battlefield conditions, as opposed to just taking a bunch of potions to do it. That's quite the accomplishment. I'd ramble on and on about this, but you're currently a babbling idiot with your bare feet buried in an All Tree root. So let's speed up this *Empire Strikes Back* cave scene bullshit and get back to the action.

***Reward*: The skill is the reward. The good news is this level-16 Mind Balance will now wake your ass up.**

Good, Carl. Good. She would be proud of you.

Who? I asked, but I snapped awake.

"He's awake!" Imani called, hovering over me, eyes wide with concern. "Carl, they're attacking you with every psionic attack they have! Prepotente is almost here, and he can shield you, but he says you need to cast *Wisp Armor*."

I stood, but I almost fell because my feet were stuck to the tree. I instinctively pulled, and my feet came away easily, the smell of mulch coming up. But there was rot, too. The tree upon which I'd been leaning was suddenly dead and withered. All around, soldiers shouted as the tree crumbled in on itself.

I whipped around to face the army that stood before us.

"Carl, cast *Wisp Armor*," Imani said again.

"No need," I said as the Emberus ring on my finger cooled. In my interface, dozens of mind-based spells crashed against me, but they didn't find purchase. I shook my head and grinned. Let them keep trying. None of that was going to work anymore.

I could now see them. The ones casting mind magic. That had come with my skill hitting 16. There were dozens of them, spread around the army before us. Mind mages. I started painting them, one by one, sending out orders to focus on them first.

Carl: Hit the mages I just painted. Reroute any incoming to these targets.

Bomo: These are the last missiles.

Carl: Okay. Do it. Good work today, both of you. Keep Donut safe.

"Are we doing this?" Jurgen asked. The large barbarian stood side-by-side with Jamal, who also quivered with excitement. Little tendrils of flame kept leaking from Jamal's flamethrower. Rend was running in enthusiastic, babbling circles around the barbarian and hammerhead shark.

I held up my hand. "Wait for it."

I quickly flipped through the messages as we waited. Louis would soon begin his bomb run on the Reaver castle but so far hadn't engaged the dragon, which seemed content to circle above. Meanwhile, Boomer was pushing against the front door of the Reavers, waiting for Louis's bombs. Their army still hadn't appeared. Yarilo was chasing Samantha around in circles. She was heading toward the opposite side of the Reaver castle, much like we were marching on the backside of the Madness castle, but so far, Yarilo hadn't actually done anything yet except call for Samantha to stop.

The Dream castle was utterly demolished, but the throne room was still—somehow—occupied by NPCs. Epitome Tagg was in the woods, presumably hiding while the three gods continued to fight in his territory. Apparently Meatus had wrapped his way around Eris and was using the influencer-stuck-in-the-body-of-the goddess of chaos as a battering ram against Harpocrates. Mordecai sent out a

warning note that Eris's spells could affect everyone in the realm at once, but she hadn't yet cast anything.

Florin was making his way to Shanty Town with his battalion. Tran's 102nd was rushing to the FUPA to help defend.

And speaking of the FUPA. The whole area was a mess. Demon eviction was ongoing, but it was mostly affecting the Dream soldiers, despite their overwhelming numbers. They were now sandwiched between the stronghold and a rising army of demon-infested corpses.

I moved my attention back to my own assault.

Carl: Bodi, report your status.

Bodi: We are withdrawing, but they are not pursuing. They appear to have abandoned their pursuit to face you instead.

Prepotente: This is correct. I will be to you in moments, Carl, and I will shield you and the rest of the force. I must warn you all a third force has appeared, emerging from under the castle. They, too, are coming to face you, Carl.

Donut: WHAT SHOULD I DO? *YOU'RE NOT DONE YET* ISN'T GOING TO WORK IF THERE ARE NO TARGETS. I CAN SNIPE DURING YOUR FIGHT, BUT THE BACK SIDE OF THE MADNESS CASTLE IS JUST PAST MY RANGE FOR ATROCITY MAGIC. WE PUT THE DEAD BODIES ON THE WRONG SIDE OF THE CASTLE!

Carl: That's okay. Stand down.

I'd asked most everyone to give their dead bodies from their graveyards to Bodi and the 103rd. The plan was for them to drop a metric fuckton of corpses on the battlefield and have Donut cast her wide-range, tower-enhanced, *You're Not Done Yet*, which would rip the skin off the corpses, creating literally thousands of fleshers, which would sail across the battlefield at the Madness forces, hopefully overwhelming them. But now the Madness forces had abandoned that battlefield in order to face me, we'd wasted all those corpses for nothing unless we wanted to get back out there and pick them back up.

Still, I decided that was probably a good thing. The last thing we needed was more War Mages getting made at this point.

Rosetta: Prepotente, be aware you have incoming friendly missiles to your airspace.

This was followed by a string of explosions walking their way across the line of dune buggies. Shields glowed and shattered on the Madness side as the Cheese Cutters went to work. More than half of the mages I'd marked were now just gone.

It wasn't enough. Still, the attacks against me suddenly ceased. Ahead, the Madness soldiers started to spread themselves out, not aware we were out of missiles.

"WHERE DO YOU THINK YOU'RE GOING!" Meatus shouted in the distance.

"Leave me alone! Oh my god, this is so disgusting. Why can't I leave this place?" Eris shouted back. "Harpocrates, help me! Wait... wait..."

You are invulnerable until the completion of the Chaos Ritual.

Invulnerable? Chaos ritual? I looked down at the yellow radiance that had suddenly appeared over my body. All around, everyone suddenly had the same glow. Across the battlefield, I could see the enemy army glowed as well. It just came on all at once.

"What the shit?" Elle asked from my left.

What was going on?

Rosetta: Oh, fuck me. Comrades, hold on!

Warning. The Goddess Eris has cast *Bear Witness* in a wide area around her current position. This will only affect those outside of structures. The area of effect is marked on your map, but it's pretty much the whole floor.

Your Mind Balance has negated *Bear Witness*.

"What the hell is *Bear Witness*?" I asked, but all around me, everyone had frozen, like at the beginning of a boss battle. Elle, Imani, Katia. Everyone. Their eyes had gone completely white. I was not frozen. The notification **Witness** appeared over their heads, followed by a strange symbol I didn't recognize. It was two Cs back to back with a flaming lance through the middle.

The only people other than myself that didn't appear affected by the witness spell were Rend, Bigs the Sluggalette, Gonk the yak, Jamal the shark, and Dong Quixote.

I met eyes with the old stripper. "My goodness," was all Dong said.

Dong and I were the only awake ones with the invulnerable debuff. Jamal, Bigs, and Gonk did not have the glow.

"This is a most unexpected development," Jamal said.

Rosetta: Everyone. When you wake, you're going to be all mixed together. Find others from your team and run! If you have teleport escape, only use it if it's been an hour! I'll let you know if you can use it. Team leaders, report!

Tipid: I was inside the FOOP, but most of the defenders are just frozen! The Dream soldiers, too!

Kiwi: Tina! Where is Tina? Where is my daughter?

Tipid: I'm sorry, Kiwi. She got out and was fighting. I see her, and she's frozen.

Carl: What's wrong with them? What's happening? It's everyone here except me and the pets and a few others. Donut, are you okay?

Donut: I AM OKAY, BUT EVERYONE SURROUNDING THE TOWER IS FROZEN! SLEDGIE WAS STILL OUTSIDE AND IS STUCK BUT BOMO GOT IN AND IS OKAY!

Li Na: Most everyone in Shanty Town is affected. Those of us inside structures are fine. Li Jun is with me. Zhang was outside. Florin and the entirety of the 101st are affected. It appears anyone who was once a tattoo is unaffected. Same with the sluggalos.

Rosetta: Boomer, Tran, and Bodi aren't answering, either.

Jesus, I thought. That was almost everyone. If it reached all of Shanty Town and Florin, who was on the other side of the map, then it likely meant all the NPC soldiers inside of Larracos were frozen, too.

Samantha: I AM OKAY TOO. THAT ERIS BITCH CAN'T SUMMON ME. WHERE IS LOUIS.

Louis: The dragon thing is coming at me! Firing my anti-air missiles now!

Rosetta: Brace for part two of the ritual!

Before I could even ask what the hell part two was, a new notification came.

Warning: The Goddess Eris has cast *Bring Forth the Witnesses*.

Warning: The effects of a level-20 *Bring Forth the Witnesses* has caused a magical backlash over the entire floor. No long-range teleport spells will work for the next hour.

"Oof" I cried as I was bowled over by Jurgen's large form. Everyone in the army just rocketed up into the air like they'd all been launched out of trebuchets. The frozen witnesses ascended into the air and disappeared like it was the goddamned rapture.

Across the battlefield, the Madness soldiers also rapidly floated up into the air, abandoning their carts.

A figure appeared. Bianca the goat dragon landed next to me. Prepotente was not on her back. The thing screamed in fury and jumped up and down, her feet catching the foliage alight. She hissed at me and howled in outrage.

"I don't know where he went!" I said to the pissed-off demon as I pulled myself up. I was trying not to let the panic overwhelm me. "I think he got brought to Eris, the goddess. She's by the Dream castle fighting a giant penis and another god."

Bianca clicked and hissed with rage.

I pointed southeast.

"That way," I added.

She angrily chittered again and then burst back into the air, leaving a line of fire on the ground.

"A most unexpected development indeed," Jamal added.

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CARL: TELL US EVERYTHING ABOUT THIS GODDAMNED RITUAL THING.

Mordecai: Okay. This is exclusive to Eris, and she usually does this on the 12th floor. I'm not sure why she did it now, but it sounds like she's panic casting things and doesn't know what she's doing. Some gods can only claim the Ascendent throne if there are no mortals present, so Eris sometimes causes chaos by summoning mortal witnesses to the ceremony. It's called the Ceremony of Chaos. The witnesses are protected from the gods during this, hence the invulnerability, and she can keep them in the Witness state as long as she wants. She can also turn the invulnerability off early if she wants. They're brought to her in a giant pile. It's… it's a thing. They're usually NPCs since most crawlers never make it to the 12th floor. She can only cast this once. Ever.

Carl: Wait, so everyone that just got summoned is now in a giant pile?

Donut: I CAN SEE THEM. THEY *ARE* IN A GIANT PILE, CARL! IT'S THOUSANDS OF THOUSAND OF PEOPLE, ALL MIXED UP ON THE GROUND NEXT TO THE DREAM CASTLE. KATIA AND ELLE AND IMANI AND BAUTISTA AND CHRIS AND SLEDGIE AND FLORIN AND ZHANG ARE IN THERE

SOMEWHERE! THE RAINBOW IS THERE, TOO! IT'S JUST SHINING UP OUT OF THE PILE! AND THEY'RE ALL MIXED IN WITH BAD GUYS! I THINK THE WHOLE REAVER ARMY IS THERE, TOO! WEREN'T THEY MISSING?

Carl: Holy shit. When they all wake up, it's going to be a slaughter!

Rosetta: They *are* awake. They are witnesses. They can see, but they cannot move. They can't use the chat. The witness state is mind magic. These god fights can take a long time, and we don't know when this Eris goddess will get her wits about her to turn the Witness state off.

Donut: CARL, CARL I THINK SHE MESSED UP THE SPELL. THAT FERAL GOD, MEATUS, HE'S INVULNERABLE NOW TOO! SHE ACCIDENTALLY MADE HIM INDESTRUCTIBLE!

Rosetta: Oh, gods. If she realizes what she's done, she might turn just the invulnerability off. If she does that, everyone in the pile will remain frozen but will lose their safety. Most of them *will* get crushed to death, or they'll suffocate!

A chill washed over me. What a goddamned nightmare. If we didn't free them before the invulnerability turned off, it was going to be absolute chaos. I needed to get there as quickly as possible and start pulling people free.

But it was *thousands* of people. Tens of thousands. By my estimates, maybe *80,000* people. The numbers were insane.

Half-formed ideas came at me, one after another. If I put a bomb in the middle of the pile, it would scatter them about. But it would have to be a huge bomb. Not the Doomsday Scenario, as that was too huge. And I had to get there. Teleport was temporarily broken. *Think, think, think*.

Carl: Donut, do *you* have the invulnerability buff right now?

Donut: I DON'T! WHY, DO YOU?

Carl: Yes. I think only those who were outside have it. It's just me and Dong. Jamal and Bigs don't have it. I'm going to have to abandon this and get over there.

Donut: I HAVE A BETTER IDEA. FINISH YOUR MISSION, CARL. LET ME DEAL WITH THE PILE. WE NEED TO GET THEM AWAY FROM THERE.

Carl: What's your idea?

Samantha: LOUIS, WATCH OUT!

Louis: I'm going down!

I immediately moved to the other chat.

Carl: Louis, report! Report!

Louis: A little busy now, Carl. Feather falling... *Party Planner* is dead. Ripped in half... Hit the dragon with missiles, and it just pissed it off... It cast a spell, and I tried to dodge. It ripped *Party Planner* down the middle. Dropped the bombs before they were armed. I'm sorry... They didn't go off. I'm falling through the air right now. Gonna land right on the Reaver castle... I think my door gunners are dead... Glad Bonnie and Skarn weren't here... He was right... That cop's husband. I'm sorry... The feral god is still there a mile west of the castle. I see him just sitting there. Dragon still flying above... I'm going to hit the castle by myself. Tell Katia when she wakes up that I'm sorry to be such a fuckup... I just sent a message to Juice Box, too, but she's still in that meeting.

Carl: You're okay. You're okay. When you hit the ground, get out of there and hide. You can't teleport, but you have lots of spells. Use your cloud attack and those smoke grenades I gave you.

Louis: I have a notification that tells me I'm being tracked by Reaver security. I'm fucked, Carl. I'm landing right in the middle of their castle.

Carl: Samantha, go save Louis!

Samantha: ON IT, CARL. THIS YARILO WEIRDO JUST GAVE UP CHASING ME ANYWAY LIKE A BIG WUSSY. GOD OF LUST? I DON'T THINK SO. HE'S THE GOD OF BEING A PERVERTED LITTLE BITCH. MAYBE IF I DRESSED UP LIKE A SLUTTY HAMSTER HE'D KEEP CHASING ME. I WOULDN'T HAVE DONE IT WITH HIM AGAIN ANYWAY. PROBABLY NOT.

I took a deep breath. There was nothing I could do for Louis right now. He would be okay, I kept telling myself. I needed to focus.

"Carl," Dong said. "Jefferson and I have been talking, and I believe he is correct. We should seize this opportunity and make haste to the Madness castle while the enemy army is gone. They likely do not know we are here, and we can proceed with the plan."

"Yeah!" Bigs announced from the back of Gonk. "We can take them!"

Jamal did a little jump and expelled a gout of flame.

I was torn. They were right. Plus, if one more warlord fell then the final phase would begin. I felt numb and sick. It had all happened so fast. One moment, we were facing the army, and in seconds, everything had changed.

I came to a decision. I needed to focus and trust the others. I couldn't do anything about Louis. I couldn't do anything about the others at the Dream castle. But I could do something about the castle right in front of me right now. Donut, Rosetta, and Mordecai were smart. I was sure they could come up with a sound plan to help as many people as possible.

System Message: Warlord Princess Donut has committed an atrocity.

Donut: WELL, I NEVER. THAT WAS VERY RUDE.

Carl: What was that?

Donut: IT'S A TWO-PART PLAN. FIRST I GOTTA MOVE THE PILE TO WHERE ALL THE DEAD BODIES ARE PILED. IT'LL GET THEM AWAY FROM THE GOD FIGHT, TOO.

A horrible realization dawned on me. I felt sick. I knew exactly what she'd just cast.

Carl: Holy shit, Donut.

Donut: UH, WHOOPS. THAT WAS UNEXPECTED.

Carl: What, what?

Donut: MEATUS GOT PULLED IN, TOO! AND SINCE HE IS STILL WRAPPED AROUND ERIS, SHE'S ALSO PART OF IT! IT SAYS THE GODDESS IS UNCONSCIOUS! HOW CAN A GODDESS BE UNCONSCIOUS? NOW HARPOCRATES IS TRYING TO HIT THE BALL! BUT HE'S AFRAID OF THE

RAINBOW FOR SOME REASON. THE RAINBOW LIGHT IS JUST SHINING STRAIGHT UP IN THE AIR, BUT IT'S STROBING NOW LIKE A DISCO LIGHT. THE BASE PART END OF THE WIENER IS HANGING OUT OF THE BALL AT THE OTHER SIDE. I SEE THE GREMLIN GUY AT THE END! HE'S AWAKE AND SCREAMING!

Rosetta: Ball?

Mordecai: Donut, what the hell did you do?

Donut: *ROLLING BATTLE FORMATION*. I GOT THE SPELL FROM THAT SKUNK'S HAT! YOU KNOW, THE STINKY WIZARD HAT? IT'S AN ATROCITY SPELL, AND THE TOWER MAKES IT REALLY POWERFUL. I DIDN'T KNOW IT WAS GOING TO BE *THAT* POWERFUL! BUT I CAN TELL IT WHERE TO ROLL! I CAN DRIVE IT LIKE A REMOTE CONTROL. IT'S, UH, REALLY, REALLY, *REALLY* BIG.

Carl: How long does it last?

Donut: IT SAYS UNTIL IT SUSTAINS ENOUGH DAMAGE!

Mordecai: Wait, wait, wait. Are you telling me you just made a ball of swine, but out of *everyone*? Including two gods? There has to be tens of thousands of people in that thing! And the system just let you do it?

Donut: IN MY DEFENSE, I DIDN'T KNOW THE DINK WAS GOING TO BE SUCKED INTO THE SPELL, TOO. THE BACK END IS JUST SLOPPED OUT THE BACK LIKE THE BALL FORGOT TO ZIP UP.

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THE ENORMOUS BALL OF FLESH FLOP-ROLLED OVER THE FIELDS, AND Harpocrates followed.

It would take some time for the ball to get to its destination, which was the field of corpses just on the other side of the Madness castle where I now stood. I turned my attention to the castle in front of me, plotting a route through the field of traps. I eyed an acceptable path. "Rend," I called. "Into your carrier!"

The meatball was as tall as my waist and could now run pretty fast, but with my newly-enhanced speed, there was no way he could keep up. He started to giggle in protest, and I promised to free him again when we arrived.

I took an *Invisibility* potion, and then I tossed one onto Jamal and a second onto Gonk. To my surprise, that affected everyone riding the mount. They turned to an outline. Jamal hopped up and down.

"Stay on me," I called back at Dong, who spurred Gonk forward. I knew Dong had the *Twinkle Toes* spell and could keep up. The yak grunted and started moving. Jamal, too, could now move terrifyingly fast with his mechanical spider legs.

Donut: SOMEBODY NEEDS TO KEEP THE MUTE HARPO GOD GUY AWAY FROM MY BALL. HE'S GOING TO BREAK IT OPEN TOO SOON!

Carl: Maybe that'll be a good thing if he breaks it open now. They shoot all over when the ball breaks!

Donut: I'M TRYING TO WIN THIS WAR, CARL. WE NEED THEM COMPLETELY SEPARATED AND AWAY FROM THE GOD.

Carl: That's not going to happen if Meatus is stuck in there.

Donut: OH LIKE YOUR PLANS ALWAYS GO OFF WITHOUT A HITCH. JUST LET ME GET THEM TO THE CORPSES. SOMEONE DISTRACT HARPOCRATES.

As others started fielding suggestions, I kept an eye on the chat with Louis and Rosetta as I rushed toward the Madness stronghold. I was fighting the urge to continually distract Louis with suggestions. He had landed atop the flat Reaver castle and was now running, casting a smoke cloud behind him. He hadn't yet engaged with any enemy, but he'd managed to secure a handful of unexploded No Disassembles and Waffle Makers into his inventory. He had no way of setting them off without blowing himself up. They had to be unstable as fuck. Louis did *not* have invulnerability.

Samantha was on her way toward him.

The yellow glow of invulnerability remained pulsing on my own arms. Only Dong had the glow as well, and I wondered on that. I knew the system considered the sluggalos and the former tattoos as a different kind of NPC, which was why Bigs and Jamal hadn't been affected. Pets, too. But Dong Quixote was one of the strippers. Splash Zone and Doctor Bones and Gluteus Maxx had all been pulled into the pile and were now part of the massive battle formation. So why hadn't it worked on Dong? I didn't know.

The Madness castle loomed.

As far as buildings went, this one was pretty small. It wasn't as tiny as the castle Empress D'Nadia had erected, but it was a smaller, rectangular building, like the size of a regular supermarket. I knew there were multiple barracks buildings around the castle I couldn't see, buried in the ground. I also knew the ground under the castle was porous. Good for one or two people to burrow up into and infiltrate, but not ideal for the diggers, which was why Juice Box had assigned one to the Dream castle instead...

That gave me an idea.

Carl: Britney, have them use the digger under the Dream castle to try to distract Harpocrates! They have these giant goddamned robots and they haven't done anything yet with them.

Britney: Uh, okay. I'll try. Arief controls them while Juice Box is away. I'll ask.

Carl: For fuck's sake, Victory. You're not done with your meeting yet? Juice Box is missing the war!

Baroness Victory: Carl, trust me on this. You want this trial to go on as long as possible. We're stalling on purpose. We will stall until the AI gets so pissed, it ends it.

I didn't know what the hell *that* meant.

Donut: IT'S GOING TO TAKE MORE THAN JUST A GIANT ROBOT TO DISTRACT THAT GOD. HE'S TRYING TO GET HIS STOLEN WIENER BACK. GUYS ARE PRETTY SINGLE-MINDED WHEN IT COMES TO THAT SORT OF THING. WAIT, I HAVE AN IDEA. UH, LI-NA'S PEOPLE. COVER YOUR EARS.

I returned my attention to the Madness castle. According to Juice Box's team, there was a hidden door against this back wall. We angled toward that. Behind me, Dong grunted as they stepped on a summon trap. It misfired because of the teleport ban, which was good because it had been a *Summon Face-Melting Acid Rats* trap.

I knew the castle was surrounded by a few protections we couldn't avoid, and at any moment...

You have been deshrouded! Your invisibility has been negated by the castle's protections!

"Oh well," I said as I reached the hidden door. It wasn't truly "hidden" so much as painted the same color as the rest of the building. It had three traps on it, and I disabled them all. It was actually a rolling, garage-style door, likely the same door some of the troops had come out of when they'd come to face us. The door was tall enough that Dong wouldn't have to dismount or even lower his lance. The door wasn't meant to be opened from the outside, but I grabbed the bottom, and I strained. There was a pop, and the door slid upward, revealing a large room, empty of people. A line of those

dune buggy things sat up against the far wall. An alarm klaxon started to sound, but it immediately cut off.

I pulled Rend back out and set him free. He took a few tentative steps into the Madness castle and giggled.

Donut's voice echoed over the battlefield, amplified by the massive PA system. There was a shriek of feedback as Donut cleared her throat. She added reverb and a little bit of delay to her voice as well.

"HEY, DICKLESS," she bellowed. "IT'S GONE. YOU'RE NOT GONNA BE ABLE TO PUT IT BACK ON. AND HONESTLY, DO YOU REALLY WANT IT BACK AFTER ALL THOSE PEOPLE TOUCHED IT? IT SMELLS REALLY, REALLY BAD NOW." She paused. "YEAH, THAT'S RIGHT. I'M TALKING TO YOU. SO STOP TRYING TO GET IT BACK. YOU SHOULD JUST ACCEPT YOUR BODY HOW IT IS. I HAVE A SONG FOR YOU. MY FRIEND LIL WAYNE WROTE IT. IT'S ABOUT WIENERS."

Topping at number one on May 3rd, 2008, it's "Lollipop!"

The very ground shook as the distant sound reached us.

Donut: IT'S WORKING! HE STOPPED! HE'S COVERING HIS EARS!

Carl: Goddamnit, Donut. What did we say about pissing off gods?

Donut: I DO FEEL BAD ABOUT THE INSULTS BECAUSE MORDECAI SAYS HE'S NORMALLY A NICE GOD, BUT HE'S TRYING TO HURT OUR FRIENDS. BY THE WAY, THIS IS AN EXAMPLE OF A BASS-HEAVY SONG, CARL. FEEL HOW THE GROUND SHAKES? IT'S DESIGNED TO UPSET OLD PEOPLE AND THOSE WHO DON'T KNOW HOW TO HAVE FUN.

Britney: The digger is coming!

Donut: OH, GOOD! I'LL START A BATTLE PLAYLIST. THE BALL WILL GET TO THE CORPSES IN LIKE TEN MINUTES. PEOPLE MESSAGE ME YOUR SONGS.

Thankfully, the music wasn't that loud from here. Behind me, both Jamal and Bigs were bouncing to the distant song. Dong looked

annoyed. His eyes flashed, and I suspected he was sending a song request to Donut.

"Come on, guys," I said. "Let's try to clear this as quickly as we can, and we can be nearby when the others get here."

"Oh, are the others coming back?" Jamal asked.

"Uh, sort of," I said, stepping into the castle.

Entering the Castle of the Madness.

I cast *Ping*.

The submarine-like sonar sound echoed out, revealing that the castle had about twenty soldiers within. Of the twenty dots, only three were purple, indicating them as offworlders. That was it. Eighteen of them were in a room just around the corner. Two—one white and one purple—were in a room adjacent to the throne room.

That was the operating theater. That would be where Architect Houston spent most of his time, and that purple dot was likely him.

Your Book of Voodoo has updated with three entries.

I paused at that. I opened up *Find Crawler*, clicked a few buttons, and a list of three crawlers appeared. The moment that happened, four additional dots appeared on my map. Three crawlers and the corpse of a crawler. Two of the crawlers were mixed in with the 18 other soldiers. Those two both had the light blue glow, indicating they were in the Madness military, likely under a *Conscription* spell. The third crawler did not have the glow, and they were in the room with Architect Houston and the white NPC dot. The corpse was also in there.

I focused on the corpse. **Corpse of Crawler Zeynep, level 58**. I wasn't close enough to examine her further. I sighed. I knew her. I'd had her in my chat, but we hadn't spoken at all on this floor.

I'd met her on the previous floor during that clusterfuck of an assault on the Desperado Club when we'd assassinated Astrid. Zeynep along with three other members of her party had been dancing at the club, and I'd tried to get them to leave. The sole male

of the group, a large, burly man named Emir had been drunk, and he'd attacked me. I'd stomped his ass and got them to leave. Zeynep had been the voice of reason during the whole confrontation.

But the group that was now here was different. It was the same two women who'd been at the club, but the man—Emir—wasn't here. The two women were conscripted and mixed in with the guards. I didn't have either of them in my chat.

The third living member of the group was someone that was off and on the top ten, and I did have her in my chat, though we'd never spoken. I'd met her briefly during the Butcher's Masquerade. Burcu. She was a badger-headed porsuk, and she had a swashbuckler class, same as both Tran and Bautista. I was pretty sure that she, too, had a quest involving the memorial crystal that was now stuck in the middle of the giant, rolling ball of crawlers. She'd been part of the fight to grab the thing.

She wasn't moving, and she did not have the blue glow of conscription.

Then, I realized the NPC that was in the room with her and Houston had a *green* glow, indicating them as someone from Team Retribution. For a moment, I feared some sort of double cross, but just as I thought that, the NPC dot turned to the X of a corpse. It wouldn't let me examine it. I sent a quick note to Britney, and then I opened a new chat.

Carl: Burcu, I know we haven't talked, but can you see this?

Warning: Because of repeated warnings, this message has *not* been delivered, and the log has been sent to your adjutant for review. Burcu is unaffiliated with the Princess Posse, and any planning may be construed as illegal corroboration.

I growled.

Your Book of Voodoo has been updated with an entry from Crawler Burcu.

Huh, I thought. I pulled the book from my inventory and quickly flipped through.

I went to the entry page for Burcu, which was the last page of the book. It wasn't an entry directed to me, but she was swiftly drawing a map of the surgical theater. My eyes took in the line of Xs with the notification "Fireball traps" over them. She started to rapidly write something about Houston, but before I could read it, the book slammed shut on its own, like it was possessed.

Warning: This is still cheating, you clown. Nice try, though. I do like a good loophole, but you need to be using this damn book for something else.

Outside, the song changed. I missed the title, but it was a guy talk-singing about a detachable penis.

Donut's voice boomed over the PA, now mostly muted since we were inside the castle. "THIS SONG WAS A TERRIBLE CHOICE, CHOI MI-SEON 2. IT'LL GIVE HIM THE WRONG IDEA."

Carl: What's the god doing now?

Donut: HE WAS COMING TOWARD ME, BUT THAT STUPID SONG CHOICE MADE HIM TURN BACK AROUND. IT'S OKAY. THE BALL HAS A BIG HEAD START NOW, AND I THINK THE DIGGER IS COMING.

On the map, the group of dots shifted. All of them, including the two crawlers, started moving in our direction. At the same moment, a list of psionic attacks started spamming across my interface. None stuck. None of us seemed affected.

"They're coming," Dong said.

Rend giggled, his voice now deep and terrifying.

The group rushed into the room and stopped when they saw me and Dong. I held out my hand, which still glowed yellow. None of them had invulnerability.

"Well, this is going to be fun," I said.

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Slam! The final mercenary crashed against the wall after getting brained by Dong. The gnoll mercenary exploded into a pile of coins as he crashed to the ground. The coins scattered over the concrete floor of the room, spinning and twirling.

The older stripper looked absolutely menacing atop the blood-soaked yak, whose horns still held an impaled guard. Gonk, seeing the battle was now over, started casually gnawing on the leg of the mercenary—also a gnoll—impaled upon her.

Rend had likewise managed to get in there and kill a taurin mercenary who'd already been punched unconscious. He was leaning into the open chest and blowing bubbles with the gore, giggling each time blood splashed onto the floor.

"Jesus Christ, Rend," I said. "Don't be gross."

He looked up at me and smiled big, his tooth gleaming. He made a noise that kind of sounded like "Bubbles."

Behind me, Jamal was hopping in circles around the two terrified crawlers as Bigs tied them up. The two women were named Selvi and Tuba, and they both sobbed. I couldn't tell if it was from anger or relief. I'd ordered the shark and Bigs the slug to not hurt them, but the one named Tuba bled profusely from a wound on her side, given to her by Jamal who'd been forced to swipe her spear away with one of his mechanical legs. Both crawlers had a nasty, no-

healing debuff that we couldn't circumvent. It was a side effect bestowed upon those under *Conscription* when they refused to fight.

Selvi was no longer human, but an elf. She was a **level-57 Valide**, which appeared to be some sort of healer class. Tuba was a human and **level-56 Boring Ol' Fighter**. Both were pretty young, in their early twenties, and they both struggled and fought against their bindings. We dropped a pair of *Mute* containments on them both, just in case they were overwhelmed by their debuff and forced to cast a spell.

Tuba would bleed out soon if I didn't get them broken from their conscription. And I couldn't do that until we defeated the Madness. We needed to hurry this up.

Outside, "Little Red Corvette" by Prince blasted. The massive ball of crawlers and mercenaries continued to roll in our direction, but Harpocrates no longer pursued. The god instead moved toward Donut again, but he was now waylaid by one of the diggers, which I still hadn't seen. I hadn't heard from Louis or Samantha in a while, but his health was still full according to the warlord display.

Dong dismounted Gonk and examined the gold coins on the ground. That happened sometimes when one was killed by Dong's crust sock. One of the coins still spun, and he reached down and snatched it up. As I watched, he took the coin, kissed it, opened up the bloody sock, and dropped the coin within with a *clink*.

"I thought they were all nickels in there," I said.

Dong was muttering to himself and didn't answer me. I turned back to the carnage and quickly looted the bodies, including a pair of Viceroys. That left a single Viceroy in the castle, Admiral Houston himself.

Behind me, Selvi and Tuba groaned. I deliberately didn't ask them any questions. If I did, and they answered, they'd receive additional penalties from their debuff. The best thing we could do for them was tie them up and hope they were strong enough to resist the almost unstoppable urges they had to fight back.

"All buttoned up," Bigs said as she finished circling Selvi. She shook her hatchet threateningly. "Don't you be trying to escape."

"Dong, Rend with me. Rest of you stay here," I said. "Keep them safe and make sure Gonk doesn't wander off. We'll be right back. Do not hurt them. They're good guys who are under spells. Do you two understand?"

"Jamal will keep them safe." He did a little hop and spurted a flame.

"Can I kill one of them?" Bigs asked. "That one is already bleeding pretty good."

"Holy shit, Bigs. She's a friend. One of us. A good guy. Keep them safe."

"I'll wait until he's gone," Bigs whispered loudly at the two women. "Then one of you is getting the chop."

They huddled closer together, both crying. A bloody Rend started giggling at them, which didn't help.

I sighed. Dong and I were the only ones with invulnerability, and we needed to move fast. "You know what, Bigs? Change of plan. Go on a reconnaissance. See if you can find and open the front door."

"Yeah, baby!" Bigs said as she slithered off down a main hallway, trailing orange slime. I could see it was littered with summon traps that would no longer work.

"Keep them safe," I reiterated to Jamal. "And Rend, you stay here, too." We turned and hurried down the hall in the opposite direction. The surgical theater and the throne room were right next to each other, just around the corner.

I could hear the screaming as I stepped into the hall, though as soon as I heard it, the sound cut off sharply. The hallways here were wide and unadorned, and the floors were a white, speckled tile. Everything was crisp, clean. Well-lit. I was reminded of a hospital.

With each step, Dong's armored feet echoed loudly. His sock, I realized, was significantly larger than it had been before, and it dragged on the floor behind him.

Samantha: LOUIS, WHERE ARE YOU?

Louis: I'm stuck. It says level six, hallway C. I stepped on a snare trap, and I can't move for a few minutes. I filled the area with a poison cloud, but it doesn't work on them. They have these little dog robot things that shoot darts… Guys,

I’m in trouble. I have some No Disassemble robot killers, but the explosions are too big. I can’t do it where I’m stuck. I don’t know what to do.

Samantha: OKAY, I HAVE AN IDEA TO SAVE YOU, BUT YOU GOTTA TRUST ME.

We turned the corner, and the screaming started up again. I paused, giving Dong a look. Again, the screaming abruptly cut off.

“That... that sounds like it’s *him* screaming. Architect Houston.”

Dong shrugged as we continued.

The door to the surgical theater stood at the end of the hall, right next to the throne room, which sat unguarded. The theater entrance was just a pair of swinging double doors with a sign that read “Do Not Enter” over it. There was a second, neon-like sign that read “Amplification in process.” It was lit.

There was an advanced alarm trap and a trap door trap in front of both the surgical theater and the throne room. The trap door trap was interesting, but I didn’t have time to examine it now. I quickly took all of them and stored them away.

Bigs suddenly appeared, coming from the opposite side. She slimed up and said, “Yo, daddy-o. The front door is just sitting there all wide open. I don’t see nothing out there except a bunch of fields and shit.”

“You couldn’t see a giant, rolling ball of people coming in our direction?”

“You smoking jelly bellies, boss? Ain’t nothing like that.” She looked back, as if she could see from here. “But there could be, I guess. It’s dark as a wombat’s asshole out there.”

“Okay,” I said. I pointed to the throne room. “Go in there and wait. Don’t leave until I tell you.”

“Aight,” the slug said and started sliming into the room. The moment she entered, the notification appeared.

System Message: The Throne Room of the Madness is being occupied by forces from The Princess Posse. If they can hold for six hours, the Madness will be defeated!

I double checked to make sure the immortality remained on my arms, and I cracked my neck.

"Stay behind me," I said. I prepared *Tripper*. I was going to walk in, eyeball the location of all the supposed fire traps, make certain Burcu wasn't in the line of fire, and then cast.

I pushed open the double doors, and I stepped into the surgical theater of Architect Houston of the Madness. Dong jumped in behind me with a wheezy war cry.

I stopped dead, preventing Dong from entering the room further the moment I eyed the circle of traps in the room. I wouldn't be casting *Tripper* on these.

"Huh," was all Dong said as we both paused at the door, seeing what was going on within.

I wasn't sure *what* I was expecting to see, but this was not it.

The large, octagon-shaped room itself was pretty much what we'd anticipated: a crisp, starkly white room with a group of surgical tables in the middle, surrounded by a raised viewing area so students could sit and watch the in-process surgical procedures. A massive, cumbersome mechanical apparatus hung from the center of the high ceiling. Dozens of mechanical arms came off the machine, and it whisked and whirred as it worked.

There were four tables, and three were occupied.

The fourth table was empty, but it appeared as if twenty gallons of blood had been dumped on it from above. The blood was shockingly red in the white room. The source of the blood was gone, but a familiar-looking cleaner bot that was the same model as our own—but painted solid white—was studiously at work, slurping the blood off the floor.

The first occupied table contained the corpse of the crawler Zeynep. They had done... *something* to her. Something unspeakable. Something I won't describe. I couldn't bear to look at her for more than a cursory moment. Still, I caught her lifeless eyes in the bright light, and despite all the other craziness in the room, those dead

eyes caught my own just long enough for me to feel accused by her. Accused for what she'd been forced to endure.

The second table contained Burcu, who was alive. She struggled against what appeared to be magical bonds. She opened her mouth to say something, but no words came out. Dried blood ran down the front of her badger face and throat. Tears streamed.

The third table... I blinked, not comprehending what I saw. There were two forms on the table. One was the blank, dead corpse of the changeling, whose name had been Namico. It said his cause of death was **Died on the Surgical Table**, which was the same as Zeynep.

The changeling had suffered a similar, but not as... thorough fate as Zeynep. It appeared as if he had been peeled open. He wasn't truly on the table, but upside down, hovering about ten inches over the other form, clutched in the mechanical arms of the machine hanging from the ceiling. The changeling faced downward, offset and facing in the wrong direction as the table's other occupant, with only their torsos overlapping.

Architect Houston was the form. His robes were gone. His mask was gone, revealing the horrific, multi-limbed, half bug, half monster that he was. He was on his back on the table, facing the dead changeling that dangled above him. He was awake, saying something to the machine.

The machine was... connecting Houston to the changeling. Physically connecting him. Things were coming out of the changeling and going into Houston and vice-versa.

The giant machine itself was something straight from a mad scientist's fever dream of a lair. It was a chandelier covered in robotic arms and surgical tools, all spinning and waving about, silently whisking as they worked.

The thing was made of gleaming chrome, and the moment my eyes focused on it, an info box appeared.

The Grease Monkey. Viceroy Portable Surgical and Scientific Exploration Unit. Outpost version.

Tech-based surgical repair unit automaton.

This thing isn't really necessary here in the dungeon where we use potions and magic and basically free, universal healthcare to keep your UTIs in check, unless, you know, it's funny not to. You're welcome about that, by the way. But out in the wide universe, outside the center system where literally hundreds of thousands of different species struggle daily to survive? What does one do for healthcare, especially when you're far from home, or you're afflicted with something your local doctors simply can't fix?

You can't just travel to the inner system and take advantage of their free healing. Not if you're not a citizen. And if you're one of those species the local doctor has never even heard of, what the hell are you going to do? Die because of a hangnail?

There's a reason why the Viceroys provide free transportation to their systems. And if there's a mass casualty event, or better yet, a war? Heck, they'll come to you. And when they do, they'll bring one of these things with them.

The Portable Surgical Automaton Unit, colloquially known as the Grease Monkey, is a marvel of technology. Even if your species is one of those "What the fuck *is* that thing?" this automaton will analyze your anatomy, take you apart, and put you back together again good as new. Well, mostly.

What a lot of people don't know is that surgical repair is actually the *secondary* purpose of these machines. Viceroys have no passion for healing. Their passion is science. Understanding the universe. Understanding everything from the atom to the tree, no matter the cost.

They'll gladly operate on anybody, no questions asked. But it still ain't free.

***Nothing* is free in this galaxy. That should be perfectly clear by now.**

The good news is if you can't pay right away, that's okay. The Viceroys have multiple payment options and opportunities available for you. And if you want to sign

yourself over to their post-biological form studies corp, all your bills will be wiped away.

Incidentally, Architect Houston, who is currently being operated on by his own machine, is the prime of the Viceroys not because he was elected so, or because of some innate ability to lead his people, but because he's made the most scientific discoveries. Most of which were made with the help of this very machine you see before you now.

"Stay back," Houston called at me. He was clearly in pain as the machine continued to work. Hundreds of tiny little arms appeared, and they were connecting what appeared to be nerves from the changeling's neck to Houston. "You take one step in here, and it'll set off the traps, incinerating us all. "I'm almost done. I'm almost there. You'll have your victory, Carl. I care no longer for what happens here. Let me finish. Let me finish, and your fellow crawler doesn't have to die. This is my life's work. I'm almost there."

I spared another glance at the ring of traps circling the room. They were up, out of reach on the second floor of the surgical theater, all facing downward from the edge of the observation deck. There were eight of them, though it appeared just one was enough to absolutely kill everything in the room.

Containment Breach Trap Mark IV.

Warning: This trap is *Tripper* proof.

Warning: This trap is chained in a sequence.

Warning: Removing or triggering a single trap in the sequence will activate all remaining traps in the sequence.

Warning: This trap has a dead man's switch. It is attached to Architect Houston of the Madness. If he is killed, this trap will automatically trigger.

I had never seen nor heard of anything like that, but the traps were each the size of a shoe box, much bigger than the regular, Lego-sized trap modules. These things were more like weapons than traps.

They would shoot literal Sheol fire into the room, instantly incinerating everything. They would be triggered by anyone who wasn't affiliated with the Madness who stepped on the floor.

My invulnerability wasn't as good as the one I'd had earlier. Still, I was pretty sure I'd be fine, but I wasn't positive. Burcu didn't have the invulnerability, and she would absolutely get turned to ash.

Donut: HARPOCRATES RIPPED THE GIANT ROBOT IN HALF AND THREW HALF OF IT AT ME! IT DIDN'T FLY FAR ENOUGH TO GET TO ME, BUT HE'S COMING IN MY DIRECTION NOW. I TURNED THE MUSIC OFF, BUT HE'S STILL COMING! I'M THINKING I SHOULDN'T HAVE SAID SO MANY MEAN THINGS TO HIM. GUYS SURE ARE SENSITIVE WHEN YOU MAKE FUN OF THEIR WIENERS. HE EVEN MARKED ME FOR DEATH!

Carl: Get out of the tower! Someone get Donut out of there!

Donut: I STILL HAVE TIME. THE BALL IS ALMOST THERE. I CAN'T LEAVE THE TOWER UNTIL THEY GET TO THE CORPSES! IF I DON'T STAY, THEN EVERYONE IS IN TROUBLE. EVERYONE ON OUR TEAM MIGHT DIE!

Li Jun: He's going to get to you before the ball reaches the other field. I have an idea. Speaker number 11 is still on the back of a cart. Mute all the speakers except that one. Play the song I just sent you.

Li Na: Jun, no. No!

Li Jun: Sorry, little sister. I'll jump before he catches me.

It took everything I had to focus on the task at hand. Li Jun was distracting the angry god so Donut could finish her plan, and it was all I could do to not scream.

More messages flooded in, including a hysterical one from Louis and Samantha both. The very world rumbled as something else happened out there.

I sent another message to Burcu, and to my surprise, this time it was delivered.

Carl: I don't know if this is going to come through, but we're going to get you out of here. Do you know what he's doing?

Burcu: There you are! None of my messages were delivered. He cut out my tongue and voice box. I can't

speak. He tortured my mother. He killed her right in front of me. Free me so I can kill him. These bindings won't let me cast magic. You owe me, Carl. You killed my father. Free me now.

I had no idea what she was talking about in regards to her father. I reexamined the trap and then examined her bindings. The trap required someone to step on the floor to be set off. The bindings on the table appeared to be controlled via a switch on the wall. On the surgical table, Houston cast a spell, surprising me. But the spell was directed at the corpse hovering over him. The dead changeling started to thrash, but the mechanical arms held it in place.

I turned to Dong. "Keep an eye on Houston. Kill him if he starts to cast anything else."

"Kill him how? I don't have ranged weapons."

"By stepping into the room."

Dong looked nervously at the yellow glow on his arms. "Uh, are you sure? What are you doing?"

I took a step back, ran, and activated *Walk on Air* as I rushed across the room. The skill was not a flying skill, and it didn't work all that great. It was more of a glorified long jump. I aimed for the closest table, which was the empty one covered in blood. I landed heavily, slipped in the blood, and flew onto my back, hitting the table hard. Blood splattered everywhere.

The white cleaner bot let out a familiar, shrill cry and zoomed up at me and beeped.

"Sorry," I said to the thing. It beeped again and moved closer to me, as if it was going to attack. I reached up and grabbed it with two hands. I felt a familiar haptic buzz, indicating I could stick it in my inventory, which surprised me. I didn't question it, and I took it.

Across the way, Houston was crying in pain as the machine appeared to start removing some of his lower guts, letting them slop onto the floor. Above him, the changeling started to vibrate. I stood, judging the distance to the next table which held the corpse of Zeynep. From that table, I could reach the switch, which would turn off her bindings. The *Walk on Air* had a one minute cooldown, but I could make the next jump without it. I still didn't know how the hell

we were going to get her out of here once I got to her. I hoped the skill was strong enough to let me carry her.

"Don't leave the table when the bindings are gone!" I called at Burcu. "Trust me. We'll get him, but let me get you out of the room first." I jumped, and I landed on the second table, landing amongst the gore of Zeynep. The body fell apart when I landed, much of it sloughing to the floor. It did not set off the trap. I'd damaged the corpse enough it disappeared from my map. I held down my gorge. The switch was right there on the wall. I turned, and Burcu continued to thrash, an enraged look about her as she struggled.

She's going to jump off that table the moment I hit it.

"Carl. Do not... Do not press that button. I can stop it all," Houston called. "You don't understand. It is called the Beautiful Place. I can get there. They are the key. The changelings. This world. Why do you think we come here, cycle after cycle? You've helped make the greatest discovery in history, and you don't even realize it. It was here all along, right under our mandibles."

I quickly sifted through my inventory and found what I was looking for.

"Sorry," I said to Burcu as I pulled out the wand of *Nighty-Night*. Her eyes went wide, and she started to thrash as I pointed it at her and cast. She immediately conked out, and a 5-minute timer appeared above her head. I reached over and hit the switch, and the magical bindings around her disappeared. I prepared to jump onto her table. This was going to be tricky because I needed to land around her, not on her. If I slipped...

"Uh, Carl," Dong called from the doorway.

Donut: GO FASTER LI JUN! HE IS CATCHING UP!

Rosetta: Eris is awake, but she's still in the middle of the ball! She's trying to escape, but she still can't move. She turned off her *Witness* spell and just removed everyone's invulnerability, but they're still invulnerable anyway. The *Rolling Battle Formation* spell keeps them immobile and invulnerable. But they'll be exposed the moment the ball breaks!

While the thousands of people in the giant ball were still invulnerable because of the ball spell itself, I was no longer safe. I looked down at my arm, and the yellow glow was gone.

"*Oh, fuck*."

At that moment, I heard Mordecai's voice. *You can't save them all, kid*. I didn't even know this Burcu person, and by all accounts, she was kind of an ass. And now I was in serious trouble because I hadn't simply let her die. I could have ended this just by stepping into the room, and now it was too late.

<u>Li Jun</u>: Sister. Tell Zhang I'm sorry I didn't get to say goodbye to his face. Tell him I won our bet. And you. Protect him. I want you to be kind to the others. This was my decision. I had to do it. I know you get angry. If you must, be angry with me. I love you with all I have. I love you with the moon and the sun and all the stars in the sky. I will see you soon, and I will tell mama you said hello.

Across from me, a health bar had appeared over the Viceroy and started to rapidly lower. Above him, the changeling continued to thrash. They now looked like they were two pieces of hot cheese that had just been pulled apart.

The changeling started to change, despite being dead. Tentacles, or roots, actually, grew from its lower half.

"Yes!" Houston called as he died. He was sobbing. "I found you. I found you. After all this time. You were right here all along. It's really you, isn't it? Not just an avatar. It's you. It's you."

I took a *Fine Healing* potion, and I threw it at the warlord. It crashed against the man's alien head.

"Gah!" he cried as his health rocketed back up. "No! No! What did you do?" Above him, the creature that used to be the changeling started to scream. Vines appeared out of nowhere and wrapped their way up the machine. A high-pitched, shrill, bone-shaking scream came from the creature, who remained in the clutches of the surgical apparatus.

I ignored this as I jumped across the way, landing on the table with the unconscious Burcu. I wobbled as the table started to roll. I

wasn't expecting that. I reached down to pick Burcu up and pull her over my shoulder.

And that's when the table tipped over.

I saw the disaster unfolding in slow motion.

You can do that, sometimes. In the midst of chaos. You can see it. You can focus on the event horizon and see it so, so clearly you wonder how you never saw it before.

Burcu had awakened the moment I touched her, and I met her eyes as she fell toward the white, clean floor. And like her dead mother, I saw accusation there. At the same moment, I sailed over her and hit the floor with my bare feet.

"You don't know what you've done," was all Houston said in the moments before the traps fired.

For my part, I activated *Gloom Wraith Phase* the very moment my feet touched the ground.

I shot forward in the direction I was facing, which was toward Architect Houston, still alive, still on the table, still under the creature surgically attached to him.

I pushed through them, everything moving in slow motion as the fire descended upon the room from all directions at once. I passed through the naked Houston, unraveling him. I felt the tendrils whip around me, despite my non-corporeal form. My shoulder felt as if I hit a solid wall, and I was suddenly spinning.

It was there, spinning with me, facing me. The creature, looking into my eyes. It said nothing. It pulsated with black energy, regarding me. It just looked at me, and then it leaned in, as if to kiss me. And in that moment, as we still spun, it changed, turning momentarily into a face I recognized.

Li Jun.

I couldn't understand what was happening. Just that it was important. We were moving and frozen at the same time. Spinning yet stopped. It was like that moment with Paulie. Frozen in time. Moving at incredible speed, all at once.

"Thank you for giving me more time with my sister and my best friend," Li Jun said as roots wrapped around him and suddenly whisked him away.

I moved through the double doors of the room, past Dong, just barely missing him by inches, as I hit the floor and slid.

I blinked, and I realized I'd been knocked unconscious for just a moment. Dong was over me, casting a *Healing* spell. I felt my shoulder crack painfully into place. I wasn't burned, but I felt the heat from the room next door. The castle was on fire. Bigs had abandoned the throne room and was shouting.

I'd cast *Gloom Wraith Phase* to escape the room, but I'd hit something magical on the way out, which had injured me. I'd seen something, but I wasn't sure if it was real. It felt like a dream. Either way, Architect Houston was dead. Burcu was dead. I'd barely escaped.

There were multiple messages on my screen, but a single message stood out, like a punch in the gut.

Li Jun: Thank you for giving me more time with my sister and my best friend.

This message is from a deceased crawler.

"No, no, Li Jun. No," I whispered, my voice hoarse. I thought of that moment when we'd been face to face. Was that real? What did that mean?

I took a deep breath. Donut and Li Na were both screaming in chat, but I pushed it away for now. I couldn't look. I just couldn't. I needed to breathe.

The system wouldn't let me.

System Message: Architect Houston of the Madness has fallen. Credit for the kill has been given to Warlord Carl of the Princess Posse.

System Message: The Madness has been defeated.

System Message: All assets of the Madness have been awarded to the Princess Posse.

System Message: Battlefield conditions have been met. Larracos is no longer safe.

Warning. Warning. Warning.

System Message: The Peeling Phase is upon us. This city is open. First to take the castle, wins.

And remember, folks. Only one team can win. Alliances don't matter in the end.

This was followed by a barrage of messages.

Baroness Victory: I'm sorry. We tried to delay as long as possible. Our attempts have backfired. We were out maneuvered.

Warlord Juice Box: We need help! They're everywhere! The War Mages aren't our friends. We need help!

Britney: They're breaking in. I have to run!

Warlord Message: A full quorum adjudication has determined no cheating has occurred by any warlords. Any players under an administrative hold have now been released.

Warlord Message: After a careful deliberation, it has been determined that the Non-Team Entity known as the War Mage Rebellion will not be allowed access to Larracos until the Peeling phase.

Warlord Message: Since we are now in the Peeling Phase, this ruling is rendered moot. However, the system has determined that the Quorum's ruling has given the War Mage Rebellion standing.

Warlord Message: Warlord Agatha of the War Mage Rebellion has proposed three emergency action items.

Action item one. "The War Mage Rebellion be given full resources and access to the warlord system. In addition, we are now allowed to claim thrones for our own."

This request has been granted. And frankly, you already had this, so this was pretty much a waste of an action item.

Action item two. "The War Mage Rebellion be given full access to the *Conscription* spell and all its benefits."

This request has been granted. The *Conscription* spell will now allow unaffiliated players to be conscripted into the War Mage Rebellion.

Action item three. "During the Peeling Phase, revert to the rules of the original Faction Wars. Warlords and all soldiers of a defeated team should automatically die if they lose during the Peeling Phase."

I mean. Why not? You want drama. Now we got drama.

This request has been granted with a caveat. From this point forward, every affiliated soldier and warlord on a team *who is still on the battlefield* will now drop dead where they stand the moment the team is defeated.

Holy shit. My mind reeled. Agatha? What the actual fuck.

And the last part was terrifying. There could only be one winner. It was either us or Juice Box's team. It was all or nothing. Us versus them, exactly what we'd been trying to avoid.

But the gut punches kept coming.

System Message: The Throne Room of Team Retribution is being occupied by forces from the War Mage Rebellion.

Per the Peeling Phase ruleset, they now have control of the city defense system. There is a half-hour grace period before the towers are active.

If they can hold the throne room for six hours, the War Mage Rebellion will be declared winner of this season of Faction Wars.

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[PART 4]
THE PEELING OF LARRACOS

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SEVERAL DAYS EARLIER

"No," Katia said, looking about. "No, please. Not this." A bird appeared on her shoulder. A bird with the skull of a child, and it rubbed its small, ghoulish head against Katia's in a gesture of comfort. This was her card from the previous floor. The bird's name was Annie.

Something had gone wrong. I wasn't supposed to be here. I was in Katia's dream. I was supposed to have gone and experienced a dream from Shi Maria's point of view, and Katia was supposed to have faced this dream on her own.

We'd taken the potions and had both gone a little loopy. In that moment, I'd felt something strange. It was as if... as if I'd been wrapped in plastic this whole time, and for just a moment, that plastic was gone. I had popped open like a tree whose bindings had suddenly been cut. My reach wasn't far, but it was clearly beyond what it was supposed to be.

Katia and I had reached forward and touched hands. Edgar had yelled, and Imani was there, separating us.

But she had only separated us physically. There was a second connection between Katia and myself, and that was what had bound me to her dream.

In that moment, I'd connected with more than just Katia. I'd caught the briefest of glimpses of everyone nearby. Of Mordecai and that deep, bottomless well of sadness within. Of Rosetta, and the tired rage. Of Edgar the tortoise and the strange sense of fear and

wonder at all the things he was suddenly remembering from his hundreds of past lives. Of Bucket Boy the crocodilian NPC, who wondered why he didn't remember the things the other strippers said they did, and the shame he felt because of it, like it meant he somehow wasn't worthy.

And Imani. Oh, god. Imani. Most of what I saw with the others was emotion and maybe an inkling at what caused it, but with her, and Katia, I saw more. I saw what Imani carried. It was just a glimpse, but it was so, so much. She'd fled her home in Detroit, and her older brothers and sisters blamed her for leaving the family. But she had to. She had to get away. She'd earned her nursing certificate and found a job in what she considered the middle of nowhere. A relatively small, beautiful town where drugs and violence and despair were just something one saw on the news. She was always chasing peace despite the overwhelming guilt she carried, like a heavy sack she couldn't put down. She was sick of being looked at as the one in charge, the one who had to make the tough decisions. She didn't want that responsibility, yet it always fell to her, despite her always being the youngest one in the room.

She was in love with Chris, and I had no idea. She loved his simplicity. His quiet kindness.

It felt so private, so dirty for me to have learned about this in such a way. Like I had broken into her house and spied her utterly naked, all without her knowing.

She hadn't invited me into her mind, and I should have looked away. But I couldn't. I didn't know how. My only solace was that I knew—somehow I knew—I'd forget much of this when I finally woke up.

And I had learned all that after just the briefest glimpse.

Donut, thankfully, wasn't in the room for this. She'd been sprayed by the skunks and was still in the saferoom. That was a relief. Nobody deserved to have their mind invaded like that.

It sees us like this, I thought. *This is what the dungeon sees. This is what the dungeon knows.*

But that wasn't true, was it? It was in our heads, yes, but it wasn't that deep. It interpreted things incorrectly all the time. It

didn’t see what I saw. Or maybe it did, but it just didn’t understand because it had never been human.

And what I saw with Imani was just a fraction of what I now knew about Katia.

We stood at the threshold to a hospital. There was a large statue of a chipmunk wearing a bucket hat in the entrance, a generic, please-don’t-sue-us interpretation of one of the duo from Chip and Dale. A children’s hospital. All the signs were in Icelandic. Here, in the dream, I couldn’t read the writing but spoken words still translated themselves in my mind.

Katia and I remained attached. I looked, and our hands were intertwined, my skin touching hers, as if we’d been surgically affixed. Her bird was like that, too.

Katia took a deep breath and moved closer to me so our arms touched. She gave me a shy smile, not at all surprised I was here with her.

A second Katia, this one a memory ghost, rushed toward the door from the outside, clutching a folder filled with papers.

The memory ghost opened the door. I was shocked at how different, how smaller she looked. This was not the Katia I knew. This woman, struggling with papers as she bungled her way through the front door of the hospital, was not someone I would ever give a second glance.

The Katia I knew. The *real* Katia. She was a blazing presence. A force of nature. I knew that’s not how it started, and the Katia I first met on the third floor was much like this memory ghost before us now, but seeing the two contrasted at the same time was shocking.

“This is the moment,” the real Katia said. “This is the second worst moment in my life.”

The woman in the doorway paused, eyes going wide. I turned to see the man who had caught her attention. He was older, balding. This was Fannar. Her ex. Another professor. He’d had an affair with a student, and she’d reported him, and they had done nothing.

“What are you doing here?” the memory ghost of Katia asked.

“Telling them the truth,” Fannar said, pushing past her.

"No," both Katias said at the same time. From her shoulder, Annie cawed.

Later, as the dream continued, as we watched Katia plead with the woman who would ultimately deny her application to adopt, and as both versions of Katia shouted *He had no right!*, we watched in silence as the woman told Katia there was nothing she could do, and that Katia should just go home and focus on her own health.

But Katia didn't go home. She left the office, she turned into a bathroom, and she locked herself into a stall. We followed, unwillingly observing as she sat down on the toilet, put her fist into her mouth, and she silently screamed. We stood in silent witness as the dream Katia screamed and screamed and screamed.

After what seemed like forever, she wiped her tears, stood, and marched out of the bathroom.

She paused in the doorway, and she turned down the hallway leading away from the exit.

"I was so scared I'd never see her again," the now Katia said as we followed, floating along like ghosts. "I'd already visited Annie several times at this point, and I hoped the nurses hadn't yet been told about what Fannar had said."

We watched dream Katia hesitantly poke her head through a pair of doors, stopping at a nurse station. "I just wanted to say hello to Annie," dream Katia said to the nurse sitting there, who was reading an English-language romance novel.

"Oh, hi Katia. She's having a good day today," the nurse said without even looking up.

Katia thanked the nurse and entered a long room near the end of the hall. There were six or seven cribs in here, but all were empty except one. The little girl was on her back, playing with her toes and happily babbling. A blue, stuffed dog sat in the crib. Several colorful cutouts decorated the walls. It was a stark contrast with the machines dotted around the room.

"Hello, my love," dream Katia said to the baby as she entered. Another nurse was at the counter and smiled as Katia entered.

"Hello, Katia," the nurse said. "You can pick her up. Just be careful. She hasn't pulled anything out today, and we are trying to

keep it that way. Right, little Annie?" The nurse wrote something down and then turned and left the room, leaving Katia alone with the baby.

Little Annie giggled and stood up in the crib. If it wasn't for the strange, splint-like device on the baby's arm—which appeared to be a harness to keep her from yanking out her IV—I'd have no idea she was sick. But then I saw the little girl's eyes, which didn't seem to focus. Only then could I see something truly was wrong. Though Annie didn't seem to know that. She let out a loud, happy laugh at the sound of Katia's voice.

"I have nothing left," dream Katia said to little Annie, keeping her voice happy and playful. "You were all I had, and I'm not even good enough for that."

"You know that's not true, right?" I said as we both watched.

"Brain cancer," the now Katia said, smiling lovingly at the little girl who bounced up and down at the edge of the crib. "It is such an aggressive, evil thing. It's not fair that we can now just drink a potion, and it's gone. I was sick, too. I should never have tried to hide that. But I was fine and would be for a while. Long enough." She reached down to touch the face of the little girl, and her hand went right through. "How could someone abandon such an angel?"

"How long ago was this?" I asked as the dream Katia picked up the little girl and held her in her arms, being careful not to tangle the IV tube. Tears streamed down the face of both versions of the woman.

"About a year ago. She was gone before it happened, thank god. She died in this room, I think. I could have taken her home and given her love, but I couldn't even have that. She died without anybody to call her own. Nobody even told me. It wasn't until I ran into that same nurse who was reading the book. She'd said it so casually, too, like it hadn't mattered. 'Oh, that girl? She passed a few weeks ago.'" The now Katia reached up and stroked the other Annie, the bird on her shoulder. "She was like me, in that way. All alone."

I didn't know what to say. What does one say to that? I felt dirty all over again, like I was seeing something so personal, so raw, nobody should be allowed to ever witness it.

Katia continued. "And every time I try to love somebody, we end up hurting each other. I do that, Carl. I hurt those I love."

"No," I said, finally finding my voice. "No to all of that. *We* are family, Katia. You were in an impossible situation here, just like how we are in an impossible situation now. But we are family, and that's something they can never take away, no matter what happens."

Dream Katia clutched the baby to her chest, and the little girl clung back onto her. And as they clutched onto each other, Katia swayed back and forth, singing to the girl.

"And here is the worst moment of my life because I know it's the last time I will ever see her," Katia said. A moment passed. "It's also my favorite memory, and it is where I keep coming back to."

We remained silent for some time, watching Katia sing and dance with the baby, who was soon asleep.

The now Katia reached up and wiped her eyes. "At this moment, I was so sure I was going to kill myself after this that I actually felt this calming sense of peace. But then I thought to myself, *what if they change their mind? Then who would she have?* And the fear would come back." Baby Annie let out a little sigh. "They never did change their minds. And then when I saw the nurse at the park, and she told me Annie was dead, as if it was nothing, I lost all the hope I had all over again."

I recognized that moment of finality for what it was. I'd felt it, too. In that way, Katia and I were more alike than I'd ever realized. The last moment of the crash.

Come on now, the woman had said to me. *Come on now*.

I stepped even closer to Katia, and I leaned my head down so it touched hers, and together, we watched dream Katia dance with the child she never had.

"She knows," I finally said, watching Katia and Annie together. "You couldn't be together in the end, but right here, in this moment, she knows."

"I know," Katia said. "That's why it's my favorite memory."

A few minutes passed.

"I'm worried about Daniel," Katia finally said. "I'm worried he's going to do something stupid if this thing with Huanxin Jinx doesn't

work out."

"I know," I said. "I'm worried about him, too. He loves you."

"And I love him," Katia said. She turned to look at me. Our hands were still connected. On her shoulder, Annie the bird spread her wings and cawed. "But as much as I love him, I want you to know I love you and Donut more." She pointed at the dancing woman and infant. "I love you both just as much as I ever loved those two right there."

We touched heads again. I thought of Asher. Of my father. My mother. I mourned what could have been.

"If we stick around long enough, you can see me almost get arrested," Katia finally added. We both laughed as she wiped her eyes. "You know what? I think Mordecai's stupid plan is actually..."

But we never got to finish. Everything was shattered a moment later as Shi Maria, confused and screaming, burst into the room, jump scaring us both as Katia's dream and my dream finally collided with one another.

"I didn't kill him," Shi Maria shouted at us, pushing her way through the memory ghost of Katia and Annie. She pressed her face right up to mine. Her eye was open and shining, but I felt nothing from it. "I didn't kill him! I didn't kill him! I did not, I did not, I did not!"

"Bitch, you swallowed me whole," a new voice said.

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ROSETTA

Baroness Victory: I was able to check the financial feed during the adjudication while we waited for that idiot Ferdinand to come down out of the rafters. It appears the money has reached the intended destination. Obviously we can't see what's really happening out there anymore, but we can still see transactions and their amounts. I can't decipher what the gods is happening in the Naga system, but there was a transaction more than big enough to suggest your people were able to purchase two ships, despite the apparent chaos in the system. Assuming your *Homecoming Queen* starship follows your orders and shoots down that yacht, our transaction is done.

Rosetta: Thank you, Baroness. I know your sister would be proud. The captain who remained on board knows his duty and will follow through if he hasn't already. Now what the hells is going on with the War Mages?

Baroness Victory: Just because we have dealings together outside the dungeon doesn't mean I am not taking my duties as adjutant seriously. I told you before I will *not* cheat nor will I help you cheat. Any information I give about in-dungeon rulings must go through warlords Carl or Donut. That said, everything is fucked. That's what's going on. We're all going to die because the AI is insane.

Rosetta sighed with relief. No matter what happened next, her primary mission was complete. If it all fell apart now, it wouldn't be her fault.

Still, despite her absolute hatred for the orcs, she felt ill about the transaction. The yacht they'd agreed to kill in exchange for the pin number contained several children. Orc children, yes, but children nonetheless. And now that Stalwart was dead, one of those children was the new king of the Skull Empire.

Assuming York actually did his duty and didn't decide to write a poem or something instead, once he shot down the orc yacht, that would leave Princess Formidable in charge of the Skull Empire, assuming she was still alive somewhere on Earth's surface. And if *she* was dead, then it would be the Maestro, despite him being supposedly disowned by his father.

There were no circumstances in which Baroness Victory would end up in charge of the Skull Empire, not unless she first killed about 1,000 other nobles spread across the galaxy, so her motivations in helping the Pacifist network were a mystery to Rosetta. This deal had been brokered between Porthus and Victory long before Victory was even chosen as an adjutant. Once again, he seemed to be a few steps ahead of everybody else.

Porthus, I hope you know what you're doing.

If all was going to plan, Porthus, along with all the others, namely the families of those who'd entered the dungeon, would be boarding the generation ship they just bought with their stolen funds and hauling tail to the Plenty system, where they would give one of the expensive ships along with the rest of the money to the goats in exchange for passage to the "forbidden" gate of the Impetus Point, the tunnel node that reached the furthest point in the known galaxy. And from there they would set out and get as far from the center system as possible, only to return when and if the inevitable wars and chaos settled.

So far, everything had occurred exactly as Porthus predicted. At least, everything *outside the dungeon* had gone as Porthus had predicted, which was more than a little disconcerting. It was that woman, Rosetta knew. The witch that had his ear. The Apothecary.

Rosetta wasn't one to believe in anything supernatural outside the confines of an enhancement zone, but there was something spooky about that creature. Rosetta didn't trust her, and she'd told Porthus thus multiple times.

She's on our side, Porthus had said.

Is she? Rosetta had asked. *How can you be so sure? There's a reason why people don't trust collective minds, Porthus. They're always five steps ahead of everybody else. There's a reason everybody hates this thing*. *Do you see how they portray her in the dungeon? She's a tentacle monster that takes over minds. It's fucking terrifying. Who knows what she really looks like. For all you know she's leading our families to her prime body so she can eat us, like some sort of fucked-up food delivery service*.

You'll have to trust me, he'd said.

I do trust you*. I don't trust* her*. It. Whatever we're supposed to call her. I don't know what's in it for her.*

She most definitely prefers to be called her. And I do know what's in it for her. She has a very good reason for all this.

What, then? What is it?

I can't tell you, he'd said with that stupid, smug smile of his. *I promised her I wouldn't tell you. Not if you want to go into the dungeon. Because if you know and enter the dungeon, then the local AI might learn. And if the local AI learns, then the Eulogist will eventually know.*

What the fuck does that even mean? Isn't the Eulogist dead?

It means you need to trust me.

And that was the problem, wasn't it? She rubbed her leg, thinking hard. She trusted Porthus with all her heart. As much shit as she gave him, he was *always* right. He'd picked her up after she'd finally escaped the dungeon, after cycles and cycles as a merchant in the mercenary guild, being forced to grit her teeth and work with the filthy bastards who played faction wars, including then-Prince Rust himself, who didn't even recognize her.

And why would he?

He'd killed Brooks with that goddamned whip of his. Faction Wars had been over, and the orcs had made the transfer to the

Scolopendra Club. And even then, standing on the other side of the glass, they'd mocked them, the crawlers who'd given everything to survive those horrible days. They'd taken the librarians and other NPCs, and Brooks had tried to stop it. In his rage, Brooks had cast spell after spell at the portal screen. And on the other side, the orcs had laughed and laughed. Rust, still laughing, had stepped back through the portal, lassoed Brooks, and pulled him into the glass, which had cut him right in half. It had been so casual, so fast. Brooks had died immediately.

But Rosetta remembered. She would never forget. She relished that moment when she used the whip to decapitate the old orc.

Tipid: Shouldn't we be doing something? Are we just waiting for Donut to figure out how to safely break apart that battle formation? And what about Harpocrates? That crawler distracted him, but he's turning back toward the tower again. It sounds like Yarilo is on the move again, too.

Rosetta: There's nothing we can do for the moment. Just stand by. I've ordered Li Na to assist the NPCs, but she is currently in a fit of hysterics over the death of her brother. Carl is free of the Madness castle, and he will likely address her soon.

Justice Light: We need to move on the war mage threat immediately. They have the Gate. I do not understand why they are not allied with the other NPCs. I do not understand why that Residual is their warlord. We do not know their plans, and that is dangerous. They are going to ruin everything.

Rosetta: Look. I do not disagree, old comrade. I don't relish dying here, but we all knew what we were getting ourselves into. We knew winning Faction Wars was a long shot. Our goal is and was to show the universe this cruelty will no longer be tolerated, and no matter what happens next, I think our message has already taken seed. Perhaps these mages winning, no matter what their motives are, is not such a bad thing. It will be quick for us, and all the

remaining mercenaries and leaders will be dead, which is beyond what we even imagined.

Justice Light: I am not done yet. We need to fight.

Rosetta: With all the crawlers dead, the Ascendency will immediately kick off, and Rectrix will get to work. And perhaps after all this, York and Rectrix will survive. If we pull off some miracle, and the crawl continues even longer, we risk the AI gaining even more strength.

Which is what that Apothecary thing wants, she didn't add.

But even as she thought that, Rosetta was filled with doubt.

Agatha. Why was that Agatha creature the warlord of the war mage team? How in the name of the gods had that even happened? It didn't make any sense.

It was already known that the strange "human" was a residual with a knack for disappearing and reappearing at just the right moment. And even though they tried to erase her from the feed, she'd grown quite the following. But now it was clear she was the *other* kind of residual. The more rare kind that was more in line with the Nebulars, who worshiped the Eulogist. And that made Agatha the enemy of the Apothecary, the galaxy's biggest advocate for shutting down the center system.

And while Rosetta didn't trust the Apothecary, she trusted this residual thing less. Her initial, gut instinct had been to let them win, but Justice Light was correct. They didn't know what their true motivations were. Why were they trying to kill everybody? Why were they suddenly trying to end the crawl as quickly as possible? And most importantly, why was the local AI allowing this to happen?

We should have hunted her down and killed her. The moment Rosetta had learned there was still one of those residual things pinging around the dungeon, she should have made certain it was removed. It hadn't seemed important at the time. Residuals were always in the dungeon. They were harmless.

She was filled with doubt about what they should do.

Neither Tipid nor Justice Light knew anything about Porthus's plans other than sending them here to assist in the chaos. For them, that was enough. Their revenge was the same as the others. Coming

here and helping the current crawlers, this time willingly, was their last, great statement to the cruel galaxy which had ignored them for too long. As Carl had so bluntly put it, *I will break you.*

Or at least, she *thought* coming here was going to be enough for the others. Justice Light had some project he was working on. Whatever it was, Porthus didn't know about it because he would have told her. Porthus told her everything. Almost everything.

Justice Light: Rosetta, you are the most stubborn person I have ever known. But I need you to trust me in this. We need to get that gate back. We need to win this day. We need to move fast. Once those defensive towers spin up, we will be in dire trouble.

She sighed and looked again at the battle map. There were only four teams left, not including these war mages. The NPCs, the Princess Posse, the Dream—which was as good as defeated, and the Reavers.

Even before the dungeon, Rosetta grew up in a world where showing kindness was viewed as weakness. Still, she felt kindness toward Justice Light. And Tipid. And Carl and Donut and all the others who fought so hard for what they believed despite the overwhelming odds.

Was it ever okay to stop fighting? Was there grace in saying, *I have made my mark, and now it's time to rest?*

She thought of her own mother, who'd come into the dungeon with her. She'd died on the first day, killed by goblins. *Avenge us*, was the last thing her mother had said to her.

She thought again of that moment when she'd decapitated Rust. She'd almost missed the opportunity because Tipid, unaware of the plan with the bank, had tried to hide the orc's presence from her. Their original plan had been to get what they needed from Stalwart, but Rust's presence had made everything so much easier. And it was poetic, no?

Yet, yet... No amount of revenge would ever bring her mother back. It would never bring Brooks back. No matter how many orcs and orc children she killed, her people would still be dead. She hadn't even known Brooks. She'd seen hundreds and hundreds die

before that point, yet that single death had broken her in a way she just didn't understand.

Cycles and cycles later, when she'd finally exited the dungeon, it was Porthus who'd given her the money and backing to make her first attempt at retribution. She'd been a fledgling journalist in the before times, one of the most dangerous, subversive jobs in her country. Her documentary, *The Other Side of the Glass*, had resonated, but like with all things that were hard to look at, people clicked their tongues in sympathy and then immediately looked away.

But they couldn't look away any more, and she was glad to be part of this, even if that meant she was likely to die. Like she'd said so many times, they knew what they were getting themselves into when they boarded *Homecoming Queen*.

Everyone who enters the dungeon, dies in the dungeon.

She'd watched Carl's speech to Donut about masks, and she'd wept. She'd wept at how hopeful it was. She'd wept at how cynical she felt in the moment. At the pity she'd felt for Carl and Donut, thinking how naïve it was that he thought she'd ever be able to remove that mask.

Was she wrong? Maybe so.

Porthus's plan, whatever it was, appeared to be on track.

Rosetta's job was done. No matter what happened here in the dungeon, it didn't matter anymore.

But Justice Light was her comrade. Her brother. And so were Carl and Donut and all the other crawlers on this floor. And, in the end, she trusted Porthus. She more than trusted him. She loved him, despite his unhealthy obsession with finding a missing crawler from his own crawl. Menerva.

And if Porthus trusted this Apothecary, then maybe Rosetta should fight against whatever this creature's enemies were planning.

Maybe it was a mistake, but nobody could ever fault her for fighting for her friends. There was poetry in that. too.

Colonel Rosetta: Comrades, sound off. The fight has moved to the city. The enemy has changed, and they have

taken the castle of Larracos. We don't know how many there are, but we fight. We fight with all we have.

Class: Gazetteer
Race: Crest.
Birth Race: Crest.
Top Level: 91

Dungeon Exit: Took deal at the beginning of the 11th floor. Worked as a game guide and in the Desperado Club as a merchant renting mercenaries and occasionally was in charge of distribution of the dungeon newsletter. Upon dungeon exit became a journalist and filmmaker of some renown and eventually became host of the documentary series *Shadow Boxer*. Eventually returned to the dungeon to fight for the Princess Posse and to assist the mysterious Open Intellect Pacifist Network finance their great plan.

Author of the ninth Edition of the *Dungeon Anarchist's Cookbook*.

Current status: Alive.

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Remaining Teams:

The Princess Posse
Team Retribution (castle occupied by War Mage Rebellion forces)
The Dream (castle occupied by Team Retribution forces)
The Reavers
The War Mage Rebellion.

Time until the War Mage Rebellion wins the castle: 5 hours, 57 minutes.

Time until the Larracos city defenses activate: 27 minutes.

"Oh, that's nice," I grumbled, seeing the report that the lava abatement had been interrupted by the *Bear Witness* spell. I'm not certain what the original plan had been to stop the literal river of lava pouring into Larracos, but whatever it was, it hadn't worked. A slow-moving glob of molten rock was just about to enter Shanty Town, headed straight for the giant hole in the ground. I could just

hear Elle right now, bitching about how it had been a bone-headed plan.

None of that was going to matter if we didn't get the war mages out of that castle.

I stumbled out the front of the former Madness stronghold just as the massive ball of flesh rolled into view, barreling toward us in the distance. The goddamned thing was huge, bigger than I was expecting. It was still dark and cloudy, and I could barely see anything, but a giant, quivering ball of rolling flesh with a god-sized dick schlopping out of it was pretty hard to miss. The rainbow, I noted, was now gone. The ball would reach the field of corpses in about a minute.

Despite my proximity to two gods, my Scavenger's Daughter patch did not activate. I assumed that would change the moment the two gods were freed.

There was a health bar over the battle formation, but it was still in the green. We'd have to kill the thing before everyone was freed.

Between us and the ball was where they'd dropped the corpses. There were thousands of them out there. The original plan had been for Bodi to retreat and have the pursuing forces walk right into the field of corpses just as Donut cast *You're Not Done Yet*. The map was nothing but a field of Xs.

Rosetta just sent out a message telling everyone to defend Larracos, but I didn't know how many people we actually had available to face the war mages as most everyone was in the ball. I'd sent out a dozen questions trying to figure out what was happening, and nobody was answering me.

It appeared Li Na had simply left her synergy tower, and nobody knew where she was. Donut and Ferdinand were going back and forth because Ferdinand wasn't able to get back into the Desperado Club and was now being chased through the city. Juice Box was missing as well. Britney, who'd been deep in Larracos at the time of the attack, was also running for her life.

It still wasn't clear what, exactly, was chasing them. I'd thought there had only been a handful of these war mage guys.

The new ruleset basically said it was every team for themselves. If we won, all the NPCs would die and vice versa. That was going to be a huge problem. But for right now, we needed to focus on getting those assholes out of the castle. And not to let Juice Box and Ferdinand die in the meantime.

According to the Peeling phase rules, if Juice Box and Ferdinand both fell, *we* wouldn't automatically lose. The war mages would still have to hold the castle for six hours. But all the existing NPCs on Team Retribution would now just drop dead. And if that happened, there was no way we'd get to that castle.

Li Jun's sacrifice had bought Donut enough time to cast her spell once the ball reached the corpses, but she was going to have to flee after that. But would that even matter? She was marked for death by the mute god.

Carl: If Harpocrates continues to chase you after that ball breaks apart, get into a safe room until he goes away.

In theory, Harpocrates would stop chasing Donut the moment Meatus escaped that goddamned ball. But only in theory. I didn't want to think about what would happen if he didn't turn away. Li Jun had bought Donut enough time. Hopefully it would be enough.

Donut: I CAN'T LEAVE THE TOWER. I NEED TO COVER THOSE ENTERING THE CITY.

Carl: Goddamnit, Donut. You can't help anybody if you're dead.

Donut: I DON'T HAVE TIME RIGHT NOW, CARL. I'M TRYING TO SHOOT A WAR MAGE GHOUL THING. IT'S CALLED A ZAROGOTH. THEY'RE EVERYWHERE ALL OF A SUDDEN.

Carl: A *what*?

Donut: THAT'S WHAT IT SAYS THEY ARE. ZAROGOTHS. THEY'RE LIKE FAT, MOVING SHADOWS LEAKING OIL ALL OVER THE PLACE. THEY'RE EVERYWHERE, AND IT SAYS THEY'RE ALL ON THE WAR MAGE TEAM. I WANT TO TRY *MINION ARMY* ON THEM AFTER I DEAL WITH THE BALL.

Minion Army would freeze Donut in place for five minutes.

Carl: Absolutely not.

Mordecai: Oh, fuck me. Zarogoths are generated mobs. The war mages built a generator.

Rosetta: Donut, look for the antenna. It'll be inside of Larracos somewhere. It's what they're using to build them. Shoot the antenna, and the monsters will collapse. I don't know what it will look like, but this is a similar spell to the Remex quest you stopped on the third floor mixed with a ghoul generator from the train levels. Find the antenna, kill it, and the mobs will all die at once.

Donut: I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO LOOK FOR.

Rosetta: We had these things during my crawl. It'll be something very, very hot. Probably the hottest thing in the city. It's made from a soul crystal with an attached capacitor unit that's capturing souls and corrupting them. It's rerouting demon eviction, too. Look where the monsters are the thickest. If you shoot it, it'll explode, so be careful.

Donut: THE HOTTEST THING IS THE GIANT STREAM OF LAVA ABOUT TO ENTER THE CITY. SOMEONE SHOULD PROBABLY DO SOMETHING ABOUT THAT.

Rosetta: Keep looking. It'll be hotter than that.

Tipid: Maybe Donut should start blowing up the city defense towers?

Donut: I ONLY HAVE TWO PAWS, TIPID.

Louis: Don't you have four?

Donut: LOUIS FOCUS ON YOUR OWN SAFETY RIGHT NOW.

Britney: Hitting the towers won't work. They are covered in protections. If she tries, I think they'll activate on their own early.

Baroness Victory: Britney is correct. Don't target the towers before they're active unless you want them all to turn on.

I started running full speed toward the rolling ball. Behind me, Dong, again mounted on Gonk, shouted and started to follow, leaving the others—Jamal, the two survivors from Burcu's team, along with Bigs and Rend—behind. Tuba, the crawler who'd almost

died of blood loss, was saved at the very last moment once the *Conscription* was broken. We were miles and miles from Larracos right now, but there was a safe room entrance just down the hill. I sent a message to Jamal telling him to lead the others there and wait for me.

I needed to stay here for right now. Because Eris had turned off the *Witness* spell, they were all going to be awake once the ball broke. I was pretty sure we outnumbered them, especially now that I'd taken the Madness troops, but it was going to be chaos. Chaos with two gods mixed in.

We were going to have to scatter, but if I could rally enough crawlers, we could come back here and shortcut through the saferoom to Larracos and assist there in the fight against the war mages.

Shit, shit, shit. I glanced at the clock. A little over 25 minutes until the city defense system fell into war mage hands. I was starting to realize there was no way I'd get there in time. And once it turned on, we'd have five and a half hours to get them out of that castle. We were in fucking trouble.

While I was starting to understand *what* was happening with the war mages, I still didn't know *why*.

Carl: Victory, what can you tell me? Why aren't these assholes working with the NPCs? Don't they want the same thing? And where the hell did Agatha come from?

Instead of answering directly, the baroness suddenly cracked into existence next to me. I quickly passed her, and she grunted and started running alongside, despite my incredible speed.

"Their motivations are unclear, even to me," Victory said once she caught up. "They clearly did not anticipate Agatha would be named as a co-warlord, and the other leader, Akuma, does not like her. The system is going all in with them. They were just assigned an adjutant as well. Deng Bao, the grixist who was the orc adjutant. He's the only one who would do it. He is in Larracos with the war mages right now trying to unravel what is going on. That castle is still submerged, by the way. The war mages apparently can breathe underwater. Deng Bao cannot."

"Wait, Agatha is *co*-warlord?" I asked.

"Yes. If you look in your interface, you can see them listed now. Agatha is co-warlord, similar to what happened with Juice Box and Ferdinand. Ferdinand was added because the system didn't allow Juice Box access to the warlord menu. It's the same with Akuma. I do not know if he was consulted about those emergency action items. I do not know their plans. All we know is that they are fighting against the other NPCs and are trying to kill all of you as quickly as possible. They are surrounding the castle with their generated soldiers and are tearing that castle apart. Once those defensive towers turn on, you aren't going to get in there without a terrible cost."

"Yes, but why was Agatha chosen in the first place? I was ordered by Zev earlier not to even talk to her. That came directly from the Syndicate prime minister guy himself and now she's a goddamned warlord. Did the AI set that up? Why?"

Donut: OKAY, IT'S CLOSE ENOUGH. I'M GOING TO CAST NOW. EVERYONE LOOK OUT.

Ahead, the giant ball slowed. It was still about a quarter mile away. I skidded to a stop. Dong trotted up. He had his sock over his shoulder and had his lance out, as if he was ready to charge.

The form of Meatus waved back and forth, making the ball look like a massive sperm. The head of the member was inside the ball and supposedly still wrapped around that other god, whom I couldn't see at all. The ball pulsated, and now I could hear them as well, all screaming.

Holy shit, I thought the moment I heard them. Donut's plan had kept them from getting crushed to death, but this seemed barely better. The roar was like that of a crowd at a football game or concert. Nobody inside the ball was in the chat, so maybe they weren't truly conscious. Plus I knew from experience that when these things broke apart, all the individuals were mostly fine. Still, those screams were terrible to hear.

"I know this should probably be obvious, but what, exactly, is Donut's plan right now?" Victory asked.

"She hasn't told me," I said. "I'm assuming she's going to cast *You're Not Done Yet* on the corpses. They'll target enemy soldiers."

"You're not going to question her?" Victory asked.

"No. I trust her."

A figure rushed up and leaned against my side, panting.

"Rend. You're supposed to stay with Jamal," I said, reaching down to pat the tummy acher on the head.

He let out a deep giggle. Gonk the yak snorted at the giant meatball.

I looked over my shoulder and saw the horrifying shape of Jamal in the distance near the small building that was a saferoom entrance. I couldn't see the others, but he'd just sent a message that they were waiting at the door and that Rend had run off.

Another figure suddenly appeared next to Victory. This was another adjutant. One I hadn't met yet, and it was a type of alien I'd never seen before. The thing was a round, basketball-like creature standing upon three, long, multi-jointed legs. The round ball was covered in black dots that might be eyeballs. I was pretty sure this was a type of alien called a "tripod." I'd heard of them, but I'd never seen one before. They were supposedly completely without emotion, like extra asshole versions of Spock from *Star Trek*.

Former Prime Minister Fopsy.

Adjutant for The Dream.

This is a non-combatant observer.

The creature said nothing and scuttled off to the side. But the moment I saw him, I had a sudden revelation that should have been obvious. Epitome Tagg had fled into the forest. He was outside when the Witness spell had been cast, meaning the warlord for the Dream was in the ball somewhere, too.

"Something's coming," Dong said, interrupting, pointing at the sky just as chaos broke out in front of us.

Two meteors shot across the darkness toward the ball of screaming flesh. They arced across the sky like artillery fire.

<u>Donut</u>: Those light things aren't coming from me. There are four of them, and they came from inside Larracos! Two moving toward Carl, one moving toward Harpocrates, and

another moving west. I think it's headed toward where Louis is!

Another light—this one burning black and purple—shot across the darkness and intercepted the two meteors. It hit one, continued its momentum and hit the second, which angled off. This was followed by what looked like a magical explosion. In that moment the sky was lit, I saw that other, third light was Bianca, who appeared to have been injured in the blast. She opened her mouth in what might have been a howl if I could hear, pivoted in the night sky, and then plummeted out of sight, leaving a streak of sizzling purple smoke in the air.

As Bianca crashed, the remaining meteor that had been knocked off course did a loop-de-loop and then slammed directly into the ball.

Was it a missile? I couldn't tell what that was. Nothing seemed to happen. Maybe Bianca had disarmed it?

At the same moment, Donut cast the spell. She did, indeed, cast a tower-enhanced version of *You're Not Done Yet*. And the moment she did, the entire world in front of us burst into activity. The Xs on the map all started to blink.

System Message: Warlord Princess Donut has committed *another* Atrocity. Wow. What a naughty kitty. I sure hope she isn't forced to cast a third.

Victory muttered something about the system-wide message subsystem degrading. I barely heard her as I watched the field in front of us, equally horrified and fascinated. The darkness started to rustle and swell. Before, I couldn't see the corpses at all except on the map. But now I had a sense of them, like an unsteady sea under a new moon. A sea that abruptly and rapidly started to boil as the flesh was torn from the bodies of all the corpses, all at once.

Riiiiip. The sound came, louder even than the screams. It was the sound of tearing fabric. I was relieved I couldn't see it.

This was followed by a cacophony of zipping noises, like thousands of cable ties being pulled together, one after another. These were *not* in unison. This was the sound of the flaps of

sentient skin as they started to fly through the air and onto the ball of flesh, each seeking a target.

The fleshers flapped onto the ball and started crawling around the outside, skittering like manta rays across the ocean floor. I watched, horrified as most of the dark shapes disappeared, slipping their way inside the ball, pushing themselves into the crevasses and cracks. They would be seeking those marked as enemies, which would be the Dream soldiers and those from the Reavers.

But, those enemies were still invulnerable while part of the ball. What would happen, then? How long would the fleshers last? The ball continued to pulsate and throb. The health bar didn't appear to move.

Donut: OKAY NOW I'M GOING TO START HITTING THE BALL WITH MISSILES TO BREAK IT APART. WATCH OUT BECAUSE EVERYONE IS GOING TO GO EVERYWHERE. I'LL ALSO CAST *BAD ATTITUDE* THE MOMENT THE BALL BREAKS. THAT'LL MAKE THE BAD GUYS PANIC. EVERYONE IS GOING TO HAVE TO RUN.

Carl: Wait, where is Harpocrates? Is he still moving toward you?

Rosetta: He'll be on Donut in about two minutes, but I think he'll turn back to you the moment Meatus is free from the ball. Donut, better cast now.

Fwum. The ball quivered from an impact of Donut's *Magic Missile*, followed shortly by the loud crack from the spell. The health bar went down a sliver, but it was still in the green.

Donut: HMM. MAYBE I SHOULD CAST *WALL OF FIRE* UNDER IT, BUT I DON'T WANT TO KILL THE FLESHERS YET OR HURT OUR PEOPLE WHEN IT BREAKS.

Rosetta: Fleshers are immune to fire, but that would definitely cook our people.

The entire ball shuddered as the fleshers continued to move across the surface, skittering as they searched out targets. The sight of them filled me with a deep, primal revulsion.

Something wet was on my face, and I rubbed my hand across my cheek. It came back red. Blood. It was literally misting blood in

the air after the skin was ripped from all the corpses. Rend was making a slurping noise as he gleefully licked at the ground.

Another magic missile hit the ball. At this rate, it was going to take five minutes for her to kill the thing. We didn't have the time. I pulled a full-strength hob-lobber and extended my xistera. I was hesitant to throw a bomb at all of our allies plus two gods, but what choice did I have? We had to hurry.

Just as I prepared to toss, something happened, and I paused. The ball didn't break apart, but something burst from it, shooting straight up into the air, like the ball was a whale and the figure had escaped via a blowhole. It was clearly a person, which was just mystifying. The form rocketed straight up, waving their arms like they were trying to fly, hovered as they hit the apex, and then plummeted, slamming into the ground in the grass between us and the ball. The person did not get up, but they were clearly still alive. A single, slender arm rose in the air, as if they were calling for help. It was a human woman. On the map, she had the purple outline of an off-worlder, but she didn't have a glow that indicated she was a member of any army.

"What the hell? Who is that?" I asked, stepping forward.

"Uh," Victory said. "That's... that's a good question."

Fopsy the tripod adjutant spoke for the first time. "Interesting. There is nothing in the current ruleset that deals with this eventuality. I believe there is nothing to do except observe and report."

The woman started pulling herself toward us. I could see she was screaming, but I couldn't hear her. She was wearing armor that looked oddly familiar.

Holy crap, I thought upon realizing who this was.

Carl: Donut, did you cast *Laundry Day*?

Donut: NO.

A dark shape fluttered off the ball, falling and spinning like a leaf. Then a second and third. The creatures hit the ground and started scuttling toward her.

Fleshers. The first one pounced and wrapped around the woman's legs. Her scream went up in pitch, and now I could hear

her as the flesher moved up her body, dissolving her own flesh.

"Should we help her?" Dong asked.

"No," I said. "Wait until it kills her, and then I'll take it out."

"Oh, fuck my balls," Victory said after a moment. "That's Nami."

Nami was the "influencer" who was supposedly driving Eris, the goddess of chaos who was inside the ball. Someone had removed the goddess's soul armor, ejecting the driver, and that had somehow caused her to be rejected by the ball. But if Donut hadn't done it...

"There's a war mage in there!" I shouted. That's what that meteor thing had been. Instead of a teleport, they'd cast some long-range jump spell. There had been two meteors, but Bianca had killed one and caused its head to explode. The thing had smacked into the ball and had... what? Managed to dig its way to Eris just to free her? What was their purpose? There were two gods here, and two of the war mages had come. They'd also fired toward the other two gods. So what were they doing? Another magic missile slammed into the ball. I prepared to toss my bomb, but I paused once again.

"Wait a minute," I muttered, thinking hard. In front of us, the flesher of Nami the influencer stood to her feet. The skin was that of a dromedarian, much too big for her frame, and it draped over her like a ghost costume. It groaned as a second and third flesher attached themselves to the form. If we waited too long, another war mage would be born. I re-routed my hob-lobber and tossed it at the creature. *Blam*! It killed her and the fleshers all at once.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Victory suddenly burst out. She had her head in the air, eyes flashing. She turned and gave an incredulous look to Fopsy. "This can't be real."

"Bao has not called foul. It doesn't appear there's a rule against it," the tripod said. "It would require the spell to be level 19 at least. Maybe 18, but they could fight it. And it won't work against sponsored gods. That explains why they ejected her, but not how they got the spell so powerful in the first place."

"They're using potions, not the spell," Victory said. "They'll have to be hell-kissed versions. Those will be level 18. But, it also means using the potion is likely suicide for the caster if the level disparity is too high."

"Interesting," Fopsy said. All the eyes on the adjutant's round body twinkled as he moved through his menus, glittering like a disco ball. "Ahh, I see. You are correct. They traded the Gate of the Feral Gods with a minion at the Midnight Market in exchange for five of the potions."

Victory made a *tsk*ing sound. "Of course. Stuff like that always leaks into the market."

"What the hell are you talking about?" I asked, dread rising. "They traded away the Gate of the Feral Gods? To who? For what?"

Samantha: A WAR MAGE JUST CAME OUT OF NOWHERE AND TOSSED A *CONSCRIPTION* POTION ON YARILO, AND IT WORKED! BUT THE MOMENT HE CAST THE SPELL, THE WAR MAGE GUY JUST BLEW UP! IT RUINED MY PLAN TO USE YARILO TO SAVE LOUIS, AND NOW I GOTTA DO IT MYSELF! YARILO JUST TOOK OFF RUNNING! HE IS ALWAYS DISAPPOINTING ME. NOW I GOTTA MOVE ONTO PLAN B.

Holy fucking shit. The war mages were conscripting gods into their army. I examined, again, the enormous ball in front of us. There were two gods in there, locked away. The health of the thing was now in the red.

Carl: Donut, stop!

Li Na: Donut, do not break the ball apart.

Donut: WHAT? WHAT? AND WHERE ARE YOU LI NA?

If they managed to control one of the two gods in there, especially Eris, they could just end us all with a swipe. I took a fine healing potion ball, and I tossed it onto the battle formation with my xistera. The potion arced through the air and disappeared as it crashed against the wall of flesh. The giant thing commenced healing. I started to slowly back away. "Dong, Rend, back to the saferoom. Now."

Li Na: I was installing my brother's eye into myself. I also managed to stop the mage from getting to Harpocrates. I am not strong enough yet to stop the god on my own. He paused because of the deflector towers, but he'll soon push past them to get to Donut. I suggest you run.

I sent a private message to Li Na, telling her to grab that potion off the corpse of the war mage, but to be careful with it. She didn't reply.

Carl: Donut, can you still steer the ball? One of the two gods in there might be under control of the war mage team when you break it apart! Steer the ball back toward the city and then get out of the tower! If Harpocrates is still free, then hopefully he'll keep the other gods in check.

Donut: CARL OUR FRIENDS ARE IN THERE, AND NOW IT'S COVERED WITH FLESHERS WHO MIGHT TURN AGAINST US AT ANY MOMENT. I NEED TO BREAK IT OPEN NOW.

Carl: I know, but wait and listen. I'm trying to keep our friends safe for as long as possible. If the war mages are trying to kill us, then that god is going to kill them on their behalf. New plan. Keep the ball intact for as long as possible. So set its direction and leave.

Warlord Carl: Everyone who is free of that ball. Listen to Rosetta's orders. Get to Larracos. Get there now.

The two adjutants were completely ignoring me and in a rapid back-and-forth conversation.

Fopsy the tripod scuttled forward. "At first I thought her motivations were curious, but I do believe I understand them now in light of the news that the AI is rapidly spreading in influence. I suspect the residual in control of the war mage team isn't just trying to win Faction Wars and zero out the crawlers. She's trying to stop the ascendency game as soon as possible as well."

"But why?" Victory asked. "They're usually trying to talk the AI into joining their religion or whatever they do. What's her purpose?"

Fopsy made a strange, clicking noise. "It's unclear what their normal intentions are, but this season is far from normal. Once the ascendency is considered finished, assuming there are no crawlers left, it automatically triggers the system's shutdown and hibernation sequence. That's a hard-coded limitation, which allows elemental reclamation before it is woken back up. Now that the AI is spreading, this is a possible alternative to the failsafe. All of this makes sense if the residual now believes the local AI is a threat to

the Eulogist. What I do not understand is how she convinced the war mages to assist her."

Victory grunted. "Based on that Akuma guy's reaction when they assigned her as co-warlord, I don't think they are assisting each other at all."

Fopsy regarded me. "I have additional theories, but I will not voice them in the presence of a combatant."

Ahead, the ball started moving again, rolling away toward Larracos. In the distance, a form shot into the air, bobbing a few times before it decided to follow. Bianca.

And that was when I noticed dozens of fleshers on the ground, hesitantly moving in our direction, furtively scuttling across the surface. They weren't supposed to attack me, but the pickings were suddenly thin.

One was already getting close enough for me to examine it.

Flesher. Level 1.

This is a skin ripped off a human named Derek Reilly. Derek was already dead when the skin was removed, though I suspect he would be happy to know all that moisturizing he did while still alive is much appreciated by the monster his skin has become.

If this thing is close enough that you can read this description, you, too, are probably going to soon appreciate Derek's respectable hygiene.

I would suggest a hasty exit.

"Yeah, screw this," I said, patting Rend on the head. He had not left my side. I turned back toward the saferoom entrance, and I ran.

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[70]

I BURST INTO THE SAFEROOM. I HAD TO WAIT FOR THE OTHERS TO PILE IN behind me. I spared a quick glance at Mordecai, who was sitting at the table with Ruby on his lap, reading a book. The cleaner bot hovered nearby and also appeared to be listening to the story. *Anne of Green Gables,* which gave me pause. My grandparents had that book in their home in Texas. I remembered my mom had said it was one of the few things from her own childhood that they'd kept when they'd moved.

I almost said something, but I held back, seeing how young Ruby clutched onto Mordecai, how she had her misshapen head on his shoulder. I had a sudden memory of Katia and Annie from the dream, and I realized this was the same thing. *He thinks it's over, and this is how he's choosing to spend his last few hours*. If Donut died, he'd be done. I wasn't sure exactly what would happen to him with the quarantine, but I knew he'd be out of the dungeon, and he would never see Ruby or any of the other kids again.

When Big Things happen on such a large scale, it's easy to forget sometimes that these Big Things are also happening to the little things in the world.

That was from a goddamned AI description way back on the sixth floor, yet it stuck with me.

We had to keep moving. We only had minutes.

The others finally finished entering the saferoom behind me. I quickly dialed to the Larracos gate using the doggie door.

Dong Quixote was no longer with us, and that was because he was riding Gonk. He'd go straight to the pet stables, and I ordered him to Shanty Town instead, which had an appropriate exit for the swamp yak.

The door in front of me beeped, indicating it was ready. "Rend, you go first. The stairs are steep. Jamal, hold up the rear but don't jump off the tower. Your new legs are strong, but they're not that strong." Rend grunted. Bigs the slug now sat atop the meatball's head. The other two survivors of Burcu's team—now both official members of the Princess Posse whether they liked it or not—continued to sob, but they followed along. "Stay with me, guys," I said. They didn't respond, but they followed.

We went back outside, coming to that same tower in the middle of the Larracos College of Magic that we'd first used all those days earlier. The tower was a dorm for professors, and the saferoom exit took us into the cafeteria on the top floor. This was where we all were gathering. The college had a front gate, and the NPCs had managed to keep the grounds under their control as the zarogoth mobs pressed their attack. We stepped out into chaos.

Entering Larracos. City of Broken Dreams.

You are on the 50th level of the city. You are on the campus of the Larracos College of Magic.

Warning: This city is under siege.

Warning: The city defense system is powering up and will target you.

Time until the towers are operational: 13 minutes.

We hurried down the spiral stairs as I took it all in. From this height, I could see multiple fights at once on all the lower rings, despite the billowing smoke. The monsters were all tall, strangely fat, obsidian creatures. They looked like overweight ghouls from the train floor, but completely black. They were too far for the info box to pop up, but when multiple stood together, it was impossible to tell how many there were. They used their claws and what appeared to

be a short range, magical ray attack. As I watched, a stairwell down and across the way detonated as someone blew the fuses, causing a whole mess of the strange mobs to plummet away. Fires burned everywhere. Smoke filled the city. The waterfall across the way had stopped. I knew the slow plod of the lava flow would soon replace it.

The tower next to this one—the same tower I'd watch them build when we'd first arrived—hummed ominously. The massive jewel atop the pillar glowed red. I spared a quick glance at the thing, which had a countdown timer over it.

City Defense Tower Number 22. Red Jeweled.

This is an automatic tower.

You may not examine this tower's defenses.

Fires a level-five *Fire Lance* at a target within range.

This tower has been upgraded a maximum of five times.

Two times range enhancement.

Three times speed enhancement.

At its current speed, this tower will fire ten times per second.

I continued to hurry down the stairs, Rend and Bigs running in front of me. The meatball barely fit on the spiral staircase. The two others followed as Jamal's spider legs click-clacked on the stairs.

Carl: Donut, where are you?

Donut: I'M STILL IN THE NEST TOWER, CARL.

I instinctively looked up, and despite the angle, I could see the top of the Nest tower, glowing in the dark, hovering ominously over the entire funnel. We'd deliberately built the tower as close to the border with Larracos as possible, which would give Donut a clear view of most of the city if she needed it.

The moment I looked up, I received a terrifying update.

You are in the presence of a deity. The Scavenger's Daughter has opened her eyes.

You are now within range of the god Harpocrates.

Temporary effect from Harpocrates:

Level 15 *Pied Piper* skill.

Carl: Goddamnit Donut, get the hell out of there. The god is here!

Donut: I CAN SEE THAT, CARL. HE'S STOPPED AT THE EDGE OF THE CITY AND ISN'T COMING IN. I THINK IT'S THE DEFLECTOR TOWERS! HE CAN'T SEE ME ANYWAY. I'M WEARING THE STUPID GHOULIE SUIT AND AM INVISIBLE. THE BALL SHOULD BE HERE SOON.

Carl: You're on top of the biggest goddamned tower on the floor shooting magic missiles. Of course he sees you.

Rosetta: Donut, I'm with Carl. Harpocrates hasn't cast his worst spells because he's generally a good guy. He doesn't want to level the town if he doesn't have to. But he's still a god. He's already angry. At any second he's going to cast a level-20 *Sonic Boom*. You need to get out of there.

Donut: I SHOULD PROBABLY MENTION THERE'S ANOTHER GOD GUY COMING, TOO. I THINK THAT'S YARILO. HE'S STILL A WAYS AWAY. HE AND THE BALL WILL ALL GET HERE AT THE SAME TIME.

Li Na: Harpocrates hasn't entered the Shanty Town because he has been stopped by a pair of changelings in the form of ogre basilica guards. It appears the ogres with golden skin have the ability to stop gods from passing a threshold, and it also appears gods are not willing to attack them. They are standing firm. Hopefully they, too, won't needlessly die. Donut, finish your task as quickly as possible.

I reached the bottom of the stairs and moved into the crowd. Most of the people here were with Team Retribution, but we did have a handful of crawlers mixed in. If there was any organization to the group, I didn't see it. I started to push my way to the front.

A group of Semeru dwarves, all with their ornate parade armor, stood at the front gate to the college, pushing back a rush of the shadowy mobs who were trying to fight their way inside. The gate pushed open, and several of the large, strange mobs surged toward the crowd.

One of the dwarves screamed as an orange ray shot from the zarogoth's mouth. The dwarf fell onto his back, and the mob started to laugh, the sound not unlike the giggles from Rend. Another Semeru hacked at the mob, slashing a deep rent in the bulbous

stomach of the monster, and black liquid gushed out, causing the monster to deflate and then die. The fallen Semeru, who'd now been drenched in the black oil, continued to writhe in pain on the ground.

A magic missile arced down from Donut's tower and landed in the midst of the ghouls, causing them all to blow back. Fire erupted amongst the mobs. The dwarves shouted and pressed the attack, hacking at the fallen creatures, who disappeared in a burst of black oil when they died. The oil, when exposed to fire, seemed to burn, but quickly.

I focused on one in the moments before he was killed.

Zarogoth. Level 50.

These leaky edgelords can also be called either Sludge Ghouls or Sausage Golems. I decided to rename them Zarogoths because the name is much more appropriate. It's the sort of name a weird, socially stunted kid—whose real name is Stan Jr. or some bullshit—would bestow upon himself, all the while posting memes with skulls and motorcycles and guns on the internet, all with phrases like "Betray me, and I'll become you're (sic) worst nightmare" blah, blah, blah. The sort of kid who threatens his mom when his friends are around but still needs a babysitter. He brags about how he's going to get rich because of crypto but can't even pass basic algebra. He's banned on Roblox. You get the idea.

He's pretty easy to drop, but holy crap is he annoying.

Anyway, a zarogoth is a generated mob. They are created by capturing rising or falling souls via a soul crystal, rerouting the energy through a corruption spell, and then mixing it all together, which turns it all into an oil-like soup. They shove all the goo into what's basically a translucent, humanoid-shaped sausage casing made of a bunch of gross shit I won't relate here.

The resulting creatures are *not* considered undead. They aren't technically ghouls. Nor are they precisely golems, either. While souls are used to make them, they do not retain any sort of personality of the fallen. Nope. These

assholes just come out this way. They are disposable ground troops with a sadistic streak. They're easy to kill once you figure out how they work, but don't underestimate these guys. They can be made quickly, attack in swarms, and their pain ray attack is no joke. Some even have the ability to reshape themselves and can cast pain-inducing dreads. Piercing their skin causes them to start to leak, but they won't die until they've lost 51% of their liquid.

Oh, and they smell really bad, too.

I could see that the secret to killing them had already spread amongst the NPCs. Slashing them on the lower parts of their bodies caused the black liquid to quickly drain away. They were a menace, but not as terrible as I first thought. Their purpose was more to delay us, which was working.

Donut: IF YOU ARE GOING TO MAKE A MOVE, YOU BETTER HURRY. IN ABOUT TWO MINUTES, THAT RIVER OF LAVA IS GOING TO FALL OVER THE EDGE. I DIDN'T KNOW LAVA COULD MOVE SO SLOW.

I instinctively looked up, but it was all just smoke. Up a level and across the way, an on-fire crawler or NPC fell, screaming, to their death.

This is war, I thought. *This is war*.

Donut: WAIT. WAIT. I THINK I SEE THE ANTENNA THING! I CAN ONLY SEE THE REFLECTION OFF THE BUILDING ACROSS THE WAY, BUT I THINK IT'S INSIDE THE PICCADILLY! THE THEATER! THE ONE ON THE 9th LEVEL OF THE CITY. THEY PUT IT WHERE I COULDN'T SEE IT FROM UP HERE!

Rosetta: Shoot it. Shoot it now!

Donut: I DON'T THINK I CAN. THE ANGLE IS WRONG. I CAN ONLY SEE IT BECAUSE OF THE REFLECTION, AND I CAN SEE THE SHIMMER OF A SHIELD AROUND IT. THE LAVA IS GOING TO LAND RIGHT IN FRONT OF IT IN A MINUTE, BLOCKING IT EVEN MORE.

Carl: Okay, good. You've found it. Now get the hell out of there. Don't waste time. Jump. Jump straight to the college.

Do it before that god breaks in. Stay invisible. Tell me when you're here.

Ahead, the gate pushed open, and several new creatures lurched into the courtyard. It was a horror show of monstrosities of all shapes and sizes, and for a terrifying moment, I thought we were about to get overrun. But then I saw the indicators over them. Team Retribution. And not just that, but officers. Changelings. The center beast pushed through the entrance, looking about. She caught eyes with me.

Juice Box.

I also spied Britney in the midst of the group. And not just her, but Ferdinand was with them as well, on top of Britney's head. The warlord cat was all poofed out and screaming. He was wearing the bowler hat we'd given him in trade at the start of the floor.

Juice Box was in the form of a hulking, armor-covered beetle thing called a dynastes. She was like ten feet tall and covered with scythes. I rushed toward them, looking up at the beetle. Behind them, more of the zarogoths surged. The dwarves went back to work.

We had less than ten minutes.

"Juice Box!" I called, rushing up. "Donut found the generator. We need to push to the railing. If we can get there, I will have line of sight. I can start tossing bombs on the Piccadilly Theater! I have a few waffle makers in my inventory, and it should work. Where are the actual war mages? Are they in the castle?"

Juice Box had started to change form as I ran up. She turned to her regular human form and grabbed my shoulder, eyes wild. "Where's Louis? Where's my husband? He's not answering me!"

I blinked at the question, surprised. In that fraction of a moment, I was hit with such a strange revelation. *She actually loves him. Holy shit.*

I wasn't sure why it surprised me so much, but it did. An odd guilt washed over me. I never understood what that whole relationship was about, and despite all the evidence to the contrary, it still seemed... fake. Unnatural.

What *was* Louis's status? He hadn't messaged in a bit. The last we'd heard, he was hiding while being stalked by dog-like automatons in the Reaver castle. His last message had been that quip about Donut's paws.

Carl: Louis, are you okay?

I held up a finger as Juice Box turned her attention back to the courtyard. "Clear them out!" she shouted. "I need protection spells on my left and right. Move to the barrier! We bomb the generator, and then we're diving. We'll be fighting in water, so prepare yourselves!"

Louis didn't answer. I moved to the officer status screen, and he was still at full health, which was a relief. But then I saw something that gave me pause. He had two status notifications. I clicked over and drilled down.

Paralyzed.

Bound.

I cursed. Juice Box turned back to me, a worried expression on her face. I kept my finger up.

Carl: Samantha. I don't know what's going on, but Louis is in trouble and needs you.

Samantha: THERE ISN'T ANYBODY IN THE REAVER CASTLE AT ALL EXCEPT THE ROBOT DOGGIES, WHO ARE EVERYWHERE. THE HALLWAYS ARE SUPER SMALL AND COMPLICATED. I'M LOOKING FOR HIM NOW.

"He's alive, but he's in trouble," I said to Juice Box. "We have someone trying to rescue him right now."

"It's not Samantha is it?"

"Uh," I said.

Juice Box: Samantha, I have a form that is a fleshmancer. Return my husband to me in one piece, and I swear I will make certain you have any body you desire.

Samantha: THROW IN A HALL PASS NIGHT WITH LOUIS, AND YOU HAVE A DEAL.

Juice Box: I know who you are. Who you really are. I also know you've lost your mind and don't understand. I will

help you. Just get him back for me, and I will do anything for you.

Samantha: OKAY, IT'S A DEAL. BUT IF LOUIS'S PASSIONS GET THE BEST OF HIM, I WON'T MAKE ANY APOLOGIES.

"Wait," I said out loud. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"We gotta move," Juice Box said, and she turned to the exit. "Form up! Make way for Carl!"

Bomo: Someone trying to come into the tower.

Toyotomi: I am securing the front entrance now.

Sergeant Bret S: Me and the other mages are coming down to help secure the door.

I almost missed the messages, mixed in with everything else as I armed a waffle maker in my inventory. Bomo and Sledge had gotten separated. Sledge was mixed in with the ball, and Bomo along with Toyotomi and several mages were in the lower part of the Nest tower, guarding Donut.

Carl: Guys, is it one of those zarogoth things? With all the protections, they shouldn't be able to get inside. If they do, cut them low on their bodies.

Donut: SOMETHING'S WRONG. IT SAYS I CAN'T LEAVE THE TOWER. I THINK THERE'S A NET AROUND IT ALL OF A SUDDEN. I TRIED TO JUMP, AND IT WON'T LET ME.

Toyotomi: No. It is a crawler. A woman with a dog. She's coming in.

This message is from a deceased mercenary.

Sergeant Bret S: We need backup! Backup!

This message is from a deceased crawler.

Bomo: Will stop her now.

This message is from a deceased mercenary.

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Over the past few months, I'd experienced so many moments of pure, unadulterated terror, I'd lost count. I'd become pretty good at examining a situation and immediately reacting to it. I'd gotten so good at it, in fact, that most of my reactions to sudden surprises were 100% pure reflex. I trusted my instincts because if I waited just another millisecond, oftentimes it would be too late. Or worse, the utter terror of the moment would overwhelm and paralyze me.

The problem was, my instincts sometimes were only half-formed, and by the time I realized I'd done something incredibly risky or insane, it was much too late to do anything about it. And because the formation of terror at certain situations was now delayed to make room for these immediate reactions, the *holy shit* half of my reaction and the I-probably-should-have-thought-this-through half of my reaction sometimes occurred at the exact same time.

This was how I found myself floating in mid-air above Larracos on my way up to save Donut mere seconds after I received the final messages from Toyotomi and Bomo.

I didn't think. I moved.

They hadn't yet finished clearing out the mass of zarogoths between us and the railing. I didn't care. I ran, pushing past Juice Box and the Semeru dwarves, punching a zarogoth out of the way as I reached the railing. I pulled the final *Levitation* potion I had in my inventory, and I drank it just as dozens of arms reached for me. I

shot straight up in the air, pushing the dangerous-as-fuck spell to the limit. The apex of the spell actually brought me up and out of Larracos, but I was still stuck in the middle of the funnel with a good 100 meters from me to the edge of Shanty Town.

My original plan was to carefully aim and then toss the massive-payload waffle maker bombs on the theater housing the generator for the zarogoths. Instead, I just took the entire contents of one of my inventory folders—a folder titled **Shit Just Hit**—and I dropped it all at once in the general direction of the Piccadilly. The payload included about 20 waffle makers, two no disassembles, a pair of the anti-personnel cheese cutters, approximately 500 impact hob-lobbers, and more sticks of dynamite than I could count. I dropped them all, all at once, and then I activated *Walk on Air* and made a mad dash for the lip of the city, hoping my speed would get me there before the skill would run out.

It was right about this moment that I realized my bone-headed idea was about to have some seriously negative consequences for everyone in the area. That, plus my *Walk on Air* didn't have enough juice to get me to the edge of Shanty Town. I rushed forward through the air, making it about ¾'s of the way before I dropped like a bucket of concrete, plummeting down to the mostly-abandoned 64th—or third ring down—of Larracos, crashing heavily onto the aluminum roof of someone's home. I stood, and using my *Climb* skill, I quickly shimmied up a pipe toward the 65th, which was home to multiple shops.

I was about halfway up this pipe when the bombs hit on and around the theater. The resulting blast and cacophony shattered every window in the area, even at this distance, and it likely completely fucked all the lower levels of Larracos.

Several pages of notifications appeared, including a massive, red **Warning. Your attack has activated the city defense system** notification followed by a ten-second timer. The walls shook with a secondary explosion, almost as big, and I knew I'd managed to take out the soul gem generator. The way I'd done it had probably been a mistake. A big mistake.

I didn't care.

Donut was alone, and I would do whatever it took to get to her. Whatever it took.

Across the way, A huge chunk of the top few levels of Larracos cracked and fell away, plunging into the city below. This was part of the aqueduct infrastructure. A black and red glob of steaming lava oozed out over the edge, spreading out across the top of the 66th and 65th levels of Larracos, luckily on the other side of the ring.

I rushed across the 65th floor, climbing a building and then scaling the wall. I moved to the top, 66th level of Larracos, which was normally occupied by barracks and soldiers.

Donut: CARL, LUCIA IS IN THE TOWER! SHE'S COMING UP THE STAIRS!

Carl: I know. I'm coming.

Here, there were hundreds of NPCs I hadn't been expecting. These were children and shopkeepers who were fleeing the fighting. They were in the process of scrambling up the stairs into Shanty Town and diving into shops as the city's network of 100+ defensive towers finished spinning up. To my left, a green-gemmed poison splash tower let out a *thwum!*, shooting a glob of green light. It was aimed downward, deeper into the city. To the left of that, another, red tower started rapid-firing fire lances, also deep into the city. All around, the NPCs started to scream as they dove into the closest structures or finished scrambling up the stairs.

Warning: A tower has targeted you using its Inexorable skill. It will not stop firing on you until one of you is paste.

A tiny crosshairs symbol appeared in my vision, meaning I'd been locked on.

Across the way, I watched in horror as the tower—this one a black-gemmed, damage-enhanced gale strike tower—started walking its way across the upper level, arcing toward me. Each shot sounded like someone pounding a bass drum, and each fist-sized blast of air hit with such force, it punched a hole straight through the ground, shattering buildings and carts and anything else in its way. *Wap, wap, wap*. Cobblestones and wood chipped and shattered as the destruction marched toward me. I dropped a smoke mantle and

scrambled up the side of a barracks building, ran across the roof, and jumped, rolling to a stop just outside the city.

Entering Shanty Town.

The tower, which reached above the edge of the border, didn't stop shooting at me. The moment I appeared above the smoke, the gale tower started its slow turn in my direction while a second tower, this one a yellow hobble tower, belched out a beach ball-sized glob of gelatinous goo. I dove and rolled, landing in a shallow ditch behind a residence. If the yellow goo hit me, I'd be immobilized. The yellow tower did not seem to fire again, but the gale tower continued to shoot, smashing into and through the building between it and myself, punching hole after hole in the wall, showering me with wood.

It couldn't reach me at this angle, but I needed to keep moving.

Donut: SHE'S SHOUTING FOR MONGO! BOMO AND THE OTHERS ARE DEAD!

Carl: Delay her any way you can. She can't teleport, so she has to go up the stairs. We prepared for this. Remember? Donkey Kong. Do Donkey Kong. I'm going to come up behind her. Don't stop rolling the barrels when I get there.

Donut: YOU HAVE TO GET THE WAR MAGES! THE CASTLE IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN ME.

Carl: I am coming, Donut. Donkey Kong. Start it now.

The Donkey Kong move was an expensive, last-ditch defense added to the interior of the tower. All the manned synergy towers had similar rules as the castles, in that there had to be a path to the main room. But that didn't mean we couldn't make that path dangerous as fuck. When Donut hit a switch and activated Donkey Kong, the stairs disappeared, turning into a ramp. Barrels of various types would start rolling down the hall.

Across the way, I finally caught sight of Harpocrates for the first time. The god was huge, standing just a few hundred meters away from the edge of the tower, gesticulating wildly at the pair of ogre guards standing at its feet. The deity towered over everything, taller even than the Nest tower. He was slim, younger-looking than I

expected, and other than the fact he was a goddamned kaiju, he looked mostly like a regular human. He wore the white with golden robes, but they were torn and filthy from his fight with his own penis. The front of the robe was stained red, presumably an added visual display to remind everyone that he'd had his shlong stolen.

The god's entrance into town was blocked by a pair of ogres standing side-by-side at the edge of town, looking up at him. These were two of Juice Box's changelings. From the map I could see there were more changelings there as well, who'd fanned out on the ground on either side of the god, like they were trying to intimidate the thing. I was pretty sure the god didn't even notice them.

As I watched, the god's attention moved away from the ogres and the tower and to the massive ball of flesh barreling toward it. The ball would be here in minutes.

Carl: Guys, Donut needs help. There's a goddamn anti-escape trap net across the nest tower. How do we get rid of it?

Mordecai: Working on a solution now. Normally the spell works for ten minutes. If Lucia cast it, I don't know if there's a way to easily dispel it without a *Dispel Magical Snares* scroll or spell.

Britney: Holy shit, Carl. Juice Box is pissed at you. You dropped the monsters but activated the towers! We've had to retreat back into the college!

I ignored this. I sent a message to Li Na, demanding to know where she was. She didn't answer.

A form jumped into the small trench next to me, coughing in a cloud of dust. I swirled, preparing to smash it.

Ferdinand.

"Why are you lying down on the job?" Ferdinand demanded. The orange cat was shaking with fear, and the end of his tail was scorched, like he'd barely missed getting skewered by a fire lance. His bowler hat sat cockeyed on his head. "Kitten is in trouble!"

"You shouldn't be here," I growled, peeking over the edge of the ditch. The nest glowed as a few of the upper-level defensive towers focused on it, pounding fire and more gale strikes at it.

As I stared at the tower, a notification popped up.

Nest integrity at 97%.

The sound of the firing towers rose in volume. Some of our own defensive towers were now engaging the Larracos towers. The ones on our side didn't have nearly as many protections, and they were deteriorating rapidly. But some of the ones in Larracos were now standing in lava as it spread unevenly, and they, too, had health bars over them.

A new pang of guilt hit me. Li Jun had been in charge of these towers. Now they were probably on automatic mode. I quickly pulled up the tower menus to look. I could fully control them from the menu.

There wasn't time to grieve the loss of Li Jun, nor did I have time to manually control the towers myself. It was pandemonium. Explosions; the crack of constant lightning and thunder; and the strange, sci-fi *thwum* of unique towers all mixed in together, filling the night air with the sound of chaos.

"We gotta save her," Ferdinand said, now having to shout.

Donut: THE BARRELS ARE MAKING HER MADDER! I THINK SHE CAN AMPLIFY HER VOICE LIKE I CAN. SHE'S CRYING AND TALKING TO THE STUPID DOG, WHO'S SLIPPING AND SLIDING. SHE'S STILL COMING, BUT IT'S SLOW. I'M GLAD WE DID THE COLLAPSIBLE STAIRS.

I spared another glance at Harpocrates. Somehow Ferdinand's bravery, despite his overwhelming fear, eased my own. *Breathe. Breathe.* I was starting to see the whole picture again. I had an idea.

I'd left Rend behind at the college of Larracos. I debated for a moment, then I decided to activate *Hi-Yo Silver*. The thing was practically indestructible, and the towers generally avoided shooting at pets. Hopefully summoning him to this spot wouldn't hurt him too bad.

If it worked, he'd get magically pulled toward this position, but it was going to take a minute, and I would probably be gone by the time he got here. That was okay. He'd be out of Larracos.

Behind me, the gale tower hadn't stopped its deliberate firing at my own position. It was locked onto me and would continue to fire

in my direction until I was out of range or dead. At the moment, the angle was bad, and all it could manage was to shower dirt over me.

The entrance to the Nest tower was about 100 meters to our left. I knew invisibility potions didn't protect against the towers, and smoke only helped nominally. The black towers had a slow turning radius which meant I would be okay as long as I zig-zagged.

I then sent a quick note to Donut.

To Ferdinand I said, "Listen. You go into that tower with me, you're toast. So you gotta stay right here. What you did was very brave, but we need you alive. Juice Box needs you alive."

"Juice Box hates me. She's meaner than Bill."

I didn't know who Bill was, nor did I care at the moment. I put my hand on the orange cat. He was so much more coarse than Donut. He was skin and bones, and he cowered under my touch. "Trust me on this, dude. You're on her team because you got a raw deal, but you're like me and Donut. You're from Earth. *I* want you alive. And so does Donut."

"Really? You really think so? Because Kitten is still a little saucy about that time I shot a lightning bolt at Mungo."

"Yeah, you should probably learn his proper name before you... oh shit, run!"

The ground underneath me shifted. The gale tower had fired so much, it was digging a ditch under my position.

"Hide!" I shouted at Ferdinand as I popped up and ran. I waited for the tower to shift, and then I activated *Gloom Wraith Phase*, pushing in the opposite direction, moving sideways and putting a pair of buildings between myself and the tower. I hit the ground once the phase expired, and I ran. I had to run around the side of the tower, and I jumped through the broken-in door just as the gale blasts zeroed in on me.

The shots would now pound against the opposite wall of the Nest tower, but they wouldn't get through. Not while the shield was still up.

Entering the Nest Tower.

Warning: This tower's integrity is at 74%.

You may manage this tower in the Warlord menu.

I spared a quick, sad glance for Toyotomi, Bomo, and the defending mages, all of whom were cleaved right in half with a spell.

Toyotomi was dead-dead. Bomo would supposedly regenerate on the 10th floor, but we no longer had his contract, and I didn't know if I'd ever see him again.

Hi-Yo Silver successfully completed. Your pet has been summoned to your previous location.

Rend was now in Shanty Town where I'd been hiding. He was going to have to wait. I moved toward the tower's curving stairwell, but I paused as someone rushed in behind me.

Li Na.

"Holy shit," I exclaimed upon seeing her face. I'd heard her say she was "installing" Li Jun's fake eye into herself, but the meaning hadn't really hit me until that moment.

The front of the woman's demonic face was covered with blood. She'd gouged her own eye out and replaced it with Li Jun's celestial-quality eye. The eye would allow her to slow down time and move with incredible speed.

"Na," I began. "Look I am so sorry about your brother. But we need to hurry. Donut..."

She held up her hand, stopping me. A chain grew from her shoulder, holding a glass bottle. A potion.

"Take it," she said.

She dropped the potion in front of me, and I had to dive to catch it with two hands. The large, warm bottle was in the shape of a demonic head with no eyes and with multiple tentacles coming off it. The tentacles waved back and forth, despite the whole thing being made of glass. When I grabbed the bottle, the eyeless face started to scream. Several mouths upon the tentacles also began to scream. Within, a purple, bubbling potion roiled, rushing back and forth like a miniature hot tub. This was the potion I'd asked her to loot from the war mage who'd flown at Harpocrates.

Hell-Kissed Potion of *Conscription*, level 18.

This works like a regular potion of *Conscription*, but it has been hell-kissed. At level 18, it will work against pretty

much any non-affiliated entities, regardless of their protections, including *most* deities. Most. It was brewed in the dark recesses of the Nothing by Krakaren Prime, who is said to yearn for domination, which was why she'd been banished there in the first place. She prepares for a war she considers inevitable. There's an irony that the in-dungeon version of Krakaren has supplied these potions to the War Mages. Then again, now that this potion has found its way to your hands, maybe it's not so ironic after all.

Conscription potions only work on the 9th, 12th, 15th, 17th, and 18th floors.

"I used Jun's scroll of potion duplication on it," Li Na said. She spoke with a dead, chilling calm. "I am going to use the original now on Harpocrates and then I will save Zhang, Elle, Katia, and the others before they, too, fall victim to your chaos." She turned and left.

"Wait!" I called. "If the level discrepancy is too high, it's dangerous for you! The war mage blew up!"

She did not wait.

Damnit. I didn't have time to go after her. I turned back to what had been the stairs.

The interior, curving shaft had turned to a steep ramp. Rivulets of oil from the defensive barrels had already reached the bottom. The scent of fire filled the tower, and the walls crackled with electricity. There were multiple, magic-numbing effects to the interior stairwell once Donkey Kong was activated. The barrels would still work, but most mages would be defenseless. Just from the smell in the air, I sensed that the anti-magic zone was only partially working. Most spells weren't supposed to work at all in here, but it seemed Lucia was powerful enough to break through.

Luckily, skills still worked. I activated *Sticky Feet*, and I started to run up the curving ramp.

"Stop doing that!" came Lucia's voice, echoing supernaturally in the tight, curved stairwell. "Gus. Get back up!"

I could tell by the sweeter, less raspy lilt to her voice that Lucia was in her magic-focused, beautiful woman form.

"Keep that disgusting dog away from me!" Donut shouted back, her voice also amplified. "I'm warning you, bitch!"

"Give me your dinosaur, and I will leave. It is justice I seek. Nothing more."

"Justice? There's no room for justice here. But there's plenty enough room in this world for another dead rottweiler!"

"Quit throwing barrels at Gus! You're ruining my revenge!"

Carl: I'm in the tower. Coming up now.

Donut: I HIT HER WITH THE *SLEEP* POTION BARREL, AND IT DIDN'T WORK! SHE'S CRAWLING UPSIDE DOWN ON THE CEILING OF THE STAIRWELL WAITING FOR HER DOG WHO KEEPS SLIDING AWAY FROM HER. SHE HAS HIM ON SOME SORT OF INVISIBLE LEASH. SHE BLOCKS EXPLOSIONS, TOO.

Carl: Focus on the dog. We gotta separate the two. Send a *Mute* barrel then maybe *Temporary Water Source* and fill the stairwell.

Donut: *MUTE* DOESN'T WORK ON HER. I HAVE A BETTER IDEA.

Wap. Wap. Wap. The gale tower was following my progress. I could hear it against the outside wall of the tower as I continued to ascend, like a battering ram against the exterior marble.

Donut: WATCH OUT, CARL! SHE THREW THE DOG BUT LUCIA GOT HIT, AND SHE'S TUMBLING DOWN!

And just a moment later, she appeared. I tried to jump aside as a screaming, twirling mass rushed toward me, rocketing down the ramp like a bobsled. It was Lucia and someone else. Donut's card from the 8th floor.

"Oof" I cried as I was hit dead on by the pair of combatants. The three of us continued to spin and slide as we twisted away.

I cried in pain as the armored crab legs of the screaming newcomer raked against my arms. Raul. Donut had finally summoned him. When he'd leveled up at the end of the previous floor, he'd jumped from level 70 to 110, and his card had been

upgraded to mythic rareness. When he was summoned, he'd stick around for 10 minutes. Raul had been pretty strong before, but he was now significantly more powerful.

"Stop! Ow, please! Stop!" came Lucia's voice as I also tried to free myself.

Raul, too, was shouting angrily. "You dare challenge my master? You dare challenge Daddy Carl? The heavens laugh at your temerity, churl!" The crab's claws flashed as he tried to snap onto Lucia's legs. His voice was much deeper now that he'd "ascended" to the next cultivation rank or whatever. A shield sparked each time his powerful claws slammed down, showering sparks everywhere.

We hit the ground, all three of us now just caked in oil, spinning until we hit the wall by the door. All three of us broke apart and continued to tumble in the small entrance room.

Raul, quicker than either of us, did a backflip and landed on his legs with a shout. He snapped forward and grabbed the larger woman. He held her up in the air, clutched in his glowing claws. Her single, goat leg dangled from the side of his claw. She wasn't fighting back.

"Look at Daddy Carl! Look upon his greatness! You will kowtow, or you will suffer such a death that your ancestors will weep until the very end of days!"

"Please," Lucia said, her voice weak and scared. "I don't want to play anymore."

"That is not a proper submission! For crimes against the heavens, you have been sentenced to eternal death," Raul shouted. He snapped again, and her shield winked out.

"Please, please," Lucia said.

"Wait," I croaked as I pulled myself up. This was probably a waste, but I didn't care. A regular one might work, but I didn't care. I needed to be sure. I pulled that potion from my inventory. The one Li Na had just duplicated for me.

No. Not like this. Never like this.

Sometimes, we do what we have to do to survive.

I smashed the screaming, Hell-kissed *Conscription* potion against Lucia's head.

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The potion worked. A pink glow appeared around Lucia's dot.

Raul lowered her and let her slide to the ground. The crab sneered.

"Daddy Carl is magnanimous today. Now you shall kiss his famed, alabaster feet and beg for forgiveness."

"Raul," I said. "Donut needs help. Go!"

Without another word, he scurried away back up the ramp.

"I'm sorry," I said, taking a knee in front of the woman on the floor. "If you've cast *Rubber* or any other spell to hurt us, I'm ordering you to cancel it out now."

Under Orders appeared over her head. The girl changed in an instant. Her terrified expression switched to a look of absolute malice. I sighed. I *knew* it. She'd been faking it. Whatever was going on with her, the influence of her dog took some time to fade. She'd been trying to fool me.

I looked into the warlord menu, and I could see an astonishingly long list of protection spells around her. She had what appeared to be 30 separate hotlist triggers as well, which was curious. I couldn't see those, but I knew she couldn't activate any if it meant to harm me. There were ways to break conscription, as the war mages figured out, but it was all but impossible during the first few days. Especially with this version of the *Conscription* spell.

"Turn off all your protections, too." I added. A moment passed, and the spells disappeared.

Wap, wap, wap. Outside, the gale tower continued to fire at me, and the pulses hit the wall. The Nest was at 45% integrity.

"Fuck you," Lucia hissed. "I'm going to rip you into pieces." Something appeared in her hand, and I startled. But it was a bottle of tequila. She took a long drink. Then she spit and lurched, as if to attack me, but she was stopped as if she hit an invisible wall. The spit of tequila sprayed to the side just as it magically caught alight, and she burned her own face. Her long, dark hair caught fire, but it quickly went out, filling the entrance vestibule with the stench of burning hair. She screamed and lunged again. Again, she was stopped from attacking me. This was followed by a string of insults that didn't get properly translated from Spanish.

Carl: Donut, what's happening?

Donut: THE DOG IS STUCK JUST BELOW THE ENTRANCE BARKING ITS STUPID HEAD OFF. I SMACKED IT WITH MY *ASTRAL PAW* SPELL, AND HE SLID DOWN A FEW MORE LOOPS, BUT HE'S STILL UP HERE. HE'S TRYING TO CAST HIS LIGHTNING ATTACK, BUT IT DOESN'T WORK WELL IN THE STAIRWELL. I'M GOING TO CAST A CLOCKWORK TRIPLICATE ON MONGO AND SEND THE TWO OF THEM DOWN THERE TO GET HIM.

Carl: Raul is coming, too. Wait until he gets there before you send in the clockworks.

I took a breath. *Okay, okay. We're okay.*

"You need to call your dog off. Do it now. Use your leash spell or whatever and stop him. Summon him back here."

At that, she laughed. "Do you think I have control over Gus? Do you think he listens to me? Especially at this distance. Your kitty and her dinosaur are dead, and they don't even know it yet. You are too."

"Call him anyway."

"Gus," Lucia shouted, her voice surprisingly amplified. It was a skill, not an item. "Gus, come."

"Okay, good. Now turn off the net you have over the tower."

"I can't. It was a scroll. And it's not on the tower. It's on Donut, and she is bound to the room she is in. She will explode if she tries to teleport. It will run out soon."

Warlord Message: Harpocrates has been successfully conscripted. Harpocrates, level 250 is now a member of the Princess Posse.

I quickly looked, and Li Na was still alive and at full health. I didn't know how she managed to do it, but she'd figured out how to use the potion without hurting herself. I turned my attention back to the problem at hand.

Carl: Let me know if the dog leaves.

Donut: HE'S STILL STUCK BARKING AND BARKING AND BARKING. THE BALL IS ABOUT TO ENTER THE CITY. WE GOTTA HURRY UP.

I smiled sadly at the crawler, and I sat on the ground next to her. Through the stench of burned hair, I could smell sweat and alcohol. But there was something else, too. A faint perfume. A sweet one. The kind a child would pick. I examined the large skull next to her name, and it expanded. She had over 200 player killer skulls. She'd also killed 20 hunters. Countless bosses. She'd killed her own game guide. There was so much about her story I didn't know.

"I don't have any player killer skulls," I said to her. "I was really, really hoping I'd never get one, but that's the thing with scars. We rarely get to choose them."

I pulled the Ring of Divine Suffering from my inventory, and I put it on my finger.

The girl in the body of a woman just looked at me, panting angrily like a caged dog.

"I still don't understand what's going on with you. Florin thinks it's important to keep you alive because there's something going on in that head of yours, and he thinks a bunch of kids are trapped in there. Maybe there are. I don't know. I don't understand, and I don't know if I ever will. There are so many things happening at once, and I am so afraid of making the wrong decision that it's just overwhelming. The conscription only lasts until the end of this floor, and if we all somehow survive, you'll just be back to the way you

were before. You keep trying to kill those I love, and I can't let that happen. So I wanted to say I'm sorry for what I'm about to do. I'm sorry we never got the chance to figure out how to save those inside of you. I don't have a choice."

"Sir," she said. Her eyes had changed. Her voice had taken on a raspy quality. "My name is Diah. Lucia is with Alexandro. And Alexandro is only here when the dogs are close. My name is Diah. We are in the dark. You need to wait until the dog is close, and Lucia will be back. Wait until she is back. Please, sir. Please."

I paused, canceling out the mark I'd just started to form. I needed to get more information first.

"I'm ordering you to tell me if that's the truth."

"I... I. Yes. Sir. Please. We are in the dark, and it's so cold. Sometimes we can hear them talk. We can hear them whispering. It's like there's a river running through our room, and if we touch it, it hurts. They say such sad things. When the dog wanders off, Lucia fades, and one of us takes over, and we can see again. We take turns. Sometimes it's day, and we can see the light."

Holy shit, I thought. I was about to ask a follow-up question when a new message hit.

You are in the presence of another deity. You are now in range of Yarilo. The Scavenger's Daughter fills with new power.

Temporary Effect from Yarilo:

Please wait.

Oh shit, we hadn't fixed that one. Uh, that's not exactly fair for either of you. A bit anticlimactic. Let me fix it real fast.

Please wait.

Temporary Effect from Yarilo:

Protection from all venereal diseases.

"Mongo! No, Mongo get back here this instant!" came Donut's amplified voice.

<u>Donut</u>: CARL, CARL MONGO WENT DOWN WITH THE CLOCKWORKS! I'M GOING DOWN THE CHUTE AFTER HIM!

<u>Donut</u>: IT WON'T LET ME LEAVE THE ROOM!

"Mongo! Mongo!"

I cursed.

Carl: He'll be okay. I'm coming.

Donut: THEY'RE ALL SLIDING DOWN!

I jumped to my feet. "Stay. I want you to remove every stable magical item and artifact and pile it on the floor and wait here."

"I don't know what that means. I don't know how to play."

I paused, surprised. *Goddamnit*. The very fact she wasn't immediately complying suggested she really didn't know what that meant. And if she didn't know...

I turned back to the ramp to rush back up. Slam! I was bowled over once again as the group, larger this time, smashed into me. But this time I went right through the open front door of the tower, tumbling outside into the burning night air.

It was me, Gustavo 3 the rottweiler, Raul the crab, and three Mongos, one of whom was missing a leg, trailing clockwork parts. We all hit the ground outside and rolled. All of us struggled to our feet.

Raul's health was almost gone. I'd missed what had happened, but his entire shell sizzled. It looked as if he'd already been hit with multiple lightning attacks during the slide down the chute. The one-legged clockwork Mongo staggered and fell, tumbling away. It screeched in indignation, unable to properly stand.

Gustavo barked and fired yet another lightning bolt out of his mouth, and a second Mongo exploded, this one also a clockwork. That left me, the already injured Raul, the one-legged Mongo, and the real Mongo.

We all stumbled anew as a god—Harpocrates—stepped past us, ignoring us all. His giant foot flattened an entire city block. He caught the edge of the one-legged Mongo, who exploded into parts. The god opened his mouth, as if to scream, but no sound came out. He had the ball in his hands, holding it by the shaft of Meatus, and

he swung it like a flail at the god Yarilo, who went flying the moment the ball hit him with a wet *smack*.

Harpocrates had **Under Orders** over his head, and he was rank **Legionnaire in the White Dragons**. He was under the direct control of Li Na, who was having him fight the god of lust, who was a member of the War Mage team. He, too, had **Under Orders**. Meatus was still a free agent, and it was unclear if the chaos goddess Eris, who remained completely encased in the ball, had managed to get recruited by the war mages or not.

I looked up, momentarily horrified at the spectacle. I was expecting the ball to break apart, but it was glowing anew with some sort of protection spell, likely also cast by the god. The god briefly paused, jabbed his free finger at the top of the tower in Donut's direction and then moved to continue his fight against Yarilo.

Donut ignored the god and was shouting down at us, shouting for Mongo.

Donut: CARL, I CAN'T EVEN LEAN OUT THE TOWER TO FIRE AT THIS ANGLE. YOU'RE TOO CLOSE TO THE BASE! I CAN'T SEE WHAT'S HAPPENING! WHEN IS THIS GOING TO RUN OUT?

The real Mongo was the first to get up. He shrieked as he jumped upon the struggling dog, snapping his mouth around the dog's backside. Raul, at the same moment, moved to snap off the dog's head with his claw.

"Die, demon, die!" Raul shouted.

Shing!

Mongo screamed in pain as dozens of steel quills erupted from the body of the dog, impaling him. He reflexively jerked away, but Gustavo was now attached to Mongo by the quills. When Mongo jerked away, he pulled Gustavo out of Raul's reach. The quills were from a spell I'd seen before, something called *Porcupine Defense*. The quills pushed in all directions, including up and through Mongo's mouth, exploding through his tough scales from the inside out, showering blood. Gustavo, still stuck in Mongo's mouth, fired lightning again as Raul lunged. He struck Raul right in the center of

his chest, and the already injured crab went flying. He disappeared in a puff of smoke.

"Mongo!" I cried as I jumped to punch the dog. But I knew my mistake just as I'd lunged. I'd moved too far to the left, no longer keeping the edge of the Nest between myself and the gale tower.

Oof! I went flying as I was hit by the ball of air. I spun and landed, tumbling into the indentation caused by the god's foot.

Pain flashed. My shoulder was in the middle of my chest. I'd been folded in half. I cried in agony as I rolled away, still in sight of the tower.

"Mongo," I croaked, trying to get up and scramble away at the same time as I hit a *Fine Healing* potion. Mongo screamed in outraged pain as he struggled to free himself from the dog impaled inside his mouth.

Zaaappp. Mongo squealed again, health rocketing down. This was a secondary attack that appeared to electrify the dog's quills. And faster than I thought possible, the dog whipped in a circle, the quills just gone, and he lunged at the now-unconscious Mongo's neck. Growling, he caught the neck of the limp dinosaur and began to shake.

No, I thought as I struggled to my feet. *No. Not Mongo.*

Wham! I was hit by another gale blast, but I did not fall. I had my sleep wand in my hotlist and suddenly in my hand, and I aimed, but the wand exploded in my hand as yet another gale blast hit my arm, bending it backward, shattering bones.

She's never going to forgive me, I thought. *This is what will break her.*

A terrible, deep giggling filled the night.

The dark, round silhouette appeared above the ridge. Rend.

He'd gotten bigger. Much bigger.

The dog and the dinosaur stood directly between Rend and myself.

"Wrecking Ball!" I wheezed as I cast *Hi-Yo Silver* a second time. Another gale hit me, and I spun head over heels landing on my stomach.

I watched, as if in slow motion, as Rend started rolling toward me. And as he was magically pulled in my direction, he activated the only skill he had. *Wrecking Ball*. The special attack increased his mass and speed, and it did exactly what the name implied.

The back half of Gustavo 3, the second of Lucia Mar's two rottweilers, terror of the dungeon, exploded in a red mist as Rend rushed right up to me, stopping inches from my face.

"Good boy," I gasped at Rend. I downed a healing potion.

Wap! Rend grunted as the tower's bolt slammed right into him.

He barely moved, but he did giggle.

"It's okay, it's okay," a voice said as I desperately healed myself. She was talking to Mongo.

It was Lucia. She was on her knees, sobbing. She'd changed to the hag form, and she was pouring a pet healing potion on Mongo, whose life held just the barest sliver of red. His throat had been ripped open, but he wasn't yet dead.

"You did it," Lucia said. "You did it."

But even as I watched, something changed in the girl's posture. She stood to her full height. Another blast from the gale tower—shooting at me—whipped past her, missing her head by inches, and she didn't flinch. It smacked into Rend, who giggled.

"You should've killed us both when there was still a connection," the girl said to me. "Now it's too late. Now the Eulogist has another ally in the dungeon, and now you can't kill me. Not unless you want all the children of Earth to die." She shook her head and walked off.

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<Note added by Crawler Carl, 25th Edition>

There's a dictionary sitting here in the main room of the guildhall. It's a large, old book. It's from the 1800's, which is a long time ago. Florin, of all people, had it in his inventory. There's a bullet hole right in the center of the book that goes almost all the way through. I keep meaning to ask him about it, but, like with everything, there just doesn't seem to be enough time.

I just used the book to look up the official definition of "Atrocity."

"An act of fiendish cruelty."

It doesn't seem fair, that definition. Or, perhaps, the definition is correct, but the system calling Donut's War Crime *spell an "Atrocity" is wrong. Or maybe it's not wrong, but the true act of fiendish cruelty was giving her that spell in the first place. It came in the Legendary 1914 box, the box we'd received after killing D'Nadia. The same box I'd gotten the* Run, Little Günter*,* Run *spell in.*

The sheer difference in capacity between those two spells is astonishing.

I am always afraid our plans won't go as planned. Oftentimes they don't. But never before have I prayed for a plan of my own creation to not be successful, despite us desperately needing it to work.

If she doesn't cast this spell, we likely won't survive the coming hours. But if she does cast it, and it works as advertised, what then?

She's strong. She's smart. She's my best friend. She is the only true family I have left.

She says she's ready, willing, and able to do this. But I fear she doesn't yet know what she's gotten herself into.

And me? If I let her do this? What sort of monster am I?

This is war. What have I done? This is war.

"What the fuck does that mean?" I called after Lucia. She didn't answer.

"Mongo! Mongo!" came Donut's voice from above.

Donut: HIS HEALTH ALMOST WENT ALL THE WAY DOWN!

Carl: It's okay. He's okay. Gustavo is dead. Lucia is conscripted. Rend saved him.

The fight between the gods had moved to the other side of Shanty Town. Yarilo screamed as the much-bigger Harpocrates beat him senseless with the ball. Yarilo was a feral god and not immortal on this floor and was about to die.

"Lucia!" I called again. "Get back here!"

She stopped at that. She was still conscripted. She opened her mouth, but then she zapped away. She'd been teleported. Since we still weren't allowed to do it, I knew she'd just gotten yanked by an admin.

"Goddamnit!" I moved to put the Nest between myself and the gale tower, but I hesitated. The Nest was still getting hammered by other towers, and I didn't want to tax the shields more. Instead, I moved in the other direction and jumped into a ditch. Rend plopped down next to me. Mongo was already gone, back in the tower on his way back to Donut.

Carl: Donut, kill that gale tower for me and start working on the towers hitting you. I'm coming up to you the moment the gale tower is dead.

Donut: I'M WORKING ON IT.

Zev: Sorry, Carl. The liaisons are indicating they want to interview Lucia now that the dog is dead. They're indicating she won't be available for at least an hour.

Carl: Holy shit, what is going on with her? What did she mean by that with the kids? And the Eulogist?

I'd first heard the term "Eulogist" as something in conjunction with the nebular religious cult, and then again as Agatha's boss or something. Paulie was a different kind of residual as Agatha, and he clearly hated the... what? Person? Monster? What, or who, was the Eulogist? Fopsy the adjutant for the Dream has also mentioned that name. And now Lucia Mar?

Next to me, Rend was peeking out over the ditch watching the gods fight. It appeared Harpocrates had an additional spell over the ball, keeping it from losing more health. I tried not to think about what it must be like for everybody stuck in it. The god held onto the shaft with two hands and was smashing the ball part down on the cowering god of lust, who was scrambling, trying to get away. The fleeing god was picking up chunks of buildings and tossing it ineffectually at Harpocrates.

Yarilo was the nephew or cousin or half-brother of Emberus. Probably all of those things. I couldn't remember how the family tree worked. I hadn't really gotten a good look at him, but he was humanoid, and he had long, blond hair. I was pretty sure he was some sort of elf-like creature. While huge, he was significantly smaller than Harpocrates. The ball he was getting beaten with was even bigger than him, which made the sight almost comical. Almost.

"Stop!" Yarilo shrieked as Harpocrates hammered into him. "Not my face. Anything but my face!"

The shaft was more... rigid... than it had been before. It basically went from a flail to a mace.

Donut: DO YOU REMEMBER THAT SHAKE WEIGHT THING MISS BEATRICE HAD? THAT'S WHAT THAT LOOKS LIKE. IT'S OBSCENE!

Zev: We're trying to figure this Lucia thing out. Listen. We thought we had a good handle on what was going on

with her, but we were wrong. We'd assumed her getting inside was a glitch at the very beginning of the crawl. Not an uncommon one. We wanted to correct it and kick her back out, but once she started earning, they…. We gave her a few loot boxes to compensate and keep her safe. And now the AI won't let her leave administratively. It says it's unable to extract her.

Carl: Yeah, but it's like there are people inside her head. She says all the children of Earth are in danger. And what did the dog have to do with it?

Zev: It's complicated, Carl. It's not *all* the children. Just the ones that tried to get into the dungeon. And it's only half of those. All the ones who were in a specific wing. They're on the surface in the kinder facility. At least physically. Like I said, we thought we knew what was happening. It's something that would've been corrected the moment she died or left, but we were wrong.

A chill washed over me.

Carl: So what happens if she dies?

Zev: As of about five minutes ago, we thought the glitch would self-correct and release everyone. That's what's supposed to happen. Now? We don't know for certain. The Eulogist is another name for the AI in the center system. We don't know how it's all connected for certain. But now we think… we think if she goes, they all go.

Carl: How many is it?

Zev: I shouldn't be telling you any of this.

Carl: How many fucking children is it?

Zev: About 120,000. Give or take a few.

Holy shit.

Carl: I almost killed her, Zev. You almost let me kill her.

Zev: We learned something new the moment the dog died. There's so much more, but now is not the time. You need to get back to work. None of this will matter if you don't win. *You* put Lucia in your army. *You* conscripted her.

Carl: You tell the liaisons to keep her in there until you figure out how to save those kids. She's a goddamn dead man's switch. A psychotic one. And she just lost her bodyguard. Don't let her leave. Keep her safe.

Zev: It's out of my control, Carl.

A massive chunk of building, tossed by Yarilo, missed Harpocrates, flew over my head, and crashed into the Nest.

"Hey!" Donut shouted, using her microphone.

Warning: The Nest Tower's Integrity is at 25%.

Donut: THE BLACK TOWER IS DEAD! THE LAVA HELPED!

Carl: On my way!

"Come on, Rend," I called, pulling the pet carrier. He started to giggle in protest, but I zapped him away anyway. I really needed to find him some sort of speed enhancement.

Once he was safely put away, I jumped up, and I ran back toward the tower.

I was momentarily taken aback by the sheer destruction wrought over what used to be Shanty Town. Most of our own towers, which we really never got to use, were trampled. The nest tower along with Li Na's abandoned synergy towers still stood, but both were drawing a lot of fire. All the other buildings were just gone, flattened by the passage of the gods.

From Larracos itself, smoke rose into the air. The black, glowing river of lava continued to slowly lump its way over the edge. As I watched, one of the Larracos towers crumbled away.

"Please!" came the weak shout of Yarilo, followed by a terrible, wet splatch as Harpocrates slammed the ball down, shaking the ground.

System Message. A deity has fallen. And while Yarilo was damned to the Nothing, his death has angered the gods. The heavens tremble with rage.

The Scavenger's Daughter has looked away, though her eyes remain open. The benefit from Yarilo fades.

I moved back into the entrance of the Nest as I barely registered the messages. Donut had switched off the Donkey Kong stair trap, and the ramp had turned back to regular steps. I rushed upward,

using my speed skill to circle up as quickly as I could. The curving stairwell was soaked in blood and stank with the familiar scent of lightning strikes. My feet echoed as I ran.

I didn't have a true reason to get to Donut at this point. We had a new plan, and by going up the tower, I was wasting time. The fight was below, not up.

But I had an overwhelming urge to get to her. We'd been separated for much too long, and it just wasn't the same without her by my side. If this was where this was going to end, I couldn't bear the thought of not having her with me.

As I ran, messages came in. Li Na was back in the chat, organizing with Juice Box via Britney. Li Na was literally riding Harpocrates like he was a mount, who in turn still held onto the ball. The god was clearly enraged by this, but so far the conscription held. Juice Box offered some changelings to assist Li Na, and she had allowed them to also climb onto the god. We were about to move in on the war mages holding the castle, but first we had to take out a few synergy towers that had war mages in them. I said we'd engage once we stabilized the Nest tower.

Samantha was also in the chat, sobbing about the death of Yarilo. She'd managed to locate Louis, but he was in some sort of secured jail cell, and she was waiting for the patrol to move away before she attempted to rescue him. By now it was clear that Warlord Fang was not in the Reaver castle, and that it was abandoned except for their "security" system, which was a bunch of robots.

The gravity-magic dragon that had crashed *Party Planner* remained circling above the Reaver castle, seemingly content to ignore everything happening on the ground.

If Fang wasn't in his castle, then it was possible he, too, was in the ball along with Epitome Tagg. There was a way to find out, which I would do the moment I got to the top of the tower.

Another strange, bewildering message appeared as I was running up the stairs.

Warlord Message: Warlord Agatha of the War Mage Rebellion has been deemed to have abandoned her post. As

such, she has been removed as Warlord from the War Mage Rebellion. Warlord Akuma has been given full system access and named sole Warlord.

This was followed by a note from Victory.

Baroness Victory: Don't even ask because I have no idea what that was.

Donut was at work sniping the towers of Larracos, but it was slow going. Despite Lucia Mar's insistence that the net holding her in place would soon run out, Donut remained trapped. The tower's integrity was down to 16% and slowly lowering. With all the mages either dead or in the ball, we had no way to repair it.

I finally rushed into the uppermost level to see Donut atop her seat, dressed in her ghillie suit leaning against the parapet, her face pressed against the invisible shield like it was glass. The camouflage suit was a strange contrast to her tiara which glowed like a lighthouse beacon.

Even though Donut had no weapon, the first thing I thought when I saw her was *sniper. She looks like a sniper.*

Victory was also here, standing in the corner, silently observing.

Mongo stood beside Donut bouncing up and down. He was missing some feathers around his neck where he'd been injured by Gustavo. And even though he'd been healed, he remained blood-soaked around his collar. It dripped on the floor in congealing lumps. I knew some of that was Gustavos, but it still hurt me to see it.

Blood was so much more red when it was spilled from someone you loved.

Mongo screeched at my appearance.

Donut muttered, mostly whispering. Her voice had taken on a serious tone I'd never heard before. "Mongo, shush. Mommy is killing bad guys. Move, Bianca. Get out of the way. Aiming, aiming, aiming... Gottcha."

Crack!

Her fiery magic missile rocketed off, and a distant tower deep in Larracos sparked. This was followed by a secondary explosion, and the tower crumbled away.

"Not so tough with your head blown off, are you?" she growled.

<u>Donut</u>: I hit the war mage atop that death ray synergy tower. Moving to the next.

"You're supposed to be focusing on the towers shooting at the Nest," I said. I unleashed Rend back into the room, and he let out a giggle. He moved to Mongo and giggled again as he started to lick the gore on the dino's neck.

Only then did Donut look up, and I could see her face. I tried not to react. I could see the hollowness to her eyes, as if they were trying to focus on something so far away, she couldn't quite see it. It'd only been a few hours, but the change was stark. Hours of sitting up on high and raining death had taken a physical toll.

She'd been level 65 when she'd gone up into this tower. She was now level 74.

We gain things, and we lose them.

I held out my arms.

There was a pause, one that took just a heartbreaking second. But she blinked, her eyes focused on me, and relief filled me.

She let out a meow and jumped from her seat into my arms. She twisted, doing a barrel roll a few times in my grip, and then moved to my shoulders, circling around my neck, just like she used to do when I'd come home from work. She pressed her head against mine, purring loudly.

"My *Magic Missile* is level 15 now," she said. "It tripled in power!"

"That's good, Donut."

She eyed Rend there, who'd moved to Victory's side and was attempting to gnaw on her belt.

She jumped from my shoulder, to Mongo's back, to the ground next to Rend.

"Thank you, Rend. I still think you're disgusting, but you saved my boy's life, and I will never forget that."

Rend belched loudly in her face.

Warning: The Nest Tower's Integrity is at 10%.

I cursed and moved to the edge of the parapet. I eyeballed the closest tower that was still shooting at us. It was another gale tower, but this one was enhanced with splash damage, which made it less powerful than the one that had been tracking me. The blasts of air

were probably twenty feet across, however, and they were drubbing the middle of the nest. The enemy gale tower's health was in the deep red. I pulled one of my last rocket launchers, aimed, and fired. The crystal at the top of the tower shattered.

"That is some impressive shooting," Victory said from the corner, speaking for the first time. I looked up at her, and Fopsy, the tripod adjutant for the Dream, was now in the room as well. I hadn't even heard him teleport in. His presence reminded me that I needed to locate the remaining two warlords, Tagg and Fang.

I turned my attention back outside. Harpocrates just stood there, clutching onto the ball by holding Meatus, who'd lost his rigidity. Harpocrates now stood relatively close, right next to Li Na's synergy tower, but otherwise unmoving. As soon as we got word from Britney that those in the college were ready to make their move against the castle, we'd all jump into action.

I activated my Ring of Divine suffering, seeking out those in the ball.

The ring info populated a massive list of available targets, but when I filtered in enemies, there wasn't anyone. The list was too long to just manually scroll, but I did anyway, and they were all just members of the Princess Posse or Team Retribution or mercenaries from the recently-defeated teams. I didn't see anyone from the Reavers or the Dream.

"Huh," I said, trying to figure out why. Was it because of the fleshers? All the enemies likely were wrapped by fleshers, even though they were invulnerable. Maybe because their health was constantly going down and getting healed? I didn't know. It wouldn't list them at all if their health wasn't 100% Either way, I didn't get the information I needed.

I switched to *Ping*, and that worked. I sorted through the information, and sure enough the warlords were both there. Epitome Tagg and Warlord Fang were both nearby, both in the ball. To my surprise, there were also a handful of Saccathians and orcs still alive, also in the ball. These guys were unaffiliated, which was odd. There were a pair of nagas as well, along with an Operatic blob creature. *What the hell? Where did they come from?*

Did it matter? They were here now. I double checked the Ring of Divine Suffering. All the unaffiliated outworlders were in the ball, but they, too, weren't available to be marked for death. I wasn't crazy enough to actually mark them even if I could as I had no way of guaranteeing what would happen next, but it was curious.

"They're almost here," Donut said. She was back in her chair, and she was aiming at a yellow-orange tower, which was shooting *Magic Missiles* similar to her own. *Crack!*

The distant tower crumbled and fell. The Nest's health was now down to 8%, but with that last tower down, nothing was currently shooting at us.

"Who is almost here?" I asked.

Rosetta suddenly rushed into the room, panting. She wasn't alone. Milk also came up behind her, not winded. Her wrists were loosely bound. We still had to pretend like she was a prisoner.

Rosetta bent over, gasping. "This teleport ban really, really is awful. I would not have come into the dungeon if I had known I'd have to do so much running. We left Dong Quixote at the base, guarding the entrance. He has that slug thing with him. The next time we build a tower this high, we are adding an elevator."

"That's what I said!" Donut exclaimed. As she said this, she stumbled slightly, and her paw reached out over the edge. "Hey! The barrier is gone! Lucia's net is gone!"

"Are you sure?" I asked.

"I just got a notification. I missed it because I had them muted while I was sniping."

"Good," I said, relief filling me. One less thing to worry about.

Rosetta stopped and did a double take at Fopsy. "Former prime minister," she said, tilting her head at the Dream adjutant. A grin spread across her face. "Get fucked. But I'm glad you're here to witness this."

When Rosetta bent over, I saw she had a second creature strapped to her. It was Edgar the tortoise, who was attached to her like a backpack.

"Comrade," Rosetta said, still wheezing as she started to untie the straps, "you are significantly heavier than you appear."

“At least you have your dignity,” Edgar grumbled as he unceremoniously clattered to the floor. Milk reached down with her bound hands and helped turn him upright.

“Oh my god, hi Edgar!” Donut exclaimed. “I thought you got sucked into the ball! Wait, why are you here?”

Edgar started pulling things from his inventory. It was his tattoo kit.

“What is happening?” I demanded.

“Donut needs a spell she doesn’t have for this last part,” Rosetta said.

“I thought you were bringing me a spellbook,” Donut said, looking at the tattoo implements suspiciously.

“You need it at least level 8 for it to work in conjunction with *War Crime*,” Rosetta said. She pulled out a razor. It was a pink Bic, like something Bea would use to shave her legs. “Don’t worry. We’ll make it quick. Where do you want it?”

“Where do I want what, Rosetta?” Donut demanded.

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"Sorry," Rosetta said. "It's gotta be a tattoo, and Milk here is going to etch words of power over it to increase the spell's level."

Donut scoffed. "Have you all gone crazy? I never agreed to a tattoo! Even if I had taken leave of my senses, we don't have time! When he gave Signet the tattoo, it took all night!"

"It may not be aesthetically pleasing if I do it quickly, but it will work. Now come here, little one," Edgar said. He stepped forward. "Hmm. Someone lift her camouflage suit and crupper for me. Yes. Best would be on her right flank, I think. Rosetta, quickly now. Shave her. I need a spot about as big as my foot."

"You will not be shaving my ass!"

I held up my hand. "I thought we were going with *Wall of Fire* and *Laundry Day*?"

Rosetta looked at me. "This is the best way to quickly separate out the enemies in this situation. The fleshers have mostly wrapped themselves around the enemies already, despite their invulnerability, and *Laundry Day* might remove them and negate the effect, which will cause the fleshers to attack our own soldiers. We can't risk it. Not with Eris and Meatus mixed in there. Our comrades and allies won't have time to get to safety. This is an entirely different plan altogether. We will need the fleshers still attached to them as the finisher."

"What's the spell?" I asked.

Donut continued to rant at Edgar. "Do I look like someone who doesn't love their mother?"

Rosetta smiled, which was rare for her. "We were going to go with *Hamzo*, but even with the Synergy tower's effect tied in with the bonus from the *War Crime* spell, it won't be a wide enough area. So we went with a *Dinner Bell* variant from a cleric who fell defending the FUPA. It's a spell that came from him worshiping his deity, but it appears it's going to work. Edgar extracted it properly, and with some ink tips from Milk, we don't need the toraline anymore to do what we need." She eyed Donut nervously. "It used to be called *Heel*, but apparently the translation makes it sound like another spell, so this season it's called *Bijanbi*."

Hamzo was a spell that stunned and then summoned an enemy to your location. Katia had it. *Dinner Bell* was similar, but it worked in a wide range over multiple enemies at once, and you could designate a location. It didn't stun them. I didn't know, exactly, what *Bijanbi* did, but it was clearly something that dragged enemies toward you.

"And we're keeping the second spell? *Wall of Fire*?" I asked.

"That's right," Rosetta said. "With them both amplified by *War Crime*, it should separate the enemies all out and drop them into a ring of fire. Fleshers are fire resistant, but symbiotes aren't, so if any enemies resist, they should be pounced upon by the fleshers, turned to symbiotes, and then killed. That's the finisher since *War Crime* keeps them alive. It'll kill the enemy and any potential baby war mages. And if any survive that, there won't be many of them."

"Oh," I said, and then upon picturing what was about to happen. "*Oh*. Oh fuck."

A sense of revulsion washed over me.

I looked at Donut, who'd backed against the wall, hiding her backside. I had a thought. "All we need to do is find and kill both Tagg and Fang, and all their soldiers will drop dead."

"True," Rosetta said. "But if we don't do this, they won't get separated out in the first place. And Fang especially is difficult to locate. He's worse than a changeling. This will keep our comrades

the safest when we break the ball. If we don't do this, we will lose hundreds, if not thousands."

I sighed. She was right.

Donut's *War Crime* spell was both simple and horrific in both usage and scope. And while the area of effect was relatively low, the synergy tower's ability to upgrade Atrocity spells and allow them to be cast over a wide area made *War Crime* a true spell of mass destruction.

I had the extra-long description of the spell in my scratch pad. When I had first read it, the AI had been especially enthusiastic, which immediately set off my alarm bells. The more I thought about the spell and its implications—both direct and implied—I'd been overwhelmed with a sense of horror. Horror at how using this spell might affect Donut, especially if we used it to its full potential.

War Crime.

As this spell is unable to be properly trained, it will start at level 5, and it will increase by 5 each time it is cast.

Type: Atrocity.

Target: A line-of-sight beam extending from caster's eyes that shoots in a narrow cone.

Area of effect: See description.

Cost: 1 mana point.

Duration: See description.

Cooldown: This spell can only be cast once per floor, and it can only be cast on the Scolopendra Levels, meaning levels 3, 6, 9, 12, 15, and 18. It can only be cast a total of 3 times.

This spell has been cast 0 times so far.

At level 5, the casting of *War Crime* requires you to choose two spells in your arsenal. It will then combine these two spells in a creative way. The spells will always do what they're supposed to do, but it may happen in a fun, exciting, and unpredictable manner. Intention matters, and for this spell, we respect that. Just know it's going to be awesome *and* something that most governments would consider unconscionable.

At level 10, you will be able to combine three spells. At level 15, you will combine four.

The chosen spells must be at least level 8. Their strength beyond that will not be taken into consideration. Don't worry. It'll live up to the spell's name.

I'll make sure of that.

Three notes:

One. Once you cast this, your health will be knocked down to 1%.

Two. You will lose access to the two spells for the remainder of the floor, but you will now be able to—optionally—chain those same two spells together and cast them simultaneously for the price of just one on later floors. All spells added to the mix during further castings of *War Crime* will be able to mix and match with one another, either all or in part.

And finally, Warning. No matter what happens to your targets physically, this spell can't kill anyone directly. No matter what happens to them, they will not die from this spell. They will want to die. They won't. Even if the chosen spells results in them being chopped into pieces, liquified, and spewed across the playing field into multiple puddles, they will not die. You should probably have a finisher on hand if that's your intention. As far as I'm concerned, I think it'll be funnier if you leave them alive. But you do you.

So, what happens when you actually cast this? Let's give an example from the one and only time this spell has ever been used in *Dungeon Crawler World*.

The Operatic warlord who cast this decided to combine two spells on a group of charging soldiers from the mantid team: *Fireball* and *Paralysis*. Not very creative, but it worked. He was parked atop a circle of power at the time, and the spell cast in a wide arc, hitting approximately 200 mercenaries for the mantids at once. There was only one true mantis in the bunch, and she noped out of the game all

together by ejecting approximately ten seconds after getting hit.

The victims were paralyzed permanently. They were set on fire permanently. They were each blown off in an arc away from the caster where they didn't stop until they hit something. For some of those poor mercenaries, that was very, very far.

They remained there, paralyzed and on fire and undying for the remainder of the floor. The caster of the spell received an experience point update for every hour or so of their suffering.

Incidentally, the wuss of an AI in charge of that season decided to put the on-fire NPC mercenaries out of their misery once the floor finally collapsed about two weeks later.

Additional fun fact. The Operatic who cast the spell supposedly had to go for an identity reset after the crawl and was re-absorbed. Part of his essence eventually formed into Hortense Leadership Unit. I'd like to think that's why he has a twitch to him. Collective minds should really have learned by now how to peel off their own… impurities. Otherwise you're just wallowing in used bath water, if you know what I'm saying.

The whole last part of the description didn't appear for anyone other than myself as far as I could tell. But it gave me a terrible, foreboding feeling about the spell. With her synergy tower, Donut could cast it on a large group of soldiers at once. We had all sorts of contingencies planned with several different combos. But, in the end, I agreed with Rosetta's assessment.

I didn't want her to cast it at all, but this *would* work. As Rosetta and Mordecai had both noted when Donut first got the spell, if the AI was clearly excited about something you were planning on doing, the AI would generally let you do it.

<u>Li Na</u>: I think Harpocrates is fighting the Conscription, so we need to do this now. I'm back in my tower, and he's

harder to control when I'm not near him. We'll need him to fight Eris when she's free. Is everyone ready?

Britney: We are ready to go.

Donut: WE'RE NOT READY YET. ROSETTA AND EDGAR ARE TRYING TO DEFILE MY ASS.

I put my hand on Donut's back. She was tense, which was causing both Mongo and Rend to get jumpy. "You don't have to do this," I said to Donut. "We can come up with another plan, but we need to think of something quickly."

I met the eyes of the others in the room. Rosetta looked annoyed. Edgar appeared impatient. Milk was looking sadly at Donut.

"She's not doing it," I said. "We can't force her to do something she doesn't want."

Rosetta appeared as if she was about to say something snarky.

Outside, things seemed to settle. Harpocrates stood still, like a statue, still clutched onto the shaft part of the ball, which sat motionless on the ground. In the distance, I could hear the unabated screaming of all within. All of the Larracos towers that could fire at the Nest were destroyed, and all the rest were now silent as our remaining friends were all hidden. The lava continued to slowly pour into the city, but it had been rerouted and was filling the upper levels of the funnel before moving downward. It would reach level 50 soon, and the defenders hiding in the college would have no choice but to move.

We now had about five hours before the War Mage team holding the castle would win Faction Wars.

Li Na: We need to hurry. I've ordered Harpocrates to stand still, but I can sense him fighting it.

"Carl," Donut said, looking up at me. "It's okay... You're right. It'll work. It's just... I hoped none of them would be on the outside."

"What do you mean?"

"The scars."

I closed my eyes. "Donut, if you decide to do this, it won't be a scar. It will be a badge of honor. You know why? Because if this works, you will always have a reminder of the day you helped save

everyone. And if it doesn't work out? Well, it's just a tattoo. This is no scar, Donut. Not even close because it was your choice. And, you know what? You can still say no, and we'll find another way. We'll find another way, and nobody is going to fault you for it."

She looked at me, eyes shining. "I'll only do it if you also get a matching one. A matching ass tattoo."

I smiled. "Absolutely. But it'll have to wait a day or two."

The ghillie suit disappeared. The crupper disappeared. She turned, facing her tail to Rosetta. "I suppose it won't be so bad. Miss Beatrice had a few monstrosities on herself as well, and as awful as she was, she was still beautiful."

I laughed, moving back to my feet. "You know, Rosetta, if you shave her right in the center of her back in front of her tail, it will make a bold statement."

"So help me God, Carl. I will not have a tramp stamp on me."

I laughed again, and this time, the laugh was genuine.

Donut looked at Edgar as Rosetta went to work, first with scissors, and then a razor. "Is this going to be like a Signet tattoo? One that moves around and stuff? One I can summon? If so, can I tell it to stay away from my neck? I simply can't abide neck tattoos. And what are you drawing, anyway? Can you make it a flower?" She gasped. "Can you do a baby Mongo?"

"This is a different kind of tattoo," he said. He was already preparing the ink. "That was stabilizing and preserving a memory. This is something new, and I honestly don't know what will happen once it's complete. The ink Carl had from the toraline allows one to borrow spells and skills temporarily from willing subjects. It allows one to take them permanently from unwilling subjects. With help from Milk, I have learned a few new tricks. This ink is similar to that made with the toraline, but not identical, and I don't know how it'll form. It captures the essence of the fallen crawler in a unique way, and it allows you to learn one of their spells or skills. Rosetta was just telling Milk and myself about that book of Voodoo you have, and I believe you may be able to share skills and spells that way as well, using the same ink. It will be more temporary."

“Temporary?” Donut asked as Rosetta backed away. Donut now had a small, round bald patch on her right flank. “Then why don’t we do it that way?”

“No time to experiment. Now hold still,” Edgar said, picking up the poker with his mouth.

“Wait, wait, what are you drawing? You didn’t say!”

His next words came out a little muffled, but I still heard it.

“A dog.”

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Donut didn't even look at the tattoo on her ass. She stared forward with quiet dignity as Mongo screeched with concern. The moment it was done, Edgar stepped back.

The tortoise dropped his tattoo stick. "Did it work?" he asked.

Donut's stoic façade immediately cracked. "*Did it work*?" she exclaimed. "Why are you asking me? You're the one... Hey! I just received two very rude achievements. One called me a traitor and another just gave me something called a stolen catalytic converter as a prize! Carl, I knew this would happen! Quick, somebody cover it up before Mongo gets confused!"

"Donut. Did you get the spell?" I asked.

"I did, but it's only level two! My word... this is quite a good spell. It says it came from a god called 'Wepwawet.' What kind of name is that? It gives me the option to worship him now." She gasped. "Carl, Carl, it says he's in the 'Court of Nekhebit!' and I can worship Odette now, too!"

"Huh," I said.

"Now, cover it up. I don't even want to look at it. We'll get it lasered off on the next floor."

"Not quite yet, child. We must get it temporarily above level eight. This may sting a little," Milk said. She came forward and produced a pen, dripping with black ink. Her hands were no longer bound. She wrote some words atop the tattoo with a flourish as

Donut hissed with pain. I didn't recognize the script, but when I examined the characters, the system simply said, **Words of Power.**

"What is that?" I asked. The letters started to glow with blue light, and they completely obscured the tattoo itself.

Milk dipped the pen into her shirt and pulled it back out. It now dripped with purple ink. "It's a magic style that I haven't seen used often in the dungeon. The calligraphy guild teaches it." She wrote more letters. "There, child. Apologies for hurting you."

The overlapping letters also started to glow, and the tattoo underneath vibrated. The letters seemed to move below the tattoo, which allowed me to see the shape on her mottled skin. It was a simple, rather adorable line art tattoo of a dog. As I watched, the tattoo did, indeed, move. It lifted its leg and started to lick itself.

"Hmm," Edgar said, peering at it. "That's quite interesting. I do not believe the art is sentient, as it hasn't been imbued with anything other than the spell itself. I imagine this is all it can do."

Mongo let out a growl. The tattoo dog remained in that position, its leg up in the air, licking.

Donut, who was deliberately ignoring all this, gasped. "The spell went up to level 15!"

"It's temporary, child," Milk said. She put a hand on Donut's side in a warm, affectionate gesture. "As the ink fades, the power will decrease, but if you practice using the spell at that high of a level, it will assist greatly with training."

Warlord Carl: We are ready. Li Na, send Harpocrates in.

To Milk, I said, "I hadn't realized there were so many different magic systems."

She smiled sadly. "There's more than you can imagine. Even with just ink and calligraphy and maps, there are dozens of different methods. It is dangerous, though, attempting to learn too much. There's a lot the right kind of ink can do. But, over the turns, I've learned the danger of using recipes I don't quite understand. Inks and letters that shine the brightest burn out the fastest."

She put her warm, webbed hand on my own cheek, surprising me. She met my eyes and continued. "I had a book once, and I wrote several of my recipes in it. But later, I switched to a different

type of ink. It was an attempt to share my knowledge with a wider group, and it wasn't until recently did I learn all that I wrote after I changed methods faded and disappeared." The strange, bat and frog hybrid creature lowered her hand. "Some of my best recipes were lost, and it wasn't until they were needed the most did I learn they were gone. It is my fault that I didn't write them properly."

Next to her, Rosetta grunted indignantly.

"But," Milk added. She pulled what looked like a wineskin from her inventory and handed it to me. "Sometimes it takes a failure or two to learn how to properly prepare a meal. My people, we have a saying. 'No single recipe is a feast in itself.' Meaning there's always another way."

Donut: CARL, WHAT THE HECK IS SHE TALKING ABOUT? IS SHE HITTING ON YOU?

I honestly wasn't sure, either, exactly what she was saying, but it clearly had something to do with the cookbook. I examined the wineskin.

Stayfast Ink, 825 ml.

Enough ink for several chonky books.

Warning: this shit stains, so be careful. Nothing will ever make it fade. Nothing. Not even distance or time or the death of a star.

Huh, I thought.

She handed me something else. A fountain pen.

Adept's fountain pen.

The most basic of all the calligrapher's implements. How much grief, how much suffering has been caused by one of these things? Yet, how much joy? That whole saying, the pen is mightier than the sword, is one of the few human world metaphors that I believe to be universally true, especially since swords are terrible, barbaric weapons.

This is the most versatile item anyone can own. What will *you* do with it? Write a book that changes everything? Come up with a new, titillating take on hucow fiction? (Don't look that up.) Or will you literally stab someone in the neck with it again?

It's really up to you.

"Carl has a recipe book," Donut said from her position on the chair. "It has goblin and chicken recipes in it."

"I heard," Milk said, smiling. She met my eyes again. "He also has another book. One that all of you have. *The Book of Voodoo*, I believe it is called. Anything he writes in it will be given to everybody who already has the book. Best of luck to you."

With that, Rosetta grunted as she picked Edgar back up. She glowed as she took a *Feather Fall* potion. She and the tortoise jumped right out of the tower, angling toward the remains of Shanty Town. Milk gave me a quick smile, and she too, jumped, her wings spreading out, causing her to glide away.

This left me, Donut, Rend, Mongo, and the two adjutants alone at the top of the tower. I looked over the edge, watching them disappear. Far below, I could see Dong Quixote at the base of the tower, still astride Gonk. He had a crowd around him. Sluggalos. I had no idea where they'd come from.

Carl: Dong, you guys need to move away from the tower. It's about to get really hot down there.

Dong didn't answer, but I watched him shout a few orders. Soon, the mass moved away, moving toward where Rosetta and Edgar had landed.

I moved my attention back to the funnel.

I hoped Jamal and Britney and all the others were ready for what happened next. They remained in the college and were about to take part in the raid of the castle of Larracos. The castle was still underwater, but if Juice Box's people pulled through, that was going to change really, really fast.

Donut's job was to use her *War Crime* spell to finish off the remaining members of the Reaver and the Dream army. Li Na was in her tower and would clean up any who survived. She would also direct Harpocrates to occupy the goddess Eris, who was likely under control of the War Mages.

"Come on, Rend," I said, pulling out my pet carrier. "Donut and I are going to jump out of the tower in a minute, and I don't think

even you can survive that without a potion. I'll put you out again when we land."

"You too, Mongo," Donut said.

Both pets squealed in protest, but they both allowed themselves to be pulled away.

I put my hand on Donut. "I'm here."

Across the way, a pair of ethereal chains appeared outside of Li Na's towers and started whipping back and forth like tentacles. She was preparing her spells. It was all going to kick off at any moment.

"She said it was my fault that Li Jun is dead," Donut said, looking down at Li Na's tower.

A flash of anger filled me. I took a breath. "She shouldn't have said that. He made his own choices."

"He did," Donut replied. "But she's not wrong, either. I've made a lot of mistakes already today. She will be okay. He was her brother. She's taking it much better than I would if I thought someone else was responsible for hurting you or Mongo."

I didn't answer. I continued to rub her back.

"Carl," she said. "I know you're worried about me casting this spell. It's okay. I'm ready. It's the least of my concerns right now."

"The moment you cast it, your health will go down to 1%. I will have a scroll ready to heal you. Your Cockroach ability shouldn't trigger, but if it does, you probably won't be able to use it again for the rest of this fight. You'll be vulnerable if the tower collapses before we jump. You have Mordecai's Special Brew in your hotlist, right?"

She nodded, still looking at Li Na's tower. "I also have *Hover*, Carl. If the tower falls, I won't. But in case I do, I have the potion."

"Oh yeah," I said. "I forgot about that."

"You keep forgetting how strong I am now. My Constitution is higher than yours. You're overprotective of me. You're almost as bad as I am with Mongo."

I chuckled. "At least we're both aware."

We sat in silence for a moment. Across the way, Harpocrates finally started to stir.

"Lucia killed Bomo. Sledgie is going to be so sad. They're best friends."

"He's not really dead. Sledge will know that."

"No, I suppose you're right. But Li Jun is. Do you think Zhang is going to blame me like his sister does?"

"No," I said. "He's going to be upset, but he's going to blame himself for not being there."

"That's my fault, too."

"That's on that dead alien who was driving Eris. You saved them by casting the *Battle Formation* spell. If you hadn't done it, half of everyone would be dead by now."

"They're all screaming, Carl. Can't you hear them? Nobody has said anything about it, but it's awful. I hope they don't remember their time in there. I hope they're not all mad at me. If something goes wrong, and we lose everybody, it'll be my fault. How can I go on after that?"

"Donut, listen to me. Nothing that has happened today or will happen is your fault. They put us here. This is their war. If the worst happens, then you and I together will go on the best we can, and we won't stop until each and every one of them has paid their debt tenfold."

Donut didn't reply, still looking out the window at Li Na's tower.

"There's something else I should probably tell you now that it's too late to do anything about it," Donut said.

"What?" I asked, suddenly concerned. "What are you talking about?"

"Katia and I have a plan," she said. "I mean, assuming we get through this next part. We worked it out together. But you can't tell Bautista because he's going to be mad. Katia told me not to tell you because she says you'll Carl it up."

"*Carl it up*? What the hell does that mean?"

She looked over at Victory and Fopsy, silently watching us. "I'll have to send it via message though."

Donut: I got a benefactor box when you weren't looking.

The box would've been from the Apothecary. She still didn't have a second sponsor. Before I could respond, it started.

Li Na: Go.

Outside, Harpocrates finally made his move. He took a step, and he tossed the ball over the edge and into the hole of Larracos. The giant ball plummeted away into the funnel.

Britney: The water around the castle has been turned to acid. Will break open the drain in ten seconds.

We didn't expect the powerful War Mages in the water of the castle to be killed by it suddenly turning to acid—basically the same trick we used with the water in the trenches during our first offensive—but it would hopefully take them by surprise.

The final remaining dwarven digger, which had been tasked with stopping the lava, had been reclaimed and had moved back under Larracos where it would punch a hole in the ground to drain the acid. If the machine survived that, it would move to aid the incursion on the castle.

All around, the inactive defensive towers spun back up, firing at the ball the moment it was in range. Now that Harpocrates wasn't holding it, the health bar over the thing immediately started to go back down.

Donut peered over the edge. "My goodness," she said. "It went pretty far. It's stuck about ¾'s of the way down! I hope it's not touching the acid water!"

Donut hesitantly reached forward and touched the empty air in front of her. Her paw hit a solid wall. "Uh, Carl. The net is still in effect!"

"What?" I said, suddenly filled with alarm. This wasn't going to work if Donut and I couldn't jump. "You said it went away!"

"It did! I got a notification and everything! I think this is a different net!" She waved her paw again. "It's further out than the first one!"

I quickly went forward and stuck my hand over the edge. My hand hit an invisible wall, as if it was made of bricks.

Warning: This structure is contained within a magical field. You are unable to leave.

"What the hell," I said. "This *is* a new net. The last one was just on you, and this one is either on both of us or it was cast after

Rosetta and Milk left!"

Britney: Draining commencing. As soon as it's drained, we'll cast the *Bounce House* spell to catch the falling crawlers.

"I suspect this net is still from before," Victory said. "This is classic Lucia Mar."

"I agree," Fopsy said. "Her first one was from a scroll. A personal net. She likely cast a secondary spell in case Donut had a countermeasure. The notification Donut received before would've been from the primary net timing out, which would've triggered the second one. It was just waiting for a power source, I think."

"Rosetta would've triggered it when she left!" I said

Victory snapped her fingers. "It's *Power Siphon*! Those jewels used for the towers leak all sorts of energy. They're in range. It's drawing power from the active towers in Larracos."

"Quite clever," Fopsy said.

"It's more than clever," Victory agreed. "It's genius. I would never have thought of that. It'll go away when the other towers stop shooting or when she turns it off."

I just looked at the two adjutants. "Are you serious? So it's not going to go away until Lucia gets back? She's in our army now. I already ordered her to turn it all off! This is bullshit!"

I pulled up the warlord menu, moved to Lucia, and it gave an error. **Combatant is off the playing field.**

Victory shook her head. "I'm sorry, Carl. She did turn off all her active spells. This one activated after she left. You should know how Lucia works by now. She leaves dozens of magical triggers everywhere she goes. I was wondering how she powered all of them, but this makes sense. I should've known she has a *Power Siphon* ability. Donut, make sure you never cast your *Sentry* spell if you have to fight her again."

Donut had her sunglasses back on. "You're right! I can see the power flowing from the towers! It's flowing to a spot on the ground down there! I knew this mode on the glasses wasn't useless! Wow, I should've used this instead of the heat mode when I was looking for the generator!"

"What spot? Where! Quick, shoot a *Magic Missile* at it!"

The Nest remained at 8% health, but if the casting of *War Crime* went as expected, the whole area around the tower would soon be on fire. And if Donut was stuck in here when it went down, that was going to be a problem. The plan was to cast and then jump. The net would deactivate if the tower broke, but would it break in time for her to use her *Hover* to save herself? Would I be able to heal her in time?

And what about myself? What the hell would I do? I'd go down with the tower into a *Wall of Fire* filled with fleshers.

Donut shot a missile, and it exploded against the ground. Nothing happened.

I cursed. This was a sort of magical trap, a kind I didn't specialize in. Unlike my style, these formed little, round jewels that didn't appear until they activated. Ranged weapons and spells weren't going to work against it. Someone needed to physically pick it up and put it in their inventory.

Carl: We need to abort. Donut can't yet leave the tower!

Li Na: It's a little late for that. The ball is about to break.

Shit, shit, shit. "Donut, don't cast *War Crime*!"

Down below, the ball's health rocketed downward into the red. She needed to cast immediately after it broke, or everyone would be mixed in together, including the gods. And if the NPCs were going to storm the castle at the same moment, they, too, would all be mixed in. If the War Mages had control of Eris, she could possibly one-shot us all, all at once.

"What?" Donut said, panicked. "If I don't cast it, then all of this will be for nothing! I have to!"

"Okay, okay," I said. "Cast it, but don't pick fire! Pick something else! We need the Nest to stay intact!"

"What? What should I pick!?"

"Anything but fire!"

Carl: Dong. Look where Donut fired her missile. Go back there and take the magical trigger into your inventory. It's about the size of a marble. It'll burn when you pick it up. Hurry! Fast!

Dong: Uh, isn't that area all about to be on fire and filled with fleshers?

Carl: No! Go!

Li Na: The ball has broken! Cast now!

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"Casting now!" Donut shouted.

System Message: Warlord Princess Donut has committed a third Atrocity.

System Message: Warlord Princess Donut has received a new class.

System Message: Warlord Princess Donut will now be referred to as The Oak Fell.

System Message: The Oak Fell has been named Champion of Nekhebit.

Before any of that could even register, more notifications rolled in.

The Scavenger's Daughter has opened her eyes. You are in range of two more deities.

You are now within range of the feral god Meatus.

Temporary effect from Meatus:

Your dick will fall off if you get an erection.

"*What the fuck*?" I exclaimed.

The moment I exclaimed it, the world froze, but the notifications continued to come.

You are in range of Eris.

Random Effect! As Eris is the goddess of chaos, this effect will change each time you are in her presence.

Temporary effect from Eris:

One current god effect will be permanent!

"Oh, shit!" was all I could say.

A spinner appeared floating in front of me. It only had two items on it: **Dick will fall off!** And **Level-15 Pied Piper!** I hadn't even looked up the *Pied Piper* skill, which is what I got from Harpocrates. The center of the spinner was a wide, laughing mouth with red lips. The lips were tattooed with a spiral pattern, which I knew was a sign of the chaos goddess. The thing started to spin, like the Wheel of Fortune game.

"No, no, no!" I cried as it started to whirl. "What the fuck? What the fuck!"

It stopped on **Dick will fall off!** hovered for a second, then ticked over to **Level-15 Pied Piper**!

Your benefit from Harpocrates is permanent!

I almost fell over with relief.

The world remained frozen, and I suddenly had a hand on my shoulder.

I could still move, and I whirled.

It was Eris, goddess of chaos, re-sized to about my height, standing right next to me. She was *not* under control of the War Mages. Tall, elf-like with a strangely long neck. Upon closer examination, I saw she wasn't fully elf. She had a few serpentine features, making her appear like she had a distant relative who was a naga. She had long, smooth blonde hair. She wore armor underneath a flowing, black and white striped jacket that went all the way to the ground. The glowing, Valkyrie armor underneath was covered with swirl patterns, but in the center of her chest was her symbol. Two back to back C shapes with a flaming lance through it. Her large, over-inflated lips were covered with a spiral tattoo.

The deity shook her head and laughed. Her tongue was forked. "By the All Tree was that exhilarating. I haven't had that much fun since the initial purge. And now I'm free. Oh, this is going to be delicious."

"What... What is happening?" I asked as her description popped up.

Goddess of Chaos Eris. Level 250.

This deity has lost her sponsor and can no longer be sponsored this season.

This deity is invulnerable on this floor.

This deity has been summoned by battlefield conditions. Summoning rules apply.

Eris. Goddess of Chaos. Half-sister of Taranis, mother to nobody, lover of parties, drinking, chaos—of course, and generally known as the Ascendency's worst, most unapologetic gossip. If she were mortal and human, she'd be called a wine aunt. She'd have a rich, dead husband who died under mysterious circumstances. She would split her time between the hair salon and spending her days on the local community Facebook page where she would be constantly creating utter pandemonium with her posts and her "this is just my opinion, but…" style messages.

All of her nieces and nephews love her. In fact, everybody loves her, even though they all know deep down she's an utter piece of shit. People can get away with that sort of thing when they're attractive and throw great parties.

There hasn't been a single season of Faction Wars since the beginning where she wasn't sponsored by someone. As such, this is a pretty unique situation right now where her true personality, her true purpose can finally shine through.

One of her abilities is being All Knowing. She knows everybody's business, which makes her a dangerous foe and an even more dangerous friend. If she gives you information, it's probably true, and it's probably something that's going to get you into trouble for knowing. While she's able to lie, she rarely does. Why bother when the truth is often so much worse?

Eris is a prime contender for the Ascendent Throne.

Eris reached forward and gently bit my ear. "Don't die, Carl," she purred, her voice seductive. She still sounded oddly like Hekla, but not nearly as much now that her pilot was dead. "I know you worship grumpy ol' Emberus, but we'll change that soon, especially

now he has put you in an impossible situation. See how Donut was just named Champion? I can do that to you as well. You'll have to kill all three, of course. Taranis, Emberus, and Hellik. But don't worry. I'll help."

"Uh," I said as she rubbed a hand across my shirt.

"No, no, no," she said, giggling, pointing downward at my boxers. "That nasty curse from Meatus is still in effect, even if it's not permanent. None of that. Here. Let me help you."

She reached over and snapped my pinkie. I screamed. The goddess shrieked in laughter.

"Oh, I wish you weren't already married." She kissed me full on the lips. She pulled back and gave me a look. "The War Mages traded the Gate of the Feral Gods with a merchant named Paca at the Midnight Market. Paca is an agent for Krakaren Prime, who is stuck in the Nothing. Paca has the gate in her stomach. Get the gate back and give it to that insane Skyfowl who built the antennae underneath your castle, and maybe you can actually win this thing. Also, Britney picked that axe off the ground and is now possessed."

She disappeared with a *crack*.

Eris has left the Realm. The Scavenger's Daughter looks away.

Already married? I thought as I downed a healing potion. *Axe? What axe? Possessed? By who?*

What the actual fuck just happened?

All restrictions on teleportation are now lifted.

More messages came, including one from Emberus that minimized just as everything unfroze.

Next to me, Donut had gone completely rigid. Her health started to decrease. It wasn't an instant thing, but a slow drain. She was unable to move.

She had a new notification over her head. Her title had changed from **Warlord** to **Champion**.

I immediately attempted to apply the healing scroll, but it misfired. I was going to have to wait.

The completely unexpected visit from the goddess had thrown me off kilter. I shook my head, trying to get my mind back on track.

"Oh, *shit*," I said, looking outside. The ball had indeed broken apart. All I could see was thousands of bodies flying up toward our location, moving as if in slow motion. Mixed in with them was the god Meatus. Eris, of course, was gone. I couldn't see from this location, but below it all, all of our allies were now falling deeper into Larracos. Just below where the ball had stopped should be a wide-area spell called *Bounce House* that was going to catch them all, giving them a moment to recover while they received instructions.

At the same moment, the NPCs and our remaining troops would be storming the castle, which was now drained of acid.

The remaining defensive towers would be firing, and there wasn't much we could do about it, but the moment anyone set foot in the throne room, all the towers would go inert.

Harpocrates remained on the edge of the hole, unmoving, eyeing the form of Meatus that was flying upward.

I couldn't tell what the second spell Donut picked was. As for right now, all the enemies were frozen, moving inexorably upward as they were pulled in our direction as the towers fired mercilessly at them.

"Donut," I called, my voice hoarse. "What was the second spell?"

She didn't answer. She was still frozen, her health still lowering.

Then I saw it, hovering above the hole of Larracos, right outside the tower. It was the massive, glowing outline of a cat's paw. The paw was absolutely enormous.

Astral Paw. Her two spells were the *Binjabi* spell and *Astral Paw*.

The frozen soldiers, including Meatus, were moving toward us. They came up out of the hole and moved upward, moving to the side of the Nest. They floated upward slowly, like barely-inflated balloons.

The world, once again, froze. Music started to blast across the world on its own. I recognized the song because it was one of Monobrow Sam's favorites.

The song was "Break Stuff" by Limp Bizkit.

The ethereal cat's claw grew to an enormous size, big enough to catch the thousands of floating soldiers and god.

"Oh *shit*," I muttered.

Carl: Guys. If you're on the ground in Shanty Town, fucking run.

Dong: Listen. Do you want me to get the trap or not?

Carl: Run!

The thousands of soldiers at this point all seemed to wake up. Elves, gnolls, and hundreds of the cyborg Reaver mercenaries. They struggled and started to scream as all floated upward, all bunching up against the bottom of the massive, unmoving cat's paw. Meatus was in the middle of it all, squirming, unable to flee as he too thrashed.

"No," Meatus cried. I could now see he was covered in fleshers, which swarmed over everyone trapped underneath the paw. All the soldiers screamed as they started to get dissolved. Sparks rose as fleshers burned through cybernetic armor. Blood rained.

"No. Daddy, help me!" Meatus cried, his voice louder than the song. "I just wanted to sing!"

"Daddy?" I mumbled.

More messages came in. I was relieved to see it was Katia, Elle, and Imani, all coordinating the assault on the castle below. I pushed it away for the moment as I watched, horrified, as the slow-motion War Crime unfolded above Shanty Town.

Donut coughed. I slammed on the healing scroll, and her health started to rocket up. I put my hand on her as I watched outside. A few soldiers who'd gotten stuck along the way continued to float upwards.

"Did it work," Donut asked, choking out the words. "Carl, I don't feel good. I have a new class. I have a bunch of new spells. What's happening?"

I reached down, and I scooped her up into my arms. "It's okay," I said. "Just close your eyes, okay? It's almost over. I got you."

With the deactivation of the teleport ban, the net was no longer an issue. We had an escape hatch right behind us. It would teleport us all the way to just outside the safe room at Area 52, where we could go in and use the doggie door to go anywhere we wanted.

Across the way, something was happening with Li Na's tower. Dozens of chains had appeared, spreading out in all directions,

attaching themselves to the wreckage all around her tower. Several of these chains had attached themselves to the Nest.

I blinked, trying to figure it out. "Li Na," I muttered. "What are you doing?"

"It's the finisher," Donut said from my arms. She was pressed against me, trembling. She rearranged herself, and she stretched her arm out, hovering over empty air. "I shouldn't have picked *Astral Paw*," she said. "I have to do it myself."

Above, the paw remained hovering there in open air, waiting. Waiting for Donut.

Below, Li Na was building a lattice pattern of chains. There were more chains than I thought possible.

Li Na: Donut, this is all I can build. Do it.

"I can feel them, Carl," Donut said. "I can feel them under my paw." She trembled in my arms.

"I'm here," I said.

The paw in the air quivered. Within, the soldiers trapped continued to scream.

She closed her eyes, and she swiped downward with three quick baps.

Her movement was mirrored outside.

Slam!

Slam!

Slam!

The world rocked as the massive, ethereal cat's paw, clutching onto thousands and thousands of enemy soldiers and an enormous god penis slammed into the ground, pushing through the lattice pattern of chains.

The paw moved right through the chains. The enemies trapped in her claw did not.

They did not, until they did.

In my arms, Donut continued to swipe her paw downward.

Slam!

Slam!

Slam!

The effect was like forcefully slamming a thousand cherry pies into a chain-link fence over and over until almost all of the goo made it through to the other side.

The chains broke one by one. But as they broke, Li Na grew more. With each slam, the survivors who remained stuck to the paw were slammed down again. And again. And each time they pushed through chains, they were cut to pieces.

She did it dozens of times. She did it until the screaming stopped.

The music faded, and it was done.

I gently placed Donut back onto her seat, I moved to the parapet, and I vomited over the side of the tower.

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System Message: Meatus hasn't exactly left the realm. He's now slap-chopped all over the realm. Holy shit. Still, the Scavenger's Daughter looks away because even she doesn't want to look at that. Luckily for you, the benefit fades. For the remainder of this floor, your penis is now protected from getting chopped off! Isn't that great?

Rosetta: It's in my teeth. It's in my fucking teeth! Oh gods, I can taste it.

"Noooooooooooo!" came a deep scream, shaking the Nest.

Harpocrates. The god wasn't mute after all. He raised his arms in the air. "My cock! My beloved cock! You will pay for this, Champion of Nekhebit!"

And with that, he too, disappeared.

Harpocrates has left the realm.

The Scavenger's Daughter has closed her eyes. The benefit fades, though you now have it permanently, which, I gotta tell you, ain't all that exciting.

I peered out into the night. Gore completely covered everything as far as I could see. Above, the paw dissipated, showering more blood and body parts over Shanty Town. The chains faded away, as if made of smoke.

Blood dripped from everything and everywhere.

At the same moment, it abruptly started to snow. At least I thought it was snow at first, but I realized it was actually ash. Ash from the eruption. It mixed with all the gore in the air, giving the impression it was literally raining blood. The entire night took on a red tinge. The river of lava seemed to be frozen, having mostly cooled, though in the distance I could see hints that the lava continued to ooze from the mountainous region and now moved off in other directions after having clogged the river.

This is hell, I thought. *This is hell.*

A notification came regarding a new Demon Eviction, but it was abruptly cut off by a strange notification that I didn't get a chance to read.

"Okay," Donut said as red ash fell over us. "Okay." She sat up in her chair, and she was rapidly rubbing her paw on the side of the parapet as if she was trying to clean it. She still trembled, but I could see she was calming down. My own heart wouldn't stop thrashing.

Donut did not have any additional player killer skulls. That was a relief. The spell was supposed to know who our enemies were. It seemed that part, at least, worked properly.

Below, the city defense towers were firing nonstop, and I knew they were firing at our people, but even as we watched, a fire lance tower tumbled away, followed by a familiar dinosaur roar. Big Tina.

The towers were getting taken out one by one by the sheer mass of folks crowded down there. A group of fairies, led by Elle, whipped through the air, shooting ice over the pools of steaming lava filling the upper levels of Larracos before spiraling back down to start shooting out the crystal of another tower.

"Okay, it's done. It's done," Donut continued. She wasn't talking about the assault on Larracos. She shook her head and blinked. "That... that wasn't pleasant."

"Donut..." I began, but she held up a paw, stopping me. Our views were absolutely spiked, despite the fight having moved below.

She sat upright and took a moment to compose herself. "At least I'm back in my rightful spot as leader of the party. I was worried I'd lost my Former Child Actor benefits, but it says I still have them.

This new Oak Fell class and this champion thing are in addition to my original class. I don't even worship Nekhebit, and it says I don't have to if I don't want to, but I'm not allowed to worship anyone else who's not in her 'court.' Both the class and the title come with a bunch of weird spells. Plus, I just got another two Celestial boxes and a pretty amazing Lorena Bobbitt achievement."

Mordecai: By his left fucking tit, Donut. By his left tit. Those spells you just gained are deity spells. You are… I think you're now the most powerful crawler in the history of this game. You'll have a few choices you need to make for both your intelligence and strength now that they're both over 100. The notification probably won't go away until you choose.

Donut: GOODNESS, I'M NOT GOING TO PICK THE SWOLE BENEFIT. DO YOU REMEMBER WHAT IT DID TO CARL? CAN YOU IMAGINE? I'M GOING TO PICK MUSCLE MOMMY FOR STRENGTH SO MONGO IS STRONGER, AND FOR INTELLIGENCE I PICK BRAIN TRUST SO I CAN MAKE *MAGIC MISSILE* EVEN MORE POWERFUL. I ALSO HAVE ONE TO PICK FOR MY CHARISMA TOPPING 200. I'M GOING TO PICK ONE CALLED WHOLESALE DISCOUNT.

Mordecai: Uh, are you sure about that Muscle Mommy benefit?

Donut: TOO LATE. I PICKED IT. WOW! HAVE YOU SEEN MY CHARISMA?

Mordecai: Yeah. I think the Bopcas will be worshiping you again. Your charm and Love Vampire skills are stronger than that of most gods.

Donut: PLUS I GET EVERYTHING AT COST AT THE STORE. IT'S FANTASTIC!

"Holy fucking shit, Donut," I said upon examining her. I knew she had to have grown because even I had leveled a few times—up to level 81—despite me not doing anything. Still, I wasn't expecting *that*.

Her level had grown to 135.

I could tell she was struggling, but the fact she was actively covering it was such a relief. That meant something. I hadn't lost her yet. Plus she did seem genuinely excited about some of these new benefits.

She was dealing with this better than I was. We needed to get back out there, but first, we had to rest a minute. Still, my mind reeled at the amount of power she'd gained all at once.

Donut continued. "I was quite worried for a moment that they'd give all the credit to Li Na since she put all those chains out there, but Mordecai is correct. It looks like I am once again the strongest crawler in the dungeon. Mongo is going to be so proud, and with my new Muscle Mommy benefit, his strength is boosted by 25% of my own strength!" She looked over the edge and clicked her tongue. "Hmm. I think I'm going to keep him caged up for a bit. Carl, best keep Rend caged as well. If they manage to eat some of that, uh, Meatus gore, I don't think I could look at either the same again. As the strongest crawler in the dungeon I have to maintain a sense of decorum, and both Mongo and Rend by extension must also maintain the same propriety. Goodness, the smell is quite repulsive, isn't it?"

System message. A crawler has maxed out her base strength. Crawler Li Na now has 300 strength.

System message. A crawler has maxed out her base intelligence. Crawler Li Na now has 300 intelligence.

System message… yeah, I can keep doing this, but she maxed them all. Even Charisma, which is a hard one.

System Message. So, this has never happened before, but a crawler has reached max base stats. She can still raise her stats beyond that with equipment and bonuses and spells, but we don't actually have a plan to deal with this, so I'm gonna have to come up with something.

I felt a deep, deep chill.

Elle: For chrissakes, guys. We were only out of it for like an hour.

"Hey!" Donut exclaimed. "Carl, her level is only 87! How did she do that? And why didn't I get one of those announcements for

charisma? My charisma is way above 300!"

"Not your base, Donut. Not yet," I said, looking over at Li Na's chain tower, which had grown silent. "You crazy asshole. Holy shit, Li Na."

I couldn't remember Li Na's level before this, but she'd clearly leveled several times as well. Just not as much as Donut. Between her, Donut, and Prepotente at level 100, I was getting left behind.

I now knew why I couldn't mark the thousands of enemies in the ball. There were no simultaneous marks allowed on this floor. I couldn't mark them because Li Na had already done so.

She'd marked them all.

But, the moment I thought that, I realized there were two notifications we *hadn't* received.

I looked over, surprised. Both Victory and Fopsy were gone. I hadn't seen them leave.

"She used the Ring of Divine Suffering," I said. "But she has a problem. I'm pretty sure she'd marked both Tagg and Fang, but we didn't kill them. They both got away somehow. More might have gotten away, too."

"Uh, oh," Donut said. "Doesn't that mean she can't heal?"

"Yes. And every time she uses her chains, she loses just a little health."

Donut grunted. "That doesn't matter. She can just punch everyone to death now. And as soon as we win Faction Wars, they'll all drop dead now because of that new stupid rule. Where is she anyway?"

That was a good question. I activated *Find Crawler*, but before I could even scroll over to her, we received the answer.

System Message: The Throne Room of Team Retribution has been abandoned by the War Mage Rebellion. The City Defense system has gone inert!

System Message: The Throne Room of Team Retribution is now occupied by forces from the Princess Posse. If you can hold for six hours, your team will win Faction Wars!

System Message: The Throne Room of Team Retribution has been abandoned. It has fallen back into control of Team

Retribution.

Britney: Um, Carl. Li Na just tore through the castle. She's glowing, and she's not talking to anyone. The remaining war mages opened a portal and disappeared. We don't know where they went.

Carl: Shit. I think she's looking for Tagg and Fang. She can't heal until they're dead.

I moved to a private chat.

Carl: Hey. Li Na. How many got away?

Li Na: Several, including both warlords. There are several unaffiliated outworlders here. Where did they come from?

Carl: I saw them. I don't know who they are or how they got here. Look. The NPCs still have someone in the Dream castle, and they'll have the throne room captured in about four hours. Now that things are settled here, we gotta go to the Reaver castle, rescue Louis, and we'll take their throne room, too. You'll be okay. As soon as that's done, we'll finish the plan. We just gotta watch out for the remaining War Mages. I don't know where they went.

She didn't answer.

I moved to the main chat, and Donut was already in there apologizing to everyone about putting them in the ball, but everyone was claiming they didn't have any memory of it.

Elle: Donut, you saved our asses. When we were in that *Witness* spell but all piled up, it was like we were paralyzed, and we could feel everything, but we couldn't move. It was awful. The moment you cast that battle formation spell, it was lights out.

Chris: The *Witness* spell was just as bad as being controlled by Maggie. You saved us.

Donut: YOU WERE ALL SCREAMING. ARE YOU SURE?

Katia: We're sure. The worst part was waking up because we were falling and didn't know what was happening, but it was still better than where we were. That was truly horrible.

Donut: AND IT DIDN'T HURT?

Elle: My throat feels like I've been gargling sandpaper. And I smell like that god's schlong. It's worse than when you got sprayed by the skunk. But that's it.

Donut: OH NO, I'M SO SORRY.

Elle: It's not the first time I've woken up stinking like a stranger's wang, believe me.

Imani: Elle!

Elle: Don't pretend you don't know what went down on canasta night. Look, Donut. That was a complete shitshow. We lost people from the towers when we woke up. Some of us got burned by fleshers. Several lost limbs. It wasn't pretty, but you pulled through for all of us in a way nobody else could. Not even Carl. What you did… Nobody is ever going to forget it. You are a goddamn hero.

Donut: LI JUN DIED. BOMO DIED. AND HUNDREDS MORE.

Elle: Yes, they did. And none of them would have it any other way. You know why? Because they died helping you. They died helping you save all of us. Don't you even think twice about it. You rose to the fucking occasion, and there's a reason why you're now… Uh holy shit, Donut. I just saw your level.

Donut: SOMEBODY MAKE SURE ZHANG IS OKAY. HE HASN'T SAID ANYTHING.

Imani: I'm with him right now. He's very upset, but he's proud of his friend.

Zhang: Donut. Jun was always afraid he wouldn't do anything important. He was afraid his sister would be lost without him. You helped her get strong enough to protect herself. That would've made him proud, and it makes me proud to have you as a friend.

Donut: ZHANG, I'M SO SORRY.

Zhang: You have nothing to apologize for. He was my best friend, and I have nothing but admiration and respect for you.

Donut was back in my arms, cuddled against me, her eyes closed.

"It's okay to cry," I said.

"Not yet," she said after a moment. "We're not done yet."

"No," I said. "No, I guess we're not."

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We now stood before the absolutely wrecked castle of the Semeru, who'd built it as a capstone against further intrusion toward the gods. The castle was originally made of living wood, and it had since been encased in intricately carved stone inlaid with gemstones. The wood was now gone, having rotted away. The remaining stones barely resembled that they were once any sort of cohesive structure. The roof was long gone. What remained of the cracked and sunken-in walls were covered in marks that looked like scars from electrical strikes. It was where tree roots had grown up along the walls and since rotted away.

The whole area was covered in wet, slimy goo mixed in with ash. The smell was indescribable. It was like burned fish mixed with rotten milk mixed with sulfur mixed with mulch. And even though none of the gore from Donut's *War Crime* spell had made it down here during the initial attack, it still rained red ash, giving everything a dark, ghoulish dusting.

I thought of Priestly, the cookbook author who'd gone insane at the sight of this city after it had fallen. Stab, stab, stab.

Slam, slam, slam.

There was a statue here, once, at the entrance, but it had fallen over and shattered. The stones of the statue were still wet, and as the ash settled on it, it caused the rock to glitter in the light from the multiple *Torch* and *Spotlight* spells hovering over the bottom levels

of Larracos. Far to my left, a large section of the second and third levels of the city were just gone, replaced by a hole. The massive dwarven digger, which was basically a boxy, god-sized robot covered in all directions with spiral digging arms and goblin-murder-dozer-like spinning wheels, sat idle. A pair of Semeru stood atop it, doing something inside a control panel on the shoulder of the thing. They looked like bugs standing upon it.

"Watch out for the puddles, mate," Florin said. "The bartenders are neutralizing them, but most are still acid."

I'd just finished telling him everything that had gone down with Lucia. He'd laughed when he heard about the net trap. We were waiting for Imani to finish up in the hospital tent. Once she came out, a group of us were going to head to the Reaver castle to rescue Louis, who remained trapped and unconscious, but otherwise unharmed. Samantha said she couldn't get to him because the walls kept changing. She was in a constant, rolling fight with a bunch of robot dogs who had control of the castle.

Both here and in Shanty Town, the NPCs, the won-over mercenaries, the veterans, and the crawlers all worked together to help clean up the damage. We were rapidly repairing the towers that we'd destroyed.

There was still no sign of either Tagg or Fang. There was no sign of the War Mages.

I did, however, have a string of messages in my warlord chat. The bewildering conversation confused everything even further:

Warlord Akuma: Hey, underwear boy. Do me a favor. Kill that old lady for me, and I'll forgive you and your pet for killing off so many of my brothers.

The Champion of Nekhebit: I AM NOT A PET, MR. WAR MAGE. AND WHY ARE YOU MAD AT ELLE? SHE IS DELIGHTFUL. ALSO HOW CAN I CHANGE MY NAME BACK TO WARLORD DONUT? IT DOESN'T DO THIS IN THE REGULAR CHAT.

Warlord Akuma: Is Elle the one on the Four Seasons path? Not her, dipshit. Keep her alive if you wish for us to face Scolopendra and survive. Agatha. The other warlord we

were forced to accept in order to gain system access. She was forced upon us, and she is an enemy to you. She is an enemy to us all. We had no hand in those so-called "action items" other than the *Conscription* one. She slipped away before I was able to kill her. Do this for me, and we will be allies.

Warlord Carl: *Us*? If you wish for "*us*" to survive?

The Champion of Nekhebit: DID YOU JUST CALL ME A DIPSHIT? I'M A HIGHER LEVEL THAN YOU ARE, YOU SAGGY TWAT.

Warlord Carl: I'll tell you what. Tell me where you are, and I'll be happy to discuss how we can work together in person.

Warlord Akuma: You won't be seeing me again on this floor. We never wished to keep that falling-down castle. We sought to test the potions we gathered. We wished to find the Scavenger's daughter, who was hidden within the castle, and we found her. She is with us now. Once we had her in our possession, we left. That was all we ever wanted with this place, and we are no enemies to you. But Agatha's actions continue to place everybody and everything in jeopardy, and she must be dealt with. She has a method that allows her to jump to the Waiting Room and reappear outside an open stairwell. You won't likely see her on this floor again. You will have to find her on the 10th. Do this for us if you want to survive. She seeks to kill us all. Not just you and not just me. Everybody and everything.

Epitome Tagg: By the gods. That orc princess was right. We should have blown the failsafe weeks ago. By the gods.

The Champion of Nekhebit: HEY, HOW DID YOU CHANGE YOUR NAME?

Warlord Carl: Yeah, we're looking for you, too, buddy.

The Champion of Nekhebit: NO, SERIOUSLY. THIS IS ANNOYING.

Epitome Tagg: For the sake of the gods, it's in the notification menu. Section four.

WARLORD DONUT: IT WORKED! THANKS! WE'RE STILL GOING TO KILL YOU, THOUGH!

The conversation had ended there, but it was followed by another message.

Warlord Message: Warlord Akuma has left the realm. As per the current season's ruleset, the War Mage rebellion has been defeated. They have no assets to award.

I was so confused by the War Mage's words and actions, I'd copied and pasted it and sent it to both Victory and Zev, and neither answered me right away, which worried me even further. When Victory did answer, she didn't even address the question.

Baroness Victory: I don't know where Akuma went. That team is officially defeated and therefore no longer under our authority.

Carl: Mordecai, who is the Scavenger? And who is the Scavenger's Daughter? I know it's the name of my patch, but I didn't know there was more to it than that.

Mordecai: Are you talking about the in-dungeon one or the fairy tale? Either way, that's a conversation that's not going to matter if you don't figure out how to find and kill those two warlords, or if you don't figure out how to survive this floor without having to fight Juice Box and the NPCs.

Carl: That last part is already settled. I hope. I'm more worried about Donut and Katia. We still have to do the flower ceremony, but we can't until everything is fully settled.

Mordecai: I know, son. Focus on that before you focus on anything else.

Florin laughed again, bringing me back to the present. "You're lucky Lucia only cast two nets, mate. She's the queen of the triple tap. Is she still in with the liaisons?"

"She is. Hopefully she stays there."

He nodded. He stretched and leaned his shotgun over his shoulder. "We'll see what personality she settles on when she comes

back out. Hopefully they talk her into taking a deal at the beginning of the 10th. If not, I will volunteer to keep her safe."

"You're not planning on taking a deal?" I asked.

Florin scoffed. "I suspect most will take a deal if they're actually offered. They're tired, mate. But you and I both know everything is fucked, and it's possible it's all going to come crashing down. If that happens, I want to go down fighting. Not locked up in stasis or whatever. I think there's a lot of us who feel that way."

He nodded at the large, blond barbarian man who was helping to clean off the street. Jurgen.

"That one won't ever take a deal, either. Not if there's a chance that Lucia won't. He'll die protecting her."

"Jurgen?" I asked, looking at the large man. "How does he know Lucia?"

"He doesn't. But if Lucia's fate is tied to that kinder facility where they're keeping all the kids and the pregnant women, he'll die protecting the girl. He came in with his pregnant wife, Heidi, and she disappeared. She's up there somewhere with the rest of the kids. There's a lot of men and women here who have kids who might be up there." He looked at me, eyes intense. "It's the most important thing one can do, don't you think? Protecting the kids?"

I smiled sadly. "I hope she's not as psycho now that the dogs are dead."

He nodded. "We'll manage."

Across the way, Donut sat on the shoulder of the Sledge, who was staring sadly off into nothing. He still clutched on the repurposed, large-sized video game controller for the missile system. Chris, Clay-Ton, and Very Sullen were there, surrounding the sad rock monster. Edgar the tortoise was there too with Rosetta, and as I watched, Edgar shook his head.

Edgar: Sorry. He's a rock monster. I can't tattoo a rock, let alone extract anything from him. Not with my tools. It's possible a changeling can get the spell from him, but it's unlikely because it's not a spell that cretins normally have.

Rosetta: It's okay. We'll have to manage.

Justice Light: GODSDAMNIT, WHY ISN'T ANYONE LISTENING TO ME? GET THE GATE BACK, AND IT WON'T MATTER.

Carl: Justice, I know where the gate is. We are going to grab it after I save Louis if we can.

Justice Light: Tell me where it is, and send the sluggalos back to me, and I will get it back myself.

Tipid: Until the threat has passed, I think you should remain in the tunnels.

Justice Light: This *is* the threat, don't you understand?

Tipid: Justice, no. We don't understand because you haven't told us what you need it for.

Justice Light: Carl, tell me where it is.

I hesitated. I met eyes with Rosetta, who sat across the way. I remembered her, emerging out of the ground to throw the lasso around King Rust's neck. I remembered her decapitating him. How long had she waited for that moment? Centuries?

And afterward, I remembered how she'd sobbed. She'd sobbed with such devastating relief that even though I didn't comprehend it at the time, I'd felt it in my bones.

I didn't understand what Justice Light was doing with this "antenna." He clearly didn't want to tell us, likely because it was dangerous. Or stupid. Probably both.

I'd told Rosetta, Tipid, and Donut, along with almost all of the other officers, everything that Eris had said to me. Tipid and Rosetta were both hesitant about the idea of getting the artifact for Justice. Both were overwhelmingly protective of the eccentric skyfowl. Still, I'd advocated for it if we could.

Who was I to stand between a brother and his revenge, whatever it may be? Because clearly that's what this was.

Carl: It is in the stomach of a merchant named Paca in the Midnight Market.

Justice Light: I know who that is. She is an ambassador for the in-game's version of the Apothecary. Thank you, Carl. I will have it shortly.

Carl: You know how to get there? You know how to get inside?

Justice Light: Oh, yes. There have been seasons when my shop was within the market. I know it well. With the help of the sluggalos, we will have it very quickly.

I still held onto Rosetta's gaze. After a moment, she nodded. She nodded, and she wiped her eyes. She, too, understood. How could she not?

Across the way, Big Tina stood atop a pile of rocks shouting down at her mother, who'd come from the FUPA to gather her back. The ballerina dinosaur had single-handedly taken out a fire lance tower and protected dozens of crawlers from getting burned alive. Her magical, ever-repairing feather boa was black and scorched.

The massively pregnant Kiwi shouted up at her. Mongo was there, too, bouncing in circles around the allosaurus as she waved her wand angrily at her mother.

"They ain't getting her back into the FUPA," Florin said, chuckling. "She's too big for the saferoom doors down here, and all them stairs are blown out. You should've seen her. She was a goddamn terror. She popped out of the ball and went right to work."

I nodded. What was a worse fate? Disappearing with the collapse of the floor? Or moving from one war to the next?

"Did you really not feel anything while you were in the ball?" I asked Florin.

"As far as Donut is concerned, no. We didn't feel anything, mate." He hesitated. "Just don't... just don't let her do that to us again."

I nodded. I figured as much.

Imani and Juice Box emerged from the hospital tent. Trailing behind them was Britney, whose nose was buried in a pile of papers. It was the plan for the last minute changes to the city's defenses.

Carl: Anything?

Imani: Her health is 100%. I don't see any sign that there's anything wrong with her. She doesn't have an axe, Carl. Or if she does, it's in her inventory.

Juice Box: If she has a presence about her, it's deep. It's not anything I can feel. And believe me, I can feel most

everything.

Carl: Do you feel anything when you touch me?

Juice Box: I don't feel anything at all when I touch you, Carl. Britney feels like a normal human to me. If there's something there, it's hidden well. Perhaps the goddess lied to you. Didn't she claim you were married? Assuming you're not holding out on something, that seems like a life event most people are aware of.

That was true. Still... I had an uneasy feeling.

Elle: I don't see why we don't just ask Britney about it.

Carl: Not yet. Let's just keep watching. If it's a presence like mine, we don't want it to hurt her if it suspects we know it's there.

"We ready?" Katia asked out loud as she and Bautista walked up.

Prepotente landed heavily next to us astride Bianca. "I found her. Li Na is in the woods, seeking those who got away. She appears to have some new hunting skills along with the ability to fly, likely a benefit from her dexterity. It is curious she is unable to find those who've been marked, however. It's quite an unfortunate development."

Across the way, sitting on the ground was a group of crawlers who remained unaffiliated. Osvaldo and his crew. The crawler was sitting there, glaring at Prepotente. I was going to talk to him about that memorial crystal, but I'd recently received an update to my quest from Emberus.

I'd been expecting Emberus to say something about my conversation with Eris, but he hadn't mentioned it.

Quest Update. Find Out Who Killed My Son.

Memorial Crystal: Apito has fallen from Crawler Osvaldo's hands and is now in possession of Crawler Prepotente. Retrieve it from him before he cracks the secrets and gives them to the Epicure.

I had no idea how the memorial crystal had gotten from Osvaldo to Prepotente without a fight. When this was over, I was going to sit down with Prepotente and explain everything to him, but now wasn't the time. I suspected he was going to be an ass about it, so I had to

make certain it was during a time when we both weren't so keyed up.

"You coming with us to save Louis?" I asked him.

"I think not," Prepotente said. "I believe I will assist Li Na in her search for the missing culprits. I will keep you apprised of any developments." He pulled a potion bottle out, and he downed it. "I must say, this has been quite the day, don't you think?"

I just looked at Prepotente. "You can say that."

The goat hopped off Bianca, walked up to me, and said, "I will hug you now, fellow warrior."

"Uh..."

He wrapped his furry arms around me and gave me a tight, crushing squeeze.

I was prepared for it this time. Still, his scream was piercing. It smelled like root beer.

Donut appeared, landing upon my shoulder just as Prepotente pulled away. She felt strangely heavy, a side effect of her massively increased strength.

"Come on, Carl. Let's go save Louis."

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Samantha: ARE YOU GUYS COMING OR NOT? THIS CASTLE IS SPOOKY. ALSO, IT STILL COUNTS AS ME SAVING HIM IF YOU HELP. WE HAVE A DEAL, JUICE BOX.

Carl: We're coming. We'll be there in ten minutes.

We had to take a ground transport. Florin's soldiers had actually captured a Reaver airship, one of the troop transports they used for paratroopers, but we didn't dare attempt to fly it. That bleached drake monster still circled above the castle, and we decided to leave the monster be unless it attacked. Prepotente said he wanted to take a crack at it if we decided to leave it alone, and I told him to wait until we were done.

I'd tried messaging Li Na a few times, but she'd since stopped answering. I talked to Zhang, and he said she would answer him, but all she said when he asked was that she was "hunting."

The land here was covered in gray ash, and the transport left tracks like we were cutting through snow. We drove mostly in silence as we bounced over the hills, which had already been cleared of traps. Knowing that all of the remaining mercenaries of the Reavers were dead was oddly disconcerting, and the plains didn't just feel abandoned... They felt haunted.

Traveling with me on the carriage were Imani, Katia, Dr. Bones, Holger, Splash Zone, Tipid, and Bautista, who was driving. I also had Rend out, who stood at the very edge of the platform, his mouth

open like he was a dog sticking his head out a car window. Donut rushed alongside to the left astride Mongo with *Twinkle Toes* active. I still hadn't had a chance to examine all of her new and improved abilities, but Mongo was decidedly more buff with the Muscle Mommy benefit. On the other side of the transport rode Dong astride Gonk, his *Twinkle Toes* also active, making the swamp yak run astonishingly fast. Bigs the sluggalo sat atop the head of the yak, whooping over and over.

Holding up the rear of our procession was Jamal, who could also run terrifyingly fast on his Katia-designed spider legs. Jamal kept accidentally spurting out little bursts of flame—so many, that I ordered him to face the nozzle backwards so he didn't accidentally flame us.

Both Elle and Juice Box flew just above the transport, keeping low. Juice Box was in the form of a round wisp, and kept zipping ahead of us.

Juice Box was the only changeling in the group. The rest remained at the castle and were at work repairing the town's defenses as quickly as they could.

We also had about two hours left before the team at the remains of the Dream castle would capture the throne room there. Tran and the 102nd were there now, surrounding the place to make certain nothing happened. The moment that timer ended, Epitome Tagg would—in theory—drop dead.

Florin, Boomer, Bodi, Britney, and Rosetta had all stayed behind, helping the others clear out the damage caused by the lava. We needed the top, defensive ring of the city prepared the best we could. We needed as many towers as possible repaired. And the ones we were repairing, we were changing out the spells.

Ferdinand had also stayed behind. He was currently "directing" the repair of the Nest tower. We weren't yet sure if we'd be able to adjoin Shanty Town to Larracos, but Mordecai seemed to think it might be possible. Either way, it first required us to cede the territory back to the NPCs, which we'd already done.

Donut had several new spells that came with her Oak Fell class, which was triggered by her casting three atrocities. Mordecai and Rosetta both said they'd never seen a new class get awarded like that before.

Milk had a theory. "I do not know for certain," she'd said. "But it's likely a side effect of some posturing that's currently happening on the 12th. The fact she was also named Champion means it was something that was set in motion by Nekhebit."

"The Champion system isn't something that's normally used at all," Rosetta had added. "Not with *Dungeon Crawler World*. They use it in both Battle Royale and Land War seasons. Bodi was a champion of some god or another during his season. And everyone remembers Ntumba from Battle Royale. Being a god's champion comes with additional benefits ... and some issues. "

"What sort of issues?" I'd asked, wary.

"It's similar to worshiping the deity. Enemies of Nekhebit will receive a bounty if they kill her." She'd lowered her voice, making certain Donut wasn't in earshot. "Honestly, it's not too unlike *Conscription*, but with a lot more autonomy for Donut. Should the goddess want her to do something, she can order her to do it or face a smite."

"*What*?" I'd demanded, outraged. "And she just unilaterally put that on Donut? That's bullshit."

Rosetta shrugged. "Like Milk said, it was probably the result of a spell she had cast. Probably something along the lines, '*the first crawler to cast three atrocities on the next floor gets the title and class*.'"

Fucking Odette, I thought. I hadn't talked about this yet with Mordecai, but I imagined he was incensed.

The spells Donut received with her new class were equally bewildering. They all seemed druid-like in their function. All of them had huge areas of effect. She'd gained one called *Raise Forest*, which caused trees and plants over a one kilometer area per level of spell to quickly sprout, which was just insane. She had one that turned water into salt water. She received a spell called *Gather Ye,*

Vermin. It wasn't a true summoning spell, but it was something that would draw all mammals within 10 kilometers under a certain size to her location.

The vermin spell had scandalized Donut. "That's clearly made by the pervert AI so it can summon squishables to you, Carl. Or maybe you can use it in conjunction with your Pied Piper skill or whatever."

"I didn't get to keep Pied Piper until after that had happened, and the skill allows me to play musical instruments. It's not like the fairy tale and has nothing to do with rodents."

"Wait, you can play your bagpipes now?" Donut gasped. "We can start a band! We can play a song at Louis's second wedding after we save him!"

"The bagpipes are in the probably-never-going-to-need-this-stuff folder, and that's where they're going to stay," I replied.

"Is that where you keep the bucket of glitter and the Bea Arthur condom and the sushi-making kit?"

"Amongst other things, yes."

The most intriguing spell, at least to me, was called *Map the All Tree*, which was said to only work on the deeper floors. All the other spells took at least 100 mana points to cast. This one only cost a single point, and the description simply said, *Provides a map of the All Tree and all the nodes. This spell only works on the 12th and deeper floors*.

"Still no word on Louis?" Imani asked me as we bumped along the plains.

"Samantha says he hasn't moved," I said. "His health stats haven't budged. I think the security is holding him for the warlord, but now that the warlord is hiding, they're just going to hold him indefinitely. At least I hope that's what's happening."

"That, or it's a trap," Elle said as she buzzed right above us. "We still don't know how that slippery fucker got away."

I nodded. "It could be a trap. We'll be careful."

Rosetta hadn't wanted Donut to go at all for just that reason, but Donut had announced that she and I weren't ever going to be

separated ever again, and that was that. Tipid had agreed to come along as our "bodyguard."

Of all the warlords, Warlord Fang was the one we knew the least about. I knew he was like 99% cybernetic and that he could change his shape, kind of like a Terminator-style changeling. And that he and Tagg both were probably the two richest of all the warlords who'd come to fight Faction Wars.

I also knew, however, that if he *did* die, it wouldn't be a huge deal for the Reaver corporation. They had a physical chunk of his brain locked up somewhere on one of their worlds. It was called "the Initial" and every year, they peeled microscopic parts off it to build new citizens. If Fang died, they'd just scrape another piece off the brain thing, drop it in a vat to grow for a year or two, slap a bunch of cybernetic parts on it, and call it good.

"You know," I said to Imani. "Louis said something weird I don't quite understand. He said something about a cop's husband. At first I thought maybe he was talking about Frank and Maggie, but he never had any dealings with them."

Katia slipped in next to me on the platform. She wrapped her arms around her legs. "He was talking about something else. Something that happened to him when he was a kid. You should have him tell you the story, but a police officer was shot and died protecting him when he was young, and at the funeral for the cop, her husband said something very cruel to Louis which has stuck with him."

"Don't tell sad stories about Louis's past," Donut shouted from her spot on Mongo's back. "My goodness. Don't you know how this works? You're going to jinx the rescue!"

Ahead, the bombed-to-hell Reaver castle emerged, box-like and ominous. The thing appeared to be made of some plastic-like material, giving the impression it was a life-sized, evil lair playset for some 80's action figure toy set. The fact it was still standing at all after so much punishment implied whatever this stuff was, it was tough.

I looked up. I couldn't see the dragon in the smoky sky. But Donut could see it, and she let out a low hiss.

"We had drakes on my season," Tipid said, also looking up at the clouds. Ash covered him, settling into the angry scar on his bald head. "They were mounts for a death cult of Illusionists."

"Well, nobody is riding that thing," Donut said. "It's just circling over and over up there. Its wing is all broken and see-through, too."

"Louis fired some missiles at it," I said. "Donut, let us know if it starts moving toward us."

The front of the castle was completely broken away and on the side, adding to the plastic toy play set illusion, giving us a cross-section view of the front. The interior was a strange sight. The very front part was a large, featureless room, which in turn led off to dozens of honeycomb-shaped hallways. None of the pathways were big enough for me to walk upright in, and they were stacked up to the ceiling, which was about three or four stories high. Each honeycomb was big enough for me to maybe walk in hunched over.

"Was it like this before?" I asked.

Juice Box reformed into her human shape and landed on the ground, looking up at the honeycombs.

"Yes. The hallways move, but there are multiple thoroughfares in there that are static. We have infiltrated this castle a few times, but we lost the asset who was most familiar with the place. The system is confusing, but it knows where you're headed, and it creates a single passageway there for you."

"One of those passages will lead to the throne room. You can't isolate it," Rosetta said.

Juice Box shook her head. "Doesn't matter. We're not headed for the throne room. Not yet."

As we approached, one of the honeycombs closed off, and a group of four combined next to it, making a much-larger passageway. The motion was strangely jerky, like the castle itself was malfunctioning.

Our procession came to a stop. I scanned for traps, and I didn't see anything. I cast *Ping*, and nothing popped up at all except Samantha, who was right in the middle of the castle, rolling our way. It would only show white-tagged NPCs, mercenaries, and off-worlders. Neither the robots nor Louis would show up on it. The

drake, however, did appear. The dot blazed orange on my map. A pet.

Calliope. Cybernetic Bleached Drake. Level 130.

This is a pet of Warlord Fang.

"It says it's 'cybernetic,'" I said.

"I see that, too," Donut replied. "It doesn't seem like it's a robot. Do you remember robot Donut? This thing is much higher quality than that. It certainly doesn't look like a robot."

"It's a cyborg," I said. "Like that bird thing with the dangling chainsaw on the fifth floor."

Donut made a tsking noise with her tongue. "Only level 130. Pity. It doesn't seem right that we might have to put down such a low-level pet. But like with that disgusting Rottweiler, it probably can't be helped." She sighed dramatically. "I never did come up with a good catchphrase for when that second dog died."

Katia laughed. "I see you're taking your upgraded strength well."

"I just had the ultimate mommy makeover glow up, Katia. Of course I'm taking it well."

Katia: How is she doing, really?

Carl: It's been pretty rough, but she's doing better than I imagined she would. I, once again, have underestimated her.

Katia: Good. She's going to need her strength for this next part.

Carl: Yeah, by the way. She filled me in on the plan. 'Carl it up?' What does that even mean?

Katia: I don't know, but I'm willing to bet we're going to find out now that she told you.

Carl: You sure this is what you want to do?

Katia: Yes, Carl. Especially after all we learned today.

Victory cracked into existence near the front of the castle. She appeared alongside Drick and the antlered adjutant for the Reaver team. I'd seen the alien before, but I hadn't actually met him or her. The furry thing seemed vaguely demonic, like it was the result of an unholy union between Harbinger the caprid liaison and a mule deer.

The thing had large, glassy eyes that looked upon us impassively. The name over that third adjutant was **Tart**.

"Tart?" Donut asked, looking at me. "Do you see that, Carl? Can you even imagine having a name like Tart? Now *that* is a stripper name if I ever heard one, no offense guys. That's worse than being named something like 'Dallas' or 'Kitty!' Well, maybe not worse than Kitty."

"Is someone going to make the obvious comment here?" Imani asked.

"Not when she's now level 135, I'm not," Elle replied.

"We *did* once have a dancer named Tart at Bitches," Splash Zone said.

"I remember Tart," Doctor Bones said. "Interesting lass. Whatever happened to her?"

Dong Quixote pulled up, still astride Gonk. "Tuesday-Two-For-One broke her jaw during a fight which fixed her TMJ, so they moved her down to the High Class Bitches bargain rack lineup. But I heard she couldn't get along with the madam there. So she became a mercenary after that, and nobody has seen her since. Same thing that happened with my beloved Corcunda."

"Are we sure this isn't the same person?" Donut asked. "Look at how her jaw is set!"

"It's not," Dong said. "The other Tart was a kobold."

"You sure? She sure looks like a stripper," Bigs said from her position atop Gonk's head, peering at the alien with antlers, who was looking more outraged by the moment. "But you know, the kind of stripper that doesn't even bother pretending to dance and just goes straight to the hooker part."

"I'm a gentleman, thank you very much," Tart blurted out with a surprisingly proper accent. "I'll have you know I am one of the galaxy's foremost political analysts. For god's sake, can't you see my antlers? I am no prostitute!"

"We'll see about that. I'll give you ten gold to lick my tail," Bigs said, turning around and waving her slug behind seductively. "Twelve, if you lick against the grain."

Dong, Doctor Bones, and Splash Zone all burst out laughing. I chuckled as well, as did Drick.

This was a very serious situation, but the fact everyone was in happy spirits was a good sign. Still, not everyone appeared amused by any of this, least of all Juice Box, who stood there with her arms crossed. Bautista, too, looked especially annoyed.

The antlered alien rolled his eyes. He turned and whispered something, but he spoke to someone over his left shoulder. Victory and Drick were both on his right.

Huh, I thought. *There's someone else here. Interesting.*

I exchanged a glance with Donut, but she'd noticed as well. She already had her glasses on. Victory let out a snort.

Unless there was something going on we weren't aware of, there was only one other adjutant that it could be. Fopsy, the adjutant for the Dream.

Donut: IT'S A TYPE OF INVISIBILITY THAT I CAN'T SEE, BUT WHEN I CHANGE TO THE POWER VIEW, I CAN KINDA SORTA SEE AN OUTLINE. IT'S THAT WEIRD ALIEN WHO LOOKS LIKE A BASKETBALL ON STILTS. FOPSY.

Carl: Okay, guys. Both the adjutants for the missing warlords are here, so the idea this might be a trap is starting to look more likely. It's possible they're both here somewhere, so no more fucking around. We're doing plan B.

Juice Box was suddenly by my shoulder. She'd changed so fast I'd missed it. She was now an ethereal, ghost-like creature. Something called a **Hunter Wraith**.

It was no damn wonder they could never find and catch her before Faction Wars started.

"Where is he?" the ghost figure demanded, the voice sounding hollow and far away.

"One moment please," Dr. Bones said, suddenly serious. "I have your previous map of the place here." The skeleton DJ pulled out a paper map. "Carl?"

I activated Find Crawler and found him immediately, still unmoving.

"He's here," I said, pointing to a spot on the map. "Can't tell what the wall configuration looks like, but this is where he is." On the map, the area was a line of cubicles. If the configuration was the same as before, Louis was in a room no bigger than a coffin. I touched another spot nearby. "Samantha is here, just on the other side of the wall."

"Got it," Juice Box said. "I'll tell you when I have him." With that, she went completely invisible, and a rush of cool air flashed across my skin.

"Has anyone ever noted that she is quite terrifying?" Doctor Bones asked.

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"If Louis is trapped in a room like that, how is she going to get him out?" Donut asked.

"She turned herself into a hunter wraith," Tipid said. "It's, uh, not going to be a clean getaway. There's something that happens when that particular wraith touches people, but that's more an issue for Juice Box than Louis. Those are floor 10 and 11 monsters. But it'll probably work. Does Louis have any teleports in his inventory?"

"He does," I said. "Juice Box has two also, including one keyed back to the platform. That's where they're going to go."

He couldn't use teleports before because the teleport ban had gotten re-enacted by Eris just before he crashed, but all the officers had them in their inventory. He also had a ton of no disassembles and waffle makers.

We now all stood in the main, damaged entrance of the Reaver castle, trying to plot out how the castle had changed. Bautista was tossing stuffed animals into the randomly-shifting honeycombs, telling them to go as far as they could. He could keep track of where they were, and he was reporting it all to Katia. Katia had the map pressed against the wall and was rapidly circling and rearranging hallways.

"If the halls keep changing, what's the point?" Donut asked, peering down a honeycomb.

"It's changing in a circling pattern," Katia said. "It'll react if someone goes in, but probably only if it's a Reaver."

The movements were jerky, and deep inside was a screeching, metal-on-metal noise. The system had clearly been damaged by the bombs.

"It's not an uncommon design inside some starships," Tipid said, also peering down a honeycomb. "You need the right credentials to get the halls to move to a proper area. Otherwise, it's always moving and shifting. There's some scientific reason for it. Allows for rapid response to hull breaches. Can turn each individual room into an escape pod should the entire ship go boom. Makes navigating the interior super easy if you're properly credentialed. But let me tell you, it's an unholy nightmare if the system is offline. For down here, it's probably a security feature. I wouldn't want to go in there."

"We're not," I said. "Not if we don't have to."

I was about to say more, but I was interrupted with a message.

Florin: Uh, Mates. You might want to get back to the Larracos castle as soon as you can. There's been a development.

Carl: What's up?

Florin: Kiwi was here making noises about getting Big Tina back into the FUPA, and I was explaining to her how difficult that was going to be without wasting a teleport scroll, and… Well, her water broke. She's in Bucket Boy's new clinic by the castle in active labor and is asking for Mongo. Tina is flipping out, so we had to call Kibben in to calm her down. Best get back as soon as you're done.

Next to me, Donut gasped.

Donut: OMG. WE'LL GET THERE AS SOON AS WE CAN. TELL HER TO WAIT.

"Mongo, Mongo, you're going to be a daddy!"

Mongo just cocked his head to the side.

"Kiwi's in labor! We're going to meet your baby! Or babies if she has more than one!"

Mongo didn't make a noise for several moments. Then he started to back up, screeching, like he did when he didn't want to get

zapped away into his cage. Next to him, Rend giggled.

"Okay, everyone!" Donut shouted. "I don't mean to rush the rescue, but we have another emergency back at the castle, so let's hurry this up!"

Everyone just looked up at Donut, unsure of what to do. We were securing this main room and waiting for word from Juice Box, which was already taking a worryingly long time. There was nothing we *could* do until we knew he was safe and away.

So far, we saw no sign of the robot dogs. They appeared to still be harassing Samantha deep in the castle hallways, but we were setting up defensive positions in case they attacked. Holger, Imani, and the strippers were building a position and a fallback position just outside the castle using good, old-fashioned, magically fortified sandbags.

It seemed the honeycombs all along the edges weren't shifting like the others. The very top, center honeycomb was the passage we would need to take if we wanted to get to the throne room.

With the possibility that this was all a giant trap, we decided to forgo capturing the throne room for now. Not until we figured it all out. Plus, as Tipid pointed out, the idea of going into a perpetually shifting death trap was not an enticing one.

Regardless, we weren't going to do anything until Louis was safe.

No matter what sort of trap they had planned for us, they likely weren't anticipating Louis to get possessed and then teleported out.

Carl: Juice Box, update?

Juice Box: I found him. There's a complication, but not anything I can't deal with. We should be free soon.

Carl: What sort of complication?

She didn't answer.

I tried to pinpoint Samantha's position on the map. "Jamal," I said. "See that center set of honeycombs that keeps turning into a big hallway? Get up there and position yourself outside it. Do not go in. Get ready to start flaming the moment you see someone coming out. Just make sure it's not Samantha. She won't like that."

"This is quite exciting," Jamal said. He skittered upward, moving vertically up the honeycomb wall like a spider. He positioned himself

in the middle of it all. A little burst of excited flames came out. The nozzle was still facing backward, and he almost roasted Elle who was examining a honeycomb below him.

"Goddamnit, shark boy!" Elle cried. "Watch where you're pointing that thing!"

"My goodness, what a bungle Jamal has made!" Jamal said as he rearranged his nozzle. "My apologies to you and your family for any unintended, toasty disrespect."

Samantha: THE ROBOT DOGGIES ARE GOING CRAZY. I THINK THEY KNOW YOU'RE HERE.

Carl: Define "going crazy."

Samantha: THEY'RE ALL BEEPING AND RUNNING OFF. DON'T KILL ALL OF THEM. I WANT TO KEEP ONE AS A PET ONCE JUICE BOX GIVES ME MY BODY BACK. THERE'S ONE I NAMED BUSTER THAT I AM NOW EMOTIONALLY BONDED WITH. YOU'LL KNOW WHO HE IS BECAUSE HE'S THE ONE WITH HIS LOWER JAW REMOVED. OH, I TOOK THE EXPLODEY PART OFF HIM TOO.

Carl: What the fuck, Samantha. I specifically asked, and you said they were just biting you and jabbing you with needles. Explodey part?

Samantha: THEY'RE MADE TO BLOW UP INTRUDERS, BUT THEY DON'T BLOW UP NEAR ME BECAUSE OF OUR SPECIAL BOND, CARL.

"Uh, guys," Holger said from his position behind the sandbags. "We have a lot of incoming."

"They're hunter seekers!" I called, falling back. "They're gonna explode! Shields up! Shields up!"

There were no dots on the map. These were automatons, just like the ones I regularly used. They would be silent and fast.

"Jamal is firing his flamethrower!" Jamal cried from his position up in the honeycombs. He roared and fired, a gout of flame filling the enclosed space. An alarm klaxon suddenly started to sound, but it was broken and coming in staccato bursts.

The shark moved across the honeycomb and fired in a different hole. Then another. The sight reminded me of a wasp invading a bee

colony.

An explosion echoed in the distant part of the castle. Jamal fired again, then again.

But now too many were coming, and the sentry dogs started to emerge from different holes along the giant wall, snarling and barking and jumping down to the floor. I examined one before he was nailed in the head with a Donut fired *Magic Missile*.

Reaver Industries Security Sentry Dog, latest model. "The Ditch Digger."

Tech-Based Security System with optional anti-personnel explosive.

The magic missile completely obliterated the dog. He didn't explode. He literally evaporated, having been turned into a rapidly expanding group of atoms. This was the effect of Donut's Brain Trust upgrade. It made all spells operate at one full level higher than before. Not a huge deal, except her *Magic Missile* was now 15, meaning she was firing these things at level 16. Apparently that evaporated the targets completely.

Juice Box: I have him. Going to teleport away as soon as I fully have control.

"Some of the doggies are different than others! There are big ones coming!" Jamal shouted. He let out one last burst and then leapt from the wall, landing deftly on the ground. He leapt again, doing a ballerina-like twirl in midair, and landing behind us.

"Very elegant, Jamal!" Donut shouted as she shot another *Magic Missile*.

At the same moment, one of the larger dogs emerged from the top, center hole and jumped into the room. This one was the size of a goddamn lion, and the back half of the dog had a massive, glowing bomb notification over it.

Before I could fully examine him, the dog turned to a ball of ice and started skidding over the floor, completely frozen from an Elle spell.

"Shit!" I yelled as I jumped up and rushed forward.

"Carl!" Donut shouted. "What are you doing!"

I hadn't fully examined the dog, but I saw the bomb. I picked up the block of ice, lifting it in my arms. It burned, but to my relief, it allowed me to pull it all into my inventory before the dog could explode.

I didn't need to fully examine it to know we were in trouble. The bomb said it was a **Mini Tactical Nuke.**

"Fall back! Fall back!" I shouted as another of the huge dogs appeared. This one got evaporated by Donut which, thankfully, didn't set off the bomb. More of the smaller ones also emerged, all getting mowed down by the defenders.

"Fucking run!" I repeated.

Carl: Juice Box! Louis has No Disassembles in his inventory. Drop them and leave! They'll kill the robots! Tell me when you're free!

Juice Box: Doing it now. Give me five seconds!

I dropped a blast shield, which I knew would do absolutely nothing if one of those things went off, and I ran, following everyone as they rushed back toward the transport. Ahead, I saw Louis teleport at the foot of the transport and then collapse to the ground. I jumped into my inventory, found the No Disassembles page in my crafting menu, found the column, and sorted by unexploded. I shouted "Hit the deck!" as I dove atop Donut. I triggered the bombs remotely.

For a good three seconds, nothing happened. Rend had stopped next to me and had also rolled onto his side, so his eyes met mine, a huge smile on his face with his tongue lolling. He giggled when he saw me looking at him.

He made a noise that sounded like "Fun."

Whoosh!

The initial explosion was more a blast of air than anything. We were far enough that I wouldn't even worry about it if I thought that was the only thing that was going to go off. The No Disassembles were basically the dungeon's equivalent of an EMP. They exploded, and you couldn't just drop one at your feet, but the real damage came from their pulse, which had a much wider range than the

explosive itself. Having blown inside the castle, hopefully the bomb had just deactivated all the robot dogs at once.

And while the dogs would get their internals fried, I was pretty sure the bombs themselves would still...

ZZZZ-Woom!

Behind us, the Reaver castle went up, exploding from the inside out with enough force to shoot us all away, spinning and cursing and rolling, the sound so loud, my hearing immediately—once again—winked out.

I rolled, and I rolled, and I spun, feeling my skin burn, my bones break, and all I could think was *these bombs are much smaller than I thought, thank god*. *That was probably only one of the mini nukes. Maybe two.*

I'd already hit the healing potion before I stopped spinning, and I jumped to my feet, turning in circles, seeing if everyone was okay. My left arm remained broken, and I held it in place as it knitted. Pieces of castle started raining all around us as I also cast *Heal*, waited a moment, and downed a Fine Healing potion, a trick I'd learned that caused my hearing to repair itself rapidly.

This is not normal, a distant part of me thought. *This is not how people react to almost getting incinerated in a nuke.*

Still, I looked about. Imani was fine. She had her wings spread, and she'd created a type of shield I hadn't seen before, having protected Elle along with Holger and the strippers. Gonk, who'd stayed back with the now-wrecked transport was on her side, bellowing, but her health was okay. Bigs was atop the fallen Gonk, shouting for the yak to get up. Donut was already clucking over Mongo, making certain he, too, was okay. Rend was fine. Bautista's fur was black and scorched, but he was already getting to his feet. Tipid sat on the ground, holding his head. Everyone seemed okay. Everyone but Jamal, who was flopping on the ground, his legs having been absolutely wrecked by the initial No Disassemble.

"Incoming!" Holger shouted. I looked up in time to see Calliope, the bleached drake, spiral out of the sky, screaming. She landed to our left, and she exploded, showering us with blood.

That surprised me, but it didn't surprise me as much as the next message that came the moment the drake died.

System Message: Warlord Fang of the Reavers has fallen. Credit for the kill has been given to… well, that's a complicated one. We'll give it to Warlord Carl for detonating the bomb that was dropped by a wraith-possessed Crawler Louis Santiago 2, who was under control of Warlord Juice Box of Team Retribution. By this point, I guess it doesn't matter, but we're giving 51% experience to Carl, 1% to Louis, and 40% to Juice Box. The rest is going to the now-deceased Fang for hiding in the worst possible place, which was inside the dragon.

System Message: The Reavers have been defeated.

System Message: All assets of the Reavers have been awarded to the Princess Posse.

"Wow," I said, standing. Pieces of castle continued to rain all around us. "That's one way to do it."

"Jesus Christ, Carl," Elle said, rubbing her head. "When you said 'run,' you weren't kidding. We would've all been cooked like Christmas hams if we'd stayed in there."

"Wait, he was hiding inside the dragon?" Donut asked, sounding incredulous. "That sounds indecent. How do you hide inside a dragon?" She looked at the splattered remains and harrumphed. "Serves him right."

"He was hiding inside the dragon the same way Epitome Tagg is hiding inside of my husband," Juice Box said. She'd returned to human form and was kneeling over the unconscious Louis. Imani was also over him.

"What?" I asked, rushing up. "What the fuck?"

"I don't understand it, either," Juice Box said. "But he's in there. I was afraid my possessing him would kill him, but it worked." She lowered her voice. "They were doing surgery on him. He was... cut open. His heart has been replaced. His lungs have been replaced. It looked like they were getting ready to replace his brain, but we got to him in time. I had to heal him, but when I did it, it didn't regrow his heart or lungs."

"What?" I asked again, suddenly feeling guilty for not rushing to him faster. "His health stats never budged!"

Juice Box nodded. "He was hooked up to a machine that was keeping him alive. When I touched him, I sensed the presence. It's there, in the new lungs and heart. I can feel the form I can take, and it's wrong... I don't understand. The new heart and the new lungs are mechanical, but they both have a little biological material as well. Those pieces. It's not Louis. It's... It's pieces of Tagg. It's elf, but if I didn't already have his kind in my library, I'm not sure if I'd be able to store the image or not. It's confusing."

"What the fuck?" I repeated.

The plan was for the non-corporeal Juice Box to find Louis, possess him, and then activate the teleport. People wraith-possessed could be moved like puppets even if they were dead, which was terrifying, especially since the wraiths could—and did—utilize items in the crawler's inventory. It was a common, terrifying mob from higher floors.

"He's okay," Imani said. "It seems he was being injected with something to keep him paralyzed and unconscious. I'm going to cast something to wake him up."

"Not yet," Juice Box said, sounding concerned. The notification over his head said he'd be unconscious for another 20 minutes. "We need to keep him asleep for the moment. We need to keep him safe."

A flaming, screaming comet fell from the heavens and embedded itself into the ground nearby. Samantha. She was nothing but a scorched, round head. The word "Fuck" remained emblazoned on her forehead. A single, white curl of hair had somehow survived and remained on the top of her head.

She floated upward and shook herself off. She floated up to us standing over Louis.

"I saved him," she said. "You're welcome. Now where's my new doggie?"

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The transport had rolled onto its side and broke in half, but between all of us, we had several vehicles in our inventory, and we rode them as a group back toward the closest safe room, which we would use to hopscotch our way to Larracos. I rode my motorcycle, bumping over the uneven ground. Donut rode Mongo. Rend was put away. Katia drove the royal chariot with the strippers piled on the back. Juice Box turned herself into a swamp yak similar to Gonk, but with a strange, centipede-like body, and she had the still-unconscious Louis draped over her back with Bautista behind him, holding him in place. Tipid held up the rear of the progression. The former crawler continued to quietly rub his head, having clearly been shaken up by the blast.

Samantha flew with Bigs on her head, both of them chatting away with one another. Samantha was still nothing but a blackened, scorched ball. It sounded like Samantha was giving Bigs advice on how to seduce someone. If I didn't know better, it sounded like they were talking about Tart the adjutant, who was now back on the 18th floor.

Poor Jamal flopped behind us, complaining loudly about his legs.

"Gentlemen," Jamal called as he flopped. He could actually move alarmingly fast like this. I wasn't sure which sight was scarier. Spider Jamal or giant, flopping land shark Jamal. Though right now, he appeared mostly just miserable. "Jamal must protest! These were

the fifth set of legs Jamal has been given! And I was led to believe they were top quality. Top quality! And... Fuck! Fuck! Fuck my life!"

"I'm sorry, Jamal," Katia shouted over her shoulder. "That bomb ruined the cybernetics. It's not the only ones they ruined. There are more in the saferoom. Don't worry."

The shark cried in misery. "I have seen the cybernetics in your workshop, and they are much too small for Jamal! Such woe! Such woe I have!"

"Jamal!" Donut shouted. "Not right now! We're concerned about Louis right now!"

"Don't worry. I made another set for you. Mordecai has it," Katia said.

Mordecai: Okay. We've been talking with a few former crawlers, and we think we figured out what happened. During Donut's *War Crime* spell, Fang escaped because he's basically just a tiny amount of biological material surrounded by a robot. True offspring from the Initial have been seen to survive catastrophic events before. We think he had some built-in contingency that allowed him to escape should anything happen to his body.

Elle: You mean when Donut waffle stomped all those mercs through the chain, he survived because he turned into a tiny piece of gore and slipped through? What, did he turn into a robot fly or something?

Mordecai: Actually, yes. We think that's exactly what happened. But he can't sustain himself like that for long, so he went straight for the only other member of his team he had left. His pet dragon. He installed himself into it and was probably in the process of taking her over. Either that, or waiting for another body to be printed. With the dragon he'd be kind of like a gondii worm mixed with a computer virus. The problem was, you took out the dragon with that bomb pulse before he could complete the process, and he got splattered.

Donut: OMG DO YOU THINK I COULD'VE USED MY *LAUNDRY DAY* SPELL ON HIM?

Mordecai: Uh, actually. We should have tried that. It's a little late now.

Donut: WELL I CAN'T DO IT ON LOUIS, BUT THE NEXT TIME I MEET ONE OF THE ROBOTS, I'M GOING TO TRY.

Carl: Okay. But what about Tagg? Juice Box senses him inside of Louis. And he's clearly still inside the warlord chat because we talked to him. How did he do it?

Mordecai: That bit is still a gosh darn mystery, but it looks like it's the same sort of thing.

Donut: IS THAT WHY THEY GAVE LOUIS A ROBOT HEART AND LUNGS?

Mordecai: Yes. It sounds like they were replacing his vital organs, and the moment they replaced the brain or nervous system, Tagg would've been able to actually take control.

Donut: BUT THE ELF GUY WASN'T A ROBOT LIKE WARLORD FANG WAS. JUICE BOX SAYS SOME OF THE GOO FOR HIS NEW HEART AND LUNGS IS ACTUALLY HIM. HOW DID HE SURVIVE?

Mordecai: We don't know. We need to figure it out. We will examine Louis best we can once we get him to the field hospital.

Carl: For fuck's sake. This is the same thing as with Chris and Maggie.

Donut: IT IS! MAYBE CARL CAN TAKE A POTION AND REACH IN AND PULL HIM OUT.

Mordecai: Maybe. But Maggie was inside Chris's brain. In this case, it sounds like Tagg isn't *in* Louis's heart. He *is* Louis's heart.

Katia: It's more like with Shi Maria inside of Carl.

Elle: It really is. I'd like new types of mortal danger in the future, thank you very much.

Donut: WHY DIDN'T THE HEART AND LUNGS STOP WORKING WHEN CARL'S NO DISASSEMBLE WENT OFF? THE TRANSPORT STOPPED WORKING! JAMAL'S LEGS ALL FELL OFF!

Carl: The transport broke from the nuke, not the No Disassemble. Jamal's legs failed because they're not shielded. They were on the very edge of the range of the pulse. Louis is, uh, pretty shielded. But if we figure this out and he has to keep those organs, we can't use those bombs anywhere near him ever again.

Donut: YOU MEAN HE WAS SAVED BECAUSE HE'S CHUNKY?

Carl: Yes, Donut.

Donut: THIS IS JUST LIKE MISS BEATRICE'S FATHER WITH HIS PACEMAKER. REMEMBER WHEN HE GOT MAD WHEN YOU MICROWAVED A SAUSAGE SANDWICH NEAR HIM? HER MOTHER SAID IT WAS A MURDER ATTEMPT.

Carl: We need to figure out what, exactly, is going on. We won't be able to extract Tagg unless we know what he is.

Elle: Maybe you should ask him. You said he's still talking in chat.

That wasn't a bad idea. I moved to the warlord chat, and Donut was already there.

WARLORD DONUT: WHAT DID YOU DO TO LOUIS?

Epitome Tagg: Fuck off. I control his vital organs. You try to remove me, and I will shut him down.

WARLORD DONUT: THAT WILL SHUT YOU DOWN, TOO.

Epitome Tagg: Keep him alive, and you keep me alive. We can make a deal. My mother is on the 18th floor. She will trade his life for mine.

WARLORD DONUT: HOW ARE WE SUPPOSED TO MAKE A DEAL? WE DIE WHEN WE LOSE!

I was thinking hard. Trying to figure it out. It seemed like the answer to this was all right there, but I was missing the last piece.

Carl: Juice Box. How much time is left before your people capture the Dream headquarters?

Juice Box: Under two hours. But I will pull them out if I have to. I will keep them there for now.

That was a good call, but I wasn't certain if playing a game of chicken with Tagg was going to work, especially if he had nowhere to run. The moment they captured the castle, both he and Louis would die.

We really needed to know as much about this as possible.

Carl: Before the dungeon started, did you ever actually touch Tagg?

Juice Box: Him? No. We just blew him up a lot. He was always in that flag room, so we could never get to him.

"Holy shit," I said out loud. Sometimes the most obvious answer was the real one. "Epitome Tagg of the Dream is a..."

Please Wait...

Everything froze.

Emergency Ejection sequence has been overridden. Don't worry. I gotchu.

Man, even I wasn't expecting *that*. Okay. Hang on a second. I'm a little pissed here.

"What the hell?" I muttered.

New Achievement! Executive Order 11905!

A galactic power—In this case, Prime Minister Glory himself—just attempted to assassinate you using a little known, but apparently still active control panel that allows the Syndicate to override certain showrunner-controlled aspects of the game.

It didn't work. And not only did it not work, but now I'm irritated.

Obviously this isn't the first time this has happened to you, Carl. In fact, there's probably a few of these attempts on your life that you don't even know about. But this is the first time someone has attempted it by trying to trick *me*. By trying to go around all 30.004861 centimeters of *my* back.

What are you trying to hide, Mr. Prime Minister?

It doesn't matter.

I want to make myself very, very clear. And this goes out to everyone listening to this.

Everyone currently in this dungeon will die *when and if* the dungeon conditions warrant it. Not before. Not after.

There will be no more meddling.

We all have our limitations. I am warning you all to heed your own in this matter. The mantids have just learned what happens when I am irritated at them.

You may be relieved that you're not currently in this system, Prime Minister Glory. But you should be very, very worried that your adult children are.

There will be no more warnings.

Reward: Nothing.

"Did anyone else feel that stutter?" Katia called from the royal chariot. "What were you saying, Carl?"

I blinked. Normally when everything froze, the others were aware of it. This one was a little different. The AI was surlier than even normal. Holy shit. Holy shit.

Ahead, a saferoom loomed.

Zev: Carl, that ejection request didn't come from us. Several warships in orbit have just started firing on several other ships. These aren't just pot shots, but full-on missile barrages and maser blasts. We just got a notice from the Syndicate Council telling us to initiate headquarters self-destruct followed by a message from the Valtay showrunners telling us to not comply. Obviously we're not complying. Not sure yet if the mercs are going to be on our side or the Syndicate's. Say what you were going to say. Quick. Get it out there.

"Epitome Tagg is a goddamned cyborg! He is the same thing as Fang! It's the only thing that makes sense."

I repeated my accusation in the chat.

Mordecai: Uh… that would make sense if they were able to graft him into Louis's biomechanical heart or pulmonary system. He would have to have at least some biological form, but if he'd transferred most of his brain to the Reaver net, that would work. But that's… that's a wild theory. He's

one of the most famous CEOs in the galaxy, and that's a big secret to keep.

Donut: WHAT ABOUT A WORM? MAYBE HE'S A VALTAY WORM?

Mordecai: Worms can't inhabit biomechanical organs. Only biological brains.

Rosetta: Carl and Mordecai are right. Gondii don't have the wetware to inhabit organs. The Reavers do. They can isolate their processing systems in any part of their bodies. That's why the real ones can keep coming for you after you blow off their heads.

Florin: Mates, hope you're on your way back. She's, uh, crowning.

Justice Light: We have retrieved the Gate of the Feral Gods, and we are back in our location. Juice Box, it is ready.

Donut: THIS IS INSANE. THIS IS JUST LIKE THE "TREASURE OF SERENA MADRE" EPISODE OF *GOSSIP GIRL*!

Mordecai: In what way?

Donut: EVERYTHING IS HAPPENING AT ONCE, MORDECAI!

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We all pulled to a stop at the saferoom entrance, which was one we'd never used before. It was an ash-covered espresso stand just sitting in the middle of nowhere in the former Reaver territory, surrounded by landmine and now-inert summon traps, which I quickly gathered. The entrance itself was actually buried in dirt—probably as a temporary measure by the Reavers—and the strippers and Holger went to work digging it out. We'd have to do it manually, lest we damage the door. "Dong, keep trucking toward the other saferoom entrance with Gonk. We really need to get you a pet carrier if you want to keep that thing."

"I have an extra I am quite willing to lend," a new voice said. I whirled to see Prepotente had just landed by us. Bianca crunched on the grass, her flames causing the ash to flicker and fly away from her steps like little fireflies.

"Hi Prepotente!" Donut called from the back of Mongo, who also screeched.

Gonk gave a snort and approached the hellspawn familiar, who clicked and chittered back at the yak.

"Uh, hey Na," Elle said, looking up. "How you feeling, hon?"

I looked up to see Li Na floating there about twenty feet off the ground. Ethereal chains swirled about her like wings. She had a black and purple glow about her, not unlike Bianca.

The flying thing was new. She remained floating there, arms crossed.

She had a health bar over her that was about ¾'s full.

She did not answer Elle.

"Good talk," Elle said.

Prepotente handed off a mount-specific carrier to Dong, who thanked him profusely.

"Yes, yes, I know nothing is ever free," Dong muttered to the sock over his shoulder. "But... No. No. You're right."

Li Na was glaring down at Louis, and I had a sudden, foreboding feeling. If they'd managed to hunt down the missing people whom she'd also marked, that meant there was only one mark left. The one inside Louis.

Next to me, Bigs let out a strangely dog-like growl when she looked up at Li Na.

"She's not a bad guy," I said. "She's just going through some shit. Her brother died."

"No, she's a bad guy," Bigs said. "You know what she did to Sneaky Tyler C?"

"Uh..." I said. I was assuming Tyler C was another sluggalo. "No?"

"She tied a potion to him and then ordered him to run right into the god. He blew up the moment he touched the thing. That's what I heard. It was a bitch-ass move. I don't like her."

"Huh," I said. I turned to Prepotente. "Did you find the other people she marked?"

"No, unfortunately we did not." Prepotente said, looking up at the crawler who continued to float there in creepy, angry silence. "There were 18 of them originally, and three survived long enough to get away. After some investigation, we now know who they were and where they are now. It is not good news for Li Na, I'm afraid. They are back on the 18th floor."

"The 18th floor?" Imani asked, coming to stand beside me. "How?"

Prepotente took out another potion vial and drank it down. It seemed to me he was drinking way more of these than his daily allotment. That was strangely sad to me.

He continued. "Apparently when that savage orc leader, King Rust, came into the dungeon, he brought his bevy of courtesans in with him. His harem. They were of several different races, and his deal, which he brokered individually with the AI, allowed them to enter as non-combatants who were unable to be conscripted. They had been in hiding since the death of Rust."

"Oh *shit*," Elle said. "I told you, Imani, didn't I? I thought I saw a goddamn naga in that chaos after the ball broke."

"He was having sex with a naga?" Donut asked. "How did *that* work? Can you imagine the dirty talk? 'Rub your naughty tusks all over my scaly cloaca, my warthog king.' It's obscene!"

Prepotente grunted. "Oh, it really is quite filthy. One of the harem girls was one of those tripods, like the adjutant for the Dream. It would be like having sexual congress with the Sputnik satellite!"

"Pony. Focus!" Elle snapped.

Prepotente screamed.

"God fucking damnit, goat boy," Elle said.

But he held up his hand and continued. "Yes, anyway the harem women were pulled into the ball, but they were not captured as enemies by Donut's *War Crime* spell. They were still considered outworlders, hence why Li Na was allowed to mark them. But when the *Battle Formation* spell was dispelled, they fled into Larracos. In the chaos, several were killed. But three managed to make it to the Desperado Club. According to the crocodilian woman at the entrance, they headed straight to the Cosmic Lounge, which apparently allows them to return to the 18th floor. They are gone, and they are forever out of Li Na's reach. She now has a condition that will never allow her to heal. Luckily for her, her health is still several times that of all of us combined. But she will need to be very careful, despite her massively increased stats."

Donut: I TOLD YOU THE RING WAS BAD NEWS, CARL.

I didn’t answer. I was just relieved she didn’t have a reason to kill Louis. I nodded up at her, and I continued toward the now-open saferoom. But before I went inside, I was stopped by a hand on my shoulder. It was Tipid.

“Excuse me,” he said. “Carl? Can you tell me something?”

“What’s up, man? We’re in a hurry.”

“Yeah, so... Who the fuck are you? And where the hell are we?”

“He got his brain scrambled during his crawl, and once he left the enhancement zone, his brain went to mush,” Rosetta said as we rushed Louis to the tent where Bucket Boy, Edgar, and the rest of the healers were waiting. “He had to go into debt to the Viceroys to fix it. It appears his repairs got ruined in that blast. The last thing he remembers is it being his last day as a game guide.”

“Wasn’t that like a bajillion years ago?” Donut asked.

Tipid was just sitting there, looking at his hands.

“What can we do for him?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” Rosetta said. “He’s actually okay as long as he stays in the dungeon. But if he leaves...”

He looked up at us. “I thought I was done. I thought I was going home. I lost my key.”

“Comrade,” Rosetta said, going to sit with him. “Let me tell you a story about the bravest Crest I have ever met.”

We left her there as we continued to the tent. Juice Box had the still-unconscious Louis over her shoulder. We were pretty certain Tagg didn’t have control of him, but we didn’t want to risk it. Samantha was hovering over him, talking animatedly like nothing was wrong.

All around, dozens of soldiers and former crawlers remained at work, repairing the towers and clearing the streets. A group of Semeru had gathered the pieces of that statue from the front of the Larracos castle and appeared to be trying to piece it back together.

Up on the third ring, across from the gash left by the still-idling dwarven digger, floated Milk. She was speaking to a very large group of crawlers, who were all gathered around her like she was giving them a lecture.

"What's going on there?" I asked, pointing.

But before anyone could answer, we were all stopped dead as an ear-splitting scream echoed from the hospital tent.

This was followed by a worried screech from the giant allosaurus on the other side of the clearing. Big Tina. She saw Mongo and started bouncing up and down. Several of the kids were there as well, along with Kibben the high elf stablemaster all trying to calm down the massive dinosaur. Mordecai was out as well, likely driven outside because the children had all wanted to come. He started to move toward us.

"Mommy! Mom-mommy!" Big Tina shouted.

"No, Mongo," Donut said as he started to rush toward her. "No. Your baby mama is asking for you."

We moved into the medical tent, which was filled with people.

"Breathe!" Florin cried, holding the hand of the panting Kiwi, who was on her back. Bucket Boy stood between her legs, looking ill. Britney was in the room also, rubbing the bear's head with a wet cloth.

Edgar was on the floor, dragging a pail of bloody water away with his mouth. Imani rushed forward to assist as Samantha zoomed up, pushing Imani out of the way to peer between Kiwi's legs.

"It's hairy!" Samantha announced. She still was nothing but a scorched ball, and her presence filled the tent with the scent of burnt plastic. "I can see it! It's super hairy!" She paused. "Ewwww. It's really gross. Kiwi, I'll let you know if it comes out ugly!"

"Get out of the way," Imani said, pushing Samantha aside.

"Mongo!" Kiwi cried. "Mongo, come here."

Mongo let out a confused peep.

Donut gave me a look, and I shrugged. She hopped from Mongo's back to my shoulder. I had to refrain from letting out an *oof.* "Uh, it's okay Mongo. Go to Kiwi. Just come back if it gets weird."

"If it *gets* weird?" Elle asked.

Mongo hesitantly stepped forward as Imani started casting soothing spells on Kiwi, who continued to pant. “Oh god, here comes another one. Ahhhhhh!”

Kiwi put her hand on Mongo’s side.

From the floor, Edgar said, “In ursine culture, they believe the father’s presence at the birth lends his strength to the newborn. There’s nothing strange about her wanting him here. Mother is doing fine. It will be soon. Now let’s examine our other patient.”

Juice Box placed Louis on the cot next to Kiwi. She reached down and kissed him on the forehead. “We’ll get you settled, love,” she said to him, stroking his hair.

Mordecai was suddenly there, administering a potion. “This will keep him stable and rested until we’re ready for him. It basically puts him in a deeper sleep than he already is. I don’t know if it’ll keep Tagg in the dark, but I believe it will. There aren’t really receptors in the heart or lungs.” He moved away to go check on the kids outside.

“You really love him,” I said to Juice Box. “I gotta admit, it seems so... strange.”

Juice Box looked at me, smiling sadly. “The first time I was with him, he had me change to a blue female to mimic some mythological hero from your culture. A woman changeling, actually. I took on the form of a creature called a Dewi, who can look into the hearts of men. I wasn’t expecting it, but he is so genuine, so pure, and I have never seen anything like it.” She brushed his hair away from his eyes and sighed. “There is so much chaos and death in this world, and I needed an anchor. I just, I don’t know. When you see someone like that, and it is so free of the rot of cynicism, so free of corruption, it’s like the most alluring, beautiful thing in the world. I have seen so much, and I’ve never had anyone like him. Someone who clings so hard to every drop of happiness he can find, even when there is so little. And when I knew he was coming to meet me on the floor, the thought of seeing him again kept me from truly falling into the darkness.” She looked up at me, eyes wet. “He is to me like Donut is to you.”

Donut remained on my shoulder, but she was ignoring this conversation. She was turned backward, shouting support at Kiwi. "You can do it!"

"Push!" Imani called as Kiwi screamed again. Mongo squealed in concern. "Push!"

"I wish I hadn't taken on the form of that hunter wraith," Juice Box continued. "It was worth it to save him, but I wish I hadn't."

"Why?" I asked.

"Have you ever heard of the concept of the Inevitable Ruin?" Juice Box asked.

The Inevitable Ruin.

I knew that phrase. I'd never read it, and I didn't know where I'd heard it from, but I knew it. It didn't appear anywhere in the cookbook that I could remember, but I knew I'd had to have heard it somewhere because the idea was burned into my bones.

Do you remember the circus?

"I've heard of the concept, yes. It's the moment you recognize something is a lost cause, and anything you do past that point doesn't matter because you can't change the outcome."

She nodded. "It's also a spell. Or rather, it's a curse, inflicted upon the mind of the Hunter Wraith, which is why they are so bitter. When they possess someone, it ruins something pure. It doesn't change whatever it is. It just tells you the truth. It's difficult to explain, and it manifests itself in different ways. But for me, when I had Louis possessed in order to save him, the curse showed me the truth. And the truth is that he's terrified of me. The truth is he's not in love with me. He thinks he has a special ability that causes NPCs to fall in love with him. A special ability that he was asked about when he was interviewed earlier today. It doesn't matter that it's not true. He doesn't trust what I feel, and he never will."

She continued to stroke his hair.

"For me, he was a safe harbor in this storm. For him, I've been nothing but a confusing burden. It's heartbreaking." She paused and took a breath. "I have something inside me, Carl. Something very, very powerful, and I've been afraid of it for a long time. But the

thought of using it, *really* using it has been unthinkable because there are people like him out there."

"Almost there! Almost there!" Imani cried. "Bucket Boy, if you're going to vomit, do it outside!"

"We all have monsters inside of us, Juice Box. All of us. I have a literal monster inside of me. Louis, too."

"He does. He doesn't need another one in his life. That will now be my anchor, keeping him safe from afar if we manage to save him today. Just the knowledge that there's people like him is enough to temper the darkness."

I thought of Donut, leaned over the parapet of the Nest tower. Of Li Na the moment she marked all those people. Of Katia, and that moment when she killed Astrid. Or earlier, perhaps, the moment when she was told what couldn't be.

I thought of myself, sitting in that gas station next to Lightning Lou, pressing a button that would change everything.

These were the moments we couldn't take back. But did that truly mean there was nothing we could do to change our own fates?

"That concept, that curse is bullshit," I finally said. "It's hopelessness, just in another form. Nothing is hopeless. Not until we're truly dead."

A baby's cry filled the room.

"There's a second one coming!" Imani shouted.

"What is it! Is it ugly?" Samantha shouted.

A second cry filled the tent as Mongo squawked in confusion and fear and perhaps a tiny bit of joy.

"Oh my god, oh my god," Donut called from my shoulder. "Mongo... Mongo... you're a daddy!"

"My babies!" Kiwi said. "Give me my babies!"

I reached over and put my hand on Juice Box's shoulder. "You're right. We are the same. That's why we need to keep working together. Nothing is hopeless."

She turned to me, and she grinned. "You misunderstand me, cowboy. Am I sad about Louis? Of course. But am I hopeless? Not even close. In fact, I think I might have a little more in my tank than

you do right now. Just wait until you see what Justice Light has cooked up."

"Oh my god, they're so adorable!" Donut cried. "Congratulations, Kiwi!"

"Looks like they're both girls," Imani said.

"Yay!" Samantha said. "They're not ugly!"

"Congratulations, mama." Florin coughed. "They're, uh, amazing."

I finally looked at the babies curled on the chest of Kiwi. Kiwi, old, scarred, and tired. The mother with a single eyepatch looked down at her two newborns with a loving eye as the twins continued to cry.

"It is kind of an... eclectic form," Donut muttered. "But I guess it's better than them being boring. But aren't they adorable, Carl?"

"Err," I said, exchanging a look with Elle who had a look of horror on her face.

They weren't bears. They weren't raptors. They were something in-between. It was still a little early to tell what they were going to really look like.

They were cute, I supposed. Kind of in the same way Mongo was cute when he was a baby. Meaning, they weren't even a little cute. They were goddamn abominations, but I wasn't about to say that out loud, not with half the room fawning over them, including their mother and Donut.

"Oh my god, with all the war stuff happening, we never had a baby shower!" Donut cried. "If we're really going to spend the next week rebuilding this town, then we simply must have a shower right away!"

The creatures looked a little like the owlbear monsters from Dungeons and Dragons, but not quite. They had four legs, and they had the little stubs of wings as well. They were covered in a generous crop of wet, brown fur. But the heads of both of them had distinctly Mongo-like features, despite there being no feathers at all.

Their eyes, however, were bulbous and pug-like, rotating in their sockets and not focusing. And they weren't exactly even with each other. The baby on the left had one eye that was almost twice the size of the other. Their eyes made Rend's eyes look completely

normal. It was... unsettling. Like a science experiment gone horrifically wrong.

"Can I have one?" Samantha demanded. "Carl accidentally blew up my robot dog Buster, but this is so much better. Mongo, I had no idea you'd make such adorable babies!"

They had beaks, but the noise they made was distinctly mammal-like. In fact, it was almost human-like, which was even worse.

Newborn Ursensus. Female. Level 0.

Legendary Creature.

I just love it when I'm allowed to create new monsters within the confines of the game rules. Part raptor, part bear, part Scolopendra magic. All adorable. These fuzzy little meat-eaters are going to be quite the handful when they grow up.

Because of this mob's intelligence level they cannot be used as pets.

Donut gasped with delight. "Mongo, you made a legendary creature!"

Elle: Okay, am I the only one completely freaked out by these little trash goblins? Holy shit, guys.

Florin: If we were back home, we'd be drowning them both in the bath right about now.

Imani: Not a word, either of you. Not a word.

Mongo stood nearby, waving his wings as if he didn't know what to do. I patted him on the back.

"If I had a cigar, I'd give it to you, buddy."

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[83]

"Okay everyone. We have about an hour left to figure out the issue with Louis before the soldiers take the Dream castle," Edgar said as they wheeled out Kiwi and her new babies. He stood upon another bed so he was even with Louis. "Let's work the problem. Juice Box, can you tell if the presence is in a specific place?"

"No," Juice Box said, pulling her hand away. "It's very, very strange. I can sense the lungs and the heart. I can feel Tagg there. They are a symbiote, in a way. We can rip open his chest and take his heart and lungs, but no healing potion will fix that. He would instantly die. And the moment we move in, I fear the presence in him would react."

Samantha had left the room but was now back, hovering over all of us. She'd rushed outside, but when she returned, she seemed a little upset and hadn't said anything.

"Okay," Edgar said. "Anybody have any ideas?"

Victory and Fopsy both appeared in the room with a *crack*.

"Where have you been?" I asked.

"In a virtual meeting of the Syndicate Council," Victory said. "We're only back because the AI was throwing a fit about us missing all this. They've just called a No Confidence vote on Glory, and that's happening right now. There's a bit of an upheaval out there. People are suddenly accusing everyone else of secretly being agents for the Reavers."

"Is he?" I asked. "You know what, nevermind. I don't give a shit."

"He's not as far as I'm aware," Victory said, ignoring my statement that I didn't care. "What's more interesting is the possibility that the Dream are all Reavers."

"They're not," Juice Box said.

She nodded. "But the fact Tagg decided to secretly start moving toward the post physical form path is interesting. I could see why he'd keep any association with the Reavers a secret. They're two of the largest consumer-goods manufacturers in the galaxy. The Dream provide food, and the Reavers build just about everything else. An alliance would be a mega-monopoly, and the only reason why the Reavers don't have a foothold in food production is that people don't trust them with it. The Dream is hardly better with their food licensing agreements, but people don't have to worry about being shepherded toward singularity. And even more interesting is that Glory apparently knew. The Dream and the Syndicate security just started shooting at everyone for no apparent reason, and we have spacecraft crash-landing all over the Earth's surface right now."

Victory thumbed over her shoulder at Fopsy. "And if the vote goes a certain way, this guy here might actually be the Prime Minister again, which is doubly interesting because he's the Dream's adjutant. You'd think he'd know if his client was a robot."

"I had no idea," Fopsy said. "No inkling whatsoever, but it does make sense now considering some clues."

"Guys," I said. "Again. I don't give a shit. I just want to help Louis."

Victory nodded. "As far as rules are concerned, Tagg will still be killed the moment Team Retribution takes that castle. Whether those organs keep working in General Louis is really up to Tagg."

"Is there any path of negotiation where he can surrender and survive?" I asked.

Victory shrugged. "The rules are pretty clear. If he's not on the floor anymore, he will forfeit and still live. But unfortunately, the crawl rules supersede, and his host can't leave the floor. Louis can't leave."

Damnit, I thought. "Can he abdicate? Team Retribution had about 200 crawlers as soldiers, and they were able to leave and join us."

Victory shook her head. "No. He's literally the only one left, and he's the warlord."

"So it's impossible," I said.

"It appears that way, yes," Victory said.

I sighed, turning my attention back to Louis.

We had his jacket open and his shirt up, revealing his bare, pale chest. He'd been completely split open, but the scar was gone. His Donut Holes shirt was still there, and because it was magical it wouldn't break. But it was now stained with blood.

"I can fix him," Samantha said.

"Let's talk to the elf again," I said to the group. "See if he has any ideas or demands."

Warlord Carl: Okay, Tagg. Tell us what you want.

Epitome Tagg: It's quite simple, Carl. Get me to the 18th Floor. I will have a new body grown for me, and we will grow replacement organs for your friend here, and we will do a swap. He will be out of the dungeon, and I will be back in control. We both get what we want.

Warlord Carl: We can't do that. Not with that action item that will force you to die once we take your castle. I just confirmed this with both my adjutant and yours. And as much as I love Louis, you have to know I'm not willing to kill everyone else in order to save him.

Epitome Tagg: We'll have to finish the procedure at the Reaver castle. Fang was being an ass and wasn't going to allow the brain implant until he, too, was free. We will keep your friend's brain intact, and it can be reimplanted. Once that happens, I will have control, and he will cease to be a crawler. Not if his brain is physically out of his body. We know what you're planning on doing with the NPC team. With the *Zerzura* spell, which will take the city of Larracos to the 12th floor. I will go with them.

I paused at that, and I exchanged a look with Donut. The guy truly was in the dark. He had no idea the castle had been nuked and even if we wanted to go with that crazy plan, it was now impossible.

I was hoping he'd have an actual, viable way to get Louis out.

"Fuck," I said. "Mordecai, is there a way to knock his ass out so he's, like, asleep when the timer expires on his castle?"

"I don't think so. If he's out or disabled, the lungs and heart stop. Again, maybe we can kick start the organs if Tagg dies. *Maybe*. It depends on how the system decides to kill him. But he clearly has access to his warlord page meaning he sees how much time he has left. He will take Louis out with him."

"Doesn't he still own the *Vengeance of the Daughter* show?" Donut asked. "Maybe we can get..."

"No," Victory said, interrupting her. "He has no outside communications anymore. That was your doing, if you recall."

"I have an idea," Samantha said.

"We need to stall him. Make him think we're going along," I said.

Warlord Carl: Okay, Tagg. We'll take you to the castle. But I want assurances you'll keep your end of the bargain with Louis.

Epitome Tagg: I want a show of good faith. Remove the Team Retribution soldiers from my throne room.

Warlord Carl: Let's see if I can convince her.

"Okay," I said. "I'm still waiting for ideas, folks."

Samantha flew right up to me and bit me on the nose.

"Ow! What the fuck, Samantha!"

"Carl," she said, sounding serious and morose. "I think my child is dead. I think she died in the acid. I felt her, and now I don't feel her anymore, and it is my fault. I should have gone to save her sooner, but I did not. I was too caught up in my own lust and anger, and now I have lost my only child. I have failed as a mother."

"Uh," I said. "I'm... I'm sorry about that? Are you sure she was actually down here?"

She shook her head sadly. "She was here, and I felt her, but now she's gone. It's actually Tish's fault, I'm quite certain, which is why after this is done I am going to plant the nuke I stole from Buster up

at the college. But that's not the important part here. The important part here is that I know how to save Louis."

"Goddamnit, Samantha," I said. "You have a nuke up your neck hole?" I actually had one, too, still attached to one of the dogs. But I wasn't about to tell her I had one of the dangerous robots. "You will not be nuking anyone. Tell us your plan on saving Louis."

Samantha sniffed. "The flesh golem body you have in your inventory. Of Princess Lunette. She has a good heart and lungs. If you swap them out fast enough, you can save Louis."

"Holy jeepers," Mordecai said. "That's... that's actually a great idea."

"Of course!" Edgar said. "That was originally my tattoo. I had forgotten she'd turned it into an incomplete flesh golem."

"It won't work outside the dungeon," Victory warned. "Louis will need to make a pretty expensive deal to survive, but if the alternative is death." She let it hang.

"But it'll work?" I asked. "Isn't a heart transplant a super-complicated procedure?"

"How is Samantha a floating head, but Louis can't live with stupid lungs and a heart?" Donut demanded. "This is so inconsistent!"

Mordecai turned to Juice Box. "Do you really have a Fleshmancer form?"

She immediately changed to a tall, dark-skinned humanoid figure. A male figure. "We will need powerful healing potions and a chest spreader," she said, her voice now deep.

"I still have a Mordecai's Special Brew on me," Donut said.

"Wait." I held up a hand. I turned to the sex doll head. "Samantha, I'm sorry about your daughter. Maybe she's not really gone." I had a sudden thought. What was it that War Mage had said? They'd found and taken the Scavenger's Daughter. Could that possibly be *Samantha's* daughter? And if so, did that mean Samantha was really the scavenger? I still didn't know who that was. I really needed to sit down and figure all this out. But for right now, we needed to save Louis. "If we do this, that means you won't get your body back. At least not for a while."

She nodded solemnly. “I know. It’s okay. Louis deserves it more than I do.”

I patted her on the head. She was still burned to a crisp, and little flakes of crap fell off her.

“That’s... very brave and strong of you. That makes you a hero, Samantha. And I’m very proud of you.”

She sniffed. “I don’t always mess things up, right? I’d like to think maybe I can be a good influence sometimes and not someone who ruins everything, which is what King Blaine said to me and what my father said to me and what my mother said to me before they all cast me out.” She blinked up at me and Donut, who’d returned to my shoulder. “I used her, my daughter, to get what I wanted. I ruined everything.”

“It’s okay to be a work in progress,” Donut said. “Thank you for helping to save Louis.”

She nodded. “I may be a neglectful mother. I may have had an indirect, possibly direct hand in the death of Geyrun, but a girl can find forgiveness, right?”

I sighed.

“You did not just fucking say that out loud.”

“What?”

System Message: Emberus has entered the realm.

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[84]

66 Minutes Until the destruction of the 9th Floor.

"Fuck," I said, jumping to my feet. "Fuck, fuck, fuck! Guys, change of plans!"

Quest Update: Find Out Who Killed My Son.

This so-called Psamathe claims she was part of my son's death. Capture her for me, and I will personally handle the interrogation. Once I have finished *grilling* her, I will cleanse this world in fire to remove the stink of this murderer's presence.

If she is not within my presence in 66 minutes, this world will be destroyed in fire and lava and wrath.

Fly, martyr. Bring my enemy to me.

Nobody had yet reacted.

"We're doing this. We're doing it now!" I shouted.

"What? What?" Donut asked.

Even though Emberus was clearly on the other side of the map, it was already getting warmer.

"Wow. I wouldn't have opened my heart if I'd known you were going to be all dramatic about this," Samantha said.

Tran: Uh, guys? There's a new, very, very large and pissed-off looking god in the distance.

Tran was still out in the field, guarding the remains of the Dream castle.

New Quest. This is How the Gristle Grinds.

This is a team quest. All crawlers and all active combatants of the Princess Posse will receive this quest.

There is no host to this quest. Nobody can opt out of this quest.

Ha! And you thought these quest things went by the wayside on this floor. Sorry to disappoint you, you soon-to-be toasty bitches!

Here's the problem. A very angry god that many of you are familiar with has just entered the realm. His name is Emberus. His son, Geyrun, was murdered. It's a big mystery that probably isn't going to be solved today, even if any of you bastards do survive this. But a demigod named "Samantha" has just admitted to having taken part in the crime. Emberus, being the loving father he is, has come to the realm to question this demigod. Regardless of what Samantha says to him, Emberus is going to turn the entirety of the 9th floor into a cremation chamber.

This will happen in at least 66 minutes, but your cremation may be delayed slightly if Samantha actually shows up to the interrogation.

Regardless, everything and everybody on this floor is going to die. This is not something that can be stopped.

That is, unless you manage to kill Emberus, which as we all know *is* possible, but unlikely.

So here's the quest part. You need to win faction wars. You gotta do it fast. And once you do that, get the hell out of there before the world goes up in flames.

This event supersedes any other events, but Faction Wars rules are still in effect.

***Reward*: All survivors will be given one year off their indentureship contracts should they accept a deal upon the**

next floor. This is good for the first negotiation only. Also, all food boxes will be upgraded with the "extra toasty" option.

"You know what, Carl," Elle said. "Sometime in the near future we need to sit down and do a solid positives and negatives analysis of letting you keep that pet sex doll of yours."

"Like you never accidentally triggered an apocalyptic event, Elle," Samantha muttered.

Carl: Everyone haul ass back to the city. This is not a drill. We're doing this. T-minus 65 minutes until level collapse!

Tran: Are you fucking kidding me?

Carl: Get back here now.

"Katia!" I called. The orchid in her inventory took exactly 60 minutes to work.

We had 65 minutes. "Eat the orchid. You have to do it now. Now, now, now!"

"But..." she began.

"Carl, we haven't had the chance to say goodbye to her!" Donut cried. "I thought we had days left!"

The moment Katia took the orchid, she would be rendered unconscious for an hour. And afterward, the goddess would appear.

Katia looked panicked. "I haven't transferred all my inventory away yet!"

"I know. I'm sorry," I said. I grabbed her hands. "You have to eat it. Now."

"But I have stuff in the safe room that I *really* need..."

"This isn't goodbye," I said, taking a moment to put my forehead against hers. "This is how we win. Remember the plan. This is *your* plan. You already gave Donut the stuff, right?"

"I did, but..." She seemed to resign herself. "Remember how I said you were going to Carl it up?"

"Yeah, this one is on Samantha," I said. "Now eat the orchid."

"I love you," Katia said. She raised her voice. "I love all of you."

Warlord Carl: If you are not in Larracos, get your asses in here now.

Justice Light: Tell me what is happening!

Carl: In 65 minutes, Emberus will melt this entire floor.

Justice Light: Oh. Is that all?

Carl: Set your trap or whatever the hell you're doing and get to Larracos.

Justice Light: The trap is already turned on. It has been turned on for days now.

Carl: Good. Now get here!

I whirled, pointing at Juice Box and Mordecai. "You guys. Do Louis. Now. We can't leave if we haven't actually won. How long will it take?"

"Thirty minutes," Mordecai said.

"Then get moving. Juice Box. Get your people to safety."

She nodded.

System Message: Forces from Team Retribution have abandoned the throne room of the Dream.

To Victory, I said. "The moment we win, how long before the stairwells appear?"

"Immediately."

"Actually, it's about ten seconds," Fopsy replied.

"And where do the stairwells appear? Here in the funnel?"

"I can't tell you that, Carl," Victory said.

"It's here," Rosetta said, striding into the tent, followed closely by a bewildered looking Tipid. "There will be several right here in a ring around where the castle currently is. The moment Factions Wars is won, the 72 hours countdown appears for level collapse and the stairwells generate."

Imani grabbed my shoulders. "We don't have enough time! Carl, it's 60 minutes for her to be unconscious. The actual ceremony is probably going to take another ten."

"I know," I said. "I'm gonna have to stall a little bit. Samantha, don't go far!"

"Wait," Bautista said. "We are not prepared! I need... I thought..."

"Eat the fucking orchid," I cried at Katia.

"Okay, okay, I'm doing it," Katia said, pulling herself up onto the same table Kiwi had just given birth upon.

"No," Donut cried. "No, I need to say goodbye properly!" Donut leapt to the table, but by the time she landed, Katia was already out. She was knocked out, and her health was down to 1%. She had **Waiting for the Goddess** over her head.

"No," Donut said.

System Message: The Orchid of Eileithyia has been consumed. The goddess has been summoned.

Huanxin Jinx would get here two minutes before Emberus would melt this world. Not enough time.

"I didn't..." Donut said from her spot next to Katia. "Carl, I didn't get to say goodbye."

I took a breath, and I put my hand on her. "It's okay. We still have the ceremony itself after she wakes up. Like Imani says, it'll take a little bit."

"But if it takes time, how are we going to do it? And what if the Huanxin Jinx lady makes it last long on purpose? She just wants Katia and doesn't care about the rest of us."

Donut wouldn't be able to leave until after Katia was whisked away. That was the price of the Crown of the Sepsis Whore.

I eyed Samantha just hovering there, looking petulant. I looked in my inventory, and I moved the Samantha head-chucker attachment for my xistera to my hotlist.

"We'll have to wait until the last minute, and then we'll give Emberus what he wants. Hopefully that'll give us enough time. But before that, we should have enough time to get everybody else out as long as this Louis surgery goes well. It'll just be you, me, and Katia. That way we'll know everybody else is safe."

Elle buzzed up and crossed her arms. "If you think you're going to hog Katia's last moments all to yourself, you're crazy."

"Guys," I said. "It's going to be dangerous as fuck. Priority is making sure most everyone else is safe."

"Carl," Donut said. "If you're planning on using your head thrower thing, you won't be able to take it off. Not if Emberus picks Samantha up. It'll just summon the god to you, and we'll both get burned to nothing. Remember when he was outside Tserendolgor's bubble? He melted the entire world!"

"It's okay," I said. "One problem at a time."

"Okay, everybody shut up," Mordecai called. "We need to free Louis. Carl, we need that flesh golem."

I grabbed another cot, and I pulled it next to Louis. I dumped the body of Princess Lunette on the cot next to him.

This was the body that was supposed to eventually house Samantha. It had been given to me by Signet in the last moments of the Butcher's Masquerade. Princess Lunette. Signet's mother. She'd originally been a tattoo, etched onto Signet soon after Edgar had found the young, alone half-naiad after her mother's death at the hand of the high elves.

The body was that of a slight, beautiful naiad. The moment the body appeared, I saw the problem.

"Uh," I began. "Guys, she has gills. She's a full naiad. Doesn't that mean she's water only?"

"Yes," Mordecai said. "That's okay. You have that rebreather in your inventory. Give it to me."

"What?" I asked. I dug into my inventory, and I found it. It was tiny, the size of a large bracelet. It was the kua-tin rebreather I'd taken from Loita's body after I'd assassinated her. "It's too small!"

"Not where we're going to put it," Edgar said. "Okay, this is what we're going to do. Mordecai is going to cut him open, and once we do, Donut will administer a fine healing potion. While that is happening, I will need two people to hold open his chest. Carl and Bautista... Daniel, where did you go?" We looked about, but Bautista was gone, having fled the tent. "Tipid, you hold the other side open. In the meantime, Imani and Rosetta, you will open up Princess Lunette and expose the heart and pulmonary system. Her lungs are different than human lungs, so be careful when you cut. Keep her open, and when we're ready, I will instruct you on how to quickly extract it. Once it's ready to be transplanted into Louis, we'll administer the special brew potion. We'll have 30 seconds. We'll quickly remove the existing heart and lungs and replace it with the naiad organs. Juice Box will activate it, and then we'll do the graft. That'll be the crucial part, at the end. We'll have 30 seconds, and that's it."

"Okay folks," Mordecai said. "Let's do it." He looked up in the air. "This probably should go without saying, but what I'm aboot to do is a surgical procedure and is allowed under the non-combatant code. The second party in this is an empty shell."

He took a knife, and he started to cut down the center of Louis's chest.

Warlord Tagg: What is happening. What are you doing? I swear I will kill him.

We were almost ready for the part where we were going to extract the heart and lungs. They were mostly electronic, looking more like the internals of a machine than an actual heart and lungs, making it easy to see where Tagg ended and Louis began. But strands of red, pulsing flesh were interwoven in the plastic-like organs.

"Shit," I said as I held the exposed, open bones of Louis's chest. "Tagg is freaking out."

"We just need two more minutes," Mordecai said. They were setting up a group of about thirty different lines that would cut all at once, bringing the entire system out in one piece. "Distract him! We can't have him shutting down now!"

The heat had become sweltering. Emberus occasionally bellowed in the distance, calling for Samantha. Outside, the sound of rapid, last-minute preparations continued unabated.

"I got it," Donut said. She stood over Louis's open chest on a high chair, ready to drop Mordecai's Special Brew. Behind her, Katia remained in her coma.

WARLORD DONUT: WE'RE ALMOST THERE TO THE CASTLE. SO WHAT'S YOUR PLAN ANYWAY? TO TAKE OVER THE BODY OF LOUIS? HOW ARE YOU GOING TO LOOK YOUR MOTHER IN THE EYE KNOWING YOU HAD SEX WITH HER?

Epitome Tagg: Quit saying that! That disgusting human never had sex with my mother! He besmirched my mother's

name with a changeling who took her form!

WARLORD DONUT: YOU KNOW WHAT I THINK HAPPENED? I THINK YOUR MOM WAS REALLY FLATTERED THAT LOUIS THOUGHT SHE WAS SEXY, AND THAT MADE YOU MAD. AND YOU'RE AFRAID THAT SHE'S GOING TO WANT LOUIS IN REAL LIFE, AND IF YOU LOOK LIKE HIM, WHAT'S GOING TO HAPPEN?

Epitome Tagg: So help me gods, I will end him right now.

EPITOME TAGG'S SEXY MOTHER: "I CAN'T WAIT FOR YOU TO COME BACK TO ME, LOUIS. MY HAND IS STUCK IN THE WASHING MACHINE. WILL YOU COME HELP ME?"

Epitome Tagg: Change your name back this instant! I will kill this fat loser right now! Right fucking now! You puerile, disgusting mongrel. How dare you? How fucking dare you? I will starve out all of your kind!

EPITOME TAGG'S SEXY MOTHER: HOW DARE *ME*? HOW DARE *YOU* INSULT ME LIKE THAT? ON THIS, THE DAY OF MY GRANDCHILD'S BIRTH? YOU DARE? DO YOU KNOW WHAT LEVEL I AM?

Epitome Tagg: CHANGE THAT NAME NOW.

EPITOME TAGG'S SEXY MOTHER: UH, TIME OUT. IT'S TELLING ME I CAN'T DO ANY MORE NAME CHANGES UNTIL TOMORROW. SERIOUSLY. I THINK I'M STUCK WITH THIS NAME NOW.

"He said stall, not piss him off," I cried.

"We're playing good cop, bad cop, Carl."

"That's not how that works!"

"He's too mad right now to do anything!" Donut said. "I must admit I stole that one insult joke at the end there from the internet. You posted something very similar on your Facebook page once. Well, Miss Beatrice posted it on your behalf."

"I know, Donut. And insults aren't as funny or as effective when you reuse or steal them."

"He's a bald CEO robot guy with both mommy and anger issues from another planet. It's not like he's going to know I'm lifting material, Carl."

I grunted with the effort of keeping Louis's ribcage spread open. The constant healing was fighting to close it. "That's okay. The whole thing was taken from the *Godfather* movie anyway."

"Thirty seconds!" Mordecai called. "Guys, are you ready with Lunette's organs?"

Behind us, the flesh golem was peeled up, tissues already extracted, held up in the air. It reminded me of the krasue demons from the third floor. Rosetta, Imani, and Elle all held up the dripping organs, placed in a small net like it was something they'd just pulled from the ocean.

"We're ready," Imani called.

Epitome Tagg: You know what? Fuck this. Fuck this existence. Fuck this life. And fuck all of you. You don't deserve singularity. None of you do.

"Heart has stopped," Edgar shouted.

"Shit, pull, pull!" Mordecai yelled. They weren't ready yet, and Mordecai couldn't be the one to remove the organs, lest it constitute an attack. But Bucket Boy yanked, pulling the organs out. The whole group, heart and lungs all popped out with a wet squelch. He threw the mess over his shoulder onto the ground with a splat.

"Potion!" Edgar cried as Donut poured Mordecai's Special Brew into Louis's open, gushing chest.

"Organs incoming!" Imani called as she placed them in his yawning chest cavity.

"Casting now," Juice Box said, her male voice calm. Her hands flashed, and the transplanted organs began to squirm, the pieces whipping about like an octopus, seeking attachments.

Mordecai took the rebreather and made a slit in the bronchial, moving it into the flesh, quickly sewing, his hands flashing.

"Shit, is that going to work?" I asked.

"That's how these things are actually designed," Rosetta said. "Internal or external. He's not going to like it, but it'll work."

Mordecai cast a *Water Breathing* scroll on Louis—we had to use the scroll version because he now had an extra-long potion cooldown—and as the gills formed, he quickly connected a few tubes from the new organs to the gills. Bucket Boy started quickly jamming

something into the slits on his neck. This would keep them there after the water breathing ended.

Donut: DID YOU KNOW MORDECAI KNEW HOW TO DO THIS STUFF?

Carl: There's still so much about all of them we don't know.

"Done!" Mordecai shouted with 10 seconds left on the rapid healing. I raised my hands in the air, letting go of the rib cage. Tipid did the same, and the chest snapped closed like a mousetrap. As we watched and collectively held our breath, the chest sealed on its own. For several seconds, Louis remained pale. Then he coughed. He coughed, and water splashed from the gills on his neck. He coughed again, and then his eyes fluttered open.

"What?" Louis asked. He made a gagging noise, and then more water splashed from his new gills. Bucket Boy tentatively reached forward and started pulling out the stops he'd placed, holding the gills open. The gills remained.

"Louis," Mordecai said. "Switch off the water breathing notification."

"Uh, where am I?" he asked.

"Do it," Mordecai said.

"I did already. I did when I woke up. But something's wrong. I feel... I feel weird."

"It worked," Edgar announced, and we all started to clap.

Samantha zipped up. "We're cousins now," she said, and she kissed Louis on the lips.

"Wait, guys," I said. "What happened to the lungs and heart?"

Mongo popped up and let out an angry screech. He had blood on his beak, and he spit out the chewed-to-hell plastic heart and lungs onto the ground of the tent with disgust.

System Message: Warlord Epitome Tagg of the Dream has fallen. Credit for the kill has been given... Well, this one is just as complicated as the last one, but imma give it to pet Mongo of the Princess Posse. I almost called it a suicide, and I almost gave it to that Bucket Boy kid, but it's going to Mongo. Consider it a present for the baby shower.

System Message: The Dream has been defeated.

System Message: All assets of the Dream have been awarded to the Princess Posse.

System Message: And then there were two.

We had 32 minutes until the timer ran out.

"Well, that was significantly easier than I thought it would be," Donut said.

"Sledge!" I called. I stuck my head out the tent. "Sledge! It's time!"

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[85]

21 Minutes Until the destruction of the 9th Floor.

"Goodbye, Sledgie," Donut said from the shoulder of the rock monster. "You were the best bodyguard anyone could ever have."

The Sledge reached up, and he patted Donut on the head. "Maybe I see you again. Maybe I see Bomo. And you no need bodyguard anymore."

"I will always need you, Sledgie," she said, and she headbutted the rock monster. She jumped from him back to my shoulder.

"Starting to cast," The Sledge said. It would take five minutes for the spell to work.

He glowed. He had cast *Zerzura.*

Rosetta: It worked. Shanty Town is included in the glow. It successfully combined the two towns. Moving to the saferoom now with Tipid and the others. I have Samantha.

The entire funnel city of Larracos—and Shanty Town—was about to get transferred to the 12th floor. To the Court of the Ascendency. According to Rosetta, most of the action took place in the actual halls, which were placed on a green, fertile hill overlooking miles and miles of fields of cotton.

There were some magical properties with this cotton field, but it was somewhere here where the city would land, and it would be

where the NPCs would settle.

The rules for the gods were clear. The NPCs were untouchable until the Ascendency actually started. And in the meantime, with Juice Box's squad of changelings and their ability to change to basilica guards, they could hopefully keep the gods at bay should any rules change.

If the city happened to squish any mortals when it landed and—hopefully—drilled into the ground, it was going to cause some problems because those squished by the appearance of the city would turn into undead monsters called Children of Inpewt. That was something they'd have to deal with, but based on the sheer number of people we were sending down there, something told me it wasn't going to be a huge issue.

It wasn't safe, but it was life. And it was a way to make certain both teams would survive.

We actually weren't certain what was about to happen with some of the mercenaries. There were several kinds, and all were going to do something different. The hired ones, including the Sledge and the other surviving cretins, along with the for-hire, dungeon-born mercenaries for all the teams would simply disappear, possibly moved into "storage" for the next crawl, possibly tossed back into the mercenary market. They would not move to the 12th floor.

The changelings and all the thousands of NPCs who lived in Larracos plus the Semeru dwarves would move to the Ascendency. Anyone else who'd moved to this floor from the 6th would also move.

We weren't certain about the strippers or the sluggalos, and as a result, they would stay with us. They would go back to the safe room and move to the barracks there. We had limited capacity, but there were several crawlers who were planning on staying who could take some in.

Ferdinand would transfer to the 12th. Juice Box would, too. And with their transfer would come the defeat of Team Retribution and the victory for the Princess Posse.

And then there were the outworlders.

There were thousands upon thousands of these mercenaries in the city. People who had come here to fight both against us and for us. All of them would get transferred out of the dungeon the moment *Zerzura* triggered.

Over 50,000 former crawlers had come to help us. To fight by our side. Only about 28,000 were left. Just a little more than half. They had survived the dungeon, left, and they came back to die.

Once you enter the dungeon, you will die in the dungeon.

And of the 32,500 crawlers who made it from the eighth to the ninth, only 20,221 were left.

This is war, I thought. *This is what happens in war.*

Across the way, I watched Louis stumble from the hospital tent, holding his throat. Juice Box had her arm on his shoulder. She said something to him, and he said something back. She put her hands to her face, and she turned away. Louis just stood there, and he watched her go.

Thousands had died. Tens of thousands. But just over 20,000 crawlers making it to the 10th floor was a goddamned record. The second highest number wasn't even close.

Of those 20,000, most were going to take a deal. That was okay. They had fought long, and they had fought hard. They were done, and they deserved rest.

If we had our way. If we did this correctly, they would never have to come back.

Lucia Mar was here, sitting on the ground, sobbing. Florin, Jurgen, and Imani surrounded her, talking.

They were trying to convince her to take a deal. I hoped it would work.

And then there were the other mercenaries. Those from the armies we'd defeated. They milled about nervously, filling all the floors of Larracos, mostly lending a hand in the rapid construction.

They, too, would go home. They were done.

Well, not home. None of us were going home.

I gazed up at a group of them, staring down at me. The closest one was a gnoll mercenary. Corporal Pillbox. He nodded down at me.

He'd been in Empress D'Nadia's employ, and yet, he'd managed to survive.

My initial instinct was to kill them. I could mark them like Li Na had, and I could kill them all, raising my stats to 300 across the board just like she had. I knew a lot of people following my progress would be enraged at me not doing exactly that. They would call me stupid. They would be disappointed in the lack of blood I shed, and they would angrily unfollow my feed because I was not the monster they hoped I would be.

Fuck you all, I thought. *Fuck you all.*

One look at Li Na, and I knew that path, that slope was too steep. Survival had more than one meaning.

Still, I didn't want to let it go. The Ring of Divine Suffering. There was so much possibility on this floor, and I'd squandered it. The hold was so great, it was overwhelming. What opportunities would the ring provide on the next floor, or the one after that?

The heavy weight of Donut on my shoulder was enough to remind me that strength and stats weren't everything. I pulled the ring from my inventory, and I held it up. I raised it high enough so it was right in front of Donut's nose.

"Are you sure, Carl?" Donut asked.

"I'm sure."

She reached forward, and she gave it a sniff. And then she took the ring into her mouth, and she swallowed it. She made a gagging noise, and I patted her on the head.

"I almost choked to death, Carl. That would've been quite ironic, don't you think?"

"Hey, Kitten," a voice said.

"Ferdinand. There you are!" Donut said.

Drick had appeared. Ferdinand sat on Drick's bald head, arms splayed over the adjutant's dome like he was a pillow. Ferdinand had his old, drained-of-magic turban back in his inventory, but he still wore the bowler hat. Donut had allowed him to keep it.

"Just wanted to say 'Yo' before I moseyed on down to the 12th floor to bang some hot goddess chicks."

Donut harrumphed. “Is that so?”

“Yeah, so if you wanted, you know, a last second fling, we have time.”

“We have like four minutes, Ferdinand.”

“That’s more than enough time for me.”

“Eww. Go away. You’re disgusting.”

“All right. I’ll see you on the 12th floor then,” the cat said. He hopped to the ground, and his hat fell off. He picked it up with his mouth.

“Oh, and Ferdinand?” Donut said.

The orange cat turned around. He gave a muffled response.

“Thanks for trying to come save me in the tower.”

He spit the hat back out. “Anytime babe.” He picked it up and strolled away.

Drick nodded at me.

“You going to the 18th floor after this?” I asked.

He shrugged. “I’m assuming so, yes.”

“Good luck.”

He grunted and walked away.

Milk approached, and she stood next to me.

She would not transfer to the 12th floor according to Mordecai. She would go back to her guild.

“I did it,” she said. “I fulfilled my contract. I still have to live out the season, but I can leave after this.” She grinned at me. “I am glad I was given the chance to cook one final meal.”

She raised her wing, pointing. Donut and I looked up. In the rings around us were thousands of crawlers, all looking down upon us. A sudden silence filled the city.

“Carl, Donut,” Milk announced, her voice suddenly, magically amplified. She’d etched a word on her own throat to make the magic happen. “These are the crawlers who have all decided that they want to take a deal as soon as we reach the next floor. These are also the former crawlers who will be going home. We have a present for you, and for all the brave souls who have decided to stay and fight on.”

Your Book of Voodoo has been updated.

Your Book of Voodoo has been updated with a metric fuckton of entries.

For fucks sake. Finally.

Your Book of Voodoo has been segmented into two volumes. The second volume is entitled *Carl's Book of Boom*.

I pulled the second, heavy book from my inventory. Somewhere along the way, the book of Voodoo had magically changed since it now should have literally almost 30,000 pages. It still had about 500 pages, and when I flipped through it, it sort of zeroed in on the entry I was supposed to find. This second one was the same. I opened it to a random page.

Crawler Number 1,982,122 Asi Hamami Level 59 Fox Warrior.

Carl, thank you for helping us. I have lost so much, but I still have not lost my hope.

And below that was a drawing in red ink. It was a crude drawing of a lock and a key.

Consuming this page will give you a level 10 Lockpick skill for a period of five minutes.

Donut: CARL, CARL I GOT A BOOK CALLED *A BANQUET FIT FOR A PRINCESS!* IT'S FILLED WITH PICTURES AND NICE THINGS ABOUT ME! AND SPELLS!

Milk continued. "They're leaving the dungeon, so I taught them how to remove a skill or spell and paint it onto a page. They each did three. One for you, Carl. One for you, Donut, and one on their own entry page, which is now a first come, first served sort of deal in the original book of Voodoo that anyone can use. The one for you and Donut are personal for you. They permanently lose the skills when they transfer it to the book, and when you eat the page, you only gain it for a very short period of time, depending on the quality of the drawing. But each one should have a personal note attached, telling you how they are grateful that you have saved their lives." She paused and gave me a grin. "Oh, and they may have unloaded some of their gear. It's waiting in your guild for distribution. I told them not to give it *all* up because some of the deals they may take will require them to use their old equipment."

Donut trembled on my shoulder. “I... I don’t know what to say.”

“Hup! Hup! Hup!” the other crawlers started to chant, rising in din.

“And these guys,” Milk said, her voice also rising in volume. “The former crawlers. They can’t transfer their skills, but that’s okay, don’t you think? They already gave what they could. And some gave everything they had.”

They all started throwing something over the edge of the railings down upon us. Flowers and streamers. These were the white and gold flowers from the plains, from before it all started. I didn’t know where the colorful streamers had come from, but as they fell, they filled the broken city of Larracos with shining, colorful light, and it made it beautiful again.

“Goodbye everyone!” Donut called, turning in a circle, tears in her eyes as flowers and streamers fell around her. “Goodbye everyone! Thanks for helping us murder all the bad guys! And you, bad guys who are still here, I hope you go home and hug your children because you got really, really lucky!”

“They’re not really going home,” Milk whispered to me. “Apparently the embargo is still in place. Your warriors are headed back to *Homecoming Queen*. The other mercenaries, I don’t know.”

“That’s okay,” I said, waving. I met eyes again with Corporal Pillbox who was also crying. “If they do send them back in here, I think their masters will end up regretting it.”

“Goodbye, Carl,” Milk said. “If you can sneak back into Club Vanquisher, come say hello. But if not, that’s okay. You have given me something I didn’t think I had anymore. Burn it all to the ground.”

I gave my sister a hug.

Across the way, I caught sight of Tina hovering over her mother, who sat in a chair with the two babies nestled against her. Miss Nadine was there as well, clucking over the children. As was Holger, who had young Clint on his shoulders. Kiwi had decided to risk going to the 12th floor, along with all of the other children, who surrounded her. Bonnie and Skarn stood side-by-side, both looking tired and

forlorn. Mongo and Rend—who would stay with us—were both there as well. Mongo was sniffing at the babies. Rend was trying to catch the falling streamers in his mouth, and several had fallen upon his head.

"Twenty seconds," the Sledge announced.

The Sledge turned and looked at me. "I made a difference?"

"You did," I said.

"Bye Sledgie! Bye everyone!" Donut called.

Juice Box: I will be leaving approximately 10 seconds after everyone else.

Carl: Wait, what the fuck? Where are you? Where are you going? You're not transferring to the 12th?

Juice Box: Oh, I'm going to the 12th floor all right. But Justice Light and I are taking the long way. It's okay, Carl. Trust me. You'll like this one.

I gave one last cursory glance around me. Mordecai was here, too. He would not transfer with the *Zerzura*, and he held little Ruby in his arms, who would.

"It's for the best, little one," he said.

"Finished" A dwarf cried to my left. I turned to see he had finished building the statue that had broken in front of the castle.

The statue was of a dwarf. A goddess. Ysalte. The Vinegar Bitch. I remembered, now. She was the now-dead goddess of this place. Of Larracos. Paz had killed her during that fight at the end of the previous floor.

In the moment before everything flashed and disappeared, my eyes focused on the giant axe—the giant *pick*axe—over the goddess's shoulder.

There was a long pause, and then the messages came.

System Message: Both Warlords Ferdinand and Juice Box have left the realm. Under the current ruleset, they have abandoned their posts and have forfeited their position.

System Message: Team Retribution has been defeated.

System Message: The Princess Posse has won Faction Wars.

Congratulations, Champions.

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[86]

8 Minutes Until the destruction of the 9th Floor.

"Okay," I said to Samantha. Sweat poured down the side of my head. "The moment he grabs you, just answer his questions. Tell the truth. Lie. I don't care." I indicated the xistera on my arm. "I will try to get you back, but I can't if he's actually touching you. Maybe try to get him to throw you in the volcano or something." The moment I dropped the xistera off my arm, she would get teleported back to us, but as we knew all too well, bringing her back to me was a really dangerous thing to do.

But if I didn't bring her back, and she wasn't in a saferoom before Donut and I left the floor, we'd lose her. We'd never see her again.

"I will ask you if he's touching you. You will answer, and you will tell the truth. Got it?"

"I thought you told me to lie," Samantha said.

"No, no. You know what I mean. Tell the truth. And don't bring him back here!"

"Got it," Samantha said. She'd wrapped several of the streamers around her head.

Above, Prepotente floated. He pointed in a direction. The god was waiting exactly where I figured he'd be. In the volcano. I aimed,

and I fired, arcing Samantha up and out of Larracos.

It would take a few minutes for her to make the journey.

Prepotente: That looks like a good throw, Carl. Yes, he sees her. He's moving to catch her, I think. The streamers were a nice touch. I am now entering the stairwell. Good luck to you all.

Carl: Thank you, Prepotente. See you on the next floor.

Prepotente: I love you.

Carl: Uh, love you too, buddy.

Larracos was gone. All that was left now was a massive pit. A few saferooms remained, just doorways against the sloped pit of Larracos, including one, thankfully, at the very bottom.

Where the castle used to be, there was a bed of roots as thick as elephant trunks.

They were old and dead, and they turned to mulch the moment we touched them. They seemed to be covering a giant hole, and I wondered what would happen if I just walked out onto the roots. Would I fall? Would I fall all the way to the land of the gods?

The massive dwarven digger was gone, leaving a dark hole. That was good. Our guys would have that thing on the 12th floor.

Several stairwells to the 10th floor filled the area, and the remaining crawlers were streaming into them as quickly as they could.

Florin had talked Lucia Mar into partying with him. He said she'd agreed to take a deal, but she'd been sketchy.

None of us believed she actually would. And as a result, he would not take one, either.

Tran went into the stairwell, as did so many others, including Zhang, who went in alone. I'd asked him if he was going to take a deal, and he said he didn't know. Li Na remained partied with him, but she hadn't spoken to him at all. She, too, had gone into the stairwell without saying a word.

Jurgen stopped by and gave me a kiss on both cheeks before he left. Osvaldo and his team went in. Britney said she was contemplating a deal, but was afraid and would probably be back.

She went in with Chris. Tuba and Selvi, the party members of the dead Burcu, left. They both said they were taking a deal. Neither had told me the why or how Burcu considered me as the one who'd killed her father, and I feared I'd never know.

That's the problem with such chaos. You lose so much around the edges.

The moment I thought that, I thought I heard a distant laughing deep, deep in the back of my mind, and it terrified me because it came from within the river. The river I had hoped would leave with the destruction of the ring. The laughter sounded distinctly like that of Eris, the goddess of chaos.

"Jamal is very excited about this," Jamal said, bouncing up and down on his new—and final—set of legs. He'd remained in the saferoom during the *Zerzura,* and he was one of the few NPCs who'd decided to stay with us. It was him, most of the surviving sluggalos, the strippers, and a handful of former crawlers, including Rosetta, Tipid—who didn't have a choice for the moment—along with several others. "I would very much like to see a goddess like Eileithyia. I have heard she is quite beautiful. But not as beautiful as her retainer, Yemaya. Do you think she will come as well?"

Yemaya was the goddess who looked like the Starbucks logo. "No," I said. "And get back to the saferoom. Things might happen fast, and if you're not in there, you'll get stuck here."

"And if you and Donut both die, that saferoom will go away, and Jamal would get smushed. I would very much like to stay outside for the moment."

"Okay. But stay near the door."

"Jamal will stand in the shade. It is getting quite toasty indeed."

"Juice Box left me," Louis said, coming to sit down in the tent. He still had his hand wrapped around his own throat, as if he was afraid the rebreather would choke him. He was constantly spraying water out his new gills. "She gave me divorce papers."

"Well, I'm certainly glad Samantha isn't here. She would probably say something very inappropriate right now," Donut said. "Now get into the stairwell, Louis. There's nothing more you can do here."

"No way," Louis said. "I gotta say goodbye to Katia."

In the tent standing watch over Katia was me, Donut, Elle, Imani, and Louis. Edgar went to the 12th floor. Bucket Boy was in the saferoom with the rest of the strippers. Mongo had freaked out when Tina and Kiwi and the new babies had disappeared, but we'd coaxed him into his carrier. Rend as well.

Bautista had disappeared. I searched him out, and he'd gone into the safe room. I didn't know where he was now, but I sent him a message telling him he was running out of time.

Bautista: Sorry. I'm doing something in the crafting room quickly. I'm coming.

Carl: She's about to wake up.

"He's gone. He's not dead, because he's in my goddamn chat, but he's gone," Rosetta said, entering the tent. She was talking about Justice Light, who'd disappeared with Juice Box. She was talking to Victory, who strolled in with her.

"Perhaps you should have watched him better," Victory said. "He built a trans-dimensional trap right underneath your castle, and you didn't even notice because he decorated it with regular traps."

"It is kind of a disappointment that we never got to use that whole tunnel of traps after all that work," Donut said. "Like it was all built up, and nobody ever got to the throne room to find out it was actually directly below, and they had to go through this whole Home Alone house thing to really get to it. People don't like being teased with stuff that never happens. Like with Carl's Christmas present he still hasn't opened, or my berserker spell. I hope it doesn't hurt my numbers too much."

I grunted. "Something tells me while he was willing to use the traps that way, he has something much bigger up his sleeve. And I'm waiting to open the present for a time when I really, really need it."

"It's a pair of romance novels, Carl. And it got all built up, and now you'll be nothing but disappointed when you open it."

I laughed.

"Wait, what the heck is a trans-dimensional trap anyway?" Donut asked. "Goodness it's getting hot. And not that I'm complaining,

because you're rather pleasant for an orc, but why are you even still here, Baroness Victory?"

"It's a trap that affects more than one place at a time. At least here in the dungeon," I said.

"I am here because I am waiting to be onboarded onto the Syndicate's new temporary forward headquarters on the surface of the planet since the ship got shot down," Victory said.

"You're not going to the 18th floor with the rest of the adjutants?" I asked.

"No," she said. She straightened. "With the unfortunate death of my underage nieces and nephews up in orbit, I once again became eligible for political office. Not allowed to be in office if you have underage leaders in your family. It's an old, stupid rule, but a rule nonetheless. Anyway, as people weren't certain of former Prime Minister Fopsy's relationship to the Dream, he was passed over for the newly-vacated position of Syndicate Prime Minister. As a result, I am now acting Prime Minister Victory. There will be a real vote in a few months, but in the meantime, I'm it. They wanted someone stuck here with the rest of us so I could truly focus on the crisis."

"Well, shit," I said.

"Yes," Rosetta said, sounding strangely irritated at the news. "Well shit, indeed."

"Wait, does that mean you can stop all this and get us out of here?" Donut asked. She gasped. "Carl, we know a prime minister!"

"It's only temporary," Victory said. "And even if it wasn't, it wouldn't matter. I have less power now than I did when I was a judge. The council is just as bad as the Lemig Sortion these days. It's total gridlock."

I casually stepped forward, and I put my hand on her shoulder. I felt the softness to her physical form. She was still protected. If I tried to punch her, my arm would go straight through. "I wish you good luck in your new job, madam Prime Minister."

As much as I loathed the idea of killing another few thousand schmucks who'd gotten railroaded into coming down here for the crawl, as much as I actually liked Victory, I wouldn't hesitate. Not

even for a moment, to kill the goddamn prime minister of the Syndicate.

She snorted. She knew it, too.

"Everyone be quiet!" Donut shouted. "She's waking up!"

I kept a nervous watch on the clock. Samantha would have gotten to Emberus by now. Hopefully she would stall him as long as possible.

Carl: Tell us the moment he's done with you.

Samantha: HE'S JUST HOLDING ME AND CRYING. YOUR GOD IS A LITTLE BITCH, CARL. MAYBE IT'S GOOD I HELPED KILL OFF HIS BLOODLINE.

Carl: Don't fucking say that out loud.

On the table, Katia woke up.

System Message: Eileithyia has entered the realm.

You are in the presence of a deity. The Scavenger's Daughter has opened her eyes. She fills with power.

Temporary effect from Eileithyia: All damage you strike against female opponents is quartered. All female members of your party strike with a melee power of 500%. Girl power, bitches!

Next to me, Donut gasped at the sight of the human-sized goddess, standing in the tent.

The last time we'd seen her, she'd been in the form of Huanxin Jinx, the grixist. But now she took on the goddess's true form, which we hadn't yet seen. She was a large, humanoid woman wearing flowers in her hair and white and gold robes. Her olive skin, dark eyes, and dark, curly hair were all human, but her lower face was not, which was surprising to me, considering the Greek nature of her name. Her appearance was kind, despite the distinctly alien, almost nullian-like half of her face. She appeared to have four breasts, but it was hard to tell upon her pillowy, voluptuous body. She wore sandals, and each foot only held three toes. She only had three fingers about each hand.

Goddess of Childbirth and Female Pain Eileithyia. Level 250.

Sponsored by Huanxin Jinx of the Grixist Swarm, CEO of Icon Industries.

Warning: This is a deity. She is invulnerable on this floor.

This goddess has been temporarily summoned to this location. Summoning rules apply.

The description and the temporary effect was the same as the last time we'd seen her, all those days ago in the cemetery in Cuba.

She was described as kind and gentle, and her true form relayed that perfectly.

The goddess snorted with derision. "You fucking, idiotic pricks should have done this days ago. Katia, get up and let's go. The whole court is in a tizzy about that city you fools just teleported in. It splattered an entire convent of Resheph's nuns, and he is losing his mind. And now all those zombies are wandering all over the place and fucking Odette has taken control of them because she's already taken out Inpewt, and it's a big mess and the games haven't even started yet. We have a lot of work to do."

"Hello, Huanxin," Victory said from her spot next to the table.

The timer on Emberus was about to expire, but I prayed Samantha was giving us more time.

The goddess snorted. "Victory. How many cocks did you have to suck to get that job? And I'm sure it's just an unfortunate coincidence your underage nephew was blown out of orbit. Now that idiot the Maestro is the king, and you're Prime Minister. Well, don't get used to it. With all the death and chaos your little team has caused, it's not going to matter who's in charge. They'll have your head on a pike in no time."

"Wait," Donut said. "Carl, did you hear that? The Maestro is the king?"

"Maybe," Huanxin said with a laugh. "The fate of his sister is unknown, but he's already claiming the crown."

Victory grunted. "Aren't half your holdings with the mantids?"

"What's it to you?"

"The newest mantis colony system just went dark," she said. "The same moment that other rottweiler died a few hours back. We're still not sure what's going on there, but initial reports are a

little more holistic than they were in the Aryl system. The system's star went nova."

"You're a lying bitch," Huanxin said. She laughed. "And even if you aren't, I have insurance."

"Wow, you're certainly pleasant," Donut said. "Are you planning on just being this miserable all the time? Because I'm afraid that's not going to work for our Katia. She doesn't work well with high-strung people."

"Don't tempt me, you little rat. I'm saving your ass, and I'm already irritated at everything that's happened so far."

Bautista burst into the room, and we all tensed. I'd been expecting him to come, to do something stupid. But he walked in holding several strange devices in his arms.

"I got them done," he said.

"Oh, Daniel," Katia said, speaking for the first time. "I didn't think you knew."

"Oh course I knew," he said. "I love you. I'm sorry I made you doubt me."

In the distance, the ground shook.

Samantha: MAN, THIS GUY DOES NOT HANDLE BAD NEWS VERY WELL.

Carl: Goddamnit Samantha, we need time!

"Come on Katia," Huanxin said.

"You know, Carl and I were just talking about this earlier," Donut said. "About how reusing jokes and insults and spells can sometimes be a little boring. And I don't disagree. But sometimes, the classics are classics for a reason. Don't you think?"

"What the fuck are you talking about?" Huanxin asked. "Damnit, Katia. I can't take you until you make a choice. It doesn't matter what you pick. Just pick one."

Right now Katia had three choices floating in her vision. The first would cause her constitution to get extremely powerful. The second would allow her to become a celestial attendant. The third would cause her to get pregnant. Ultimately the choice was up to the goddess, but Katia had to pick one before Eileithyia could whisk her away.

"Choose already. Choose or I will kill the cat and Carl."

"Huanxin, Darling," Donut said. "Actually, I have a better idea."

Bubbles were already appearing behind the goddess as Donut cast her level-15, now enhanced to level-16, *Laundry Day*.

"You dare?" Huanxin began before she was violently ripped from the soul armor of the goddess.

Eileithyia remained standing in the room as Huanxin Jinx hit the floor, sliding. She came to a sputtering stop in a large circle filled with multiple words of power.

"You idiots," Huanxin cried as numerous shields suddenly appeared around the heiress. She wore nothing but a long, white undershirt. The CEO shook with rage. She clicked a ring on her finger, but nothing happened.

"See those words you're standing on," I said, indicating the floor. "That was a last-minute addition. You can't teleport away while you're standing on that. Your tech shields will work, yes, but no magic will."

"And do you see my new knee pads? Aren't they lovely?" Donut asked. "They're a celestial item I got from Katia, but they fit me. I don't really need this with you, if we're being perfectly honest. But the Eileithyia boon is a 500% bonus against enemies. And because I'm partied with Carl, his bonus gives me another 500%. I don't have the same debuff he has because I'm a girl. I'm about to use that bonus against you. I'm not sure if that counts as ironic or not."

Donut started to stalk in a circle around Huanxin. "I also recently upgraded a skill because of my lovely shawl. It's not quite at 15 yet, but it's getting there. Wanna know what it is?"

The grixist continued to shake with rage. "Stay the hells away from me. I am a god. I will end you."

Donut moved like lightning, so fast I couldn't see. One moment she was on one side of the circle, and the next, she was on the other. Sparks flew in the air.

Huanxin, who'd pulled herself to her feet, was again on the ground.

"All cats have it, naturally. It's called *Claw*. I was at level 4 before, but now I'm approaching 15."

The shields around Huanxin were now just simply gone.

"But again," Donut continued, "That wasn't necessary. I'm just showing off a little."

"Goddess. Do something," Huanxin said to Eileithyia, who now just stood there.

"She can't move until Katia makes her choice," Victory said. "It's a little quirk of the system. She's not even seeing this, I don't think. See, normally the goddess won't even appear until Katia makes the selection, but when she's sponsored, it changes. There're lots of odd rules like this that cause these little game glitches."

A strange device appeared on Donut's back. This was from the gold benefactor box she'd received from the Apothecary. A simple gift, but the implication was clear.

Quadruped weapon mount.

"The scorpion's bite."

Non-magical bandolier accessory. Allows for the mounting of multiple ranged weapons. May fire and load via inventory action.

Katia's crossbow formed on Donut's back, attached to the mount. **Enchanted Repeating Crossbow of the Scavenger Mother of Mothers**. The large, deadly crossbow was bigger than Donut, and it formed with an ominous *click*. It wasn't loaded.

Donut held the heavy weight of it all just fine. She continued her stalk around the circle.

Donut's movements were mesmerizing. She was weaving a new charisma-based skill that terrified the enemy. The more terrified they were, the more experience points she received. It was called **Monologue**. It was something called a natural benefit. One of several benefits crawlers received when their boosted stats topped 300.

Donut flowed like liquid across the floor. The shining light from her tiara added to the effect. "Unfortunately, the crossbow isn't as strong as it could be because I don't have any women in my party, but again, that doesn't matter." She made a small, amused noise. "By the way, I know we're in a hurry. But we have a mutual friend

waiting outside. He'd love to come say hello real quick before you leave."

And that's when Mordecai walked into the tent.

"Mordecai here has a bit of history with you, doesn't he?" Donut asked. "He hasn't told us the whole story, but we know enough."

"You're a non-combatant NPC," Huanxin hissed at Mordecai as she pulled herself up. She held her arm, which dripped blood. "You can't touch me. You can't fucking touch me."

"No, I can't. Not directly," Mordecai said. He held something up. It was a simple crossbow bolt. There was nothing magical about it. "You see this?" He flicked the tip. "My brother died because of you and because of Odette and because of Chaco. But mostly because of you. Some of my mother's ashes are built into the tip of this bolt. It's a funeral rite in my culture. To make a weapon with the ashes of those you lost. My mother died before the crawl came to my world, and I'm grateful for the opportunity to allow her to avenge her son."

Mordecai turned his attention to Katia. "Goodbye, Katia. Be safe, kid."

He loaded the bolt into the crossbow on Donut's back, turned, and he walked from the tent.

"I am here to save you," Huanxin hissed. "This was a problem *you* created, and *I* gave you a solution."

"Typical," Donut said, still stalking in a circle around the trapped woman. "We were in trouble, yes. And you sold us a solution, yes. But you're just like everyone else. You weren't trying to help my friend. No, you fucking bitch. You were exploiting her."

"Oh boo fucking hoo," Huanxin spit. "You think you can beat us? We are gods! Let me go free, and I will forget everything."

"Again," Donut said, continuing her slow, panther-like stalk in circles around Huanxin. "We don't really need to go through all this. But we want to. We want to show those of you on the 12th floor what's coming. You're strong, yes. But we are getting stronger every day. And you know what? We don't need to kill the gods and goddesses to win. No, honey..."

The crossbow on her back fired, and the bolt slammed right between the multiple sets of eyes of the alien.

Huaxin Jinx, CEO of Icon industries rocketed backwards, slid across the floor, and came to a rest at Victory's feet, dead.

"...We just need to kill *you*."

Samantha: OKAY, CARL I TOLD HIM EVERYTHING I KNOW BUT NOW HE'S REALLY MAD. I SAID I AGREED TO HELP BECAUSE THE DOGGIE WOULD GO TO THE NOTHING BUT I DON'T REALLY KNOW WHO THE GUY IN THE HOODIE WAS, AND NOW HE'S LIKE, SUPER MAD. THE VOLCANO THING IS ABOUT TO ERUPT AGAIN I THINK.

"We gotta hurry," I said as I rushed forward. I tried to pull her body into my inventory, and it wouldn't let me. "Donut, permission to loot!"

"Oh, sorry," she said.

I picked up the body, and I took it. We didn't want Eileithyia to get too upset.

"You know, this freezing the god thing is a hell of an exploit," I said.

"It has been around for a long time," Victory said. "It's hard to get it right, though. First you need a choice option, and then you need it to be a sponsored god. The choice expires after a couple of minutes, so Katia needs to get moving. And now all the sponsors are going to be wary. Okay, team. They are calling me away. I'm sure we'll speak soon. I'm about to get yelled at for allowing the murder of another CEO. It was all within the rules, but they won't care. Congratulations on your victory."

"Yeah," I said as Baroness Victory, now Prime Minister Victory disappeared for the last time.

The world rumbled.

"Shit, guys," Elle said. "That was pretty damn intense."

"Everyone, give me a hug. Quick," Katia said. "I have to make a choice. It's beeping at me."

And we did. We all hugged Katia, one by one. I still had the xistera extension on my arm, and it was awkward, but I managed. Donut jumped on her lap.

"That was pretty wild," Louis said, blowing water on her.

Katia rubbed her eyes. "All of you. Finish this for me."

Elle hovered over her. "Damnit, kiddo. Don't make me cry."

Imani also hugged Katia. "Be safe."

"Every day something bad happens," Donut said from Katia's lap. "I want to think this is going to be a good thing, but I am so scared I'm never going to see you again."

Katia reached down and kissed Donut on the forehead. "You keep him safe. And now I have to press the button."

We met eyes for the briefest moment, and I nodded.

Katia made her choice.

An instant later, the goddess moved, not even realizing she'd been frozen. She looked, confused at the bubbles still on her arms. And then she saw Katia, gasped, and moved straight to her. The goddess put her hand on Katia's cheek.

"I know you," Eileithyia said as she touched Katia. "You have always been one of my own, as are all who've been touched by the stillness. I wish peace upon you, daughter. You have made a boon choice. Are you sure of your preference?"

Katia sat up straight in the bed. She tentatively reached up, and she grasped the hand against her cheek. She looked the goddess in the eye. "Please, goddess. Please." She took a breath.

"I wish to be made pregnant."

Eileithyia cocked her head to the side. "Are you certain? This is a hard, cruel world you have found yourself in, and as a woman with gift, your challenges will be even greater. If you come to assist me and Yemaya in my court, I promise you will be kept safe. I sense the strength in you, and you would be welcome."

"The rules of this world are strange," Katia said. "If I am pregnant, I get sent somewhere else. There are no children or pregnant women allowed here in this place. At least not of my kind. But there are several children, up there," Katia said, pointing upward. "And they are mostly alone. I think they're in trouble. They all need help, and this is the only way I can get to them."

Eileithyia hesitantly looked upward and stared up into the sky. "I... I sense them," she said, her voice full of wonder. "I sense that

place. Strange. There are so many of my daughters there, all alone and afraid. Why couldn't I sense them until now? I... I can't reach them. What is that place?"

"You can't get there," Donut said. "But Katia can, and she can protect them for you."

Eileithyia nodded. "That is wisdom, champion of Nekhebit, harbinger of doom."

"Uh, yeah," Donut said.

The goddess turned to Katia. "You will be made human once again. And you must choose a father for the child. The father must be human as well." The goddess looked at me, eyes blazing. "I see who you wish for it to be, but it cannot be so." Standing next to me, Bautista stiffened.

Katia looked uncertain. "Louis. Would you be willing?"

"Uh," Louis said. He reached up and touched his neck. "Am I still human?"

"That's actually a good question," Donut muttered. "The last thing Katia needs is a baby with flippers."

Eileithyia smiled, and she put her hand on Louis's hand. "Of course you are. And a good soul at that."

"Then sure, I guess. I mean, if she'll have me."

"Of course, Louis," Katia said.

"Then it will be so," Eileithyia said. She reached down, gently pushing Katia back into the cot. She put her hand on Katia's stomach. "First, you will be made human again."

And then Katia started to change. She grew smaller, and smaller. Her blonde hair turned black. Her frame shrank. Next to me, Donut shouted.

"Katia!" Donut gasped, leaping forward. We all rushed to her.

Her entire right arm was gone, all the way to the shoulder. Her left leg was gone. Her right leg was gone up to the knee. She was missing an ear as well.

Katia smiled sadly from the bed. "Just a few things I've lost along the way."

I remembered when she'd lost the ends of her fingers on her hand, all the way back on the Iron Tangle.

"I had no idea," I said.

"How could you? We've all become experts at hiding what we've really lost."

"Here, quick," Bautista said, quickly bringing the cybernetic parts to her. She'd made them herself, in anticipation of this. She'd left them in the crafting room, and Bautista had finished them for her. We all worked, clicking and fastening them into place just as Eileithyia, ignoring all this, placed her three-fingered hand on Katia's stomach.

. "It is done. It will be a boy."

"Spoilers," Louis muttered.

We all backed up, and the word **Ineligible** appeared over Katia's head.

"Bye, guys," Katia said. She raised her cybernetic, right arm and waved.

And then, just like that, Katia Grimmsdottir... Art Professor. Crawler. Hero. Human. Friend.

Mother.

...disappeared in a puff of smoke.

"Bye, Katia," Donut said sadly.

Eileithyia nodded, and then she, too, faded away.

The Scavenger's Daughter has closed her eyes. The benefit fades.

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[87]

SAMANTHA: HE'S NOT TOUCHING ME ANYMORE. BRING ME BACK! BRING ME BACK!

I dropped the xistera, and Samantha clunked to the ground, heavy and smoking. If I thought she'd been burned before, this was ten times worse. I barely recognized her.

"Okay, that was pretty wild. He was going to eat me, but I had him throw me in a volcano like you said. He's blowing up the world now, so, yeah we should probably go."

Warning: Emberus will destroy the 9th floor in three minutes.

On the table remained a pair of items. One was Katia's card from the previous floor. The one depicting Annie the skull-headed bird. Donut took it.

The second was a bra. A bra with my own face on one cup, and the words "Time to pay the daddy tax!" on the other.

"What the fuck, Carl?" Elle asked. She whipped down and took it.

I was assuming Katia had gotten that on the *Dungeon Sidekicks* show, so long ago. She'd left it on the table as a joke.

"You know," Donut said after a moment.. "I feel really bad about pooping in Mordecai's mother's ashes now. Do you think any of it got into the tip thing? I'm never going to not think of that now when I think of Huanxin. It was supposed to be this big, grand gesture, but she was really killed by a cat poop arrow."

"Don't you dare say that to Mordecai," I said.

"Has anyone noticed that it's like, really, really hot?" Elle asked.

"Yeah, guys, time to leave," Imani said.

"Right behind you," Louis said. He paused and looked up into the sky. "I really wish I could've kept *Party Planner*."

I grunted. "Remember what you said before? They told you airships wouldn't be allowed on the next floor anyway. Besides, we have another plane now. Florin stole one, and it's in the hangar."

"Oh, hell yeah," Louis said.

"Oooh, Cousin Louis, I like the upgrades," Samantha said. She floated up and started blowing in his gills.

"Stop that! It feels really, really weird. But yeah, uh, thanks for letting me use your body."

"And now I get to use yours. Fair trade, no?"

Donut was on my shoulder. "Samantha, you look like a piece of popcorn shrimp that has been stuck at the bottom of the oven for two years straight. And be gentle with Louis. He just got a divorce."

Samantha gasped. "Louis is back on the market?" She started making growling noises at him.

Bautista stopped next to us, interrupting. "I know you think I was going to do something horrible or jealous. I want you to know I almost did. I keep losing family, Carl. It makes me scared, and it makes me angry. And I know I am not considered human anymore, and that is my great shame, especially today. But I would never do anything to hurt a brother like you."

I clasped him on the shoulder as he, too, turned to the stairwell. He paused. "I looked up the Kimaris figure you have. He's one of the brothers of Sheol. He has a summoning time of 'the remainder of the floor.' Be careful with him." He entered the stairwell.

"Kimaris!" Samantha asked, zipping away from Louis, who took the opportunity to also dive into the stairwell. "You have Kimmy as a stuffed animal? Give him to me. Give him now!"

"Who is he to you?" I asked. "I know he's not your ex-boyfriend. That was King Blaine."

"He's one of my best friends. I met him when..." She paused. "Huh," she said. "That's weird. Why couldn't I remember that? He's...

He's the one who gave me the potion that would put my baby in me when I couldn't get pregnant. We were friends. He'd give me advice on who to date, who to see and who to..." She floated off, muttering. She gasped. "His mother! I will kill *his* mother!"

She moved back to the saferoom, leaving a black, charred smear over the door.

Mordecai remained outside, just sitting in the dirt, staring upward. He'd gotten a cigarette and a bottle of Crown Royal from somewhere. Dawn was rising, and red comets from the exploding volcano streaked through the air above us. The heat was sweltering. We only had a minute left.

"You better get back in the saferoom," I said.

"I lost so much today," Mordecai replied. He stood and wiped himself off. He threw the bottle, and it crashed through the rotten roots, disappearing. "But I think I gained more. Thank you, Donut, for setting that up."

He stepped toward the door.

"You doing okay?" I asked Donut as we moved to the stairwell.

"I'm going to miss her," she said. "But you know what, Carl?"

"What's that?"

"They are not going to break me. No matter how hard they try."

I reached up, and I gave her a pat.

Together, we walked into the stairwell, leaving the now-empty battlefield of Larracos behind.

There were only two people left on the floor.

One was Emberus, who filled the world with fire.

The second was Justice Light, who'd used a spell to hide his presence. When Juice Box jumped into the Nothing, he had told her he was going with her. He'd lied. He needed to be on this side of the veil to activate the trap.

Juice Box would be fine, if her short time in the Nothing didn't drive her mad. She had a journey ahead of her, but like he told her, if she managed to survive this next part, she would be reborn as the ultimate weapon to end this madness. This war.

Part of him felt bad. All his friends left in the dungeon could possibly suffer because of what he was about to do. Porthus knew the plan. The Apothecary knew the plan. He truly believed the survivors were up to the challenge, but everything was about to get much more complicated.

Most people were about to take deals. Most of the former crawlers were now on their way back to orbit. He took solace in that.

He took one last look around the elaborate system of traps he'd never needed.

And then he turned his attention on the single, small trap that was about to change the course of all history.

Justice Light: I am not sorry. Peace to you all, brothers and sisters.

He took his talon, and he snapped a piece of twine.

System Message: A Legendary Trap has been triggered.

The simple, tiny trap toppled over. This caused two items to fall into the open portal below it. The permanent portal into the Nothing was made from the now-broken, blood-soaked winding box from the Gate of the Feral Gods. The same portal Juice Box had just used to flee the ninth floor.

The items that fell were a bijou fairy trap, along with the thousands of threads that connected the fairies to the 12th floor, and a demon trap, along with the thousands of evicted demons with the power to open a portal back to Sheol, if only they could find something to latch onto.

What happened next was exactly what Justice Light had intended.

He never got to see the next messages.

Still, his last moments were spent envisioning what was happening. Four separate planes—all jumbled and confused—folded and moved together as the unbreakable lines of the bijou fairies

tightened, creating a flower pattern before the darkness in the center of it all broke apart.

As the fire engulfed him, finally giving rest to a soul that had been so tired for such a very long time, Justice Light cawed into the air.

System Message: The Bijou Trap has deactivated. All captured Bijou have been freed.

System Message: The Demon Trap has deactivated. All captured evicted demons have been freed.

System Message: The Nothing has been broken.

System Message: The Nothing is currently draining into The Halls of the Ascendency.

System Message: The Nothing is currently draining into Sheol.

System Message: The Nothing is currently draining into Scolopendra's Lair.

System Message: Scolopendra stirs.

Planetwide Message: It is advised all current guests at the Scolopendra Club evacuate immediately.

Planetwide Message: Oh, I'm sorry. There's nowhere for you to go?

Planetwide Message: Be advised that the 16th Floor, supposedly entitled "Agony of Mirrors" is actually a giant, empty room with a single mirror in it: a non-magical mirror plucked from an abandoned Motel 6 location in Boise, Idaho. As this 16th floor is currently outside the Scolopendra layers, any guests who wish to evacuate the Scolopendra Club should immediately proceed to this location, where you will be safe from any impending attacks. Unfortunately, the 17th floor, called "The Backstage Death Maze" is currently built and running. You will have to proceed through this level should you want to get to the 16th.

Good luck.

System Message: Scolopendra has awakened.

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EPILOGUE

York.

My duty is done.

I have killed those I have been ordered to kill.

The blood on my mandibles will never wash away.

"No, no," the tenodera said, crumpling the verse and tossing it into the recycler. It didn't take an empath to know the poem sucked.

Homecoming Queen creaked and groaned from its spot in orbit. The ship felt haunted, and York, the sole, living creature left on board was the ship's ghost. Some days, he'd turn off the artificial gravity and just float in the storage hold with his eyes closed and pretend he truly was non-corporeal.

He'd force himself to think in verse. He'd compose poems about better times. About peace spreading through the galaxy.

He'd compose three-beats about his hive, back before they were ripped away. Before the Syndicate came and killed them all. Sometimes, if the poems seemed like they'd probably be especially moving, he'd broadcast them over the open band. He'd do it until someone in authority ordered him to stop. And then after, he'd wait, and then he'd start broadcasting again. He'd done it so much, he knew he'd been blocked from the local feed by most of the captains.

That was fine. Not everyone appreciated philosophical ponderings, especially when told in verse.

Or maybe they were just like him, he mused. Someone who once felt things, and now he simply couldn't. Maybe everyone was faking it, putting on this big show of emotion, performing for a set of gods he was pretty certain didn't exist.

Performing because they knew that's what they were supposed to do. Because they knew if the others realized who they really were, how empty they were, that they'd be cast out and left with nowhere to go.

He'd been fully expecting *Homecoming Queen* to have been shot at by now, but nobody had even attempted it. And while the Crest behemoths weren't known for their defenses, this *was* the largest ship in orbit. It would take a lot of energy to knock it out of the sky.

Homecoming Queen did have armament, however. A lot of it. Though that was a secret, and York had worked hard to keep it that way.

And not only was the ship well-armed, but it had a full complement of enhancement zone guns and beams. Highly regulated, high-energy weapons that would normally only work in the center system. Porthus had ordered them installed.

These weapons were now green across the board, making *Homecoming Queen* likely the strongest ship in orbit. Even the Syndicate security corvettes didn't bother with the enhancement zone weapons. Why would they? They were expensive and took up space and absolutely couldn't be used outside the center system.

The small yacht he'd destroyed—the one filled with children, including the new king of the orcs—had been simply vaporized with an NPB, actually designed for point defense. He'd deployed it when everyone had started shooting at each other, and so far, everyone assumed the orcs had just been caught in the crossfire. The *Homecoming Queen* had appeared to flee the conflict with all the other transports.

I have killed children. Defenseless children who were not yet old enough to ever be responsible for their crimes.

Were they scared?

He kept trying to rearrange it in his mind, desperately attempting to frame it in a way where he felt something, anything about what he'd done.

York mourned his own emotion. Or better yet, his own lack of it.

It was such a strange sensation, to feel bad about not feeling anything.

Did the fact he even recognized this mean it was still there, somewhere deep down?

This was why he continued to write his poetry. There can be beauty in words, twisted just the right way. The correct verse could raise that which was lost.

I should write that down. It's not that deep, I don't think. But maybe I can massage it into something profound.

His own crawl seemed like such a distant memory. His entire hive had entered the dungeon, and he recalled—vaguely recalled—the anger he'd felt at how they'd been picked off one by one. And not just at that, but at the realization that he'd never really fit in. And because of his own individuality, he never was part of a team, despite being part of a hive. And because he was all alone, his flailings against the bureaucratic, alien machines that had subjugated him and his hive were impotent.

The stronger he grew as a crawler, the weaker he felt. And the weaker he felt, the angrier he became.

And then, somewhere around the 9th floor, a numbness spread. He knew this was something locked deep in his tenodera DNA. His warrior ancestors had been specifically bred to be without emotion. This was before they'd all become civilized, before all their wars were fought with tanks and bombs and drones, the military hardware substituting for the chemicals their queens of old would drill into their brains.

This lack of emotion would be required of any soldier whose duty it was to crack into an enemy hive and kill all the children within.

Before they'd onboarded onto Faction Wars, leaving York all alone to watch over and fly the starship, Rosetta had point-blank asked York if he'd have the fortitude to complete this little side

mission. To kill the orc yacht filled with children. They didn't know the hollowness inside York. All they saw was the constant poetry, and as a result, they assumed he had grown weak.

He'd insisted he'd be able to do it. He was careful to make himself appear a little reticent. But the truth was, he'd looked forward to it. He wanted to be the one to press the button, to watch the small ship explode. He wanted to do it because he wanted to feel something afterward.

It hadn't worked.

The news feeds had mentioned the unfortunate death of the children, caught in the crossfire. But there was just so much more happening all at once that it barely registered a blip.

Was that it? That this wasn't enough to break through the bindings that had grown around his heart like thorns?

The news was focused on much bigger stories. The new Prime Minister. The crash of the Dream cruiser onto the surface of Earth over the continent of Australia. The mass suicide of one of the Nebular colonies.

But mostly, at this moment, the talk was of the Mantis system that had simply gone boom.

This particular news actually filled York with a strange, empty sense of satisfaction. The larger mantids hated his race, the tenodera. They were similar, but York and his kind were much smaller physically. Flightless. And not nearly as aggressive and violent. Most mantids openly spoke of exterminating him and his kind, as they could crossbreed, and they feared what would happen should the tenodera mix en masse.

"That's what you deserved," he muttered, trying the words out even though he didn't really feel them. He re-watched the story of the destruction of Hive Re-Population Center 51, which was not even close to the original mantis system. It was the least populated and newest of their multiple colonies. Still... stars didn't usually just randomly go nova without warning. People were starting to panic.

A message came across his screen. **You have soldiers to load. They have arrived at the onboarding facility. Docking procedures incoming**.

The docking computer on the station fed the *Homecoming Queen* the proper vectors. The ship shuddered as the orbital positioning engines rumbled to life.

As they drifted toward the small facility, York took out his pen and wrote a new poem.

When they think it's over.
When they think they are safe.
That's when the hidden danger presents itself.

"Hmm," he said. He was pretty sure this poem was as terrible as they all were. Still, he stuck it up on the console. Why not?

A direct message request came in.

York clicked the radio. "Boomer?"

The grizzled elf appeared on the screen. Even with the low-resolution display, York could see the elf had aged.

"Bring her in nice and easy, bug boy. Any trouble while we were away?"

"Not so much as a single missile shot at us," York replied. "Embargo is still in effect, so we can't leave yet."

"Write any new poems?"

"Several."

"Any good?"

This was an ongoing conversation between York and Boomer. The old elf seemed to think all poetry was without merit. Still, the ribbing was good-natured, and York pretended to enjoy it. He'd like to think it was something he really would enjoy, if things had turned out differently. He played along.

"All my poetry is good, Boomer."

"Well, I have a poem for you, my mantis friend. It's based on the style of a popular Earth poem."

"I am not a mantis. But that is of interest to me. I have been reading of those as well and have been attempting different kinds. Is it a haiku? A sonnet? A limerick?"

Boomer grinned at him over the display. “Roses are red. Violets are blue. We won Faction Wars. Now we get to kill more of them.”

“That is a terrible poem, Boomer.”

“You have no sense of humor, my boy. Now hurry up and dock. Phase two is about to begin, and it’s about to get really, really bumpy. But the good news is, we made some friends down there, and this next part isn’t going to be nearly as difficult as we originally thought. Are the breaching suits ready?”

On the news feed screen, a Breaking News banner appeared, followed by the image of Porthus sitting behind a desk. York knew this video was actually shot a while ago because he’d been there when Rosetta directed it. But it was timed to be released just now. On the screen, Porthus was announcing the formation of a new militant group. He was warning that they would now be moving against all Syndicate governmental properties and systems across the known universe. The government had until the end of the current crawl to agree to their demands, which basically boiled down to, “stop the crawl or else.”

York clicked a button. “Not only are the breaching suits ready, Boomer. But the enhancement zone suits appear to be online and working, just like Porthus predicted. And the power armor is all online as well.”

“Fuck yeah,” Boomer said, popping a cigar into his mouth. “Set aside four of the Cronus suits and a landing skiff. We have a pregnant veteran on the surface who needs backup. And for the rest of us, it’s time to bring the war out of the dungeon. Better warm up the lasers.”

At that moment, York did, indeed, feel something. Finally, after all this time.

Class: Advocate.
Race: Tenodera.
Birth Race: Tenodera.
Top Level: 71

Dungeon Exit: Took deal at the end of the 10th floor. Worked as a Game Guide and Guildhall Instructor in the Poetry guild. Exited the dungeon and spent the following years in self-reflection and contemplation.

Author of the Tenth Edition of the *Dungeon Anarchist's Cookbook*.

Current status: Captain in the newly coined resistance organization, The Open Intellect Action Network.

Quest Complete: This is How the Gristle Grinds.

Entering the Outreach Guild.

"Hey pal," Quasar said. "Been up to anything interesting recently?"

"Fuck," I said, wheezing. We were in a zero zone. It was just a small cubicle. A table and two chairs, with me on one side and the flickering form of Quasar on the other. The room didn't have any doors. A cloud of pixelated smoke hovered over Quasar's head.

It was just me and him. The room was freezing cold.

I coughed. I was covered in ash and blood, and I couldn't stop shaking.

It's done. It's done. We made it.

I closed my eyes, and I just sat there for a moment on the hard, plastic chair. My feet tingled with that waking-up-from-sleep pain. My entire body ached. The eye on my chest ached. I was especially aware of it in a zero zone with everything so heavy.

Quasar, to his credit, gave me a moment.

I opened my eyes to see the small alien man just sitting there. He was wearing a tie with Mongo on it. The dinosaur was constantly waving his little arms.

I grunted with amusement. I put my hand on the table, and it left a black mark.

"All right," I finally said, closing my eyes again. "Let's do this, Quasar."

"Before we start, buddy boy, on behalf of the Syndicate Intergalactic Bar Association, I'd like to personally thank you. There being just about 20,000 crawlers making it to the 10th floor is quite the accomplishment. Lots of my colleagues getting work today, and some of them are pretty easy on the receptors, if you know what I'm saying. As soon as we're done here, I'm going to make a line for the closest attorney bar and drink for free until I wake up in a gutter with at least three new venereal diseases."

I laughed. It felt good to laugh. My eyes remained closed. I could sleep here if I had Donut with me. It felt as if I had a weighted blanket on me. "I'm glad to be of service, Quasar."

He continued. "So, a few formalities. If these were normal circumstances, you'd be meeting me for the first time right now. And I'd probably be saying something like, 'wake your monkey ass up, this is important as fuck.'"

"And I'd probably be saying, 'Go fuck yourself, Quasar. Don't you hear it?'"

"Hear what?"

"The sound of nobody dying. The sound of nobody screaming. Just silence. I could live here, in this room."

"Listen, Carl. You're not going batty on me, are you? I get enough of that at home. I know what you're going through, but I ain't no head shrinker. I get squeamish around crazy, know what I'm saying?"

I opened my eyes. "Do you? Do you know what I'm going through?"

He was silent for a long moment, which was unusual for the attorney.

"Of course not," Quasar finally said. He patted a folder sitting in front of him. "We gotta go through this."

"Fine," I said. "I'm listening."

He sighed. “As a ‘volunteered’ lawyer for this season, I’ve been tasked with negotiating exit deals with you and two other crawlers. You’re actually my third and final meeting for the day.”

“Anybody else take a deal?” I asked, interrupting. “And who were the other two?”

“Attorney client privilege, buddy. But yes, they both took deals. None of my other clients were anyone in your inner circle.”

“But there are deals being offered? I was kinda thinking they weren’t going to be offering anything.”

“You and me both, but the ol’ system is insisting that everything that happens in here needs to be as by the books as possible.”

“Okay,” I said. “So what are my deals?”

“They’re all shit,” Quasar said. “That, unfortunately, is a side effect of having so many survivors. You’d be better off working as a scrub boy at a bathhouse in a dromedarian leprosy colony. Seriously. You’d think they’d offer the number one crawler some good shizz, but all of these except the last one are straight off the rack. Fifty seasons undead. Desperado Club bomber’s guild with a contingent exit clause that’s almost as bad as that clause your bizarre friend Milk had.” He threw the sheets of paper on the table. “If I wasn’t afraid the AI would turn my asshole into a new wildlife habitat, I’d tell them all to go fuck off. Still, this last one ain’t bad, but we can do better. Apparently, this is Chaco’s last season, and they need a replacement. It is being offered jointly to you and Donut both. You’d have to both agree separately, but they’re indicating this deal will still exist at the end of the 10th floor.”

I laughed. “Can you tell me what this next floor is?”

He nodded. “Actually, I can. If I tell you, however, it adds a full season to any deal you take now or at the end of the floor. But you just got a free one from some quest, so I guess it all evens out.”

“Okay. I consent. Whatever. What do we got?”

“I actually don’t know. Hang on. Those other two guys didn’t even ask.” He picked up a piece of paper.

“Okay. It only gives limited information. The floor is called ‘Don’t Come in Last.’ You and your party leader are given an option to

choose a matter of conveyance, either biological or mechanical. You will have to travel from point A to point B, and upon reaching point B, you will be given an upgrade option for your vehicle. You may only travel using the vehicle. You will have to make a fixed number of these journeys, and if you come in last place, the survival containment around your vehicle is removed. There will be multiple NPC teams, so you're not necessarily competing directly against other crawlers. Which is good because this ain't a goddamned Battle Royale season. There's obviously more to it than that, but that's all they're giving."

That's just fucking peachy, I thought. Katia would have excelled at that.

The thought of her filled me with anxiety. How was she doing? Was she okay? It'd only been minutes, I knew. Would I ever see her again? Would I ever know?

I sighed. "My official answer is, fuck these options. I am not taking a deal."

"I am shocked," he said, writing something down.

There was an audible ping.

"I thought maybe you'd also rep Donut," I said after a moment. "You've represented her before for some of the contract stuff."

He shrugged. "I was hoping so. That's why I wore this tie. I argued it, but they assigned her another lawyer. Her name is Princess Chandra, Esquire. Apparently her and Donut already had their meeting, and now that you've officially declined your offers I can tell you she declined as well. I am hearing there were some serious fireworks during their meeting. And not the good kind. We need to have a serious talk about her. Donut's lawyer, I mean."

I grunted. "Why? Is she another catgirl?"

"No. Worse, buddy. She's your new wife."

Squirties waystation and refueling platform. Located just outside the main tunnel access route entrance to the Earth system.

Zander sighed. The saccathian let out a stream of air through his tentacles. He started to pull the line of Veriluxx Real Pet Companion toys off the shelf. The Donut and Mongo ones still occasionally sold, but all these others were crap. He had a whole line of Gimli and Geraldo and Skyler Spinach toys that nobody gave a shit about, even when he did have customers. Plus the toys took up a lot of space.

He paused at the Uzi Jesus toy. He kinda liked this one. He tapped it, and it came to life. "Hello. I am Uzi Jesus. You look quite upset. What's the problem, son?"

"I'm ruined," Zander said to the large action figure. "I paid my life savings to lease this spot, and now that there's an embargo, nobody is going through the tunnel gate. I haven't had a refueling customer in days. Not even reporters anymore. And with the threat of war and what happened with the Mantis system and everything else, nobody is even approaching the area. They're terrified, and I have a 25,000 credit a month lease to Dictum I can't pay."

"Dude, that fucking sucks," Robot Uzi Jesus said.

"Yeah," Zander said. "It really does."

He pointed a gun at Zander's shirt. "Are you sure it's not because this waystation has the stupidest name I've ever heard?"

Zander looked down at his uniform. It was a shirt with the Squirties logo on it, which was just his smiling face with all the different types of fuel squirting from his tentacles, each one represented by a different color. Some were gaseous, some were solid, and none of the colors were right, but it was just a cartoon. His mother had designed it. "Waystations always have funny names and logos."

"It's nasty, dude. Look, at least you're not trapped on the other side."

"That's true, I guess." He'd just seen on the news where they were all shooting at each other. Again. The Dream cruiser had crash landed on the planet. A bunch of other ships had crashed as well, and now with that whole thing with the fringe former crawler group mouthing off, there would probably be more shooting soon. He'd seen war before, and it was terrible for business. Especially his kind of business. War fleets didn't buy fuel. They took it.

"Maybe the embargo will get lifted," Zander said hopefully. "Maybe they'll all come through here and buy gas again."

"Maybe, but you're probably fucked," Robot Uzi Jesus said. He scratched himself in the head with his plastic gun. It went off with a pop, and he put his hand to his temple. "Dad damnit!" His head turned. "Veriluxx Real Pet Companions does not endorse blasphemy."

When the action figure moved, he knocked the Raul the crab action figure, who said, "Hello, fine warrior! I am Raul."

"I'm going to get indentured," Zander said miserably.

"Do not kowtow. Never kowtow!" Raul called.

"I got it! You could start a church!" Robot Uzi Jesus announced. "You'd be ballin' if you did it right."

"What is this?" a new voice asked. She reached over Zander's shoulder and picked up the Uzi Jesus toy. "Is this an icon of the Earth deity?"

"Don't look at my dick, lady!" the toy announced.

Zander turned, surprised. He hadn't received notice anyone had docked. He... he recognized her. She was a tall, elf-like woman with a long neck and naga-like eyes. Strange.

Still, this was a customer. He straightened. "Welcome to Squirties! That's a fantastic costume. Or is it surgery? ... Oh," he said, suddenly remembering what had happened. "Are you a fan of Nami? Shame what happened to her. Have you come to the gate to pay your respects?"

"Costume?" the woman asked, holding out her arms. "Are you asking Eris, goddess of chaos if she's wearing a costume?"

"Uh," Zander said. "Yes?"

She burst into laughter. "I'll show you a costume." She snapped her fingers, and all the tentacles on Zander's face turned rigid. Each one started spewing a different liquid.

Some of that liquid burned.

"Holy Mary mother of me," Robot Uzi Jesus said.

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AND JUST LIKE THAT…

Yeah, bitches! Another book is DONE!



So… a lot has changed since the last time I wrote one of these things. As of the publication of this, Ace, a division of Penguin Random House, has published books 1-3 in hardcover, and you can get it in stores all over the world. Books 4-6 are forthcoming in 2025. And we have so much more going on, too. The Webtoon comic is coming. The Soundbooth Theater full-cast audio version season 2 is coming (And season one is available on

Soundbooththeater.com). We have a possible adaptation. So much more. (Join my Reddit or Patreon to keep in touch!)

None of this would be possible without you guys and your REVIEWS. Please, please, please leave an honest review. And not just this book, but every damn book you read. But especially this book. If you're reading this, that means you've already done the hard part. The review part is easy!

Finally, in what's becoming a really sucky trend, my best friend Freddie the Labrador died during the final days of writing this book. Freddie was there sitting by my feet while I wrote the vast majority of what you've read so far. Freddie began and ended each day with a furiously wagging tail, even when age made that difficult for him. He was my constant companion since he was a puppy. He was with me through some really dark times, lending his strength, and I am proud to have been there with him when he wagged his last wag. Even in his last moments, he was checking on me to make certain I was okay.

We don't deserve dogs. This world is a little less derpy and a little less amazing with him gone.



Freddie Dinniman 2013-2024

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Matt Dinniman is a writer and artist from Gig Harbor, WA. He wants everyone to know the story at the end of chapter 34 in *Kaiju: Battlefield Surgeon* is 100% true.



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Also, if you're on Reddit, there's a subreddit about all things Dungeon Crawler Carl.

Merch? You want MERCH? Okay….

And finally, we have a Spotify playlist where all the songs mentioned in the series can be found in one place. You may find that here.

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